

Invisible Work, Making Visible Differences: Facilitating Transformative Learning Circles

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Abstract: The paper addresses the facilitation of experience based knowledge sharing through inter-organizational networking and dialog across the Nordic countries. Organizations nowadays look for ways to facilitate new thinking and innovation to develop their organizations. To stay competitive they need leaders and employees who assimilate, develop and share knowledge (Senge, 2006, Filstad & Gottschalk, 2011). Strategies on Knowledge Management therefore seem more important than ever. The Nordic Council of Ministers has initiated several development programs to meet both global, Nordic and national challenges concerning sustainability, citizenship, inclusion, togetherness and democracy. One of the projects connected to these programs is "Transformative learning circles". This paper focuses on the role of the facilitator in transformative learning processes in this network. Facilitators can apply different roles to activate groups of people to learn through dialogue. This include elaborating existing frames of reference to learning new frames and moreover transforming habits of mind and transforming points of view (Mezirow, 2000, Kitchenham, 2008). We examine how facilitators understand their roles as facilitators and what competences they consider as important for facilitating. A facilitator's role includes both attitudes, knowledge and skills. Our empirical investigation uncovers that there is a delicate balance between leading the discussions and letting the participants run the discussions. The facilitator's work is a kind of invisible when things work out well, but it becomes more obvious if they fail. Research methods were individual interviews, focus group interviews, observation of physical meetings and net meetings. By triangulating different qualitative methods, we consider the validity of the data to be satisfactory (Lincoln & Guba, 1994)

Keywords: transformative learning, facilitator role, adult learning, transformative entrepreneurship, knowledge creation

1. Introduction

The Nordic welfare Model is under pressure both because of global, Nordic and national challenges. Sustainability, citizenship, inclusion, togetherness and democracy are fields of challenge in an increasingly diversified society. The Nordic Council of Ministers has initiated several development programs to meet these challenges. The programs aim to develop new ideas, creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship. Some of the programs focuses on *the importance of the adult educator* in learning processes. One important issue for the programs is to create a basis for a Nordic discussion on the competences and competence needs of the "adult educator" in preparation for a further Nordic cooperation on securing quality in adult learning and education. One of the projects has been the development project "Transformative learning circles" (TLC) 2016-2017. The purpose was to develop, try out and evaluate a pedagogical model, to promote entrepreneurship, innovation and entrepreneurial competences. The development project was aiming at learning and understanding if, and in what ways, the chosen pedagogical model supported entrepreneurial learning. It was of importance to see if any factors had a special impact on learning, and if the entrepreneurial learning had any impact on the participant's practice. Our research interest has been especially to assess and examine the role of the facilitator in the learning processes. Hence, this paper focus on the different ways facilitators work in the circles. We have studied how facilitation styles, skills and methods influence on learning processes. Research methods have been both in-depth interviews, focus group interviews, document analyses of logs and observations.

1.1 Transformative learning circles

Building on the existing models of adult education, the TLC model incorporates the features of *transformative entrepreneurship* and *diversity*. A transformative entrepreneur is "someone who is aiming at and capable of bringing about changes in her own life, in the organization she is serving, and to contribute towards global societal changes that involve the emergence of a new qualitative dimension of possibilities and conditions" (Namdar, 2015). The TLC model is based on participatory and action learning processes where developmental potential and challenges are identified by participants in their daily, real life situations, and then addressed by the circle members collectively. This ensures that the circle takes up current and real issues for deliberation. There is an expectation in the model that based on the discussion circle members would be in a position to carry out entrepreneurial acts in the organizational environments. Another aspect of the TLC model is the integration

of evaluation in the learning process. Evaluation as an integral part of the transformative learning circles is a central aspect of the model. The models seeks to incorporate the spiral dynamics of reflection, planning, action, reflection. The evaluation design aims at providing a better understanding of this dynamics, by examining the kind of learning that has taken place, and how the learning processes are structured, carried through and facilitated.

1.2 Organizational context

The purpose of the project was to collect, develop and convey Nordic experiences and knowledge about entrepreneurship, innovation, creativity and adult learning. Results from the project shall promote innovation and stimulate rethinking about Nordic continuing education for adults and establishment of new networks. In order to try out the pedagogical model, three Nordic transformative learning circles were established in the spring of 2016. The work in the circles were finished in the spring of 2017. Three facilitators led the work of the circles. All participants had higher education and worked with adult learning in the Nordic countries. The meetings of the circles were both physical meetings and net-meetings, and the physical meetings took place at different locations in Sweden and Norway. The circles had different themes to focus on within the same framework, and they worked according to the same method. Members of the circles were recruited from all the Nordic countries: Finland, Denmark, Island, Sweden and Norway. The three circles focused on different themes; entrepreneurship and education, inclusion of newcomers, inclusion in working life.

1.3 Facilitation

The role of the facilitators was to support the learning processes of the circles. Their challenge was to lead the work in the groups by being role models, motivate participants, preparing for meetings, summing up meetings in meeting learning logs, and being a driving force for transformative learning. Transformative learning, however, is an individual learning process connected to individual efforts and motivation both in the circles and at the workplace. Because of this facilitation needs to balance between being a driving force and a more laid-back role.

1.4 Research question

According to this our main research question is:

How does different facilitation styles influence on reflection and learning in transformative learning circles?

2. Theoretical backdrop

2.1 Knowledge management and the facilitation of learning

Knowledge Management (KM) is according to Hislop (2013) defined in several ways. The widest definition is by Mc Adam and McCreedy (McAdam and McCreedy, 2000) that states that "KM relates to the management of anything classified as knowledge" (Hislop, 2009). Different perspectives have triggered different definitions of KM. Von Krogh et al (2000) state that knowledge is difficult to manage. They prefer to use the term "knowledge enablement". They claim that you cannot force anybody to share knowledge. However, it is possible to manage indirectly the knowledge of others by using people-centered policies and strategies. One example of such strategies is transformative learning circles, which is the subject of this research. From the perspective of KM it is of particular interest to investigate how the facilitation promote learning. Facilitation is one key activity in KM for promoting learning and underline the indirect nature of knowledge management initiative and learning processes.

2.2 Transformative learning

Learning has a connection to reflecting. By challenging the participants in the TLCs to come up with situations from their own working life, you also challenge the participants to reflect. When challenged to reflect the participants can be able to establish what Schön refers to as "the reflective practitioner" (Schön, 1987, Schön, 1991). To be able to reflect "in action", "before action" (Cowan, 2006) and "after action" will support an ongoing learning process. By assessing real working life challenges, the participants and facilitators reflect upon different problems, and are challenged through the discussion processes in the groups. This "learning by doing" is of great value (Dewey, 1902, Dewey, 1938). The learning by experiencing is also described by Kolb in his "experiential

learning cycle" (Kolb, 1984). Through concrete experience and then make use of the experiences and reflection in new active experiencing, new solutions will appear. This will again lead to a new concrete experience and the cycle is complete. Grasping is about making sense of, and the transformation is about making use of knowledge and thus become more knowledgeable and better equipped to handle similar situations.

Transformative learning origins from the literature of adult learning (Mezirow, 1978, Henderson, 2002; Kitchenham, 2008), inspired by Habermas' critical theories and Kuhn's thoughts on paradigm shifts. Groups of people can learn and reflect upon own working practice through dialogue (Schön, 1987, Schön, 1991). Facilitators can apply different roles to activate groups of people to learn through dialogue (Heron, 1999). This include elaborating existing frames of reference to learning new frames, and moreover transforming habits of mind and transforming points of view. It is important to note that people can change their points of view "by trying on another's point of view" (Mezirow, 2000, p. 21). However, you cannot adopt someone else's habit of mind. Both participants and facilitators take part in the same changes (Kitchenham, 2008). This transformation is what Mezirow refers to as transformative learning: "the process of learning through critical self-reflection, which results in the reformation of a meaning perspective to allow a more inclusive, discriminating, and integrative understanding of one's experience. Learning includes acting on these insights." (Mezirow, 1990). To promote transformational learning processes in groups it is important to develop a supportive climate. According to Ekvall (1999) a creative climate that can foster new ideas and innovation, must be playful, open, safe and free. Creativity and entrepreneurial thinking have better conditions in such climates.

2.3 Facilitation

Facilitation draws on several disciplines and perspectives like psychology, group-psychology, pedagogy and learning theories, organization and leadership theories. According to Ravn (2011), this eclectic approach has contributed to seeing facilitation as a practice and a skill, more than a scientific approach to learning and knowledge exchange in groups. The concept origins from the Latin word *facilis*, which means "easy" or "to make easier" (Solem & Hermundsgård, 2015). Kitson et al. (1998, p. 152) describe facilitation as "a technique by which one person makes things easier for others". This notion of "making easier" is also reflected in the following dictionary definition (Oxford English Dictionary, 1989): "...to make easier, to promote, to help forward; to lessen the labor of..." The guiding principles of facilitation are not new, awareness of the importance of involvement and democratic participation in group-processes stems from ancient times. Research on group dynamics origins back to the 1930ies, and for example has contributions by Lewin et al (1939) been of great importance to the field of facilitation. From pedagogy the theories of learning by doing (Dewey 1969) and experience learning (Kolb 1985) has influenced on the development of the concept. The International Association of Facilitators (IAF) has since 1994 worked to develop a platform of facilitation, framing the core competences of a facilitator. These core competences are: 1. Create a cooperative relations, 2. Design and facilitate group-processes 3. Create and maintain a supportive climate 4. Guide the group to acceptable results 5. Build and maintain professional knowledge 6. Be a role-model for a positive and professional attitude (IAF).

According to Heron (1999) there are three approaches to facilitation, or more precisely, three grades of involvement towards the group you are facilitating. A hierarchic approach means that the facilitator is in charge, has control, makes decisions and manage the relational issues. A cooperative approach means to share power with the participants, and to invite participants in to design the processes. The third approach is a democratic style that seeks to develop the independence of the participants. The group gets responsibility for both planning of the agenda, the process and the summing up. Facilitation styles can also be "handbook style", "innovative style" and "laissez-faire". These styles are in many ways parallel, if not similar to Heron's categories. The facilitator can either use one of the approaches, or a combination of the three. Factors that influence which style to use depends on several factors, such as the competence and maturity of the group, the competence and personality of the facilitator, the problem at stake and the situation (Ringer, 1999).

Rogers (1989) stated that the personal qualities and attitudes of the facilitator are more important than any methods they employ. Rogers explained that methods and strategies will be ineffective unless the facilitator demonstrates a genuine desire to "create a climate in which there is freedom to learn" (Rogers, 1983, p.157). Rogers described the essential personal qualities of a facilitator as "being real, demonstrating prizing, acceptance and trust, and practicing empathic understanding". In their conceptualization of facilitation Harvey et al. (2002) argue that the concept consists of both as a *task oriented*, practical approach, with the purpose of doing for others, or on the other side, as a *holistic approach*, with the purpose of enabling others. They outline

a model with a continuum, consisting of a task-oriented approach on one side and a holistic oriented approach on the other side. Facilitation of learning can appear along this continuum, depending on context and purpose. A holistic approach requires a flexible facilitator role, and they suggest that this approach is the best for adult learning. They do not draw any conclusion on this, as they argue more research is required.

3. Methodological approach

3.1 Design and data collection

The design of the evaluation study are a variant of action research (AR) design. By this approach, we could follow the activities in the TLCs close up, and gain new knowledge about the learning model. The evaluation adopted a mixed methods approach in order to get insights into the transformative learning circle model. The data-material presented here, has been collected by means of several different methods:

- Interviews with participants and facilitators
- Focus Group Discussions
- Observation of the meetings, including meetings in digital spaces
- Analysis of logs (document analysis), both individual logs and meeting learning logs.

We followed the three learning circles over a period of seven months. During this period, we attended the circles meetings that took on three to four physical sessions. Individual interviews were conducted with three facilitators and five participants in the TLCs. In addition, data was collected via six focus-group interviews where both facilitators and group members contributed. The third way of data collection was by observing the three TLCs in some of their sessions, both the physical meetings but also some of on-line meetings. Another data-source were individual logs and meeting-logs written by participants and facilitators before and after the group meetings. In addition to the interviews with the facilitators, we had the opportunity to follow the processes in the group through observations and focus-group meetings in the circles, and this gave us a broader range of data sources that also reflects the facilitators' role and performances.

When it comes to *credibility* of the data, it refers to the accuracy of understanding, interpretation and representation of research results (Lewis and Ritchie, 2003, Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The use of triangulation in methods secures multiple sources of data, and gives a better accuracy of understanding when collecting data. The *Credibility of interpretation* is satisfactory as we looked at empirical data from different theoretical perspectives (Lewis and Ritchie 2003). By using quotations from interviews and focus group discussions, we find the *credibility of representation* is good. Before having finished the data-analysis and interpretations, some preliminary findings were presented in a final meeting with the TLCs. This gave the participants a possibility to discuss some of our central findings and give their feedback. In this way, member-check as a data-validation was implemented (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

4. Findings and discussion

In the following chapter, we will present and discuss our findings regarding the facilitation of the TLC-circles. The most important factors seem to be the development of a climate of trust and mutual respect, which both is supportive and challenging. Furthermore, facilitation needs to balance between the two different roles of being the driving force and a peer in the group. Thirdly, it seems of great importance to empower the group members and ensure that everybody share the responsibility of learning the learning processes.

4.1 Climate of trust

Both participants and facilitators underline the importance of creating a safe psychosocial learning environment characterized by trust and openness. To be willing and to share experiences the participants must learn to know each other. If they know each other they can more easily reflect upon experiences, both their own and the experiences of others. The stronger the relationship, the easier to reflect together (Isaksen & Ekvall, 2010). Both participants and facilitators have shared the responsibility of creating a climate of trust, but the facilitators have a special responsibility for stimulating and maintaining this (Rogers, 1989). A climate of trust is the basic prerequisite for learning and co-creation in the groups. All three circles in the network seem to have succeeded in this. Many of the participants mentioned the positive atmosphere in the groups. They have learned a lot from how they have been met by others, in a friendly, open and tolerant way. They have been able to challenge themselves, and being more honest and open about their experiences and problems. To be able to learn and to

change, you have to assess real working life issues (Schön, 1987, 1991; Kolb, 1994, Mezirow, 1998). When others meet you with trust and openness, you are able to act in the same way towards them. All three facilitators emphasized building a safe climate in their groups. Both participants and facilitators said that they trusted each other, and experienced both to feel safe and to being challenged. The playful atmosphere also seems to have been important for sharing and learning. A positive mood helps learning together and facilitates creative thinking (Isaksen & Ekvall, 2010).

4.2 Structuring a supportive learning environment

A supportive learning environment is characterized by both structures and a climate that support learning. All three facilitators have made great efforts in creating frames for the meetings, concerning preparations, processes during the meetings and after the meetings. They have emphasized the importance of good preparations to meet expectations from the participants concerning predictability, but not to an extent that hinders spontaneity and creativity in the groups. The methods and approaches used seem to stimulate creativity, spontaneous thinking and reflecting, both at the individual level and at the group-level. Thus there are two ways of promoting transformative entrepreneurship; a structural approach – using logs, methods and guidelines and the personal approach using creativity and spontaneous ideas and thinking. This can be referred to as handbook-style and innovative-participatory style. Alternatively, as Harvey et al state, a holistic approach which includes flexibility and a readiness to adapt methods according to the situation and the subjects at stake (Harvey et al, 2002). The learning meeting logs have been of great importance linking the learning processes together, and helping everybody to reflect upon their learning outcomes: learning strengths and learning needs. As one of the facilitators expresses: “gathering the threads”. The facilitators organized their work in a cycle of a three steps structure: *Before the meeting, under the meeting and after the meeting*. All steps are important to the learning processes: “Preparation for the meetings is a great mental challenge” (Facilitator). Reflection after the meetings is of great importance: “Did I light the fire?” Because of the heterogeneous groups, the progression and learning outcomes of the participants have been different during the period. As one of them said: “it has been challenging to secure everybody’s learning outcome” (Facilitator).

A reflective space “The energy is in the group”

The meetings in the circles have been reflective spaces, an opportunity the participants do not have at home. The climate in the circle meetings has enabled the participants to adopt an entrepreneurial approach to their development projects at home, to see new perspectives and co-create new ideas with others. To achieve that you also have to challenge the participants to break up patterns and create new ones. To develop a transformative learning environment that foster entrepreneurial mindsets, you need to create a climate that can help participants to let go, to open up and challenge themselves. That means that this it is not about hurrying to cope with a schedule. The free space created in the circle meetings means giving time enough to make new energy, fueling and motivating entrepreneurial work and thinking. One of the facilitators used to bring his own critical incidents as a startup for discussion in the circle meetings. By doing this, he also undertook the role of being a peer in the group, instead of undertaking the leader-role of the group. Another approach was to work with the members to share the groups learning needs and learning strengths at the end of the session. As a result, some of these suggestions was set on the agenda for the next meeting, and secured a necessary continuity, adjusted to the challenge expressed by the participants (Ravn, 2011). An ideal climate of such reflective spaces balances between supportive and challenging, calm and energetic, safe and critical, empowering the participants to do their best thinking (Ringer, 1999, Rogers, 1983, Isaksen & Ekvall, 2010).

4.3 Facilitation style - driving force or laidback

We find that the facilitators make use of many different approaches and styles. They seem to have somewhat different main approaches, and they vary their methods and change between different styles, according to the diversity of their groups (Harvey, 2002, Ravn, 2011). They have found a way of managing the diversity of the group, with both practitioners and academics. As one of the participants said: “You have to act like a juggler”, in other words balancing the different inputs during the different parts of the processes. It also means empowering participants, through enabling participants to share what they have on their mind: “Set the energy free of the individuals in the group”, as one of the facilitators stated.

One approach of facilitation was to take the position of being on the outside looking into the group. Another approach was to facilitate the whole group. The third alternative was to integrate in the group by participating on the same level (as peer) and working with the group. By being a peer of the group, you can bring up own critical problems to start the discussions in the group, and thus underlining role of being a participant of the discussions and learning processes, as argued by (Kitchenham, 2008). Facilitation is to be “the glue of the group”. We consider this to be in line with the cooperation style according to Heron (1999), as well as a holistic and flexible approach according to Harvey et al (2002).

The emphasis of empowering the participants also meant that the facilitator shared the responsibility for enabling the learning processes with the circle members. Facilitators take the responsibility of creating the frames and all group members share the responsibility of creating a supportive learning environment. To facilitate also means being a driving force for the processes of the group when necessary, as argued by Ravn (2011). “To what extent the facilitator has to be the driving force, depends on the participants, the situation, number of participants and participant’s competence.” “Trust is the basic – and you have to feed the process. The participants have to bring something into the process” (Facilitator).

What then is the role of the facilitator? The driving force? Being the glue of the group? The juggler? We identify mainly two different facilitator styles:

A *handbook style* where the facilitator has a more of an “instrumental” approach to the process, and an

Innovative- participatory approach where the facilitator tend to make a point of blending in and work with the group as a member. These findings partly matches with two of Heron’s (1999) approaches, the cooperative and the democratic approach. The facilitators are more or less structured, they work in a non-hierarchal way, they take responsibility for the group-processes, and they all make a point of the importance of group democracy. This means that the learning process in the circles depend not only on the facilitation, but also on the ongoing contribution from the members of the group. To be willing and to share experiences the participants must learn to know each other. If they know each other, they can easily reflect upon each other’s experiences. The stronger the relationship, the easier to reflect together (Facilitator).

When it comes to the participant’s response on facilitation, one of the participants put it like this: “The best facilitation is often when you don’t see it, like it’s invisible” (Participant). According to participants, facilitating is an important and necessary factor for supporting the learning-processes of both individuals and the learning circles collectively. When working with adult learning, where working to support reflection and co-creation is important, facilitation is a necessary and relevant approach. On the other hand, we found that too much facilitation might hinder the learning process. The good facilitator manage to find the balance between leading and participating. “When facilitation is at its best you hardly notice it. But if the facilitator is too much a leader of the group, it can be very bad, and a hinder to participant’s learning processes” (Participant). This underlines the point that a good facilitator is enabling the participants “to do their best thinking” in the learning processes, without being too visible herself. In a sense, invisibility seems to be a factor of success in a facilitating process. This also refers to the notion of knowledge enablement (Von Krogh et al, 2000), when promoting learning and knowledge development.

5. Conclusion

We find that a holistic approach to facilitation, as presented by Harvey (2002) to be the most relevant facilitation style to support transformative learning. A holistic approach, which requires flexibility of the facilitator role, corresponds to the innovative-participatory approach, and to the democratic and cooperative approach (Heron, 1999). A holistic approach supports co-creation of knowledge and promotes critical reflection in the groups. A “handbook approach”, which to some extent corresponds to a task-oriented approach, can also be of great value, depending on the context and the purpose of the meetings. The facilitators in our study share common democratic values characterized by equality, mutual respect, trust, openness and inclusiveness. A democratic and low hierarchical approach seems to create trust and empowers the circle members. Ability to create a learning environment of tolerance, trust and openness seems to be crucial to promote the entrepreneurial learning processes. This learning climate enables the participants to feel empowered and take responsibility both for their own and the development of others. Sharing of the same democratic values and a holistic approach to facilitation seem to be central elements in the Nordic approach to transformative learning.

Facilitators can contribute to creating a supportive climate by being a role-model, but the shared responsibility among all the participants for developing a climate of trust is of equal importance. However, the facilitator fuels the processes by guiding and being a driving force. The facilitator contributes significantly to the continuity of the transformative learning processes. Our findings support earlier research. There is however, a need for more research-based knowledge on facilitation. Suggestions for further research are to study more in detail how skills, attitudes and competences of the facilitator affects the different stages of a learning processes and how facilitation can contribute to supportive learning climates. We consider our study to be a contribution to the conceptualization of facilitation, and to the empirical research on facilitation of transformative learning.

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