Methods for Facilitation

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3	Activities: Structuring Professional Learning

Methods for Facilitation Guide 1

Principles: Facilitation for Transformation

"[I] am all about the kids—that's what initially brought me to this work and continues to energize me. And because I am all about the kids, I am also all about the adults and supporting their growth and development. The two, I have learned, are profoundly intertwined."
– Ellie Drago-Severson

For many educators—especially those working with students of color and students living in poverty who have faced historically unequal treatment—school improvement efforts often have looked like mandated top-down reforms or scripted materials handed to them. At its core, school improvement cannot be delivered by script or by fiat. It is a learning process that requires the spark of new ideas and meaningful opportunities to put those ideas into practice. It requires making space for teachers to come together, share their own expertise, reflect on research, and adapt and implement new ideas. Doing this effectively takes a skilled facilitator who ensures that great ideas become lasting, equitable practices that truly support all students.

This guide provides an introduction to the approach and research behind facilitating school improvement efforts in service of a just and equitable education system. Drawing from research on adult learning, a self-reflection activity, and examples from the field, readers will explore four core principles for effectively facilitating teams of educators in meaningful conversations that lead to purposeful action.

Learning Objectives:

1. Become familiar with research and principles behind facilitation for school transformation

2. Reflect on the role of a facilitator in managing school improvement by supporting adult collaboration, learning, and reflection

In This Guide:

Research and Principles Explore research and experience underlying approaches to effective facilitation

Reflection and Planning Assess your readiness and identify facilitation goals

Further Exploration Consult self-reflection tools to develop your own approach to facilitation

Research and Principles

Four Principles of Effective Facilitation for School Improvement

Embarking on successful school improvement involves more than just good plans or thorough research. It requires turning these into action. A skilled, thoughtful facilitator can make the difference between ephemeral insights and sustainable change. This is no easy task. It requires an intentional approach that combines **four research-based principles**:

Seek Transformational Adult Learning

Cultivate Trust

Balance Research, Experience, and Analysis

Remain Goal-Oriented Yet Agile

Seek Transformational Adult Learning

At Eskolta, we often receive requests from educators for new resources they can photocopy and use in their classrooms. But we know that lasting changes in practice require more than that. Many of the problems teachers face are adaptive and complex and call for more than simple solutions. Instead, they necessitate what education researcher Ellie Drago-Severson (2012) calls transformational learning, the kind of learning that changes the way we "see and understand the world," the way we think about our own practice.[1] Whereas technical change is a matter of finding the fix for a problem, transformational learning is a matter of engaging in an active process of exploration, reflection, and growth, adapting oneself as part of achieving a solution.

The story of a transfer high school in the Washington Heights neighborhood of New York City provides an example. A group of teachers had come together to design a tool to gauge students' skills in effective "argument." The task seemed simple. Through a few meetings, they created a one-page rubric based on the Common Core standards. But as they started to score work with it, they realized in frustration that they did not have a clear, coherent idea about what "argument" actually meant. Through facilitated discussion, drawing on their own experiences in the classroom as well as outside research, they revised the rubric. Feeling more confident in what they had designed, they began using it with their students. As students took ownership over their own learning expectations, the teachers observed them thinking and acting differently. As teachers reflected on the

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For more details on how this group of teachers transformed their thinking, read The Story of HSEI in Rubrics Session 2: Using Rubrics to Promote Learning.

1 Drago-Severson, E. (2012). Helping educators grow. Cambridge: Harvard Education Press.

observed changes, their conception of the rubric's purpose shifted. The most meaningful part of the teachers' collective learning was not creating this new tool (the technical challenge of finding a fix for their problem), but rather going through a process of adapting it to help their students and, along the way, rethinking their own teaching practice (the transformational challenge).

As you think about ways to structure a school improvement effort that allows for transformational learning, start by asking yourself three questions:

Reflection Questions

→ How will you structure time for your team to **reflect on ways to adapt**?

→ How will you encourage your team to **plan next steps** to put those adaptations into practice and then **return to reflect** on how it went?

→ How will you tailor your facilitation to your team members' **level of experience**?

Cultivate Trust

Reflecting on one's own practice and trying something new without knowing if it will work involves a good amount of vulnerability. To take such risks in front of colleagues involves even more. Yet, without a safe space for risk and reflection, collaboration remains more transactional than transformational. Both common sense and a substantial research base point to the importance of **"relational trust"** in building the kind of strong and dynamic school communities that can engage in a learning process together. According to education researchers Anthony Bryk and Barbara Schneider (2003), in any school improvement effort "all participants remain dependent on others to achieve desired outcomes and feel empowered by their efforts."[2] This interdependence demands that every participant in a project feel respected and respect the others involved (Kochanek, 2005).[3]

Yet the path toward building trust is neither straightforward nor linear. Trust grows slowly over the course of numerous interpersonal moments. Bryk and Schneider (2003) contend that, in the school context, "trust grows through exchanges" in which actions—even small actions—validate the expectation that every participant is invested in and committed to the school community. Whenever a facilitator is interacting with team members—whether during meetings with the full group, one-on-one discussion, or in writing an email—those small moments in which she demonstrates that she values her team members' opinions and expertise add up to deeper trust between all members and more successful collaboration.

As you think about ways to build trust with your team, keep in mind how each small exchange strengthens your community and, in turn, your collaborative effort.

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2 Bryk, A. S., and Schneider, B. (2003). Trust in schools: A core resource for school reform. Educational Leadership, 60 (6), 40–45.

3 Kochanek, J. R. (2005). Building trust for better schools. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

Consider:

→ How will you **set norms** for group discussion at the start of an improvement project to ensure equity of voices?

→ How will you **create a safe space** to explore delicate issues and demonstrate respect for students' and participants' privacy?

→ When are the right moments to **share examples of challenges** from your own experience as a way of modeling vulnerability and reflection?

Balance Research, Experience, and Analysis

We have all seen a meeting like this before: a team of tenth-grade teachers in a New York City public school meets to discuss ways to improve their students' attendance. They know their students are experiencing external challenges including homelessness, food insecurity, and after-school family responsibilities that make it hard for them to feel like their schoolwork is a valuable use of their time. But the team has a lot of ideas! One teacher shares a research article she read about "value mindset." Another teacher mentions her own experience with a "Do Now" activity to help students personally connect with their homework topic. A third teacher suggests that they look at student attendance data to try to find patterns. After brainstorming half-a-dozen promising ideas, one skeptical teacher pipes up: "These all sound great, but how do we know if any of them will actually make a difference?" Another says, "I know what you mean. I think we tried some of these ideas a few years back and they didn't go so well." The meeting wraps up, and the team leaves without a clear sense of what to do next.

In this example, each source of knowledge the team considers—a research article, a teacher's experience, and a set of data—presents a way of looking at and addressing a particular problem. Yet, at the same time, each has its own limitations. While long-term empirical **research** studies can lend credibility to ideas, the researchers' findings can feel remote, outdated, or disconnected from staff members' experiences with their students. On the other side of the spectrum, an educator's **experience** is a powerful source of information to figure out how new challenges might be dealt with in familiar ways. Yet, individual experiences are invariably limited and bound by familiar perspectives and approaches. The third source, **analysis** of student academic or behavioral data, can help educators see patterns they may not have seen before or look across a whole school to know where to focus energy. However, these data sources are imperfect. They can feel evaluative (typically used more for accountability than learning), and they never tell the full story of a student's experience.

How, then, can we generate great insights from team discussions and turn them into practices that stick? In *Learning to Improve*, Anthony Bryk and his colleagues

See this concept in action:

Create a safe space by establishing community agreements at the start of a conversation. See an example in the [Facilitator Guide for Attendance Support Session 1: The Power of Invisibility](#).

(2015) emphasize the importance of using a process of "disciplined inquiry."[4] They lament that educators often assume there is a solution already available, but what works in one classroom in one school may not in another classroom or school. As they write, "learning how to make interventions work effectively in the hands of different individuals in varied contexts is the problem to solve."[5] To do that well—to help teams of teachers try out and successfully adapt new ideas for their students —requires structuring an improvement process that allows teams to move between these sources of information: **research**, **experience**, and **analysis**.

In the case of the tenth-grade team, they might start by looking at the research article together to pick out a practice to try with their students. After trying it in class for a week, they might look back at the attendance data and see if there were any changes—reflecting on their experience of how it's working for which students and under what conditions. Through this structured back-and-forth, the team can carefully analyze what they are learning and how they might continually adapt a practice to make it work for their students.

As a facilitator, consider how the structures you set up—even within one meeting— allow your team to sequence research, experience, and analysis. Ask yourself:

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Reflection Questions

→ How am I providing space for participants to **reflect on their own experience** as a way of empathizing with a student's experience?

→ How might I bring in **external resources** like short articles on **research** studies or **exemplars** from other schools as a starting point for designing new practices?

→ How can I make it manageable for participants to **gather and analyze quantitative and qualitative data** to learn how the practices they are trying with students are working?

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Remain Goal-Oriented, Yet Agile

In his 2018 synthesis of meta-analyses on student achievement, John Hattie found that the greatest predictor of student achievement was teachers' "collective efficacy" or the belief that through a unified effort, they can effectively overcome challenges and make an impact on student performance.[6] To foster these kinds of beliefs among a team of teachers, it is important for the team to define what that impact would look like for their students and then continually ground their efforts in these learning goals. When there is a high level of collective efficacy, "a shared language that represents a focus on student learning as opposed to instructional compliance often emerges."[7]

Download Related Materials:

Empathy Interviews help teams gather data on student perspectives to vary their research and generate insights. See the Learning Mindsets Empathy Interview Protocol in Learning Mindsets Session 5.

See this concept in action:

Each ELC session is designed to help facilitators strike the balance between being goal-oriented and agile with steps to ground participants in objectives and return to those objectives for reflection and planning.

4 Bryk, A. S., Gomez, L., Grunow, A., and LeMahieu, P. (2015). Learning to improve. Cambridge: Harvard Education Publishing.

5 Bryk, A. S., Gomez, L., Grunow, A., and LeMahieu, P. (2015). Learning to improve. Cambridge: Harvard Education Publishing, p. 181.

6 Hattie, J. (2017). Visible learning plus. Retrieved from: www.visiblelearningplus.com.

7 Donohoo, J., Hattie, J., and Eells, R. (2018, March). The power of collective efficacy. Educational Leadership, 75(6), 40–44.

As the guide for a school team, a skilled facilitator uses these student learning goals as a "north star" to help the group see where they are headed. However, even with a clear set of goals, the process of collaborative school improvement is not linear. It can be messy, and ideas and concerns may surface that take conversations down unanticipated paths of exploration. A facilitator needs to be responsive to those needs without losing sight of the student learning goals. In this sense, a facilitator is goal-oriented, yet agile: she considers both needs of her team—to have space to explore ideas and also to know what they are building toward as a group. The facilitator must strike a careful balance: too much space and a team may not feel like the conversations are moving in a productive direction. Too little space and team members can feel constrained or silenced. In both cases, buy-in is lost.

To do this, a skilled facilitator listens and uses questions to link each path of exploration back to the team's goals, asking: "How does this connect back to what we wanted to figure out?" or "How will this idea improve student learning?" or "How will we know whether this is working and for which students?" The act of steering a team's discussion back to a grounding objective provides an opportunity to ensure that a team's goals are student-centered and builds a sense of a collective effort moving toward these goals.

As you lead team discussions, consider the ways that you strike the right balance between keeping goals in mind and responding to the team's needs:

> **See this concept in action:**
>
> *When educators are given time to plan how to adapt practices for their own classrooms, they can see a path for implementing collective goals. ELC sessions include steps for planning ways to apply ideas.*

Reflection Questions

→ How will you share **learning objectives** at the start and then return to them throughout a meeting to ground participants in the purpose of the time spent together?

→ How can you gently **steer team members back to student learning goals**, while also validating their concerns if they surface a challenge, idea, or need that seems off-topic?

→ How will you include time and space within sessions for participants to **plan how they will adapt** or apply new practices in a way that makes sense for their own contexts while keeping in mind the purpose of those practices for student learning?

Reflection and Planning

A. Self-Reflect:

Review the following list of facilitation approaches and give yourself a rating on each as a way to identify your areas of strength and areas of growth.

I feel confident doing this ⟷ This is brand new to me

	Facilitation Approaches	1	2	3	4	5
Seek Transformational Learning	Consider team members' **level of experience** when planning activities					
	Structure activities that allow team members to think about **ways to adapt ideas** for their own classroom					
	Include a step at the end of a meeting for participants to **plan next steps** for putting ideas into action					
	Schedule time for participants to **return together to share** and reflect after applying ideas					
Cultivate Trust	Set **norms** for group discussion to ensure equity of voices					
	Create a **safe space** for discussions of delicate issues					
	Share **personal examples** of challenging professional experiences as a way of modeling vulnerability					
	Structure activities for participants to **share their own experience**s in pairs to build comfort					
Balance Research, Experience, and Analysis	Identify **relevant external resources** like research articles or exemplars from other schools as a starting point for discussion					
	Include steps for collecting and reviewing **qualitative data** in the form of student work samples and classroom observations as part of the learning process					
	Bring in manageable and easily digestible reports of **quantitative data** as a way to learn how the practices teams are trying are impacting students					
	Sequence activities to allow for a **mix** of reviewing **external research**, reflecting on **personal experience**, and analyzing **data**					
Remain goal-oriented, yet agile	Start each meeting reviewing the team's **learning objective(s)** to ground one another in the purpose of the time spent together					
	Connect immediate team objectives to deeper **student learning goals**					
	Return to the **learning objectives** once or twice throughout the meeting, including at the end to self-assess and reflect on next steps					
	Allow space for team members to **discuss emerging ideas** or issues constructively					
	Use questioning to gently steer members back to the objectives if they wander too far off topic					

B. Set Goals:

Based on your ratings, name two key facilitation goals for yourself:

Focus Area	What my current practice around this looks like…	What I'd like to be able to do around this in my role…
*		
*		

Further Exploration

If you want to …	Take a look at…
Learn about and practice skills for facilitating effective professional learning	Facilitation Methods 2: Skills: Building Capacity as a Facilitator
Explore facilitation moves to use in challenging scenarios	Facilitation Methods 2: Activities: Structuring Professional Learning
Improve how you structure reflection in a facilitated activity	Facilitation Methods 3: Facilitating Activities for Professional Learning
Map out meaningful goals and plans for a school improvement project	School Improvement Methods Guides on Setting School Goal
Learn project management techniques to keep teams moving forward to reach their goals	School Improvement Methods Guides on Managing School Teams
Explore ways to structure inquiry that balances research, analysis, and experience	Tools for structured inquiry: * Exemplar Review Learning Tool * Experiential Learning Cycle Graphic Organizer (based on the research of David A. Kolb)
Learn more about adult learning and elements of effective professional development	Short articles including: * Ellie Drago-Severson, "Pillars of Adult Learning" * On David Kolb's research: "The 4 Components of the Experiential Learning Cycle" * John Hattie, Jenni Donohoo, and Rachel Eells, "The Power of Collective Efficacy"
Gain more background information on continuous improvement in schools	Harvard Educational Review's summary of the book Learning to Improve: How America's Schools Can Get Better at Getting Better (Bryk, et. al,., 2015)