

How We Think and Talk About Facilitation

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Over the past few years, the notion of ‘facilitation’ has been increasingly gaining attention and acceptance in Japan, especially in the context of education and training. Today, Japanese educators think and talk about facilitation, even if it is not yet clear what facilitation is. Interestingly enough, the term *facilitation* does not exist in the Japanese language. Even so, the term *fa-shi-ri-tei-shon* somehow seems important to use, and by ‘importing’ and using it, we feel more comfortable talking about certain aspects of our communication processes. Without it we may not feel able to say anything about these aspects of communication processes. Conceiving of the act of facilitation as utilizing a set of tools enables research and writing on facilitation to examine its outcomes or effectiveness rather than being limited to considerations of it as a process. This article introduces and applies the idea of social construction of technology in order to examine the notion of facilitation.

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One dominant perspective about the idea of using facilitation is that of seeking a set of useful tools to manage organizational problems such as managing meetings and creating teams for collaborative projects. In work with adults, the notion of facilitation is also seen as a new form of leadership. By conceiving of the act of facilitation as utilizing a set of tools, research and writing on facilitation can gravitate toward examinations of its outcomes or effectiveness rather than examining it as a process. That is to say, the focus is on *what* is done rather than *how* it is done.

As scholars/students of simulation and gaming, I anticipate that readers are familiar with the roles and functions of facilitation within the context of educational environments. Acknowledging the importance of the communicative nature of facilitation processes, this article highlights the gaps among different understandings of the notion of facilitation. I begin my discussion by proposing that notions of facilitation can be understood as a product of ongoing tensions and negotiations among various social groups rather than simply being about a usage of sets of tools or management of processes.

The following discussion is based on observation of experiences in Japan; therefore, readers are invited to comment on and make suggestions about further explorations of this issue within other cultural contexts.

Facilitation as a Socially Constructed Concept

SCOT Approach

To introduce this perspective on the notion of facilitation, I will use the SCOT (social construction of technology) perspective proposed by Pinch and Bijker (1987). Although their focus is primarily on the design of an artifact (technology), I suggest that the SCOT approach is useful for understanding the ways in which we think and talk about concepts, in this case the concept of facilitation. One of the potentially valuable contributions of this approach is the opportunity to make explicit the fact that the successful stages in the development of a concept are not the only possible ones. Instead, it highlights the fact that they are the actual alternatives eventually selected through a process of interactions among various actors. By understanding the developmental process of a concept through use of the multidirectional SCOT model, it becomes possible to understand the complexity of the process and ask why some of the variants die while others survive (Pinch & Bijker, 1987).

Social Groups and Their Perspectives

As of today it is possible to identify several relevant social groups all engaged with the notion of facilitation. Each group engages in a developmental process of definitions and usages of the concept to achieve the desired goals. Each one has its own incentives and problems regarding the concept of facilitation, and around each problem, several potential solutions will be identified. To illustrate the ways in which a certain solution is selected, Pinch and Bijker (1987) introduce the notions of interpretive flexibility and closure. Interpretive flexibility identifies the situation in which people have a range of flexibility in how they think and interpret concepts, as well as flexibility in how these concepts are used and practiced. Acknowledging that concepts are socially constructed, we may be able to identify various actors (social groups) with different, sometimes conflicting, incentives who all engage in the process of construction. Each group may have its own expectations about the ways in which the notion of facilitation is promoted. Pinch and Bijker argue that a problem is defined as such only when there is a social group for which it constitutes a problem, which implies that social groups able to define a problem as relevant within the development process are likely to have control over the outcome of the construction. Closure refers to stabilization of a concept emerging as an ending of a solution of debate and negotiation. Closure can be achieved or brought about by a closure of debate and negotiation. Closure can be achieved by making the problem disappear or by redefining the problem, and thus shifting one's focus to a different agenda. Examining recent trends in Japan enables us to identify the following groups engaged with the concept of facilitation.

Business people. In business arenas, the idea of facilitation is mainly introduced in contexts such as organizational change, organizational learning, and organizational performance. There are potential needs for a new concept that enables business people to talk about new ways of understanding their organizations. Recently, books such as the *GE Work-Out* (Ulrich, Kerr, & Ashkenas, 2002), *Six Sigma Team Dynamics* (Eckes, 2002), and *Crisis at Santa's Workshop* (Weaver & Farrell, 2003) were translated into Japanese and seemingly gained acceptance among business people. The assumption here is that the idea and practice of facilitation, even though the users may not necessarily know it by that name, can be used prescriptively to cure various organizational problems through application of innovative group management solutions.

Practitioner. Japan has many practitioners involved in various educational/training activities, including community development, environmental education, and children's programs. Here, a practitioner's emphasis is on the doing, that is, facilitating the sessions, and with an understanding that this can be realized without talking about facilitation. In other words, because they have already been doing facilitating, the more recent introduction of the idea of facilitation may not have a direct influence upon their day-to-day practices. However, the introduction of the concept of facilitation may contribute to conceptualizing and providing them with a better sense of what they actually do. With a conceptual understanding, one's concrete experiences of facilitation are understood in an abstract fashion.

Teacher/educator. For teachers and educators, the notion of facilitation may create an opportunity to reflect upon their personal theory of teaching and educating and can lead them to reflect on their assumptions about communication. If information or knowledge is seen as a thinglike object, attempts at evaluation tend to be considered in terms of linear, cause-and-effect type models. Use of terms such as *outcomes*, *effectiveness*, and *explanation* is itself an indication that such teaching can be characterized by Freire's (1970) banking concept of learning. However, the notion of facilitation can be characterized by an emphasis on interactivity and cocreation of the situation rather than a simple one-way transfer of information from sender to receiver. In this regard, such teachers and educators are trying to incorporate the idea of facilitation into their teaching styles.

Nonprofit organizations. Acknowledging that the idea of facilitation entails a participatory mode of communication, nonprofit organizations are trying to use it for empowerment of local communities. The concept of facilitation is understood, here, as an instrument to produce influence, thereby enabling them to promote and deliver their messages. These organizations also endeavor to develop social networks via the use of the concept of facilitation. For instance, information about seminars, workshops, and job openings are shared through such organizations. In this sense, these

nonprofit organizations are utilizing the concept of facilitation as a medium to connect people together.

Simulations and games researcher. Simulations and games researchers are another important group using the notion of facilitation. Within the framework of simulations and games, we are already familiar with an idea of facilitation. However, because of this apparent obviousness of the notion, simulations and games researchers may need to create a moment at which they can reexamine the simulations and games, as well as a body of research on simulations and games that embeds it. This article is an attempt to suggest that by the very fact of choosing a particular set of assumptions to understand the nature of facilitation, previous studies inevitably left out other potential (virtual) approaches to thinking and talking about facilitation. It is a redirection by demonstrating an alternative research orientation. I will illustrate the possible research programs in simulations and games that attempt to describe what simulations and games actually consists of as a communicative activity.

Images of Facilitation

Given the discussion above, I will attempt to layout a range of contexts and metaphors within which the notion of facilitation is introduced and practiced.

Facilitation as a Set of Tools

In the context of training and/or learning, facilitation can be understood as the act of realizing goals through utilizing a set of tools. That is, the idea of facilitation plays an important role in managing a meeting, team, or organization. For example, brainstorming, SWOT analysis, T-chart, facilitation graphics, and affinity diagrams are introduced and used. The underlying assumption is that, by selecting and combining the tools, out of the facilitator's toolbox one can strategically and effectively control the situation toward achievement of a desired goal. These tools seem to share many elements in common with other areas such as project management and communication/negotiation processes.

Facilitation as a Form of Leadership

Facilitation is also recognized as a form of leadership similar to the notion of coaching. In this form, it is regarded as an important characteristic of leaders working to manage and control situations by facilitating the process. One of the most important characteristics of the facilitator is to actively engage in the process of guiding participants to reflect on, intensify, and generalize their own and other group members' experiences. The very act of facilitating becomes an attempt to influence

situations within which both group members and facilitator are embedded. Attempts to create an impact in this way, the facilitator's moves may involve more than simply listening and responding and may become regarded as a leader who intervenes into the process more or less skillfully and carefully.

Facilitation as Drawing Out Ideas

The familiar term *learning* is used in a variety of contexts. For Bateson (1996) it is a process of communication through which we acquire understanding. A facilitator plays an important role in such processes. From this perspective, a facilitator is in a position to maintain or transform the flow of interactions by drawing ideas out of the participants. In Japan, within domains such as environmental education, language education, and children's programs/workshops, the notion of facilitation has been well accepted. However, it seems that there is not much contact with a body of simulations and games researchers.

Facilitation as a Social Action

This perspective is closely linked to the recent trend in Japan of facilitation as aligned with empowerment of local communities. Within the past few years, at least two nonprofit organizations have been founded (the Global Network of Facilitators, established in 2003, and the Facilitators Association of Japan, established in 2004) to promote the ideas and concepts of facilitation. These organizations are very active hosting workshops and seminars, as well as contributing to development of social networks of facilitators in Japan.

Facilitation as a Research Site

Finally (for now) it is possible to conceive the notion of facilitation as a research method. From the standpoint of simulations and games scholarship, all such activities can be understood as a research site in which to study facilitation processes, because the parameters of conduct and aims of all participants are restricted (by the form of the activity) and overt, unlike everyday professional practices. The facilitator's act of guiding a simulation or gaming session can thus be considered as a form of on-the-spot experiment (Schön, 1984). The facilitator constitutes the situation through a process of communication with it, and thus their operational models and working hypotheses are constituted by the situation as well. In other words, the facilitator understands the situation by trying to facilitate it. While a facilitator and participants may enact different roles, the former being the one who guides, and the latter being the ones who are guided, the process of learning itself resides within the relationship between them. In other words, both facilitator and participants are engaged in a mutual, joint process of learning. It is a process for both of them.

The Logic of On-the-Spot Experiment

As suggested above, the act of facilitation can be understood as a form of on-the-spot experiment. There are prespecified functions of simulations and games, such as rules, goals, and roles, which may be taken for granted by the facilitator. However, the properties and organization of the actual activity, and an understanding of it, become accessible to the facilitator (and the observer) only through facilitating. This concept is illustrated in Figure 1, which is based on Schön's schema and illustrates the nature of experimenting in a practice context (Schön, 1984).

Four different situations that might be encountered can be characterized by identifying the following two dimensions: (a) consequences in relation to intention and (b) desirability of all perceived consequences, intended or unintended. In Figure 1, the horizontal axis indicates the consequences of the on-the-spot experiment in relation to one's intention; and the vertical axis denotes the desirability of perceived consequences generated through the on-the-spot experiment. In the context of simulations and games, the facilitator's on-the-spot definition of the situation can be classified into four cases.

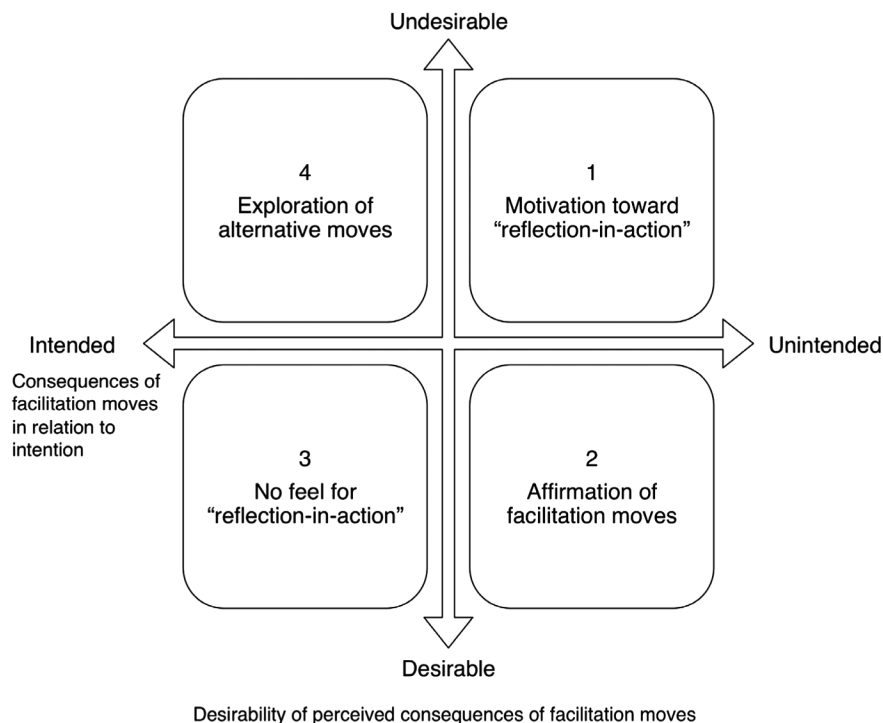
In the first case (top-right, Quadrant 1), a facilitator's move fails to generate the intended result, and such a result is perceived as undesirable. This situation, and an understanding of it, motivates the facilitator to act upon the situation to reshape the flow of his or her facilitation process. Schön (1984) suggests that this is a typical case of reflection-in-action:

When a move fails to do what is intended and produces consequences considered on the whole to be undesirable, the inquirer surfaces the theory implicit in the move, criticizes it, restructures it, and tests the new theory by inventing a move consistent with it. The learning sequence, initiated by the negation of a move, terminates when new theory leads to a new move which is affirmed. (p. 155)

The second case (bottom-right, Quadrant 2) also initiates one's reflection-in-action. In this situation, a facilitator finds that his or her move produces an unintended consequence, but the consequence itself can be evaluated as a desirable one. In terms of the logic of an on-the-spot experiment, the facilitator's move is affirmed. It is important to note that this type of affirmation may be an interesting case for exploration. Because the move is affirmed within the course of facilitation, even if the situation has unfolded unexpectedly (undesirably), the facilitator is less likely to reflect upon the situation embedded within. And yet the ways in which a facilitator has coped with the situation may embody an important element of the communicative process of facilitation. Thus, a close examination of this type of situation may generate data out of which we can identify critical issues regarding the practice context of facilitation.

In the third case (bottom-left, Quadrant 3), the facilitator's move succeeds in producing an intended consequence, which concurrently can be evaluated as either

Figure 1
Facilitation and the Logic of On-the-Spot Experiment



Source: Based on Schön's schema (1984) to illustrate the nature of experiment in a practice context.

desirable or neutral. Thus, there is no need for reflection-in-action. Similar to the second case, this type of situation may remain unnoticed and unexamined afterwards because the facilitator does not, when thrown into the situation, feel any need to try to change the situation to make his or her hypothesis fit. However, this type of situation may, consciously or otherwise, contribute to shaping and reshaping elements of the facilitator's repertoire of examples, images, understandings, and actions. In this regard, this type of situation may play an important role in generating a period of reflection-in-action after the activity is over.

In the fourth case (top-left, Quadrant 4), a facilitator's move produces an expected result, which leads to an undesirable consequence. During the activity, the facilitator may not pay attention to the theory or working hypothesis with which he or she encountered the situation. Rather, the focus will be on the consequence itself, because

the facilitator's move has generated a new problem that has been evaluated as an undesirable outcome. This type of situation can motivate a facilitator to search for new models and theories to cope with the situation.

Thus, the need for, and selection of, an appropriate direction for reflection-in-action are triggered by perceived changes produced by a facilitator's prior moves. And the process of facilitation itself can be understood as a chain of ongoing moves and decisions. In the debriefing session, a facilitator is able to look back and talk about the process within which they and the participants have been embedded. Through the debriefing process, participants learn how to analyze their experiences, evaluate them, interpret them, and incorporate them into their own understanding of the issues modeled by the activity. However, during the session, and even during the debriefing session, a facilitator's emphasis is on facilitating the session. Thus, it is difficult for a facilitator to look back and think about himself or herself while he or she is embedded in the very process of facilitation. Facilitators can evaluate and learn about their skillful practice as a guide, only when they have a capacity to recollect and reexamine the very process of their own facilitation. Otherwise, we are unable to observe and describe a facilitator's knowing-in-action—which will become increasingly tacit, spontaneous, and automatic.

Conclusion: Understanding Contexts of Facilitation

Simulations and games can be understood as recursive processes of interactions between a facilitator and participants. And it is via communication that the realities within simulation and gaming are constructed, maintained, and transformed. Some simulations and games approaches explicitly incorporate a structure requiring a facilitator's occasional interruptions to create provocative learning opportunities. Still other simulations and games are designed to incorporate some kind of thought-provoking functions into the relationships between participants and facilitator. However, few studies have attempted to describe in detail the ways in which simulations and games processes unfold (see, e.g., Francis, 1987, 1989; Kato, 1996, 2003; Sigman & Donnellon, 1989; Watson & Sharrock, 1987). In other words, while the importance of the communication process in the relationships between participants and facilitator is often discussed, research focusing on specific communicative instances is rare.

This is not to criticize previous attempts to characterize the distinctiveness of simulations and games approaches. In fact, there is a series of attempts that can be labeled as evaluation studies (Crookall, 1995) **FAQ 1** demonstrating the educational effectiveness of simulation approaches (see, e.g., Bredemeier & Greenblat, 1981; Butler, Markulis, & Strang, 1988; Pierfy, 1977; Randel, Morris, Wetzel, & Whitehill, 1992; Shubik, 1989).

The point is that the very fact of choosing a particular set of assumptions to understand the nature of simulations and games inevitably leaves out other potential approaches for thinking about and researching them. My redirection aims to identify an alternative way to understand the nature of simulations and games approaches. Grounded in the constitutive view of communication (Mokros, 1996, 2002), I suggest that we must acknowledge that discussions of simulations and games have focused on examination of their educational outcomes (effectiveness) rather than on their communicative nature. For example, Francis (1989) suggests the following:

There is very little point in trying to explain why simulation/games happen as they do, or why they do not always happen as those who design and run games would like them to, until we have much more detailed knowledge of what happens in a game. (p. 67)

Based on this view, Francis (1989) observed and transcribed the interactions (conversations) of the participants within a business negotiation game. Through a close examination of a set of extracts of negotiations, he further speculated upon the ways in which participants enact different roles within the context of the game. The proposed research may similarly begin with an observation of the process of simulations and games, that is, to describe how simulations and games actually unfold as a concerted, communicative activity. In light of the discussion above, theoretical and methodological motivations for the proposed simulations and games research direction can be summarized as follows.

First, the proposed study needs to explore the notions of reflection-in-action (Schön, 1984). We know in advance what participants can and cannot do within the simulations and games context based on prespecified rules, roles, and goals of the simulations and games. However, understanding how simulations and games unfold is accessible only through practice. In this regard, the facilitator and the participants do not (cannot) have a stable and articulated representation of the learning situation within which they are embedded, because they are all constantly negotiating with the ongoing situation on the spot. This point has been suggested by Francis (1987) as follows:

Game learning involves coming to understand, in the course of playing a game, what it takes to be a player. Even in circumstances where players are keen to comply and play the game seriously, it may not be clear to them what playing seriously should involve. And even where instructions and game rules are clearly spelt out, players have to discover for themselves what these mean in practice. (p. 202)

In effect, it is through communication that we are able to reveal the ways in which rules, roles, and goals of a simulation or gaming are practiced. During the action both participants and facilitator are engaged in a process of knowing-in-action.

Second, and closely related to this point, a focus on the practice context of simulations and games suggests an alternative approach to understanding the nature of

such learning situations. As mentioned previously, research that focuses on communicative instances in simulations and games is indeed rare. Only a few studies have directly attempted to describe in detail the ways in which simulation processes unfold. Thus, I am proposing the need for a redirection through demonstrating the existence of an alternative methodological orientation.

This proposed research direction may lead to a new image of our learning environment, as one in which a facilitator is regarded as a colearner jointly constructing the situation. In particular, it focuses on the context of an educational setting, acknowledging communication as an ongoing process of both learning, and learning about learning. It proposes a focus on exploring communicative processes that reveal, only through experience of such processes, the nature of our day-to-day facilitation practices that tend to be unnoticed because of their obviousness. Various images and metaphors can be used to think and talk about the notion of facilitation. Depending on the ways in which a specific understanding is selected, the concept of facilitation itself may guide our communication processes. However, it is important for us to keep in mind that facilitation is always and only in action.

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