

# Complexifying Facilitation by Immersing in Lived Experiences of on-the-fly Facilitation

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## Abstract

*Background:* Describing the role of a facilitator often results in to-do lists resembling a recipe or a laundry list to follow. Such lists fail to grasp the inherent complexity of **facilitation** and are not very useful in guiding facilitators when, why and if they should intervene in the unfolding live performance of that day.

*Aim:* To develop a deeper understanding of on-the-fly **facilitation** by analyzing rich empirical accounts of in-situ **facilitation** episodes.

*Intervention:* Six **facilitation** episodes were through purposeful sampling selected from a body of hundreds of interventions in forty-seven performed **crisis management** training exercises in Swedish municipalities. Each full-day **crisis management** simulation-game had between fifteen and fifty participants involving politicians, administrative managers and **crisis management** staff.

*Method:* An **auto-hermeneutical** phenomenological analysis of six **lived experiences of facilitation** episodes was conducted to understand what the facilitator observed and how a **facilitation** intervention was applied.

*Results:* On-the-fly-facilitation is instantaneous, but draws simultaneously on awareness of the past, present and future. **Facilitation** needs are foreseen during design and they influence current attentiveness and coaching. Unfolding game-play needs to be grasped quickly. Potential future consequences of intervening or not intervening are evaluated within a limited window

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of opportunity. Due to these circumstances, **facilitation** is multi-skilled, arbitrary and fallible. Such **muddiness** of on-the-fly **facilitation** requires courage from the facilitator.

*Conclusions:* In order to better understand how **facilitation** skills and roles actually are performed, the **facilitation** literature desperately needs a larger number of rich empirical accounts of interesting in-situ **facilitation**. Elaborate analysis of such **lived experiences** could develop understanding as to how available skills, situational circumstances as well as the unfolding interaction between players and facilitators actually develop into a facilitation intervention. This could generate more complex theoretical understanding of how to apply **facilitation** skills, in addition to theories that list what skills a facilitator should master.

### Keywords

auto-hermeneutics, facilitation, muddiness, lived experience, coaching, crisis management

Descriptions of what facilitation involves are often presented as laundry lists. In the attempt to be comprehensive, a crucial aspect of facilitation is lost and seldom discussed in literature. Facilitation can be understood as situated live performance (Hofstede et al., 2010) in chaordic learning environments (Leigh & Spindler, 2004), where skills of facilitators interact with the situated nature of how the game evolves just that day, and evoke *on-the-fly-interventions*. This interaction between players and facilitators can sometimes result in memorable learning and sometimes in frustration, i.e. the potential learning impact of a simulation-game is not realized in every performance (Hofstede et al., 2010). Such complexity, fallibility and intuitiveness of in-situ-facilitation is lost when generalizing to typically observed facilitation steps, -actions and -skills.

The aim of this article is to highlight the need to explore the complexity and muddiness of *on-the-fly-facilitation* in more detail. Following Tsoukas (2017) we argue that the facilitation of simulation-games is a complex phenomenon that cannot be fully explained with simple frameworks, and that theories are needed that are capable of explaining the complexity of the facilitation phenomenon. Rich empirical accounts on what in-situ-facilitation involves and how it can be understood are scarce, apart from a few exceptions (Leigh, 2003; Nakamura, 1999; Whiteley & Garcia, 1996). For this article, six facilitation episodes are analyzed following an interpretative auto-hermeneutical research approach (Gorichanaz, 2017; Heidegger, 2010). What did the facilitator intend, observe, understand and feel? How did interventions impact game-play and learning? How can messy issues like attentiveness, courage, timing and intuitiveness be understood? The aim of this contribution is to illustrate the value of sharing

rich empirical accounts of facilitation in order to develop theoretical understanding of *on-the-fly-facilitation*. Instead of creating a general abstraction, the aim of the analysis is to stay close the situatedness and muddiness of *on-the-fly-facilitation*. The article concludes that more research is needed that highlights the inherent complexity of applying general skills in particular situations where the facilitator needs to adapt to *what works and does not work for the current players in the current game*. For practitioners, the article concludes with a recommendation to more consciously reflect on their own facilitation in line with the examples of lived experiences in this article.

## **Background: Laundry Lists and Cookbooks Describing Facilitation**

Facilitation is often described by listing facilitator capabilities. Kortmann and Peters (2017) give overviews of authors that respectively list about 90 (Baker & Fraser, 2005), 41 (Stewart, 2006), 22 (de Vreede et al., 2002), 10 (Kolb et al., 2008), 13 (Vennix, 1999) or 26 (Ackermann, 1996) capabilities. Typically mentioned qualities are: Understanding the context, creating a participatory process, interpreting group dynamics and interpersonal skills (Kortmann & Peters, 2017). Such lists appear informative, but are so general that they do not give many clues as to how to apply each facilitation skill, and certainly not how to apply several of them in combination.

Other authors have pondered about the nature of facilitation in more general terms. Leigh and Spender (2004) argue how facilitators can be more directive in closed simulations and more improvising in open simulations. Kato (2010) and Kriz (2010) show how facilitation can be characterised from different perspectives, varying from a set of tools, leadership, a communicative act, social action (Kato 2010) to giving direction, explaining, motivating and coaching (Kriz, 2010). Kolb et al., (2014) discern four facilitation roles: coach, facilitator, expert and evaluator. Finally, Leigh and Naweed (2019) highlight the management of power relations and how the presence of the facilitator can influence game-play. Whereas all of these illustrations are based on extensive practical facilitation experience of the involved authors, none of these publications include detailed empirical accounts of how facilitation actually is performed.

There are a few examples of articles that include thick empirical descriptions of facilitation episodes. Nakamura (1999) nicely portrays how a facilitator gradually can become more doubtful during a series of facilitations. Leigh (2003) presents examples of how challenging facilitation situations were handled in an experiential learning course. Whiteley and Garcia (1996) represent a dialogue between two facilitators of a group brainstorming session. In order to complexify our understanding of facilitation (Tsoukas, 2017), more such thick empirical accounts of facilitation need to be presented and analyzed in literature.

## **Intervention Context: Crisis Management Training**

The context of the facilitation episodes presented in this article is the use of gaming-simulation for crisis management training. Crisis management training exercises aim to

prepare crisis management professionals on how to perform in the event of a crisis. This can be achieved through full day role-playing exercises where the participants perform collaborative practices under realistic conditions. The exercise facilitators generate a scenario by means of incoming phone calls, role-playing of external stakeholders and newswatches (on internet, radio and TV). The crisis management organization members are alarmed and operate in their usual work environment (one big crisis room, or several rooms in the city hall, depending on what is specified in their crisis plans). They are aware that they are participating in an exercise (and not experiencing a real crisis). In our case, 47 such full day exercises have been designed, performed and evaluated as part of an ongoing action research study where twelve municipalities each participated in one or several such simulation-games (van Laere & Lindblom, 2019). Typically, the trained crisis management organization consisted of 15 to 50 persons, including politicians (the political level), the municipal manager and department heads (management level), and a support staff group dealing with communication and information management (support level). The aim of the exercises was to develop new skills and strategies (explorative training) rather than to test effectiveness (evaluative training). As facilitators, our emphasis was on creating a safe atmosphere of experimentation where failure was accepted as a necessary element of learning. Full-scale exercises were preceded by theoretical workshops and table-top exercises (where participants sit together in one room and give verbal accounts on how they would intend to act given a scenario presented by exercise facilitators). This prepared participants to meet the more complex challenge of putting plans into practice in a role-playing simulation. Scenarios were customized to meet currently prioritized learning goals and the experience level of the municipality. So whereas scenarios were re-used between municipalities, the complexity level of the exercise could be adjusted by tailoring the pace, the amount of distractions, the complexity of the disruption, et cetera. As the crisis organizations were trained from an all hazards philosophy (they should learn general skills that could be applied in any crisis), scenarios varied from for example extreme weather (snow storm), technical breakdowns (electricity failure), infectious diseases (contaminated drinking water) to antagonistic threats (bomb threat). Municipality staff not involved in the crisis management organization and representatives from external stakeholders were used to role-play internal departments, external partners, citizens and media (so called counter-play). They received a rough script from the facilitators some days before the exercise, but had considerable freedom to fill in details themselves and to adapt to the course of action of the crisis management organization, while respecting the main storyline of the scenario. As facilitators, we were two or three persons who all switched between multiple roles during the exercise. These roles involved monitoring whether the scenario unfolded as planned; leading the counter-play; joining the counter-play (i.e. when necessary we could jump in and counter-play an external actor to push the scenario forward); observing and documenting the performance of the crisis management organization (to gather interesting sequences which possibly could be raised in the debriefing); coaching the trainees as active observers (on their request or on our initiative); and orchestrating the briefing and debriefing. Gaming-simulation literature often argues that the facilitator should be in

the background or invisible (Kriz, 2010: 667; Wenzler & Deenen, 2018: 9). However, early simulation-games showed how learning progress was slow, as municipality employees were unexperienced in crisis management and had a hard time putting theory into practice independently. Therefore, we developed an *active coaching approach* where we, in recurrent exercises, initially coached actively on our initiative, and later only passively on their request (van Laere & Lindblom, 2019).

## **Method: Phenomenological Analysis of Lived Experiences**

Our research approach follows an interpretative philosophy and inductive research strategy as our aim is theory building rather than theory testing (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). Action research (Argyris et al., 1982) is applied to obtain the dual outcomes of action (change) and research (understanding), which in this case implies performing facilitation and reflecting on its effectiveness in 47 role-play simulation-games. To achieve our aim of illustrating the complexity of in-situ facilitation we turned to hermeneutical phenomenological analysis (Heidegger, 2010). Auto-hermeneutics involves the systematic observation and interpretation of one's self by going back to and think about one's past and one's memories, and to rethink them and rewrite them (Gorichanaz, 2017). The approach is grounded in the Heideggerian philosophy (Ciborra, 2006; Heidegger, 2010) that a situation (a facilitation episode) always is meaningful through the inner mood, emotions and care of the human being in the situation (the facilitator). Consequently, through purposeful sampling, the first and second author selected six interesting facilitation episodes from hundreds of interventions in 47 simulation-games. Our inclusion criteria aimed at choosing ordinary and extraordinary examples, showing how rather similar situations evoked rather different interventions, and included both expected and surprising situations. The third author was invited in the research process, partly to help positioning our empirical contributions in the gaming-simulation literature, and partly to help evaluate whether the lived experiences were informative for somebody who has not been present during game-execution. The lived experiences are written in the 1<sup>st</sup> person, so you as a reader can, in line with the immersion objective of hermeneutic phenomenology, try to put yourself in the situation, live its experience and draw your own reflexive conclusions (Avison et al., 2017) before turning to our interpretation.

## **Three Lived Experiences about Facilitation of Inactive Players**

The first three episodes describe facilitator responses facing inactivity of trainees. Inactivity could signal inferior game design, a failed briefing, a poorly motivated player (despite good game design and a good briefing) or just something interesting that happens in the game-play (i.e. in our case a breakdown of crisis management practices). So when inactivity is observed it raises a lot of questions: What is happening? Why are they inactive? Is there a problem? What is the problem?

Depending on the diagnosis and other circumstances, an intervention might be desirable, or not.

### *Episode 1: Increasing the Load for Trainees who are Bored*

I am observing a work group of the support staff, the call center. They are sitting at their desk. Nothing happens: almost no citizen calls are coming in. They talk to me: “*We are bored; in previous exercises we got more calls to practice our role; we are not learning anything*”. I propose: “*I do not know why citizens are not ringing. You might discuss what could cause such a pause in incoming calls. Or you could discuss how to improve your work procedures until calling intensifies again*”. I leave the room and check whether the call center number is correctly published on the crisis website and whether there are other deficiencies. The call center number is correct, but I notice that the instructions how to boil water are unspecific (the scenario is drinking-water-contamination). I ask my peer-facilitator leading the counter-play to make them intensify citizen calls and focus on the boiling-issue. This is a potential challenge foreseen in the scenario, and I know the counter-play has prepared example questions on this issue to which my peer facilitator easily can refer. On my way down the stairs, I perform two calls myself, acting as a citizen and disguising my voice. It helps to create immediate pressure on the call center, and it gives me as observer of the training insight in how citizen questions are being answered. After finishing the second call I directly enter the call center as observer. The difference is clear, multiple calls are answered simultaneously now.

### *Understanding the Facilitation in Episode 1: Increasing Load*

*Facilitator Awareness (I see and make sense):* Managing a crisis is not a high-intensity activity for all subgroups throughout the whole event. As such, our scenarios are developed realistically to shift pressure from one group to another and to vary intensity over time. Moreover, counter-play is not fixed, but reacts as to how the play unfolds. Therefore, if the call center number is not published on the website, nobody will ring them; and if information on the website is crystal clear, fewer calls will be generated. What triggers me in this situation is that the players express boredom. Realism is good, but they should not lose interest. I diagnose boredom as a probable scenario failure (lack of load).

*Facilitator intervention (I plan and act):* The needed intervention (more calls from the counter-play) does need to be included with care so the scenario unfolds logically. As I realize it may take some time before my measures will take effect, an immediate intervention is to give the trainees some questions to ponder. This is an immediate response to their complaint (generating trust in our relationship) and it gives pedagogical signal (when you get a natural pause in your crisis management, do take advantage of it by trying to reorganize your work environment). Next, the load is eventually increased, by quickly but carefully designing an instruction for counter-play to increase call intensity. The effectiveness of this tailored intervention takes advantage

of the fact that several possible developments of the scenario were foreseen and prepared.

### *Episode 2: Raise Awareness how a Group can Initiate Reallocation of Tasks and People*

I am observing a crisis management organization that is putting plans-to-action for the first time. Subgroups are in different rooms along a hallway. In every room these subgroups are stressed, trying to keep up with the pace of the scenario, and uncomfortable while practicing their tasks for the first time. When I enter the internet-publishing-group room I meet five people sitting around a table, doing nothing. The contrast is so big that I have to suppress the tendency to start laughing. I realize they must have been here for at least 40 minutes while their colleagues are super-stressed. I feel it would be embarrassing to just sit down and watch them doing nothing, so I instantly decide that I need to discuss my observation with them. I open with: “So, *what’s happening here?*”; and get the answer “Nothing”. I ask “*Why is that?*” and the answer is “*We are waiting for instructions as to what to publish*”. In the continuing deliberation they figure out through responses to my questions that the reason for them not getting instructions might be that they are either forgotten or that the others are too busy to communicate with them. I confirm their analysis by illustrating what I have observed in the other subgroups and shift thereafter to asking: *What can be done about this?*. They argue “*The chief information officer could relocate some of us to the other groups*” and I conclude with asking “*...but what if your information officer is occupied in management meetings*”. Then the group concludes: “*Well, we could offer our support to the other subgroups ourselves*”. I applaud this proposal and leave them.

### *Understanding the Facilitation in Episode 2: Make the Group Aware they can take Initiative*

*Facilitator Awareness (I see and make sense)*: My choice to start a dialogue is made rather instantly when entering the room, but unconsciously based on a lot of similar experiences. The analysis “*Weird; they are doing nothing; as a facilitator, to sit down and stare at them while they are doing nothing would be embarrassing; let’s ask an open-ended question instead*” happens in a matter of seconds upon entering the room. Whereas the purpose of these questions initially is to collect information so, as facilitator, I can understand the situation, the use of open questions simultaneously becomes the actual intervention or can at least be interpreted with hindsight as an intervention.

*Facilitator intervention (I plan and act)*: As the conversation starts in a split second, without prior reasoning, my intervention is created while performing it. There is no plan, there is no goal, there is only an occasion (they are inactive). Whether they should stay inactive or whether something should be changed on their initiative or on my initiative is to be explored. The initial question “*How are things going here?*” is, based on rather unconscious experience, purposefully posed as neutral as possible in order to avoid labelling the behavior of the trainees as positive or negative. When they start

discussing the reasons for being inactive, I observe that they are capable of coming up with their own solutions. Therefore I switch gradually from facilitating reflection (what happened?) to coaching (what could you do about it), instead of turning to an expert style of lecturing (explaining them what to do). Note that while in Episode 1 inactivity was judged as a game design problem (lack of load), here in Episode 2 the inactivity is evaluated as unsatisfactory performance of the crisis management organization.

### *Episode 3: Silence in the Leadership Meeting*

I am observing a crisis meeting of the political board. Long periods of silence occur. Normally there is an intensive debate in such meetings. Are they not functioning? Is there a hidden power struggle in the group? Are they bored? Is my presence disturbing the process? In Sweden, some minutes of silence in groups are common and acceptable, but this is very unnatural and really strange compared to all earlier crisis meetings I have observed. I am confused, do not know what to do, bite on my tongue, think about the song *Sound of Silence*, and do not intervene. When they are talking, they discuss reasonable matters and take good decisions. The same behavior occurs during every meeting (several occasions during the exercise). In the coffee break just before the debriefing I still do not know how to handle this: Is it an issue I should raise in the debriefing in front of all their other employees? I ask the principal politician informally over coffee and cake whether the moments of silence are common in their meetings outside of the crisis exercises, motivating that I am curious as I never have observed this before. The politician proudly explains their meeting philosophy: “*You talk when you have something important to say, otherwise, you keep your mouth shut so others can think in peace*”. I thank my intuition (or luck) that I did not start intervening according to my active-coaching-philosophy and avoided disturbing them in the midst of their training process. The issue is not raised in the debriefing as there were more important things to discuss.

### *Understanding the Facilitation in Episode 3: Doing Nothing*

*Facilitator Awareness (I see and make sense)*: Throughout the whole scene I stay puzzled about how to interpret the silence. In contrast to Episode 2, asking questions is judged as potentially disturbing and interfering, so there is no possibility to gather more information. The lack of understanding for the situation makes me uncomfortable.

*Facilitator intervention (I plan and act)*: Although I could have intervened in spite of incomplete information, the risk of ruining something interesting is deemed larger than missing a necessary intervention. So I do not intervene, but I ponder quite intensively about the pros and cons of intervening and not intervening. I imagine how an intervention would generate the most positive outcomes and how it would generate disastrous outcomes. The main reason not to intervene is the fact that I cannot figure out whether the silence is something negative to be repaired (which would motivate an intervention), or whether the silence is something valuable to observe (which would be destroyed when intervening in it). If I would have intervened, it would have been

in a facilitative learning style (i.e. asking open questions “*Why are you silent; what is the function of this silence?*”) to generate self-reflection.

### *Understanding the Facilitation in the Episodes about Inactive Trainees*

In summary, all three episodes start with an observation of players being inactive (doing nothing in the call center, in the internet-publishing group, and in the political management meeting), but facilitator sense making and intervention take drastically different avenues. In Episode 1 the diagnosis is a *game-load-problem*, in Episode 2 the diagnosis is *passive players* and in Episode 3 the facilitator is puzzled and cannot reach a diagnosis. In episode 1 an intervention is consciously planned and implemented, in episode 2 the intervention arises in interaction (without planning) and in episode 3 many alternatives are envisioned, but none is implemented.

### **Three Lived Experiences about Facilitation in the Valley of Despair**

The following three episodes address a specific learning challenge that often appeared in our exercises: the delegation challenge experienced by the information officer (IO). Normally an IO works rather individually and independently as a topic expert, performing all operative duties autonomously. In crisis, the same person is suddenly backed up by a group of less experienced support staff (up to 15 people in 3 to 5 smaller groups), and the main task of the IO switches to monitoring, coordinating and leading others, rather than being an operative performer. When the IO does not delegate, it is hard to keep pace and eventually the performance becomes ineffective when the IO drowns in tasks that are not carried out. Learning to delegate is thus a typical valley of despair problem (Wenzler & Deenen, 2018: 8): “*each serious game should be designed and facilitated in such a manner that it first brings participants to the valley of despair, helps them then climb up the learning slope, and finally brings them to the plateau of the happy end*”.

#### *Episode 4: The Struggling Information Officer*

As I am aware that the IO will face the challenge of delegating or drowning, I follow the IO as a shadow. Early in the game the IO tries to delegate, by keeping the overview and giving very detailed instructions to each of the four subgroups. As a result, the staff is only carrying out specific instructions and waiting for new orders. Several of them are frustrated because they feel they could do more, but are unsure whether they can take initiatives when the IO has left them and is in management meetings. Subgroups are also lacking overview as the IO is the only one having the big picture. The IO is aware of how their organization has become more and more ineffective and how everybody is getting more and more frustrated. The IO asks me for help while walking through a hallway returning from a management meeting to the subgroups: “*I am delegating, but it does not work: What am I doing wrong?*”. I remind her of the

theoretical workshop we had before the crisis management exercise: “*You delegate small tasks, but you do not delegate responsibility. You are still controlling everything, but you cannot control when you are not there. You need a coordinator who leads the group when you are away, but you did not accept that conclusion from the theoretical workshop.*” This mirroring proves to be exactly what the IO needs. When we enter the information staff area the IO gathers all staff and explains: “*You cannot function because I am the bottleneck. I will give more general directions and you need to step up and coordinate the work between subgroups as well as take responsibility to take decisions while I am away in meetings. Pick a coordinator and make it work*”. Then the IO summarizes the main issues from the management meeting, points out what is most important to be done, and leaves for a meeting with the municipality director. This time, I do not follow the IO as a shadow, but stay to see how the staff reacts to the new orders. They start a little hesitantly. The newly appointed coordinator (CO) checks several times with me to see that they are not missing anything important as this role is completely new for the CO. I do not give much direction but rather push the CO to dare to take initiative. During the debriefing, many highlight the differences between the frustrating start and the promising new organization they tested later on.

#### *Understanding the Facilitation in Episode 4: Successful Coaching*

*Facilitator Awareness (I see and make sense):* Although each IO in the different municipalities is unique, this exercise does exactly follow the pattern that I have witnessed several times before. The IO theoretically understands the need to delegate, and makes a reasonable attempt, but has a hard time putting it in practice. In this case, the IO is aware that the performance is not good and asks for help. The request from the IO signals to me that we have done the same analysis and are in agreement, which makes that I can jump to a direct intervention.

*Facilitator intervention (I plan and act):* As I have been witnessing under two hours how the IO slightly goes downhill in the valley of despair, I have also pondered about the need for intervention. Based on earlier experiences, I find it is preferable for the IO and the staff around her to reflect, reorganize and fix the challenges themselves. On the other hand, I might need to give a helping hand if they get stuck or do not manage to start climbing up from the valley of despair in time. When the IO asks for help I feel excited. As there is limited time while we are walking in the hallway I quickly deliver my analysis in a short concise statement of advice. It is natural for me to formulate it, as the exercise follows an expected pattern, and as I have formulated it similarly to other IOs in other municipalities before. Facilitating feels rewarding when the limited intervention (just reminding the IO of something from the theoretical instructions) has the intended effect. When coaching the CO, I am confirming their suggestions. My main intervention is to boost their confidence in implementing new strategies, rather than influencing their course of action.

### *Episode 5: The Overloaded Information Officer*

Routinely, I start shadowing the IO and the staff supporting the IO as I always do. While it is first not really clear to me, I begin, after a while, to notice that things are awkward. The interaction between the IO and the staff supporting the IO is very minimal. While I would expect the IO to be in the information management room when not at meetings, the IO is gone for very long periods of time. After a while I find out the IO is in a separate room, performing tasks autonomously. The IO looks extremely stressed and pressed, and although it has been clearly expressed (as always) that I am available as a coach, the IO is completely ignoring me. The IO's body language signals '*Leave me alone*'. When I try to initiate a dialogue with the IO in a natural pause the IO responds that there is no time for deliberation. Simultaneously, staff around the IO express they could help the IO more, but feel ignored as well. I become more and more worried and I realize something needs to be done to avoid that the municipality only will learn how they should not be operating. After consultation with my peer-facilitator, I confront the IO the next time we are alone in the IO's room. When I ask the IO to judge how things are going, the IO argues that the pace of the exercise and the pressure on the IO are unrealistically high. I respond by explaining that the pressure would be less if the IO would utilize the support staff rather than doing everything alone. I feel bad and unsatisfied after this discussion. As the interaction between us feels tense, I start staying a distance from the IO and begin to observe the IO so the IO does not notice me. Feeling sorry for the staff around the IO who still feel underutilized, I start giving them suggestions how to support the IO better using their own initiative. Whereas this is a natural part of all our previous exercises it now feels awkward as the IO and I were not in agreement and suddenly it feels as if I am betraying the IO and setting up the organization against the IO.

### *Understanding the Facilitation in Episode 5: Failed Coaching*

*Facilitator Awareness (I see and make sense):* As an expected pattern arises, I first do not notice that something is awkward. When signs of self-reflection and corrective measures are not arising amongst staff and IO, I start looking for explanations and slowly it becomes visible for me that the IO is choosing a strategy to do most things autonomously. As I am aware that the IO's strategy is doomed to fail given the design of the exercise, I feel obliged to protect the IO from completely drowning in duties. I notice the IO is stressed and pressed and want to hint as to what the IO's escape route is. I am also aware that the IO is avoiding me and not open for coaching.

*Facilitator intervention (I plan and act):* All together I am stuck in choosing between two bad options: do nothing and let the IO drown, or try to influence the IO although the IO is clearly signaling with body language that my coaching is not appreciated. After consulting with my fellow-facilitator I do the latter as that feels most ethical (at least I warned and gave advice). This strategy does not work at all, and during the remainder of the day I am pondering whether it would have made any difference if I would have intervened earlier? Maybe the IO had already become stuck too

deep in the valley of despair? But on the other hand, the optimal process is that the IO or the people around the IO would have corrected problems themselves, as they had been extensively warned in the preparing theoretical sessions.

### *Episode 6: The Information Officer who Broke Down*

I am shadowing an IO. As expected, the IO is struggling handling many tasks, the delegation challenge, and leading staff that is inexperienced. Suddenly, about halfway through the exercise, the IO starts crying. I am not prepared for that. After a while when the situation is a bit calmer, I am sitting with the IO in a room. The IO and I are on opposite sides of a table. I still remember how the room smelled and the atmosphere in it. After some time, the IO explains what happened while sobbing. The communicative responsibility is only a minor role of the IOs normal duties, so in everyday organization, the IO is not even the formal head of the communication unit as portrayed in the role-play. I try to comfort the IO by explaining that the way the play evolves, considering the limited resources available, the task is simply impossible to handle properly. I am informing in a soft voice that our role as facilitators is to sort out this situation. I express gently to the IO that these kinds of exercises are aimed to reveal unrealistic expectations in staffing the crisis management organization. I explain that our intention is to re-design the IOs role and responsibility, to free more resources for information - and communication management, and that we have a successful track record in doing so in other municipalities. At first, the IO is a bit reluctant to listen to what I am expressing, but after a while, I experience that the IO is starting to trust me. The IO explains feeling overwhelmed during the role-play, not being able to portray being a professional at work, and feeling a bit embarrassed about starting to cry, i.e., losing face. I am trying to comfort the IO as we calmly discuss the above issues. Meanwhile, I am thrown back in time, when I worked as a veterinary assistant and consoled animal owners that were mourning their animals that died or could not be cured. I do lose track of the amount of time we sat down in that particular room, when we start to share moments of silence, indicating that the issue was solved for the moment, and it appeared to me that this session had naturally come to its end. Tacitly, we both reach that conclusion, and leave the room, putting on our professional roles, I as a facilitator, and the IO as responsible for information - and communication management.

### *Understanding the Facilitation in Episode 6: Comfort-Giving*

*Facilitator Awareness (I see and make sense):* I am aware that the role-play is heading in the usual direction where pressure is building up on the IO. However, as the IO provided a rather calm face before bursting into tears, I did not perceive nor realize that the IO was under so much stress. This becomes an important lesson, as this experience would lead me to intervene earlier the next time.

*Facilitator intervention (I plan and act):* My comfort-providing intervention is not planned but applied intuitively. Unconsciously, skills from my prior occupation as veterinary assistant become useful. Afterwards I am relieved that the IO calmed down

and I am interpreting the outcome that the IO is now trusting me. Simultaneously, I am feeling a bit guilty and embarrassed that the role-played developed into this situation, asking myself what I could have been doing differently in order to avoid the situation from occurring in the first place. Should I have intervened earlier when I realized that the pressure on the IO increased? On the other hand, I am satisfied, although still being a bit emotional, that I successfully coped with the situation to let the IO understand that it is totally fine to start crying, taking the IOs communication role as well as the IOs perspective very seriously.

### *Understanding the Facilitation in the Episodes about the Valley of Despair*

These three episodes show the complexity of facilitating trainees when dealing with issues that lead to the valley of despair. In theory, it sounds reasonable that “*participants need to first experience and understand their own capability gap. After that they should be given the opportunity to learn and improve their performance*” (Wenzler & Deenen, 2018: 8). But in practice, it is rather tricky to determine what the appropriate level of reasonable pain and necessary discomfort entails to gain self-understanding. In our 47 exercises, where basically the same challenge appears again and again, the depth of the valley may be rather different. It is not just about the IO and the facilitator, it depends also on the culture of the municipality, the relation between the IO and other people in the organization, the personality characteristics of the IO, the mood of the day and all kind of small incidents occurring in the exercise. Facilitation is sometimes rewarding and effective, and sometimes embarrassing and frustrating.

### **Discussion: Recognizing the Muddiness of Facilitation**

So, what is the story behind the episodes? From a Heideggerian perspective it is more interesting to recognize the nature of the whole facilitation experience, and to refrain from analyzing facilitation into bits and pieces. What does it imply to be a facilitator? When reading through our own lived experiences again and again it appears how facilitation is instantaneous, multi-skilled, arbitrary and fallible. Following our inductive research strategy, these four characteristics are our suggested ingredients for a new kind of facilitation theory.

#### *Facilitation is Instantaneous*

Facilitation implies sense making and intervening within a limited window of opportunity. Within a few seconds or minutes you need to grasp the current sequence within the context of the larger game play, evaluate potential consequences of not intervening or various ways of intervening, and initiating the intervention before the window of opportunity closes. Looking at our episodes it becomes clear that intervening is often intuitive and unconscious, but also draws upon available intentions, learning goals and previous experiences and in addition considers possible future consequences. Heidegger (2010) argues through the concept of *Dasein* how the current moment of

being (i.e. in our case the current episode of facilitation) is staged by its past and by its expected future in the present. Walsh and Andersen (2013) explain a similar view when analyzing facilitation with the concept *fusion of horizons* (Gadamer, 1975).

### *Facilitation is Multi-Skilled*

A facilitator is a Jack or Jill of all trades. As illustrated in our six episodes, you need to be both scenario director, motivator, coach, expert, analyst, observer and you need to be able to instantly switch between asking neutral and reflective questions, shortly summarizing an honest image of what a person is doing right or wrong, or instantly choosing between being confronting, comforting, demanding or supporting. Being *a Jack or Jill of all trades, but a master in none* requires courage. You need to dare to intervene while knowing that the effect of the intervention probably will be of moderate quality. The quality of the intervention depends partly on the facilitator's preparation and skill set, but is, in its current performance, also heavily dependent on the circumstances of the day and the interaction between the facilitator and the players involved.

### *Facilitation is Arbitrary*

Simulation-games have learning goals. Players have intentions, facilitators have intentions. It is easy to analyze simulation-games from this perspective and see many instances of goal-directed behavior and intentionality. Potential inactivity of players and the IOs valley of despair were envisioned and observed as our attention was focused on them. Appropriate facilitation interventions were envisioned and applied. However, a little provocative, we would argue that facilitation also is extremely arbitrary. Arbitrary in what I as a facilitator observe and arbitrary in what intervention I implement. First, I do not see and understand everything when 50 individuals in different rooms interact during a period of about 6 hours, I do however wander around and look for things that attract my attention. Next, within those 6 hours there are thousands of moments where I could intervene, but I cannot intervene that constantly as that would completely destroy the game play. So I pick my moments, intentionally, but also very, very arbitrarily: I could as well have seen or picked another issue or moment in time to intervene. And next, I can intervene in multiple ways, and again I pick, somewhat intentionally, but very, very arbitrarily one of many possible interventions. It gives comfort to say I intervene intentionally. But, if we are really honest, maybe it does not matter what I pick and how I intervene: they will learn something anyway regardless of what I do, don't or how I do it.

### *Facilitation is Fallible*

Every time you choose to intervene, you know how you are creating a balancing act between reigniting the game play and the learning experience, or disturbing and destroying it. The fallible nature of facilitation is most visible in our Episodes 4, 5 and 6 about the valley of despair. We could not have been prepared any better. Throughout

a 10 year research project we have fine-tuned, performed and evaluated the same kind of game 47 times. Although the scenarios differ, the municipalities differ, the same challenge of delegation returns within every game-play. Before and after each performance we have elaborately discussed how far the IO (and the staff around the IO) should go down into the valley of despair and how we are to get them out again. So we have many potential interventions prepared. But still, facilitation is sometimes highly successful and sometimes a failure. Did we press them too much? Did we give them a helping hand too early? As a facilitator I have to keep faith and courage, to dare to make sense and intervene instantaneously in the small window of opportunity available, and realize an intentional but rather arbitrary intervention of moderate quality that either will fly or fail.

### **Future Research Avenues**

Facilitation literature would greatly benefit from more episodes containing rich *empirical accounts* of facilitation in addition to the six presented in this article. Furthermore, theoretical understanding of what facilitation involves could be developed by digging deeper in the *situation* concept (Ciborra, 2006; Endsley, 1995; Heidegger, 2010; Walsh & Andersen, 2013). As facilitators we are always making sense and intervening in the midst of a situation. Walsh and Andersen (2013) show how concepts as *preconception* (Heidegger, 2010) or *fusion of horizons* (Gadamer, 1975) can help to recognize the muddiness of facilitation in more detail. Finally, it would be interesting to develop a methodology of muddiness, i.e. a repertoire of research methods that support the complexifying of facilitation by recognizing unique and discriminating details in empirical observations rather than focusing on illuminating general reoccurring patterns.

### **Conclusion**

On-the-fly facilitation is instantaneous, multi-skilled, arbitrary and fallible. An auto-hermeneutical phenomenological analysis of the lived experience of six facilitation episodes provides an alternative illustration of what it implies to be a facilitator, compared to describing facilitation with a laundry list of skills. Future research could either focus on sharing more such lived experiences, or on performing a deeper analysis of the instantaneous or fallible character of the facilitation situation, or on explaining how facilitators are multi-skilled. For practitioners, this article is intended to inspire a more conscious reflection on their own facilitation. Rather than only focusing on what game participants learn, facilitators should also reflect on the heart (what did you feel?) and mind (what did you think?) of their own facilitation in order to nurture their courage and capability.

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