

SYNERGY – the Asynchronous Facilitation Project

1. Project title

An Evaluation of the Role of Asynchronous Facilitation in Effective Organisational Development

2. Introduction and definition

Facilitated meetings can be a powerful agent for planning and change. This project seeks to address the major challenge of getting the right people involved in a given facilitated meeting, irrespective of their geographical location and existing diary commitments.

The efficacy of traditional ‘gathered’ groups is widely recognised, while conferencing technologies, including video and telephone conferencing, have in recent years been used to enable groups to work together synchronously when geographically distributed. These ‘distributed’ meetings need good chairing in order to manage the exercise, and more complex meetings may be ‘facilitated’ by a skilled facilitator.

This project takes a further step and will explore the new territory of *asynchronous formally facilitated meetings*, where those involved are *not only geographically distributed but are not expected to respond to one another in ‘real time’*, so releasing participants from a strict diary commitment. This is possible at a basic level through a novel application of software that is in any case new to HE in the UK, and which can offer appropriate web-based ‘any place, any time’ communication. We also have access to additional technologies that may be needed in order to maximise the effectiveness of the ‘meetings’ conducted under this arrangement.

3. Management and team

The project will be run by the University of East Anglia, through its Centre for Staff and Educational Development (CSED), in association with members of the People Development Unit (PDU) at the University of Hertfordshire.

Much of the work will be done by a team of seven CSED staff development practitioners, of widely different staff development specialisms but who hold in common facilitation skills in the ‘gathered’ setting. They will be complemented as necessary by facilitators from the PDU.

The work will be supported by a consultant (Ruth Goodall) with whom many of the team have previously worked and who led a successful GMP-funded project around facilitation, ‘*Learning the Habit of Innovation: Harnessing Technology for Strategic Planning*’.

One of the present team (Gurpreet Gill) worked full-time as a research assistant on that project, and she will act as the core project worker, working with and having a co-ordinating role between the other team members.

The project will be co-managed by two senior members of the team, Nigel Curson (Project Leader) and Paddy Anstey.

Steering Group membership represents the project team and managerial/leadership interests:

Nigel Curson, Director of MA in HE Practice, UEA (Chair)

Dr Paddy Anstey, Senior Staff Development Officer, UEA

Gurpreet Gill, Staff Development Officer and iLab Manager, UEA

Prof. Jacqueline Burgess, Head of School of Environmental Sciences, UEA

Dr Jill Robinson, Associate Dean (Teaching), Faculty of Health, UEA

Dr Andrea Blanchflower, Faculty Manager, Social Sciences Faculty, UEA

Kevin Flinn, Leadership and Organisational Development Facilitator, and
Project Manager of UHMindset, University of Hertfordshire.

4. Aims and objectives relevant to LF purposes

We wish to determine if, and under what circumstances, web-based *asynchronous facilitated meetings* offer a useful approach to facilitated work within and between HEIs, and associated organisations. Does the asynchronous approach add value to what we do as staff/organisation developers, and can it significantly help the development of our institutions by better enabling the right people to be involved in a given facilitated meeting? In what areas can it be used to enhance the quality and effectiveness of what we do? We wish to explore and describe some specific examples of the use of asynchronous facilitation and carry out an evaluation of the effectiveness of the approach in those situations, to identify both the benefits and the pitfalls.

We further believe that for such work to be successful, facilitators will need in part to rethink their implementation of standard approaches to facilitation (see, for example, John Heron's *The Complete Facilitator's Handbook* – Kogan Page, 1999); it is certainly *not* simply a question of learning lessons from those who teach 'remotely' and need to keep discussion boards running. Moreover, we want to include in our consideration some of the more structured facilitated approaches, such as Action Learning Sets or Creative Problem Solving.

In summary, our objectives are to develop practical facilitation techniques appropriate to asynchronous facilitation and to determine the parameters within which successful application may be anticipated, with the aim of maximising the efficacy of facilitated groups when run in that mode, for the benefit of our institutions and other HE organisations.

5. Methodology

This project will

(1) review the settings where facilitation is most often encountered in OD/SD, in terms of both approach, and broad application. From these, a small selection of settings where facilitation is used will be chosen, to investigate in asynchronous mode. Examples could include, for example, the use of Action Learning Sets, Creative Problem Solving, or perhaps the World Café type of environment. Choice of settings will be made on the basis of probable suitability to this different mode, and applicability to the demands of our routine facilitated OD/SD work

(2) by experimentation, reflection and analysis investigate the chosen settings for facilitation, in turn, in order to compare and contrast the efficacy and practicalities of that setting when run in the conventional 'gathered' way, and when run in a distributed asynchronous way supported by appropriate technology.

(3) place considerable emphasis on dissemination, given its critical role in order that the project 'makes a difference' to the community. Part of the dissemination will be by asynchronous facilitated sessions (ie we

will use the product to disseminate itself), which will be designed to not only give experience of this approach, but also to capture the feelings of facilitators across our community towards it, and perhaps form the basis for further work.

This present project will embrace activities in the relatively local setting of UEA (a '94-Group' HEI) and its research park but also include, for comparison, activities at the University of Hertfordshire (a 'Coalition of Modern Universities' HEI), and at least one example of the facilitation of a group comprising members of the Eastern Region Forum (of which both UEA and University of Hertfordshire are members), in which we will apply asynchronous facilitation on a *regional* basis.

To give good link-up between the various events and ensure that maximum use is made of the experience of the prior events, every facilitated event in the project – whichever team member is in charge and wherever they are based – will also be supported by the core project worker.

We are aware of the necessary limitations of the comparisons proposed under (2), and will be careful in our claims. We will also draw on asynchronous models from the e-learning literature.

6. Intended outcomes and outputs

Outcomes will be a better understanding of issues involved in running web-based asynchronous facilitated groups so that facilitators can know when this approach might be appropriate and how to best approach the facilitation task – with the result that the benefits of professionally facilitated meetings may be extended to groups that would not have been able to convene under other circumstances.

This work will also enable us to propose additional features that would be desirable but not yet conveniently implemented in the software that we have available.

Outputs will be (a) one or more *briefings* to the SD/OD practitioner community; (b) one or more *workshops* about the project, themselves run as asynchronous facilitated sessions, so that Facilitators can experience at first hand matters that we are considering; (c) a *Handbook for Facilitators* who wish to work in this mode, describing good practice discerned from the work to date, and pointing out pitfalls.

7. Intended benefits to the project partners and wider HE community

Conventionally facilitated groups are already used to investigate and/or resolve a wide range of issues in HE, both within and between institutions. Among these are strategic and organisational issues, with facilitated groups being used in or by, for example...

- Leadership Foundation Development programmes
- The 1994 Group Senior Managers Forum
- Institutional Organisation Development Programmes
- Process reviews
- Awaydays
- Focus Groups
- Project Planning
- Curriculum Development
- Team Building
- Business Strategy

Any mechanism such as that proposed here, which can assist in the application of facilitated groups, therefore has immediate and wide benefit – both to the project partners and the wider HE community.

Particular examples of application are in support of the evolving UEA/University Campus Suffolk links, and of cooperation between UEA and other HEIs in cross-HEI group mentoring and coaching. Both

project partners also have immediate plans for trialling this approach to support aspects of leadership development.

The approach also has the potential to help organisations such as LFHE, HEA and the SDF to run facilitated asynchronous discussions that could help in the dissemination/embedding of information, perhaps generated by their funded projects (as proposed to support the dissemination from *this* project). This study would therefore be timely as an adjunct to the present SDF work for the HEA, concerning ways to improve the dissemination from LGM projects.

Besides these higher level benefits, by determining suitable skills and appropriate technology to facilitate groups asynchronously, this work also seeks to:

- offer staff greater flexibility in the use of their time (a particular benefit to senior staff whose available time is limited and who have very full diaries)
- free up time from travel to/from meetings
- in some cases reduce travel (and perhaps avoid subsistence costs), which will both reduce direct costs to the institution, and help to reduce its carbon footprint.

At the individual participant level, facilitated asynchronous groups can offer the added security of complete anonymity when dealing with highly sensitive or controversial issues, because (being web-based) they are not face-to-face. For example, the approach can support the University's Equality and Diversity agenda by conducting focus group and survey activity with distributed participants, asynchronously, allowing topics to be handled with greater honesty and sensitivity.

There are also accessibility benefits for individuals with particular disabilities because (e.g.) mobility or requiring more time to respond now cease to be an issue. In terms of cultural diversity this approach to group work may encourage greater engagement from those for whom English is not their first language and where a conventional face to face, time-constrained setting could be problematic.

We also believe there may be general advantages in working asynchronously because, within the timescales given to participants by the facilitator:

- contributions can be made 'as and when' a thought or idea occurs
- the meeting is ongoing in the sense that matters do not have to be left (forgotten?) until the next meeting, so making possible a greater continuity of thought that can allow ideas to grow and develop – also with the possibility of reference to resources (including people) to help progress matters
- the facilitator has more time to reflect on progress and better manage the overall process

8. Milestones (quarterly)

Project duration: 1 January – 31 December 2008

Jan-Mar	Steering Group meeting (1) Literature review - approaches to conventional facilitation and relevant issues from e-learning Prioritise facilitation settings to try asynchronously Plan and start running asynchronous facilitated groups and compare with running conventional 'gathered' groups
April-June	Promote 'work in progress' at SDF Spring Conference, UEA, 1-2 April 08 Steering Group meeting (2)

	Continue asynchronous facilitated groups and compare with running conventional 'gathered' groups
July-Sept	Steering Group meeting (3) Start to draft the Handbook for final dissemination Continue asynchronous facilitated groups and compare with running conventional 'gathered' groups Start to prepare the video or podcast Briefing for final dissemination
Oct-Dec	Steering Group meeting (4) Continue working on products for dissemination, in readiness for a presentation/workshop and product release at... Staff Development Conference (LF/SDF, November) Run asynchronously facilitated sessions for HE facilitators as part of the dissemination (mid/late Nov, early Dec) Final report to LF

9. Plans for dissemination

We recognise the critical role of dissemination in order that the project 'makes a difference' to the community. We will liaise with the ODHE group in this matter and plan to:

- Establish a web presence at an early stage, which will be updated as the project progresses
- Within the Region, disseminate by using the study to undertake ERF business, and so actively involve regional OD/SD practitioners
- Promote the 'work in progress' at the SDF Conference April 08, which is expected to have an OD slant
- Produce a Briefing, provided as a video (probably a podcast), plus a supporting Handbook for HE facilitators and staff developers in general – distributed on a CD/DVD, and also available on SDF/LF websites
- Offer a presentation or workshop at the SDF/LF Conference in November 08. The conference would also be used to encourage participation in...
- A series of distributed asynchronous facilitated sessions on 'distributed asynchronous facilitation' for the HE community – which could additionally be advertised via ODHE/SDF/LF