

1

Introduction

in which I identify “process” as the theme of this explication and preview the conclusions about process which I will draw and illustrate from my experience and my publications

Process

Process ... It may be defined as *how* we do what we do. When we debate politics, for instance, the content is “politics”. The process is “debate”. As I write this explication the process is “writing” for me, “reading” for you.

Imagine a facilitator wishing to decide if a small group activity can be drawn to a close. Consider the effect for participants of the following questions.

“How much more time do small groups require?” or

“Who needs some more time?” or

“Does anyone need another thirty seconds?”

Each of these has different effects on the participants. There are more choices than only these three. Similar choices occur very often in the course of facilitating a process. Moment by moment, skilled facilitators make decisions like this.

Process facilitation may be more effective when it is based on good theory. In the end, however, a facilitator has to manage the present process in the moment. I'm more than usually interested in theory, and I think I'm more aware than many facilitators of why I do what I do. When it matters most, however, I don't have time to be analytic. I have to act in the moment. Facilitation, I will argue, is a performing art. The facilitator adjusts the process from instant to instant in response to what happens.

For instance a sentence is repeated using different words in response to puzzled expressions. An unplanned extra activity or step is inserted when a facilitator judges that some essential outcome will not otherwise be achieved. A process is abandoned or modified because reactions unexpectedly reveal it as irrelevant or too threatening. Pace is speeded or slowed in response to participant reactions. The wording of an instruction is changed on the run to give extra emphasis to a point participants have so far neglected.

What are you then to make of the descriptions of process in this explication and the associated documents? The descriptions of processes do have a place in all this. Novice facilitators don't have enough experience to design effective processes for every need. Experienced facilitators have mental models to guide their processes; these mental models can be more useful (and can be more often tested) if explicit.

Whatever their experience, facilitators are likely to resort to the literature and to colleagues from time to time. They may wish to keep up to date. They may need a process for a specific purpose. Process descriptions serve therefore to capture some aspects of processes on paper.

I am arguing that a particular performance, if skilled, is likely to be responsive to the emerging situation and therefore necessarily flexible. A description on paper — or a “recipe” in the facilitator’s head — may seem mechanical by comparison. An inherent tension thus exists between the performance and the description or model.

There is some benefit then in bringing the inflexible description on paper closer to the flexible process of a facilitator in action. It is a challenge to capture enough of the process to be useful without being overwhelming.

In addition there is a further difficulty.

The invisibility of process

Most of the time, to most people, process is barely visible. In many situations there is an accustomed way of behaving, a set of tangible or intangible rules to follow. We don’t have to follow the rules consciously. We can behave automatically while we focus our attention on the content that is being discussed.

Most of our institutions have set ways of behaving. In meetings we follow Robert’s Rules (Robert, 1986) or some local variation. In parliament there are set procedures (often based on the same Robert’s Rules) and a Speaker to ensure that they are followed, in action if not in spirit. Our courts are rule-bound. In our schools and universities there is often a surprising sameness in the processes used even when the content differs widely.

To most people, then, process does not require much attention. Some may even regard it as esoteric. There is one way to behave? When we have learned the one way we need not attend to it. Our conscious attention is taken up with the content of discussion. We manage the process in the background, as it were — unconsciously.

There is almost always process. Whatever we do — drive a car, carry on a conversation, write a letter, discipline a subordinate, run for the bus — there is a “how” to what we do. Process provides something of a common denominator to link together many different activities.

In this document I am particularly concerned with process as it applies to learning, communication, change and research. As process is part of the underpinning of each of these I can draw on any one of them to illuminate the others.

Process facilitation

There are people who are members of a growing process profession — process facilitation, or “process consultation” as Edgar Schein (1988, 1999) called it. Their skills are those required to design or change or manage processes. Many of them call themselves “facilitators” — they facilitate the problem-solving or the decision making or whatever the content task happens to be.

Many of them, too, carry out their profession as a performing art. They bring their prior experience to bear on the present situation. They do and say what has been useful for them in the past, choosing from their repertoire to suit the present situation. Some can barely explain how they do this let alone why they do it.

That’s true of much of the behaviour of most of us. In fact John Peirce guesses that “over 99 [per cent] of what we do day in and day out” is tacit [2005: 131].

In acting from tacit knowledge, facilitators are similar to many other practitioners who acknowledge that their work is a performing art. Examples include many managers (Vaill, 1991) or teachers (Sarason, 1999) or even philosophers (Saarinen and Slotte, 2003) or portrait artists (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005).

It is as if their memory is in their muscles. As Michael Polanyi (1966: 4) put it in his seminal book, “we can know more than we can tell”.

My experience

So we are all designers and facilitators of processes. Some of us do so without being aware even that we do. Some of us acknowledge ourselves as facilitators of process, though without always being conscious of why we do what we do. Some of us wish we could be aware to some extent of the how and the why of our facilitation. It is to this third body of people that I write.

I have been a conscious designer and facilitator of process for over 30 years now. For almost all of that time I have helped others learn the relevant concepts and skills. I speak, therefore, not as a novice. I can claim to be reasonably well practised at this exotic profession. As I am by nature both reflective and sceptical I can also claim that I speak with more than average understanding.

My own interests reflect this experience and orientation. They are in the facilitation of process, in the design of processes which function well, and in helping others to learn processes and use them effectively and with understanding.

The explication

In this explication I explore the nature of process. Illustrating my exploration with books and papers I have written I describe some of the ways in which processes can be designed and facilitated. My aim is to render the esoteric more ordinary, more within the grasp of those to whom it has previously been invisible or ignored. Part of my wish is to show how processes can be described in detail without becoming mechanistic. It is possible, while being detailed, to

preserve the flexibility which allows them to be tailored in the moment to the demands of the situation. A related wish is to place process understanding more within the reach of novices who have not previously thought much about process.

I've assumed that you won't wish to do more than sample the accompanying documentation. As each document is referred to, I therefore provide a citation and a brief summary. This and the accompanying discussion will give you enough understanding of the contribution made by the document without necessarily having to read the original. You are of course most welcome to read whichever documents you wish.

Contribution to knowledge

To foreshadow the contribution to knowledge which these documents represent, here are some of what you will notice as you read the chapters of this explication.

There are practical contributions in the form of processes I have designed or co-designed or modified. Almost all include both process design and a theoretical rationale or associated concepts. Included are processes for data collection and interpretation:

- *convergent interviewing*, a rigorous yet flexible process for eliciting in-depth information in a way which is responsive to the informant and is efficient
- *structured focus groups*, a form of focus group which is robust in the hands of a novice facilitator and at the same time can handle more diverse and larger or smaller groups than conventional focus groups
- *group feedback analysis*, a variation on a technique developed by Frank Heller (1969; Heller and Brown, 1995), modified to increase informant participation and commitment to action without jeopardising rigour.

There are processes for resolving conflict or improving relationships, again mostly accompanied by concepts which help to explain their operation:

- *conflict management*, a combination of nested processes powerful enough to resolve difficult conflicts yet learnable enough to be useful for relatively inexperienced practitioners
- *option 1.5* (“option one and a half”), a conflict management and decision making process for groups which have become polarised
- an approach to *team building*, developed through analysing conceptually what has to happen for a team to be cohesive and productive
- *personal history trip* (with Tim Dalmau), a small-group relationship building exercise which builds relationships by legitimising high self-disclosure.

There are processes and concepts for cultural diagnosis and change, developed jointly with Tim Dalmau:

- *history trip*, an identity-building process for an organisation
- *discussing the undiscussable*, a process for improving the culture of openness within a group
- a *diagnostic model* for defining the cultural issues in an organisation and choosing an appropriate intervention.

Other intervention processes (and supporting concepts) include:

- *search*, a workbook-based one-day version of a visioning exercise, modified from the approach of Fred and Merrelyn Emery (see Emery, M., and Devane, 1999; Emery, M., and Purser, 1996)
- the *Snyder evaluation process*, substantially elaborated and extended from an undocumented process I learned from Wes Snyder¹

This select list does not include various processes for personal development and communication and group facilitation scattered throughout this thesis and the accompanying documents. *Helping groups to be effective* and *Values in action*,² to choose two documents, each include several processes.

1. At the time, a colleague at the University of Queensland.
2. Both book-size publications.

More theoretical contributions (all with practical implications or applications) include:

- a “*dialectic engine*” for guiding data collection and analysis in ways which are both responsive to the situation and rigorous
- the *information chain*, a conceptualisation based on the ideas of Chris Argyris and Don Schön (e.g. 1974), described in *Helping groups to be effective* and *Frameworks for third party conflict management*,³ useful in communication and conflict management
- the concept of metaprocesses; these are processes for designing or learning processes
- an analysis in chapter 3 of this explication showing how practitioner theories and experimentally-derived theories can be related
- the concept (and process) of escalating interventions, an approach to group facilitation which can be used by group members as well as facilitators⁴
- the concept (and process) of *making the process visible*, used to intervene in a group in ways which share the responsibility with participants
- the concept of *strategic concepts*, useful in unfreezing participants or reframing their perceptions.⁵ I identify some of these later in the thesis
- the extension of Stanley Coopersmith’s (1967) recommendations for child-rearing to develop a model of leader / team or educator / class relationship.

In addition there are the many concepts accompanying the process contributions mentioned above. This explication then adds a contribution of its own: the description in chapter 7 of the nature of robust processes. It is a theoretical contribution with usable and practical implications.

3. Both are documents attached to this explication.
4. This and the next entry are described in *Helping groups to be effective*, a bound publication in the final volume of the thesis.
5. “Unfreezing” is preparing for change by being willing to abandon ideas and perceptions; “reframing” is a change in the meaning that a participant attributes to a situation or event.

I think my most important contribution to knowledge is less tangible than the items in the lists above. It consists of the thousands of people who have learned process skills and understanding with my support and modelling. You may catch glimpses of it in the learning designs of chapter 4. It may also be apparent to some extent in the attempts to make process clear in the documents attached to this explication.

Most of these contributions listed above will be described in chapters 4 to 6 and to some extent, chapter 3. Before that, there are some other preliminaries to be addressed.

Thesis structure

Chapter 2, which follows, provides some context. It contains a brief chronology of my work history. It identifies the most important of the theories and concepts which guide much of my work. Completing the preliminary sections Chapter 3 outlines some of the epistemological assumptions which guide the thesis.

Then follow in turn three chapters on process. Each provides some directly relevant background, identifies relevant writing that I have done, and draws some conclusions about process design and facilitation. Chapter 4 discusses learning processes in the classroom and training room, with a particular emphasis on experiential and democratic approaches. Chapter 5 considers change processes for community and organisation development and related applications. In Chapter 6 the emphasis is on research processes, especially action research and evaluation.

It might appear from this summary that the three areas — learning, change, research — are more independent than they actually are. It will become apparent as we proceed that they overlap substantially. Each of them informs

almost all of my work. Though the organisation of them here is roughly chronological they are taken separately as much for convenience of exposition as for any other reason.

Chapter 7 then draws together the thoughts which arise from looking back at almost three decades of experience. A brief chapter 8 then gathers the important conclusions and contributions, reflects on the thesis as a whole, and looks ahead to the future.

Figure 1.1 captures the structure graphically.

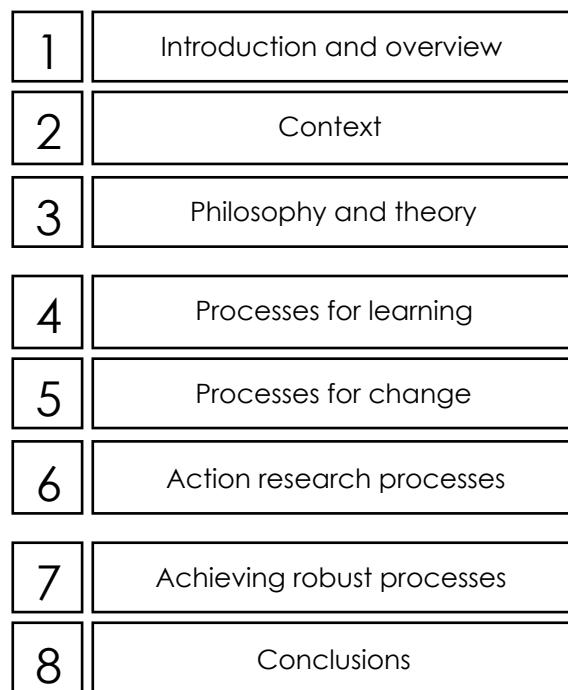


Fig. 1.1 Thesis structure

At its best and most flexible, facilitation is as much art as science. The processes which skilled facilitators use are often designed and implemented without conscious awareness. This raises an important question. How can I do justice in

a description to processes which take place in action, and which are flexible and creative? To this important question I'll return later.

Chapter 2, which follows, provides a background against which the ideas informing the thesis will be more evident.

