

Information Management Resource Kit

Module on Building Electronic Communities and Networks

UNIT 5. ONLINE FACILITATION

LESSON 2. FACE-TO-FACE AND ONLINE FACILITATION

NOTE

Please note that this PDF version does not have the interactive features offered through the IMARK courseware such as exercises with feedback, pop-ups, animations etc.

We recommend that you take the lesson using the interactive courseware environment, and use the PDF version for printing the lesson and to use as a reference after you have completed the course.



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Objectives

At the end of this lesson, you will be able to:

- identify similarities and differences between face-to-face and online facilitation.



Introduction



The role of the facilitator, both online and offline, is to make it easier for groups to work together and achieve their goals.

While there are many similarities between face-to-face and online groups, and the core facilitation tasks are the same, there are also important differences.

As a consequence, an online facilitator needs to handle certain tasks and challenges in a different and new way, or deal with completely new problems.

This lesson will focus on these differences.

Online and offline groups

The two most important differences between face-to-face and online groups relate to **space** and **time**:



FACE-TO-FACE



A **face-to-face** meeting, workshop or discussion takes place with all participants **in the same place at the same time**.

ONLINE



An **online** meeting, workshop or discussion takes place with participants in different places, and (usually) **asynchronously** – with participants **separated in time as well as place**.

Online and offline groups

Time and place influence many aspects of the group:

In a face-to-face group...	In an online group...
Verbal communication is the main mode of communication, supported by non-verbal communication such as body-language, behaviour, and visible appearances that may provide information about the participant's gender, age, race, mood, and status.	Text is the main mode of communication. Non-verbal communication is very limited, and there are no "physical cues" such as tone of voice or gestures to communicate meaning.
Participants can generally see, hear (even touch!) other participants, which breaks down anonymity.	There may be a feeling of anonymity among participants, who feel they do not know (and are not known by) others in the group.
Communication is immediate.	With asynchronous groups communication is not immediate.
The facilitator has (at least some) control over physical factors such as seating arrangements, timing of breaks and so on – and can use these as a facilitation tool.	The facilitator has no control over physical factors such as how and when group members access the Internet.

Online and offline groups

In your opinion, how do the following aspects relate to face-to-face and online groups?

a	In a face-to-face group...	In an online group...	b

1 Group meets for fixed period of time. Possibilities for extending this time are usually very limited.

3 No technological skills are required in order to access the group.

2 The individual participant decides time and location to attend the discussion.



4 Group members may face other demands on their time and attention.

Click on each option and drag it to the corresponding box.
When you have finished, click on the Confirm button.



Online and offline facilitation tasks

Differences between face-to-face and online groups impact **tasks of offline and online facilitators**.

For example, in designing group activities...



FACE-TO-FACE	ONLINE
 <p>Activities are in large measure sequential: topics are discussed one-by-one, with occasional use of parallel sessions.</p>	 <p>Many activities may run parallel. The facilitator has to set up different "threads" for parallel discussion of various topics.</p>

In housekeeping...

FACE-TO-FACE	ONLINE
 <p>The facilitator announces logistics-type information: facilities, special requests etc.</p>	 <p>The facilitator circulates "house rules" and netiquette ("network etiquette") guidelines for acceptable behaviour in online communities.</p>



Online and offline facilitation tasks



Some aspects of the discussions are different. For example:

FACE-TO-FACE	ONLINE
 <p>Discussion is oral and immediate.</p> <p>To take decisions and agree on action, the facilitator asks participants to indicate agreement orally or by a show of hands. Decisions are finalized in "real time".</p> <p>The facilitator has to summarize the discussions quickly with little time for reflection, and presents summaries orally in real time.</p>	 <p>Discussion is written, and (except in synchronous online spaces) there is a time lag of hours, days or more between comments.</p> <p>The facilitator asks participants to indicate agreement in writing, or by responding to an online poll. Except in synchronous online spaces, decisions can take days or more to be finalized.</p> <p>Except in synchronous online spaces, the facilitator has time to process written information about decisions.</p>

Online and offline facilitation tasks

Throughout a meeting, online and offline facilitators have the same tasks, such as **ensuring listening and understanding** and **managing conflict**. However...

FACE-TO-FACE	ONLINE
 <p>"Listening" is aural. Even if communication is documented (through written notes or through audio or video recordings), facilitator and participants are responding to what they have just heard. Facilitator needs to focus on the moment.</p>	 <p>"Listening" means interpreting written messages. Communication is documented, and there is time to reflect on interpretation.</p>

FACE-TO-FACE	ONLINE
 <p>Conflict needs to be resolved in a short period of time. Not always possible to deal with conflict away from main group.</p>	 <p>Conflict can be resolved over a period of days or weeks. Easy and sometimes more appropriate to communicate privately with individuals to help resolve conflicts.</p>

Same problems, new solutions



Imagine you see participants to a face-to-face meeting slumping in their seats and yawning.

A diagnosis of low energy levels is obvious!

As facilitator, you can address this by calling a five-minute break and getting participants to stretch and walk around the room.

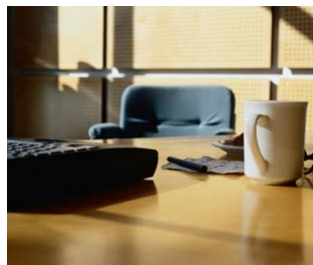
In an online discussion, you may notice that there are very few postings or responses to questions.

Unlike the yawning face-to-face group, the diagnosis is not clear.

You may have to look at other possibilities (e.g. confusion, community members being on holiday, etc.) before concluding that the problem is low energy levels, and addressing this through a new activity or a change of pace.



Same problems, new solutions



As opposed to face-to-face meetings, in online meetings there are no **visual cues** to help you understand silence or recognize a low energy level. Moreover, how the facilitator identifies and addresses these problems is different.

In these situations, the online facilitator may have to rely on **different techniques to achieve the same goals** as the face-to-face facilitator.

Issues requiring more effort

Facilitators need to sustain motivation of the group's participants, for example during a meeting.

In your opinion, is this task **more challenging** for an online or a face-to-face facilitator?

- online facilitator
- face-to-face facilitator

Please click on the answer of your choice

Issues requiring more effort

Participant motivation is a big issue for the online facilitator, while it may be less time consuming in face-to-face facilitation.

In a face-to-face group participants are not always highly motivated to take an active part in discussions.

However, they are to some extent a "captive audience". Once they are **physically present** in the room, people often (though not always) think they "might as well participate".



Participants in an online community have **many other immediate demands and distractions** on their time.

Sustaining motivation and active participation on an ongoing basis is a particular challenge for the online facilitator.

Issues requiring more effort

In your opinion, what strategy works best to **encourage participant motivation** in an online space?

- Explain how easy it is to write a message to the group.
- Make sure that all participants are introduced to each other and understand and support the common purpose of the group.
- Make it easier to contribute by providing the participants with a ready-made plan of action.

Please click on the answer of your choice

Issues requiring more effort



Overcoming anonymity and **building trust and relationships** can be a particular challenge for the online facilitator.

If participants have never met, particularly if they come from different language groups, cultures, regions, or if there are any other significant differences between them, community building will require a high level of ongoing effort from the facilitator.

The facilitator will also have to pay close attention to ensuring understanding across the different groups.

Issues requiring more effort

Facilitating **ongoing interaction** is another challenging task for an online facilitator.



While some groups come together online in order to achieve specific outcomes (e.g. collaborative projects), many online groups are **ongoing and have broader aims**, such as general networking and sharing of information.

Facilitators need to sustain participation in the long term, without a formal agenda to structure community interaction.

The membership of such groups is also likely to **change over time**, and the facilitator needs to be aware of the changes in group dynamics this may bring.

Online facilitation challenges

Finally, the facilitator of an online space is likely to experience **challenges that are unique to the online environment**:



UNEQUAL ACCESS

Unequal access to the online space because of limitations in Internet access or computer skills can create frustration, irritation, and uneven participation in the discussion and information exchange.

The facilitator needs to

- find the group's common denominator for access: What is the baseline access? Does everyone have e-mail access? Web access? Do they have access daily, weekly or monthly?
- explain to the group the different ways in which participants access the online space; and
- give individual support to participants who need it.



VARYING GROUP

Participants may come and go (especially if they can subscribe and unsubscribe without help from the facilitator) and most participants go through stages of intense participation and periods of relative inaction.

The facilitator should be actively involved in **building an inclusive and enthusiastic** online community: ask newcomers to introduce themselves, make new participants feel comfortable about joining already established discussions, create summaries of past discussions so newcomers can catch up quickly, be enthusiastic and **motivate participants**.

Online facilitation challenges



ONLINE TECHNOLOGY

The facilitator's task is to liaise with the people responsible for the technology to ensure that everything functions as it should.

The facilitator also needs to ensure that community members are **comfortable with the technologies** that support the group. It is important for the facilitator to be able to use and teach others to use the tools, at least at a basic level, and he/she may need to provide individual support to community members who are struggling with technical problems.

Job aids

From here you can download and print documents that can be used to make a more detailed comparison between online and offline facilitation.



Face-to-face and online facilitation tasks

This document compares face-to-face and online facilitation tasks in different phases of a group process.



Face-to-face and online facilitation: an example

Now that you have learned about the differences between offline and online facilitation of a meeting, let's look at an example.



Summary

There are many similarities between face-to-face and online group facilitation.

Important differences between face-to-face and online facilitation are the result of the influence of time and space on the communication process:

- some facilitation tasks are the same for both offline and online facilitators, even if they need to be performed using different techniques;
- other tasks, such as sustaining participant motivation, are particularly challenging for online facilitators;
- finally, online facilitators may face some completely new challenges related to the specific nature of an online community.

Technology can become an obstacle in the facilitation process if it doesn't work smoothly in the background.

If you want to know more...

Online Resources

James, M.; Rykert, L. 1998. From Workplace to Workspace: Using E-mail Lists to Work Together. Ottawa, IDRC.
http://web.idrc.ca/en/ev-9369-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html

Bellaneet. Mailing List Facilitation
http://www.bellaneet.org/itrain/dsp_document_dl.cfm?doc_file_id=53

Full Circle Associates. Online and Offline Facilitation: Different Yet Alike?
<http://www.fullcirc.com/community/onvsofflinefac.htm>

Full Circle Associates. Facilitating and Hosting a Virtual Community.
<http://www.fullcirc.com/community/communityfacilitation.htm>