

Educational dialogue: Supporting your colleagues through facilitation

Week One: The role of the facilitator

Video content

Introduction:

This 6-week course aims to equip you with the theory, methodologies, tools and resources to support your colleagues in developing their dialogic approaches through conducting reflective inquiries into their practice.

In this first week, we will be discussing the role of the facilitator, drawing on the findings from a recent study, that showed the importance of the role of the facilitator and of teacher collaboration in sustaining impact. We will also discuss possible facilitation models, as well as successes and challenges as seen by other facilitators. This week your objective is to reflect more deeply on what you want to get out of your facilitation in order to articulate your aims.

This course is best taken prior to your intended facilitation, but if you want to convene your colleagues at the same time as taking it, I would recommend including them in some of these discussions.

Part 1: What is a facilitator?

Facilitators are individuals who take a leadership role through coordinating and supporting other practitioners in their setting in developing their dialogic practices. In addition, they...

- will likely have familiarity with the principles and practice of educational dialogue, and be enthusiastic about the benefits of a dialogic approach,
- will have a willingness to continue developing their own practice and learn alongside their colleagues,
- will have local knowledge and should be responsive to requests, and
- will have a strategic and flexible plan for support at different stages of their colleagues' inquiries.

The role of facilitator emerged as critical during a recent study¹ conducted by members of the Teacher Scheme for Educational Dialogue Analysis (T-SEDA) group that aimed to understand whether and how practitioner-led inquiry can offer a sustainable and scalable way of developing dialogic practices.

¹ Hennessy, S., Kershner, R., Calcagni, E. & Ahmed, F. (2021). Supporting practitioner-led inquiry into classroom dialogue with a research-informed professional learning resource: A design-based approach. *Review of Education*, 9(3). <https://bera-journals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/rev3.3269>

Part 2: Models of facilitation

Each facilitator in the trials had a different model and level of scaffolding and support they provided to their colleagues depending on their setting. There is therefore no fixed, recommended structure to follow. Rather, the content here and the templates should serve as guidance to be adapted depending on your setting and the aims of your facilitation.

The typical approach was for facilitators to lead their colleagues in selecting an inquiry focus and planning the activity or lesson, advise on the recording of data and their interpretation of the results. Facilitators also arranged for their colleagues to get together regularly as a group for peer discussion of the progress and outcomes of their individual inquiries, and devised a timetable for this at the first meeting or workshop they held with participants so they knew what to expect.

The following visual shows how facilitator support was seen to particularly lead to their colleagues having a comprehensive understanding of dialogic learning, focusing and conducting their inquiries, and sharing their outcomes, which of course generates a better understanding of dialogic teaching.

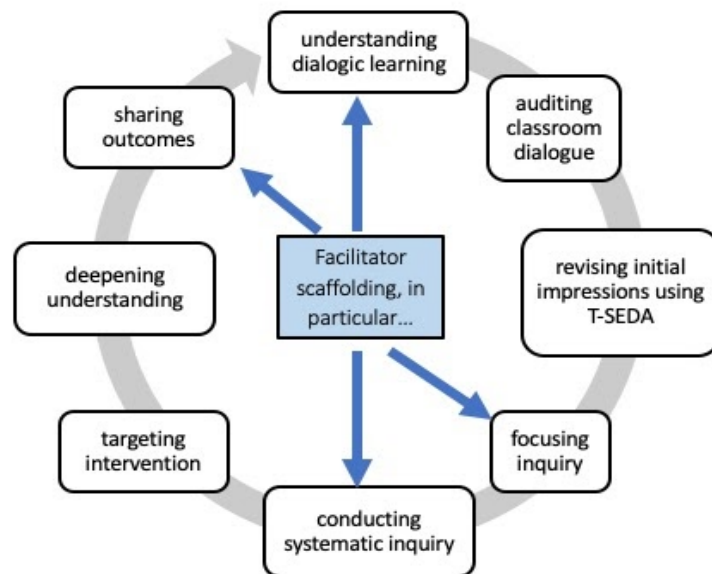


Figure 1: From Hennessy, Sara. Dialogic inquiry facilitator roles. Jan. 2021. PowerPoint Presentation.

Part 3: Successes and challenges in facilitation

The trials² found a number of factors that contributed to successful facilitation:

1. Facilitators were familiar with dialogic principles and practice and could see and articulate the benefits of dialogic approaches for student learning. They were then able to use this knowledge and enthusiasm to promote teacher buy-in, which facilitators noted was critical for success: *"I think that once teachers realise the power of just changing the way you maybe ask questions, or changing the way that students ask questions, it could be really quite a wow moment"* (Facilitator, T-SEDA IAA trial).
2. Facilitators had personal and professional motivations for facilitation.
3. Facilitators were strategic and flexible in planning their support and 'scaffolding' for their colleagues.

Planning the support needed will be strengthened through conducting a needs assessment and thinking carefully about what model is right for your setting. This should include the balance of support that is needed between providing a structured framework but also letting teachers work autonomously.

Further successful practice included facilitators negotiating with their institutions or other stakeholders for some dedicated time for inquiries, setting up regular meetings to offer participants structured opportunities for dialogue and critical reflection with peers, and securing leadership support and proposing a whole-institution approach.

The following are challenges that facilitators faced:

1. Managing the diverse needs, hopes and expectations of their colleagues.
2. Contextualising and translating materials for local accessibility and needs.
3. Time pressure for facilitators to provide sufficient support in regular meetings with participants and keep momentum going, while acknowledging the limited time available for all involved. It proved important to allow participants to set their own timescales and meeting schedules.

This video content was created by Meaghan Brugha for the course Educational dialogue: Supporting your colleagues through facilitation, available here:
<https://mbrugha.github.io/course-in-a-box/>

² Trials refer to data from both Hennessy et al. (2021) and the pilot study for the PhD research that this course contributes to (Brugha, forthcoming).