

Facilitating for Learning

Tools for Teacher Groups of All Kinds

David Allen

Tina Blythe

*Foreword by
Ron Ritchhart*

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Foreword: The “Wants” of Professional Learning

by Ron Ritchhart

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Introduction

This book (as you may have guessed from the title) is about facilitation, and, more specifically, the facilitation of teacher groups within schools. If you have picked it up (either in hard copy or on your e-reader), you are probably an educator who shares our interest in this important and complex work.

The facilitation of teacher groups has been a central part of our work—individually and collaboratively—for nearly 2 decades now. As both facilitators and coaches of facilitators, we have experienced some of the most rewarding moments of our professional lives—and also some of the most challenging. We remain committed to the work not only because it is essential to improving teacher learning and student learning, but because it is essential to our own learning as well.

This book is intended for teachers and other educators (administrators, coaches, teacher educators, staff developers) who facilitate in a range of contexts: faculty meetings, department meetings, professional learning communities, grade-level teams, and inquiry groups, among others. In it, we share our evolving ideas—based on our studies of facilitators and facilitation, as well as on our own experiences and practices—about what makes this work so challenging and so necessary. We provide resources that we hope will help you facilitate groups productively and find deeper personal satisfaction in that work, whether you are a teacher facilitating a group for the first time or an experienced facilitator seeking to develop your skills further.

In this chapter, we address some preliminary questions: Why a new book on facilitation? What kind of group learning are we talking about? Who will facilitate? How do teachers become facilitators of groups? We also describe how the book is organized and relate this book to our earlier work on facilitation of protocols for examining student work and teacher work.

WHY A NEW BOOK ON FACILITATION?

One of the most important shifts in schools in the past 2 decades has been the growing emphasis on collaboration among teachers and other educators. The use of collaborative teacher learning groups has become an increasingly

common strategy for professional development and instructional improvement in schools at every level, in the United States and throughout the world (Mehta, 2013; Villegas-Reimers, 2003). These groups include, among others, study groups, inquiry groups, and professional learning communities (PLCs). Traditional structures such as high school academic departments, elementary or middle school grade-level teams, or instructional leadership teams can also function as vehicles for professional learning, in addition to carrying out administrative functions such as scheduling, budgeting, or allocating resources.

The increasing number and variety of such groups reflect a growing recognition that the most effective forms of teachers' professional development are those that emphasize "learning in and from practice" (Ball & Cohen, 1999)—in other words, teachers learning *with* their own colleagues and *within* the ongoing work of their own schools and classrooms. As Linda Darling Hammond (2014) writes: "Productive professional learning [requires] communal engagement in sustained work on instruction over time" (p. 13). In the next section, and throughout the book, we explore what such productive professional learning looks like.

These views offer a counterpoint to the idea that teachers' professional learning (often equated with "training") primarily occurs outside of the school, in teacher preparation programs, inservice workshops, institutes, graduate courses, and so on. Teachers then apply lessons from those sources within their own classrooms and schools. It is a neat model, but perhaps not sufficient for the kinds of professional learning that teaching demands.

To be clear, we are not disparaging the value of these out-of-school learning experiences—indeed, we both are active as instructors and workshop leaders in preservice and inservice programs. Rather, we believe that opportunities for teachers' within-school and with-colleagues learning, mainly in teacher learning groups, can and must be greatly expanded and improved. Considering how to do this requires us to clarify the term *group learning*.

WHAT KIND OF GROUP LEARNING?

Although most groups require facilitation, not every group requires facilitation for learning. In this section, we describe two key features of the kinds of groups/meetings that are the topic of this book. Such meetings (1) focus on professional learning, and (2) use collaboration as the means to achieve professional learning.

Focus on Professional Learning

By professional learning, we mean the kind of learning that helps the members of the group become more effective educators, better able to understand

and support the learning of all the students for whom they are responsible. Professional learning encompasses a wide range of topics and questions, from instructional strategies to assessment of student learning to pedagogical content knowledge.

It may be helpful here to draw a contrast between groups that focus on professional learning and groups that focus on other kinds of goals. Many groups in schools call for skilled facilitation but do not focus on professional learning: a faculty meeting in which colleagues are figuring out how to create time in the daily schedule to implement the district's newly-adopted reading program, for example, or a task force established to review the student disciplinary process, or a committee that is attempting to develop benchmarks for the 4th-grade science curriculum. Such sessions require facilitation, but these kinds of meetings are focused more on task completion than on the learning of the group members.

Of course, these situations could *also* be about learning—completing tasks and professional learning are not mutually exclusive. But more often than not, the urgent needs of completing the task push aside the important but apparently less time-sensitive goal of professional learning. In Chapter 2, we describe more fully this kind of “learning stance” (in contrast to a “task-completion stance”), and in Chapter 9, we explore ways in which facilitators can help groups to repurpose task-oriented or logistics-focused meetings to incorporate opportunities for professional learning.

Use Collaboration

There are many reasons for members of a group to *communicate* with one another—for example, to let colleagues in the same discipline or grade level know when they will be teaching specific content or skills. Other situations call for colleagues to *coordinate* their actions in completing a task—for example, to ensure that everybody makes an important announcement to their classes. And sometimes, teachers need to *cooperate*—for example, to share a limited set of curriculum resources.

Collaborative learning, however, goes beyond communication, coordination, and cooperation. It occurs only when the group achieves learning outcomes that no single member of the group could have arrived at on her own. True collaboration occurs when the group members have a hand in choosing and shaping the kinds of issues, questions, and practices around which they focus their collective learning. The group members collectively, with support from the facilitator, reach new ideas, questions, and practices that are not wholly predictable at the outset of the group's work. This kind of collaborative learning contrasts with the more predictable outcomes of the expert-led workshop that is focused on conveying specific strategies or content. It also differs from the common examples of communication, coordination, and cooperation described above.