

FACILITATION: THE FUTURE OF TEACHING

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Capable NZ was set up as Otago Polytechnic's response to the educational needs of adult workers who are in work and under-credentialed, and has enjoyed 15 years of unique provision in this space. The adult learner in work has responded to evolved processes of work-based learning at, for and through work; Capable NZ has provided for them an alternative and valued paradigm for acquiring credentials. As its provision grows, Capable NZ is going more and more to learners in their workplaces, merging experiential, professional and academic learning for learner development.

While Capable NZ began with a traditional Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) model, it quickly evolved into a process that generated new learning within a very powerful individual learning approach. The undergraduate learner is now able to follow a guided Independent Learning Pathway (ILP), where critical reflection on workplace practice and experience, along with targeted new learning, results in the capacity to meet the requirements of a designated graduate profile and earn an appropriate credential. This is often a surprising, transformational journey for many learners, who have never before experienced a means or opportunity to assess, enhance and validate their workplace learning (Ker, 2017).

On the surface, the journey may appear to be a simple process. However, underpinning it is a complex foundation of facilitation and support based on principles and competencies that have evolved and developed over many years. These have recently been presented and enhanced in a Model of Effective Facilitation of Learning (Ker, 2017) which will inform Capable NZ's current and future work. In this context, Ker defines facilitation as a professional activity rather than a set of technical skills, arguing for a definition of the skill and process involved that is complex, multifaceted and learner-centred.

The model presents four principles at the centre of the facilitation process; these are reported by learners as key aspects contributing to their successful completion of the learning process, as well as in facilitator reports.

Principle 1: Fit – it is important that there is a close fit between learner and facilitator

Feedback from learners provides information on the success of their learning process. They attribute much of this success to the facilitator "caring about them" or "understanding their background and experiences" or "being able to meet them on Sunday morning" or "having lots in common." Fit includes the following dimensions: location, the area of specialisation and commonalities, culture, gender and age; it is important that, wherever possible, the alignment between facilitator and learner is a good match. Where there is an instant recognition of "things in common" – whether that be location, background interests (e.g., music, sport, writing plays, children) or work roles – the initial contact and beginnings of building a relationship become much easier (Ker: 106-7).

The facilitator's role in supporting this principle is to have the self-awareness to recognise if the 'fit' with a learner is ideal and, if they believe they are not the right person, to gain clarification of who might be, so that the learner is successful. This principle aligns with a professional conception of facilitation – the interests of the learner come first. At the same time, it is important that learners are empowered to suggest changes if they are not comfortable with either their facilitator as an individual or the actions of their facilitator.

The element of 'fit' has been recognised within Capable NZ as sufficiently important that it now drives the allocation of work to facilitators. It is the basis for the establishment of the facilitator–learner relationship, which itself is essential and which forms Principle 2.

Principle 2: Relationship – it is important that the relationship between facilitator and learner is bound by mutual respect, trust and empathy

This model acknowledges the powerful influences of relational learning (Hall, 2001); in this model of individual learning, the building of a productive relationship rests on the ability of the facilitator to gain personal insights into their learner as soon as possible. They will read the learner's CV and their entry documentation and, armed with this background knowledge, they can quickly establish a rapport, demonstrating that they care about the learner and that the learner matters.

The facilitator may also detect at this point whether there might be a clash of values which would trigger consideration for reallocation of the learner to another facilitator.

As part of the first engagement, a skilled facilitator will listen attentively and be curious about the learner; as learners often share anxieties and misconceptions about the ILP, and typically seek clarification or further information before confirming their enrolment in the programme. If a learner, in their first meeting or initial contact, makes an instant connection with their facilitator – for example, talking about things in common or a work role they have performed, or even a sense of humour and some light-hearted laughter about study – this will spark a sense of appreciation along the lines of "this feels good, s/he understands me, I feel validated, I matter". Thus, it is important that the facilitator sets out to create a positive environment from the outset – i.e., from the learner's initial enquiry. To do this, the facilitator must be aware and be able to recognise personal nuances, whether it be in a person's voice on the phone, facial cues on Skype, or in the initial greeting and the way they engage when the parties meet in person.

Principle 3: Skills, Knowledge, Attitudes - it is important that the facilitator has the capabilities for the role

Learners who participated in this study suggested a range of skills and attributes that are required in a facilitator: passion, energy, empathy, accessibility, availability, responsiveness, providing timely feedback (including just in time (JIT) feedback), being an effective role model, and showing the ability to know when to be both "patient and pushy." Learners like to know that they are in "good hands" – i.e., that the facilitator fully understands the Independent Learning Pathway process, and that this is evident in the way they discuss it and demonstrate their confidence in it. Learners responded positively to affirming conversations and recognition that the facilitator has heard them, acknowledged their experiences, and is genuinely interested in fostering their understanding and success in their learning journey.

Beyond their skills and attributes, the facilitator requires a strong knowledge base. As the learner discovers how to merge the workplace with the academic world and to formulate their experience to meet academic criteria, so also the facilitator must be able to respond with both academic knowledge and the understanding of how workplace practice contributes to higher level competencies. A sound knowledge of adult learning theories (especially reflective practice), an understanding of experiential learning, a grasp of the subject-specific knowledge of a particular learner and an understanding of their workplace practices are all required. Knowledge of learning processes includes full awareness of the requirements of degree-level learning.

Principle 4: Learners First – this principle demands the full responsiveness of facilitators to their learner, as well as their availability and willingness to meet learners' needs and always act in the interest of the learner

Work time frames are one area in which this principle can be easily illustrated. Effective facilitators are willing to work flexibly and to be available to engage with learners within the parameters of their work and life constraints.

ILP learners typically are in work, and often their study time is in the evenings and weekends. Therefore facilitators need to be available at these times, within reason and as negotiated with the learner.

While a willingness to work flexibly is a desirable attribute of the facilitator, the corollary is a willingness by the facilitator's employer also to appreciate that effective facilitation is unlikely to always occur within a traditional '9 to 5' time frame. Therefore, the employer will ensure that facilitators have autonomy and flexibility around their work hours. This principle is congruent with the conceptualisation of facilitation as a professional activity, whereby professionals manage their own time and accept responsibility for meeting client needs.

At the same time, effective facilitators encourage autonomous, self-directed learning and empower the learner to take control of their own learning as much as they can. The facilitator must be intentional and purposeful in their work with a learner in this regard.

Relevant to all four of the above principles is a requirement that the facilitator work effectively with learners from different cultural backgrounds, and in New Zealand with Māori in particular. For facilitators of the ILP approach this is most important, given the inherent attractiveness of the ILP to Māori learners.

This Model of Effective Facilitation of Learning is informed in particular by the Māori value of manaaki, which underpins notions of relationship, caring and understanding of the learner as a person. The common meaning of manaaki is hospitality, people caring for people and being kind (Moorfield, 2011). In this learning process, this correlates with the priority placed on valuing people – caring for them and letting them know that they matter.

CONCLUSION

The authors offer this brief insight into a highly complex process in order to highlight a new model of facilitation for reflection and discussion. It is our view that the future will increasingly see more learning occurring in the workplace, and teaching will increasingly cover the process of guiding learners to reflect in and on their workplace experiences.

In short, teaching will be less about passing on the knowledge and skills of the teacher and more about helping people extract their learning from and through their work. The Model of Effective Facilitation of Learning presented here has been developed, tested and validated through the work of hundreds of learners, and may have much to offer to the process and accomplishment of these future changes.

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