

Project Brief



Purpose

The purpose of the study is to investigate how the use of narrative can be beneficial in facilitating online relationship development. The goal is to develop some processes and techniques that are useful in building and maintaining relationships between members in online groups.

Study

While the building of online relationships is of fundamental importance to facilitators, there is very little offered in the form of systematic, empirical research to guide online facilitators. This study aims to address this gap by bringing together an international group of facilitators who are frequently facing the challenges of facilitating effective online group work.

The link between group effectiveness and member relationships is an important area of study in online groups. Stronger relationships lead to improved group effectiveness, and narrative potentially offers a useful catalyst in developing these online relationships. It provides an accessible form for developing inclusiveness, deepening rapport and for people to present aspects of themselves in an environment lacking in information richness.

By knowing in finer detail how narrative can be beneficial in building relationships, processes can then be developed, tested and enhanced for better facilitation practice, and thus improve the effectiveness of online groups. The study group will also explore other areas of online facilitation throughout the research process, including areas of trust, power, conflict, inclusion, community, motivation, best practice, metaphor, learning, process and system design, conferencing, tools and culture.

The study brings together facilitators from around the world to explore story and narrative in the art and practice of online facilitation. Many participants will be members of the International Association of Facilitators (IAF), and from other regional and affiliated facilitator networks. They offer specific expertise in online group dynamics and process development.

The method of co-operative inquiry will be used within a participative approach. This approach aligns strongly with facilitator values of equality, shared decision-making, equal opportunity, power sharing and personal responsibility. The cooperative inquiry method is a form of research where participants are viewed as co-researchers who participate in decision making at all stages of the project. Though uncommon, it has a strong grounding in participant experience and will be particularly useful in representing the multiple perspectives that occur in online groups.

Research Plan

Whilst the research design and details of the plan will be decided within our research group when we come together, there are several main phases that the study will follow. There's an initial phase of about 6 weeks where we will get to know each other, get familiar with the tools we will use, align on our group purpose and culture, and investigate some areas of interest within the area of the research question. From there we will review what worked well for us in the pilot stage and agree on the timing and focus of more in-depth areas of inquiry.

We will follow through several deeper cycles of planning, action and reflection. Finally we will pull the threads of our inquiry together, clarify our outcomes and decide on how we will share what we have learnt.

Research Phase	Process
Contact	Contact and informal discussion Invitation and ethics compliance
Initial Phase	Introduction – participants, tools Sharing expectations Aligning on our group purpose and culture
Phase 1 - First reflection phase on topic	Choice of the focus or topic and type of inquiry Launching statement of the enquiry Develop a plan of action for the first action phase Choice of method for recording experiences during first action phase
Phase 2 – First action phase on topic	Exploring experience and action aspects of the inquiry Applying an integrated range of inquiry skills Keeping records of the experiential data generated
Phase 3 – Full immersion in Phase 2	Break through into new awareness Lose our way – stepping into the unknown Transcend the inquiry format
Phase 4 – Second reflection phase	Share data from phase 3 Make sense of the data collected Review and potentially modify our topic Choose a plan for the next action phase to explore the same or different aspect of the inquiry topic Review the method for recording data used in the first action phase and amend it for use in the second.
Subsequent Phases of planning, action and reflection will:	Continue the inquiry in cyclic fashion Involves five to eight full cycles of planning-action-reflection with varying patterns of divergence and convergence, over several aspects of the inquiry topic. Include a variety of intentional procedures for enhancing the validity of the process End with a major reflection phase for pulling the threads together, clarifying outcomes and deciding on dissemination