Empathy in Collaborative Meaning-Making

From a group facilitation perspective, one of the basic challenges is when a group is working on a high-stakes issue, where significantly different perspectives are present. In this kind of situation, participants are at risk of triggering one another into defensive postures (fight-or-flight states). As humans, whenever we are temporarily triggered in this way, we are no longer in the open and creative state of mind that allows access to higher-order capacities.

The need in these kinds of situations is for participants to create new meanings together, which in turn allow the creation of new possibilities for action. Based on our experience as group facilitators, the process of *empathizing with felt meaning* seems to be a powerful ingredient for facilitating substantial progress along those lines. Of course, this is a capacity that we would want all humans to develop. Yet in the meantime, we have found that if a person serving in a facilitative role engages with each participant, working to empathize with their felt meaning, a single trained person can facilitate a significant shift in the functioning of the larger group.

In our practice, my colleagues and I have been using an approach that does not follow the conventional "rules" of many forms of group facilitation and mediation. For example, we find it productive to bypass initial definitions of the shared design challenge. Instead, we encourage each participant to speak to those aspects of the shared situation that are most significant to him or her. Aside from some basic time boundaries re the beginning and end of the session, we generally find it helpful to dispense with a linear agenda. Also, rather than attempting to "separate" participants from their initial positions, we find that welcoming initial solutions generates greater openness among participants to one another's perspectives.

Over the years, and in a number of different countries, we have found this non-linear process to offer powerful results, as reported anecdotally by both participants and facilitators. My previous writing on this topic includes a practical how-to guide, revised frequently over a period of twelve years, recently published as a book (Zubizarreta, 2014). My intention here is to explore one specific feature of this approach, a practice I am calling "connecting with felt meaning" or "empathizing with felt meaning." While this practice arises from our experiences with this body of work, it may also have wider applications.

In lieu of a definition, I'll offer a simple description of what I mean by "connecting with felt meaning". Usually when someone holds a perspective, they don't just want someone to "get" how they are feeling. Instead, they want someone to also "get" what they are thinking. While this may appear obvious, the process of empathizing with participants' contributions does not seem to play a key role at present in many group facilitation approaches. This is especially apparent, for example, in contrast to the Human-Centered Design movement, where empathy is explicitly included as a significant part of the design process (Battarbee, Suri, & Howard, 2014).[1]

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[1] One approach to group mediation, the Restorative Circles movement, does explicitly feature empathy. See Shpunging (2011) for a simplified description of the process for use with children. Unfortunately no "how-to" manuals exist at present for the adult

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Current Obstacles to Foregrounding Empathy in Group Facilitation

The present lack of attention to empathy in group facilitation may be due to several factors. One is an overall trend toward "minimalism" – having the facilitator do as little as possible, while instead having participants themselves do as much as possible, right from the start. Along these lines, we have often heard that our approach, especially in the beginning stages, seems to give "too large a role" to the facilitator, since he or she is tasked with reflecting and recording each participant's contribution.

A second factor contributing to the understated role of empathy in current facilitation practice may be the historical misuse of the practice of "active listening". Of course, various facilitation texts do mention the value of "active listening", often when speaking about the need to "manage difficult participants." Yet this brings us to a significant distinction I am introducing here between "active listening" as a technique, and conneting with felt meaning as a practice: the distinction having to do with purpose and intention.

By definition, whenever "active listening" techniques are used in a rote manner, they cease to be an expression of empathy; we are no longer offering another the possibility of having an authentic experience of "feeling felt". Worse, whenever these techniques are used to accomplish an ulterior motive, they become a tool for manipulation. This is often the case, for example, in a sales context; it's no wonder that many people have acquired a strong suspicion of hearing their own words reflected back to them!

Yet it is not just sales people who can misuse the appearance of empathy for their own ends. If a facilitator is using active listening with the intention of having the participant "settle down" so that the facilitator can "move on" with the agenda, it is unlikely that a participant will feel truly heard and valued. As I wrote in another paper, "if someone is 'reflecting my words back to me' simply as an attempt to get me to 'move along', the technique will not cover up the underlying experience of disregard or manipulation. Instead, the underlying unpleasantness of the situation will be transferred onto my experience of the technique, thus creating an 'allergy' to hearing my words reflected back to me." (Zubizarreta, 2014b).

Thus, a contributing factor to the relatively minor role of empathy in current facilitation practice may be a widespread confusion between intention and technique. The formats for communicating empathy that were originally inspired by the transformative work of Carl Rogers have too often been misused. This has turned "active listening" into a practice whose unskillful use will at best, garner mixed reactions from participants—while at worst, transmogrify into a manipulative tool devoid of integrity.

A third factor leading to the undervaluing of empathy may be the constraints imposed by sequential facilitation processes. These constraints preclude non-directiveness. Instead of holding space for emergence, many facilitators feel responsible for making sure that participants "move along" from divergence to convergence within a prescribed time frame, or follow a series of sequential steps such as

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version of this work, but see Lyubansky (2013) for a description of the powerful results that this process can have in a highly charged and complex environment.

"surfacing underlying interests" before engaging in any exploration of possible solutions (Fisher, Ury, & Patton, 1991). These kinds of formats create some structural limits to the possibility of empathizing with felt meaning. For example, they make it difficult for a facilitator to welcome a contribution that is deemed "off topic", or to welcome a divergent perspective during a period when the process is supposed to be moving toward convergence. Even more significantly, by their very nature, directive processes preclude the possibility of our experiencing how powerful the process of empathizing with felt meaning can be, within the context of a non-directive group process.

This brings us to a fourth, overarching factor: our default cultural assumptions about communication. If we saw communication as a relational process, it would make more sense for the facilitator to be primarily focused on developing an appreciative relationship with each participant, especially during the initial stages of a highly conflictual process. Instead, our default cultural assumption tends to see communication as a transactional event. This limits our attention to whether each person has had a chance to speak, while occluding the realization that having had a chance to speak is *not at all the same thing* as having had the opportunity to experience feeling heard.

It may also be that the view of communication as a transactional process is what leads us to conceive of the facilitator role as one of being neutral or impartial. Instead, from a relational perspective, we prefer to consider our role as one of multipartiality, or "taking on all sides". We will revisit this in the next section.

The Gifts of Empathizing with Felt Meaning

Just as scientists have shown that "mother's milk is good for you", recent scientific research is also confirming the beneficial effects of human beings feeling understood. In Love 2.0, Barbara Fredrickson (2013), a positive psychology researcher, explores the powerful physiological effects of what she calls "micro-moments of connection" between humans. Similarly, David Rock (2008) has chronicled recent brain research showing that as humans shift into a connected and creative mode instead of a fight-flight-freeze mode, our brains become more open to hearing other perspectives.

One significant point here is that cognitive empathy is not necessarily verbal. Nancy Kline's work on creating "Thinking Environments" has shown that human beings think more effectively in the context of receiving silent yet appreciative attention (1999, 2009). Our attention and intentions, especially as communicated by subtle non-verbal cues, make a difference to other humans. Of course, this is an area where we clearly need more research, to document and explore how humans are able to sense and respond to varying attitudes on the part of a listener, regardless of whether that listener is saying anything or not.

At the same time, our experience has shown that offering iterative attempts to verbally empathize with felt meaning can be quite useful, especially in potentially conflictual group situations. In our training work, we offer facilitators-in-training the opportunity to be part of the process they are learning to facilitate, as well as, to take turns in the role of the facilitator. One of the main purposes is for them to experience as

participants, how having our contributions reflected back to us by a sensitive and highly "correctable" listener, can offer a powerful opportunity to gain additional clarity and to deepen our thinking.

We also find that having a facilitator offering verbal reflections of felt meaning to each participant, offers group members the opportunity to experience a maximum of creative tension with a minimum of interpersonal anxiety (Zubizarreta, 2014a). Knowing that each person will be thoroughly listened to, appreciated, and "gotten" seems to offer a basic sense of safety in a situation of potential or actual conflict.

Of course, the experience of receiving empathy for our felt meaning is deepened when we are also receiving empathy for the fullness of our human experience. I want to *expand* our sense of the valuable forms that empathy can take, not to minimize the usefulness of reflecting participants' emotional and somatic experience, nor to discount the value of approaches that focus on reflecting feelings and needs. Indeed, as my colleague Tom Atlee has said, what we seek in our listening responses is to "embrace and integrate the wholeness of the speaker, their message, and the experience they had speaking it".

For those who wish to explore the nuances involved in offering listening responses that help someone to connect more deeply with their own experiencing, I highly recommend Gendlin's chapter on "The Experiential Response" (1968). While written in academic language for therapists, anyone whose professional work involves listening can benefit greatly from it.

Also in the field of therapy, Bozormenyi-Nagi pioneered the practice of *multidirectional partiality* (1986) in his development of Contextual Family Therapy. In our work, we call this attitude "taking all sides". This is not just an abstract valuing of each person's right to express their perspective; instead, it is an active "joining" with each participant that includes an empathic appreciation of the particulars of their position. We have found that this allows participants to feel less threatened by perspectives that are quite different from their own. Once participants have begun to appreciate the value that diverse perspectives bring, our role as facilitators can fade into the background, where we are available to step back in as needed.

We have found that having an active "scaffolding" phase at the beginning, creates an environment where participants can maximally engage in higher-order functions, including synthesizing information, engaging complex problems, and generating new ideas. Furthermore, we have discovered that we do not need to manage group convergence. Instead, we can allow convergences to effectively emerge on their own, as part of a spontaneous flow of meaning-making. Thus, our active role as facilitators is primarily on the micro level of supporting each participant's contributions. In contrast, on the macro level we work in an open-ended way. Creating the appropriate basic conditions, in large part by connecting and empathizing with felt meaning, allows us to trust in the emergence of the group's own shared meaning-making process. In turn, this allows us to reliably evoke powerful outcomes in a highly non-directive manner.

While our approach is quite low-tech, it has some key parallels with Dialogue Mapping (Conklin, 2005). While Conklin does not foreground the role of empathy in his work, he also welcomes and connects with

each participant's felt meaning in a non-linear manner. Each contribution is verified with that participant, and included in the emerging dialogue map in the form of initial solutions, concerns, pros, and data. Both of these approaches, the low-tech Dynamic Facilitation approach and the high-tech Dialogue Mapping approach, are strong proofs-of-concept that connecting with the felt meaning-making process of each participant, can play a key role within a non-linear, non-directive process of collaborative meaning-making, where convergences are not negotiated but rather emerge spontaneously as part of a group flow state.

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