

STYLES OF FACILITATION IN THE EDUCATIONAL PROCESS AT UNIVERSITY LEVEL

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Abstract: *The co-operation between facilitator and student is the main principle in the facilitation process. In this respect, professors at university level develop a personal style of facilitation based on students and their needs. Starting with a general discussion about the main theoretical orientations and researches in the field, this article has as goal to identify differences between the facilitation styles adopted by professors at university level and to propose modalities for developing and optimising this personal approach. In this respect, we questioned 105 students at the West University of Timisoara. The study reveals significant differences between course and seminary professors only at the level of activity based style of facilitation. The nondirective facilitation style is more frequently used by seminary professor-assistants and the activity based facilitation style is less used by course professors, in each year of study.*

Key words: *style of facilitation, nondirective, appreciative, activity based.*

1.Introduction

The style is a specific way of expression in a specific area of human activity, for certain purposes of communication; a personal way of expression (www.dexonline.to). So, the style represents a set of personal characteristics and behaviours which are used and strengthened for a long period of time. For professors, the amount of these particular manifestations in the educational process represents the teaching style. J. Lowman (1995) included characteristics of the professor into two categories: Intellectual excitement (enthusiastic, knowledgeable, inspiring, humorous, interesting, clear, organised, creative, exciting, engaging, prepared, energetic, fun, stimulating, eloquent, communicative) and Interpersonal rapport, as interpersonal concern (concerned, caring, available, friendly, accessible, approachable, interested, respectful, understanding, personable) or effective motivation (helpful, encouraging, challenging, fair, demanding, patient, motivating). We can see that the area of professor's characteristics are very wide and covers the main dimensions of his personality and psychological construction. In this respect, not only the scientific qualification of the professor is important, but also the personal characteristics, which sustain the educational process and the guidance of students' learning process. In other words, we speak about the style of facilitation embraced by professors in the educational process: personality, cognition, motivation, behaviour and personal learning process. The development of a personal facilitation style is a lasting process, a dynamic one and supposes objective self-knowledge. This personal facilitation style must be optimised during the career development process or must be changed, if the context and the characteristics of the educational process will require.

Thus, the professional identity of professors is formed, defined by their sense of self, as well as their knowledge and beliefs, dispositions, interests, and orientation towards work and change (Spillane, J., 2000). The personal style of facilitation represents one of these components of professional identity. Adopting a style of facilitation and customizing it in relation with personal, social and professional identity is not an easy process, but, it is certainly related to students and their specificity. In this type of educational relationship, not only the student must build a personal learning style, but also the professor must identify his personal orientation regarding facilitation. The two processes are tightly related and depend on each other.

M. Rosemann, A. Hjalmarsson, M. Lind and J. Recker (2011) realised a description of the ten styles of facilitation behaviour (presented by other consecrated authors in the field), through a dyadic relationship between two opposite behaviours. In the following, we will discuss and analyse the topic of specific facilitation behaviours which may determine a certain style of facilitation:

A. Communication style: talks vs listens – the facilitator models effective communication and supports participants to understand each other (Vennix, J., 1996; Webne-Behrman, H., 1998). In this respect, the facilitator's behaviour is: to listen and monitor communication; to take part in the dialogue; to set guidelines for group activities such as encouraging, clarifying, restarting, reflecting, summarizing and validating. The facilitator's behaviour can be characterized by the two extremes: talks (guiding the dialogue) versus listens (in order to derive the results from the participants). We must say that, related to the group characteristics, the facilitator can only suggest the direction of the discussion, emphasising the plan and the structure of the communication process or can use the student's expertise or background as support for future interactions.

B. Power style: assertive vs empathic - the facilitator takes an opposite position during the process and, in an assertive way, decides something or everything or can adopt a specific behaviour, based on empathic understanding, having the ability to understand the participants' reactions from the inside and a sensitive awareness for the process monitoring modalities (Heron, J., 1999; Rogers, C., 1967, 1989). The assertive facilitator expresses his own thoughts spontaneously and sincerely. This does not mean that he does not respect the students' opinion. He became a model for students regarding self appreciation and respect of the personal needs and necessities. The empathic facilitator is more centred on students' needs and permanently eager to satisfy their demands.

C. Adaption style: static vs flexible - the facilitator's work can have different degrees of predictability: if he adopts a static style, everything will be predefined and detailed from the beginning (the allocation of tools, the techniques and methods for each activity) or he adopts a more flexible approach, with plans and preparations of the specific actions, but with the possibility for adjustment of the successive actions which are dependent to the emerging events (Vennix, J., 1996; Rogers, C., 1989; Richardson, G.,P., Andersen, D.,F., 1995; Suchman, L.,A., 1987). Certainly, a few aspects of the educational process are predefined (like the objectives, the didactic time, the strategy of teaching, the evaluation strategy). Also, the timing of the students' activity is very important and requires changes and a certain dynamics of making personal decisions.

D. Disagreement style: embraces conflict vs avoids conflict - the facilitator adopts an alternative tactic, focusing on questions regarding to what can be done for hampering the situation and on participants' own behaviour. The other possibility is that the facilitator avoids conflict, trying to manage the disagreements between participants, which are encouraged to go on talking and tell more (Schein, E.,H., 1987; Doyle, M., Straus, D., 1986). In both situations, the facilitator became a conflict manager, adopting different management styles: in the first example, by own strategy, the facilitator offers solutions to the conflict, while in the second example it is important for him to determine the students to cooperate and manage group disagreements.

E. Control style: centralized vs decentralized - the facilitator delegates the participants to manage the process of taking decisions, encouraging them to play new roles and assume responsibilities, or the facilitator does not divide the roles and the tasks in the group, remaining in the centre of attention (Heron, Jh., 1999, Webne-Behrman, H., 1998).

This is an important issue of facilitation: the facilitator's control on the group activity and the dosage of the authority. A facilitator must know the following: in the process of facilitation, the facilitator would move back from centre stage into an invisible position (on the margins of the classroom), slowly but deliberately, facilitating a learning process in which young minds took

charge of their own learning, design their own materials, invent their own learning opportunities, and he is preoccupied of developing „*a learner-centred classroom*” (Jansen, J., D., 2001).

F. Model behaviour: does model vs lets model - the facilitator simultaneously facilitates the dialogue and records the model from the modelling dialogue or uses a recording assistant and the participants are domain experts (Persson, A., 2001; Vennix, J., 1996). In contrast, the facilitator should let the participants do the modelling, transforming them into modellers, which are encouraged and governed by the facilitator. As „draftsman” of the dialogue, the facilitator transforms himself into a model of flexibility and transparency in communication. If he lets students choose the model of the dialogue, then the facilitator fundamentals the process on the personal style of students’ educational behaviour.

G. Facilitation behaviour: does facilitation vs lets facilitate – the facilitator tends to control the facilitation process, using the participants only as contributors or the facilitator allows joint facilitation, while the participants are co-opted as facilitators in some groups, as a source of knowledge and inspiration (Webne-Behrman, H., 1998; Rogers, C., 1989). If the facilitator considers that *he does facilitation*, is centred on the process and not on students’ needs or learning activity. His goal is to develop permanently the facilitative process and not the students’ learning process. In this way, this is not a facilitative process in a true sense, because of the lack of co-participation for attending the common objectives.

H. Involvement style: involves vs ignores – the facilitator is involved in the facilitation process, based on an agreement between the facilitator and the participants or the facilitator ignores this collaboration, having a rigid view of the rights and wrongs, the truth or the false in a situation. A. Sharp and P. McDermott (2009), proposed the concept of constructive ignorance, based on discovering that an “*off the wall*” comment from a participant was rather on the point.

I. Work style: structured vs unstructured – the facilitator observes a situation without prejudice and applies prior experience only as a guide, not as a constraint, in a planed and structured way or not predicts events, actions and makes decisions during the workshop (Sharp, A., McDermott, P., 2009). We observe that this style refers to the organisation of the process and a good facilitator plans and structures his activity, related to the objectives.

J. Domain knowledge style: domain agnostic vs domain expert (Webne-Behrman, H., 1998; Schwarz, R.,M., 2002) - the facilitator has deep knowledge in the domain, understanding the culture and domain from which the problem has arisen. The other style is characterised by the lack of knowledge about the domain, being modelled and depending on abilities, skills and techniques to develop domain knowledge during the modelling process.

Analyzing these dyads, we must conclude that the approaches of styles in facilitation are very wide and realized from different perspectives of different domains. Sometimes these styles are very similarly explained and confused because of their similarities.

In the educational process, during the evolution of facilitation, the following styles of facilitation are presented: the nondirective style of facilitation, the appreciative style of facilitation and the activity based style of facilitation. Each of these styles should be defined by some particularities.

The nondirective style of facilitation is centred on the signs which are offered by students in the educational process (Charlton, D., 1980). These are educational behaviours which are considered opportunities for self development and for setting up a certain direction of the facilitative process. Nothing is forced or specifically required, the professor and the students assuming the role of the negotiator. The singular aspect which will not be negotiated is the educational value regarding the objectivity of the facilitator in self evaluation and the evaluation of the students (Heron, Jh., 1999). Despite of the no implication appearance, the professor with nondirective style is a fine evaluator of students and suggests ways for improving autonomously their learning activity. As a result, students became more responsible and involved in the educational process. They are partners in the selection of the contents and the modalities of learning and are more motivated to be responsible for their educational development.

The appreciative style of facilitation revolves around the efficacy of the educational process, assured by the valorisation of the students' best characteristics. Considering what the facilitator thinks about the students, that the student will become (Torres, C., 2001), the facilitator determines the students to become better in certain field or in their learning activity, through a permanent positive feedback and encouragements. He sustains the idea which considers the personal involvement of the student in the educational process. The right way for professor' progress is determined by the way in which a student resolves certain issues.

The activity based style of facilitation valorised at the maximum level the students' practical activities, through group interactions. This style is centred on setting up specific learning situations, based on practical experience, which have as goals valorising the personal experience of the students and enriching it with a new one, in the context of group-work (Thiagarajan, S., Thiagarajan, R., 1999). The group-work is a resource to facilitate learning and pragmatic approaches of contents. On the other hand, the group became a framework for personal relationship development.

But, each style of facilitation is not limited on how to facilitate students. Beyond this reflection issues, the style of the professor as facilitator reflects the whole personality, manifested in the educational process. This assumption made many authors reflect on the importance of the facilitation style in the educational process or on what the main particularities which define a style of facilitation are. In the following, we mentioned some recent researches, having as a study theme the facilitation style of the professors and its influence on different characteristics of the educational process or the learning activity of the students:

- J. Gilmartin (2001) studied the four types of professors that emerged from the data research in nurse education: ranging from type 1, which displayed a striking negative attitude towards interpersonal skills work, to type 4, which was creative and enthusiastic. This article described the major characteristics in the different facilitation types and what the factors that influence the learning climate in the educational process are.

- J. Gregory (2002) proposed in his article a change of the professor's role: the professor has stopped being an expert or a guide who transfers knowledge, but he is a facilitator, a moderator and a discussion partner in the educational process.

- T.J Hostager, S. W. Lester, M. Bergmann, K.J. Ready (2003) studied the effects of agenda structure and facilitator style on participant satisfaction and output quality in meetings employing groups, using support systems GSS.

-J. Clifton (2006) described the characteristics of facilitator talk and pointed out that facilitator talk cannot be tied down to any one single pattern of interaction, but in the educational process there are certain interactional devices which could be described as facilitative.

-J. Reeve argues that the students' classroom engagement depends, in part, on the supportive quality of the classroom climate in which they learn. He proposed, for professor modalities, to nurture their motivational resources, adopting an autonomy and supportive motivating style, as an important element to a high quality professor and student relationship.

-S. Cacciamani, D. Cesareni, F. Martini, T. Ferrini, N. Fujita (2012) present the influence of levels of participation, facilitator styles and metacognitive reflection on knowledge building in two blended, post-secondary education contexts. The authors concluded that a high level of participation, a supportive facilitator style, and ample opportunities for metacognitive reflection on the students' own participation strategies determines fostering epistemic agency for knowledge building.

2. Methods and instruments of the research

The previous studies were not centred only on the facilitation style, but mostly on the relation with other important issues of the educational process. *The hypothesis* from which we started our research was: the course and seminary professors involved in the higher education system have a different style of facilitation, determined by the student's year of study and the specificity of educational activity.

Settled up on a **survey based investigation** (*a questionnaire with 15 items*), our research goal was to establish the differences between the three facilitation styles: the nondirective style of facilitation, the appreciative style and the practice based style of facilitation, presented in the following:

A. The nondirective style of facilitation:

- ✓ The facilitator adopts an impartial attitude regarding the contents and students' learning activities.
- ✓ The facilitator suggests, does not plans when and how the students will act.
- ✓ The facilitator assures opportunities in order to facilitate the self development of the students.
- ✓ The facilitator encourages debates between students.
- ✓ The facilitator supports students in personal self knowledge and personal acceptance.

B. The appreciative style of facilitation

- ✓ The facilitator is centred on valorising the best characteristics of the students.
- ✓ The facilitator offers permanent feedback for students.
- ✓ The facilitator uses sustaining encouraging phrases for students.
- ✓ The facilitator motivates the students to become better, in every moment.
- ✓ The facilitator believes that what the students decide is the best way of doing it.

C. The activity based style of facilitation

- ✓ The facilitator used group-work and is centred on group development.
- ✓ The facilitator determines the group to solve the given task, in a predefined period of time.
- ✓ The facilitator generates experience in which each member of the group is learning.
- ✓ The facilitator is involved in team-work, for facilitating the learning process.
- ✓ The facilitator sets up tasks which sustain the pragmatic character of the learning process.

Identifying the main characteristics of the teaching process at university level, we may offer an objective image over the predominant styles of facilitation, which provide support in the students' activity of learning. In this respect, we surveyed a number of 105 students from the West University of Timișoara (year 1 to 3, BA) that analyzed the facilitation style of their professors (125 professors), for the courses and seminars of the second semester of the year 2011-2012.

The objectives of the research were:

- O1 To settle differentiating aspects regards the facilitation's styles in the didactic activity, relating to the study year.
- O2. To identify differences between the course professors and seminary assistant- professors regarding the facilitation style adopted in the educational process.
- O3. To formulate suggestions for defining the facilitation style of the professors in the educational process, at university level.

3. The results of the research

In order to analyse the obtained results, we made an analysis on the following dimensions:

1. The score averages for each style of facilitation and each year of study.
2. The t test on independent samples (course professors and seminary assistant-professors), to establish the significant differences between the averages of the scores obtained by course professors and seminary professors on each facilitation style and each year of study.
3. The t test on independent samples (course professors and seminary professors), to establish the significant differences between the averages of the scores obtained by course professors and seminary professors on each facilitation style.

In the following, we present the analysis of data on each mentioned dimension:

For the first year of study the highest average where the nondirective facilitation style and activity based facilitation style for seminary professors was noted. The score averages for each facilitation styles are very close, without one which is leading the others. The lowest average was obtained by course professors with the activity based facilitation style. The interpretation of the *t Test*, reveals significant differences between course professors and seminary assistant-professors only in the case of activity based facilitation style.

Table1. T test for the significant differences between course-seminar professors/facilitation styles/year 1 of study

Facilitation styles	Sample	Score averages	T	Sig. (2-tailed)
The nondirective facilitation style	Course professors Seminary professors	3,8248 3,9849	t(297)= -1,775	p=0,077; p> 0,05
The appreciative facilitation style	Course professors Seminary professors	3,7467 3,8548	t(297)= -1,094	p=0,275; p>0,05
The activity based facilitation style	Course professors Seminary professors	3,3987 3,9658	t(297)= -4,870	p=0; p< 0,05

For the second year of study the highest average on the nondirective facilitation style and appreciative facilitation style for seminary professors was noted. The lowest average was obtained by course professors with the activity based facilitation style. The interpretation of the *t Test*, reveals significant differences between course professors and seminary assistant -professors only in the case of activity based facilitation style.

Table2. T test for the significant differences between course-seminar professors/facilitation styles/year 2 of study

Facilitation styles	Sample	Score averages	T	Sig. (2-tailed)
The nondirective facilitation style	Course professors Seminary professors	3,4787 3,5556	t(182)= -0,685	p=0, 494; p> 0,05
The appreciative facilitation style	Course professors Seminary professors	3,4702 3,5556	t(182)= -0,678	p=0, 498; p>0,05
The activity based facilitation style	Course professors Seminary professors	2,8766 3,2822	t(182)= -2,873	p=0,005; p< 0,05

For the third year of study the highest average on the nondirective facilitation style and for seminary professors was noted. The lowest average was obtained by course professors with the activity based facilitation style. The interpretation of the *t Test*, reveals significant differences between course professors and seminary professors only in the case of activity based facilitation style.

Table 3. *T test for the significant differences between course-seminar professors/facilitation styles/year 3 of study*

Facilitation styles	Sample	Score averages	T	Sig. (2-tailed)
The nondirective facilitation style	Course professors Seminary professors	3,4459 3,5224	t(307)= -0,905	p=0,366; p> 0,05
The appreciative facilitation style	Course professors Seminary professors	3,3732 3,4842	t(307)= -1,129	p=0,260; p>0,05
The activity based facilitation style	Course professors Seminary professors	3,1796 3,4316	t(307)= -2,268	p=0,024; p<0,05

Analysing the results (score average on each facilitation style and each year of study), we observe that each facilitation style is well represented, at each year of study. The nondirective facilitation style is best represented at the level of seminary assistant- professor because of the specificity of seminary activity: students became in this context more independent; their actions are based on personal decision; the professor supports interactions and communication, debates on specific issues.

The lowest score obtained in each year of study at the level of activity based facilitation style, used in the course context is somewhat understandable: the course activity is based on the academic lecture, minimizing the real implication and pragmatic interventions of students in this context. Despite of this, the major issue of the educational process at university level (in our opinion) is the mismanagement of the pragmatic approach, related to the requirements of the future student's job.

The *t test on independent samples* (course professors and seminary professors), to establish the significant differences between the averages of the scores obtained by course professors and seminary assistant-professors on each facilitation style renders the following:

-for the nondirective facilitation style there are not significant differences between course professors and seminary -assistant professors;

-for the appreciative facilitation style there are not significant differences between course professors and seminary assistant- professors;

-for the activity based facilitation style there are significant differences between course professors and seminary assistant- professors;

Table 4. *T test for the significant differences between course-seminar professors/facilitation styles*

Facilitation styles	Sample	Score averages	T	Sig. (2-tailed)
The nondirective facilitation style	Course professors Seminary professors	3,5970 3,7041	t(790)= -1,919	p=0,055; p> 0,05
The appreciative facilitation style	Course professors Seminary professors	3,5373 3,6402	t(790)= -1,662	p=0,097; p>0,05

The activity based facilitation style	Course professors	3,1921	t(790)= -5,639	p<0,01
	Seminary professors	3,5979		

4. Conclusions

The hypothesis of the study: the course and seminary professors involved in the higher education system have different styles of facilitation, determined by the students' year of study and the specificity of the educational activity was partially confirmed. As we previously noted, the T test for the significant differences between course-seminar professors noted that these differences are relevant only for the activity based facilitation style (which was already motivated in our study). The lowest average obtained for this facilitation style, on each year of study and in generally, of course professors may be perceived as a warning signal for professors. It is very important to sustain and guide the students at university level in their learning process, to sustain and motivate them in their personal development, but it is not sufficient. Students must be practically prepared for their jobs, in our opinion, gradually and in a progressive and systematic way, starting with the 1st year till the 3rd year of study. This progressive development is not reflected in our results: for example the appreciative style decreased from the 1st year till the 3rd year or the activity based style has not a stabile evolution.

The pragmatic approach must also be identified in the cohesion between course and seminary activities. The course professors must be involved with their students more frequently in the educational process, through reflection activities, using heuristic conversations, debates on specific field problems and accompanying their presentation with practical exemplars from the future students' jobs. The seminary professors must continue the applications, starting with the issues discussed on course activities and emphasizing more or also different possibilities to apply the specific theories and models. In our study, the seminary professors adopted all styles of facilitation: the nondirective one obtained the highest average score and the activity based facilitation style the lowest average score for each year of study and in general. This is a relevant problem for the university educational process, which should be resolved mostly assuring the utility and the grounding of curricular contents in the real life and future jobs of students.

Our general conclusion for this study is that the choice of the facilitation style depends on the context and the specificity of the educational activity. It is not important for university professors to adopt a single facilitation style, but to adapt to the students' needs and type of activity in which they are involved. This will be a solid fundament for their personal and professional development, with profound pragmatic implications in their future adult life. The context and the type of activity should determine the facilitation style, but the permanent resizing and optimising of personal facilitation style is necessary for learners, in order to become what the facilitator wants: himself/herself.

The analyzed data can be used as a support for further researches, such as: to establish the differences between facilitation styles at university level and secondary college professors; to identify specific modalities for the assurance of the continuity of facilitation process at different levels of study in the educational system.

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