

Playful facilitation methods for serious purposes

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Alison (left) and Alice (photo by Erin Barnes)

The facilitation approach described here, though developed in artistic contexts, can easily be adapted to tackle serious organisational issues like team relationships, collaborative working and strategic planning. In a nutshell, it involves combining movement, material and words to create an emotionally safe, trusting landscape that is conducive to honest, brave exchange. Our reflections are based on two particular events, separated by a couple of years, in two different oriental locations. We begin by describing a visit to Taiwan, where we worked with a group of older people to prepare them rapidly for a live collaborative performance featuring ice and ribbon. The other (earlier) event took place in Cambodia and, though it was based on similar principles, the context was quite different: a group of staff from all levels of an NGO managed to develop a draft strategic plan by writing on fruit and teapots. In both cases, a playful and creative way of working enabled those involved to bond rapidly and achieve something useful and positive.

Key words

facilitating, groups, movement, materials, verbal communication, writing, human relationships, strategic planning, playfulness

Introduction

In November 2017, we (Alison and Alice) flew to Taiwan to spend a few days in the vibrant city of Taichung where we were to take part in a conference on Inclusive Arts

Practice (Alice's speciality). Our hosts were the British Council and the National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts. While there, we spent time working with a small group of older Taiwanese people ('elders' – about six women and one man), preparing them for a live performance in one of the museum's public galleries. We had limited information about the elders, who appeared to be relative strangers to each other and who were probably not in the habit of performing in public. What was clear, though, was that their language was Mandarin and the museum would provide a translator.

The performance that we developed together included a number of 'ingredients': movement, materials (blocks of ice, long pieces of red ribbon, marker pens, and pieces of cloth and tracing paper), as well as words, spoken and written. We rehearsed with the elders over three afternoons, and on the third day we put on a [10-minute public performance](#) (with both of us joining in).

My first ever visit to Taiwan (by Alison)

Alice and I had been friends for a few years and had often had conversations about our respective professional interests. One day, a few months before the Taichung conference, Alice mentioned that she was going to work with a group of elders while she was there and was hoping to collect stories from them. I pricked up my ears immediately and expressed an interest in joining her to work with her and the group.

As it happened, Alice was looking to travel to Taiwan with a small number of women she trusts, and to my delight she included me amongst them. From the start, I was excited about seeing Taiwan for the first time. Years earlier, I had done some basic Mandarin lessons, and I am a lover of the Oolong tea that grows on the island. In addition, collecting stories was something I had done plenty of. I spent about 10 years, for example, working with Macmillan Cancer Support, gathering stories from groups of health professionals to serve both as a record and as a way of evaluating the charity's investment (Donaldson, 2013; Donaldson, Lank, Maher 2011). It was clear, however, that in Taichung there would not be enough time to hear, let alone transcribe and edit, lengthy stories told by the elders. For a live performance, we needed more concise, poetic forms.



Credit: tvtropes.org ('Useful Notes')

While anticipating the trip, I was really curious to find out how Alice would work with the group. As my own work is normally focused on words (written and spoken), and I have limited experience of drama and performance, I felt slightly apprehensive about my contribution. But that was the point – for Alice and me to bring our different backgrounds together and to test collaborating together.

On our first day in Taichung, we walked from our high-rise hotel to the museum to see where we would soon be working. On the way we took in the urban atmosphere of the city with its colourful signs and Chinese characters, and the swarms of motor scooters. When we reached the museum, the contrast was striking: we



Street scene in Taichung (photo by Alison Donaldson)

found ourselves in a calm and spacious modern building surrounded by green space. A member of staff showed us round and took us to the gallery in which we would be working, and I noticed how Alice looked carefully at the room before confirming that she could work with it. She would somehow find a way to integrate the benches fixed to the floor in the middle of the performance space.

The next day we started working with the elders. The first revelation for me was the way in which Alice opened the session. In the organisational context, I had seen plenty of ‘warm-up exercises’, including some that involve movement, and I had initiated many rounds of verbal introductions myself.

Alice knew from experience that movement can help people leave their distractions behind and ‘land in the room’. So she started by inviting each person to dream up a spontaneous physical movement or gesture to introduce themselves to the others. She then got us all to speak out our name and make our gesture. Soon we were performing our gestures as a group, and within minutes, people not used to appearing on stage were performing together quite naturally. It looked beautiful.

I noticed that I felt relieved at not having to articulate verbally who I was, or to feel under pressure to sound interesting or accomplished. The gestures were accepted by the group without any need for discussion and they became our ‘sign names’ or personal

signatures, expressing something essential about each one of us. In effect, rather than plunging straight into speaking, we were getting to know each other in a very different way, through movement.

Later, Alice got us working in pairs, passing small blocks of ice to and fro. The ice dripped, changed shape and finally melted away between our fingers. Looking into one another's eyes while passing a melting piece of ice to and fro, edging closer step-by-step, was an intimate and bonding experience. Not a single word was exchanged. Afterwards, to keep our hands warm, she invited us to come up with some special hand movements like rubbing and smacking them together, which ultimately became part of the public performance.



Practising hand movements (photo: British Council)

Everyone was asked to share associations and stories inspired by ice.

Some of these were moving, some unexpected. We noticed, for example, how, given the warm climate in Taiwan, some of the elders associated ice with something pleasant and cooling, rather than cold and uncomfortable to touch.

At some point, a stranger wandered into the gallery, apparently expecting to join in. We had no idea who she was but Alice was quick to include her without asking any questions – a good reminder for me that the context of our activity was *inclusive* art practice.

By now, Alice and I were pondering whether the elders, having shared their personal experiences of ice, would feel comfortable expressing their thoughts about 'love'. To our mild surprise, they seemed to have no difficulty. (Months afterwards, while working on this article, we learned that the pronunciation of 'ice' in English sounds similar to the word for 'love' in Chinese – a nice coincidence.)



'Poem' emerging (photo: British Council)

The next task was to get some of the words and phrases about ice and love written down on pieces of tracing paper and cotton cloth (materials carefully chosen by Alice to bring out the elegance of Chinese

characters). Once this was done, Alice and I invited the rest of the group to order them into a co-authored 'poem'. Despite my Mandarin lessons, I had little clue about what the characters meant (a new experience for me, as I tend to be very alert to the word choices that people make). But fortunately everything was interpreted for us by our dynamic young translator, Christin.

We didn't (couldn't!) edit the poem at all but as a piece of writing it was rather lovely. Though some bits sounded sentimental to my ears, others seemed profound (possibly Taoist or Buddhist inspired – for example: “If you have everything you have nothing. If you have nothing you have everything. Everything is nothing, and nothing is everything.”)



Minutes before the live performance (photo: British Council)

On day three, in final preparation for the live performance, Alice got two people to read out the poem (one of the elders in Chinese, followed by Christin in English) while the technicians who had been assigned to us made an audio recording. This enabled us to use a recorded bi-lingual version of the poem as an evocative soundscape during the final performance, rather than projecting the words onto the walls of the gallery (as we had originally anticipated).

Excitement grew as we watched the audience arrive. Alice then brought us into the performance space one pair at a time. Some performed their duets on top of the benches, while others stayed on the ground, thus creating a two-level spectacle for the audience. The [10-minute performance](#) was professionally filmed and later edited for sharing on the web.



Passing ice during the live performance (photo: British Council)

Underlying philosophy (by Alice): using movement, material and words

Our aim was to combine movement, material and words to create an emotionally safe, trusting landscape that was conducive to honest, brave exchange. Accordingly, one of our research questions was: Can performing with ephemeral, sensuous material such as ice and ribbon rapidly create understanding and closeness within a newly-acquainted group?

Movement

The use of movement helps people 'land' in the space and feel safe in it. But why bring movement into the group *before* words? Essentially because the brain doesn't know everything. Movement helps us to become more attentive and to listen to our heart and gut.

Material

When working with materials, each item has to be chosen carefully. The red ribbon, for instance, jumped out at me in a stationery shop in Taichung the day before we started working with the elders. Like ice, it is sensuous and potentially symbolic. A length of



Mu-Dan Chang (張牡丹) cutting ribbon
(photo by Mei-yen Liu (劉美燕))

ribbon can silently link two people together, creating a physical connection whilst measuring the distance between them. It also lends itself to cutting with scissors, scattering scarlet snips in pretty patterns on the ground.

In the performance, each pair worked sensitively and responsively, moving together gradually, keeping the ribbon reasonably taut while snipping away at the ends. The diminishing ribbon highlighted the growing physical and emotional intimacy as the performance progressed.

As for ice, everybody can connect it with some experience. They may also be able to make metaphorical associations with it. For instance, thawing ice could symbolise the growing warmth between people as they get to know each other. Another advantage of ice is that it 'does things' – changes shape, turns to water, drips and vanishes. And by noticing how people respond to these qualities, we can learn something about them and about the cultural differences.

Words

But all this emphasis on movement and material does not mean eclipsing words altogether. While materials are well suited to evoking feelings and associations, and they create opportunities for abstract and emotive forms of expressions, language can offer us a higher degree of precision. It is worth noting, however, that in a performance the value of words is not to 'explain' anything, nor to 'translate' movements into language. Another way of putting it is that *words act as one ingredient among many*, in this case providing a poetic soundscape for the live performance.

Combining all three

By combining words with material and movement, we hoped to encourage people to go beyond cliché and abstraction and tell their personal stories. One of our main research questions was: Can performing with ephemeral, sensuous material such as ice and ribbon rapidly create understanding and closeness within a newly-acquainted group? During our time with the Taiwanese elders we were able to observe how the use of movement and materials quickly brought people together, encouraging them to speak openly and authentically. It was an opportunity for them to express, hear and feel powerful evocative messages. And it created meeting points as well as a series of shared experiences and intimate connections between them.

This complex and varied set of personal exchanges and developing relationships can be understood as 'meshworks' (Ingold, 2011). The performance also supported an authentic dialogic exchange, a place to 'dwell together'. Or, as Richard Sennett has put it: "*To counter the fetish of assertiveness by opening up an indeterminate mutual space, the space in which strangers dwell with one another*" (Sennett, 2013, p23).

Variation on a theme: a tea party in Cambodia

Each new group comes together with a different purpose, so it is always important to make a judgment about which materials to introduce and what people will do with them. A couple of years before our Taiwan trip, Alice had worked in Cambodia with about 45 people for a non-government organisation (NGO) called [Epic Arts](#). The collective aim was very concrete and practical: to come up with a three-year strategic plan. The group encompassed all strata of the organisation (directors, artists, caretakers etc.) and a range of departments (e.g. education, buildings, performance). Readily available materials included



Cambodian fruit with words
(photo by Alice Fox)

teapots, tea cups and tropical fruit, all of which were both cheap and culturally significant. The fruit was part of everyday life and locally grown, while the teapots were intended to evoke the English tea party ritual.

The process that Alice designed in Cambodia was quite different from that in Taichung. First, she got each person to write down their personal achievements and goals (“What worked well? What do you want the group to know about you?”) directly onto the fruit, as an unusual way of introducing themselves to each other.

Later on, the teacups, saucers and teapots served as surfaces for each person to write down what they thought their team should do next. People took turns talking and writing, so everyone had a voice, whatever their position in the organisation.

Finally, tea was poured into the teapots and the whole group had a convivial tea party, with everyone sitting on the ground, whatever their official status, chatting informally while drinking tea and eating up the pile of accumulated fruit. By the end, the directors were astonished by the high ambitions of their workforce and the productiveness of the session. The three-year plan had been created. A playful session had produced a solid result.

Translating artistic processes into organisational settings

The artistic and relational methods described here have wide relevance, and we hope to test them in more conventional organisational settings in future. They can be helpful to different kinds of people: managers, leaders, academics and other kinds of practitioners, even to highly ‘cerebral’ types who might otherwise feel nervous of moving their bodies in front of strangers.

The approach could also be fruitful in tackling a range of group issues (e.g. listening and communication, working relationships, team building, collaborative working, leadership development, employee engagement). What’s more, it can introduce an element of fun and playfulness into otherwise arduous and serious tasks like strategic planning (as seen in the Cambodian example).

For facilitators more generally, working with movement and material allows us to invite people to ‘let go’ of rational thinking for a few moments and get to know each other in a different way, maybe even understand how those around them think. Many of us who have worked in organisations have at times felt weighed down by negativity, cynicism, resignation or conflict. Groups and organisations who give this approach a try might just notice trust, collaboration and work satisfaction growing in the process.

Reflecting on creative processes

It is worth considering the best way of 'evaluating' this kind of work (something often demanded in public sector and non-profit organisations, like universities and charities). Our view is that, given the creative quality of the approach, there isn't much point in expecting people to rate their experience purely quantitatively – e.g. on a scale of 1 to 5. It is much better to ask open questions that invite thoughtful, reflective answers. One might even get group members interviewing each other, sharing stories and exploring striking or memorable moments. Participatory arts research celebrates the immersive, situated, subjective nature of the researcher and the research process. It often leads to a fertile, messy mix of resonance, new understanding, multiple meanings and further questions.

While preparing this article, we reflected on how we collaborated as facilitators, and we quickly agreed that it wasn't a matter of two identical people sharing all the tasks 50:50. We weren't even sure in advance exactly how we would work together. We did know, however, that we liked each other and there was a lot of trust between us. We also recognised and appreciated certain qualities and skills in one another – not just knowledge and attitudes, but also our individual 'presence' in conversation. Ultimately, facilitating together is more about trust and appreciation than it is about CVs.

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About the authors: complementary backgrounds

Alice: Artistic performer and director, academic leader and pioneer in inclusive arts practice, based at the University of Brighton. Often uses body and movement to bring people together and build their confidence. Has a knack of talking in warm, crystal clear, inspiring words.

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