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The Role of the Facilitator in Faculty Learning Communities: Paving the Way for Growth, Productivity, and Collegiality

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Effective facilitation is essential to creating and sustaining an environment in which faculty learning communities can thrive. Just as faculty learning communities differ qualitatively from other familiar work groups in higher education, the role of the facilitator differs from what are perhaps more familiar roles of content expert, lecturer, chairperson, or traditional leader. The authors explore the nature of facilitation; outline important facilitative attitudes, skills, and tasks; and consider a number of key concepts about adult learners and collaborative learning as well as group development and dynamics that can shed light on the experience from the point of view of a facilitator.

Education, in the deepest sense and at whatever age it takes place, concerns the opening of identities—exploring new ways of being that lie behind our current state. Whereas training aims to create an inbound trajectory targeted at competence in a specific practice, education must strive to open new dimensions for the negotiation of self. It places students on an outbound trajectory toward a broad field of possible identities. Education is not merely formative—it is transformative. (Wenger, 1998, p. 263)

Scenario 1: A Richly Woven Tapestry

A group of eight colleagues from art history, biology, business, communication, English, history, and sociology met bi-monthly over the course of a year to learn about new technologies and to practice using them in their teaching. Some weeks, the faculty members visited one another's classes to observe and later discuss applications of technology they saw used during class as well as students' reactions and level of engagement. Other weeks, they met in the computer lab to try a new software application and to practice presenting short lessons for one another. At other times, they prepared readings about the relative merits and drawbacks of using particular technologies for teaching. They debated these readings in lively discussions during meetings that were often held off campus—in a local coffee shop or at someone's home. It didn't feel like work, as members had time to socialize and get to know each other outside of the typical constraints of departmental politics and committee work. Those with more experience and technology skills readily tutored others who were less well versed. Members learned about one another's fields, about the pedagogical approaches necessary or preferred in different disciplinary contexts, about colleagues' current scholarly undertakings, and even about one another's lives beyond the campus. All looked back on the experience at the end of the year with gratitude, but also with regret that the intense engagement and mutual support of the learning community was coming to an end. Three years later, several of the group members continue to collaborate on a scholarship of teaching and learning project—work begun in the group that has led to several publications in peer-reviewed journals; two others regularly team teach an interdisciplinary course in art history and biology, a course that emerged from their learning community projects. All eight faculty feel a special bond among them that is quite different from what they experience elsewhere at the university.

Scenario 2: A Cloth in Tatters

A group of eight colleagues from accounting, chemistry, French, linguistics, political science, religion, and theater history started the academic year with the intention of learning how to integrate more active learning into the college classroom. After a month, regular attendance had dwindled to four. By November, the group disbanded, as none of the remaining members could spare the time. In the first meeting, the colleague from political science, an outspoken skeptic whose department chair had urged her to participate as a way to work on improving her teaching, had monopolized most of the two-hour meeting, disparaging the notion of "learning in community" and rejecting all efforts to get to know and to listen to other members as being much too "touchy-feely." A second colleague

from linguistics, also a skeptic, asked if it wouldn't be possible for each member to work on an individual project for the year and then to meet again in May to conduct a preliminary peer review of each other's manuscripts on active learning. His own disciplinary work, he explained, was really on the cutting edge, and he didn't want some peripheral distractions to come between him and his efforts to continue to increase his productivity—something, he knew, that might not concern those in the group who were less dedicated to an ambitious scholarly agenda. The three colleagues from accounting, chemistry, and theater history tried valiantly to hold the group together, suggesting that as a start they could read and discuss articles about active learning, and even pulling together a bibliography. They suggested that they develop a charge for themselves as a committee would have, and they called for a vote, but their suggestions were ignored. The few early meetings devolved into gripe sessions about campus politics peppered with rampant complaints about today's underprepared and disrespectful students. The group dispersed having explored little about active learning, and its hopeful members were disillusioned about the feasibility of learning together with colleagues in cross-disciplinary groups.

What can promote the success of a faculty learning community? What is likely to hinder it? It is a tall order to encourage community while promoting risk taking, intellectual growth, and productivity among faculty. Yet faculty learning communities (FLCs)[1] aspire to do just that: to provide a context for faculty and professional staff to come together and engage in sustained inquiry in authentic and supportive communities. The challenge comes from the "insistent individualism" of most faculty life (Bennett, 2003, p. 1), and from "an academic culture infamous for its individualism, judgmentalism, and competitiveness" (Palmer, 2002, p. x). Experiences on campuses both large and small around the country have shown that FLCs can provide a framework for undertaking shared inquiry that benefits both individuals and groups.

But FLCs, as developed, refined, and explored by Cox and others (Cox, 2001, 2004), are not simply structural and programmatic frameworks that undergird meaningful learning and growth; they are also a special kind of professional development group grounded upon the cultivation of positive collegial, interpersonal, and collaborative relationships. FLCs depend for their success on countering the individualism and alienation of the academy with a balancing spirit of appreciation for the collective, acceptance of others, support for all members' growth, and willingness to engage in genuine collaboration. Thus, both learning *and* community are essential outcomes.

Given the strength of our individualistic and competitive traditions,

structures, and habits, forming a cross-disciplinary group with no additional guidance or support will not necessarily result in positive community or outcomes. Members may witness a range of behaviors, including self-promotion or posturing, committee-like politicking, uneven opportunities to contribute to conversations, waning commitment, or increasing absenteeism. Shifting to a more collegial and committed way of working with colleagues—even when this latter experience is desirable and desired—is not necessarily natural and must often be nurtured, eased, *facilitated*. The FLC facilitator thus plays an essential role in helping to create and sustain not only the structures but also the ethos that can foster genuine community, deep learning, and projects of significance.

This article makes two contributions to a large body of literature on facilitation practices. First, much of the management and K-12 literature, where most facilitation guidance is found, serves as a valuable point of departure, but it doesn't completely and directly transfer into the culture of higher education. Second, new facilitators, often faculty members without time to delve deeply into this literature, need condensed, clear guidelines and concepts to begin their work—even while such guidelines provide only the barest bones of work that must be learned by doing. To this end, we explore (a) what an FLC facilitator (and an FLC process) is and is not; (b) vital facilitative attitudes, skills, and tasks to guide collaborative learning and group productivity; and (c) common patterns that occur during an FLC's development.

The Big Picture: What Makes FLC Facilitation Distinctive?

The widely bandied word *facilitator* may seem at first as easily defined as the ease implied in its Latin root *facilis* ("easy"). But far from being easy, the challenge of facilitation is precisely how to *ease* the experience of a group of people as they work toward defining and achieving shared goals (Bens, 2000; Justice & Jamieson, 1999; Kelsey & Plumb, 2004; Schwarz, 2002). A learning community facilitator must find ways to help establish a climate conducive to genuine inquiry, risk-taking, learning, and productivity. Such guidance requires that one note and help adjust the flow of conversation, aid members in negotiating conflict, cultivate members' sense of ownership of the experiences and the results of their work (and play) together, and encourage increasing member responsibility for the work of leading and even facilitating the group—all while participating in the intellectual life of the group, yet not imposing ideas or misusing power.

Because a facilitator is neither a group's expert nor its leader, his or

her first task is to serve the group and create the possibility for members to achieve their individual and their collaborative goals. To do requires that one focus more on interpersonal processes as well as approaches to working together than on content; more on others' contributions than one's own; more on listening, observing, modeling, and "directing traffic" than on speaking, presenting, or taking the lead.

Many faculty members already work in a variety of small groups, such as committees, task forces, study groups, and seminars. These forums provide experience in running or contributing to meetings, inviting multiple perspectives and encouraging civil debate, setting and steering a course toward group goals, and so on. Naturally, then, because we are creatures of habit, we often tend toward "committee-ization" once we are in a faculty learning community. Particularly for topically focused groups exploring issues of institutional rather than individual, policy-related rather than pedagogical, concern, members can begin to channel all their energies into trying to influence policy and to enact a perceived or self-ordained "charge." To avoid falling into such familiar but unreflective patterns of behavior, it is important to consider how committees and FLCs should differ as well as what they have in common.

Norming Exercise:
Comparing and Contrasting Committee and Community

When asked to list their associations with the word committee, faculty in facilitation training workshops around the country typically respond with common words and phrases: *minutes, chair, cross-disciplinary group, goal, task-focused, Robert's Rules, meet regularly, charge, agenda,* and so on. The list usually expands (with knowing laughter, groans, and anecdotes) to include more pointed evaluations: *boring, waste of time, goes nowhere, busy work, time consuming, chair does the work, no need to do outside work,* or, on the other hand, *extra work.* Someone inevitably objects by countering that some committees are really very productive and collegial. Because there are indeed valuable, productive, and collegial committees, it is worthwhile to consider what distinguishes such committees from those that evoke memories of dread.

Workshop participants are asked to imagine, by contrast, how faculty learning communities might ideally be characterized. Typical terms that emerge include *collective decision-making, personal meaning, inquiry, enjoyment, shared responsibility, self-selecting, non-threatening, social, intellectually stimulating, creativity, chance to grow and learn,* etc. Using the "Defining Features Matrix" classroom assessment technique (Angelo & Cross, 1993),

we chart these associations as being either characteristic or not characteristic of the different types of small groups they have been involved with (see Table 1).

As people note contrasts and commonalities, the discussion tends to bring flashes of insight. Despite professed disdain for many committee experiences, faculty can easily fall into "committee behavior" in an FLC. Both committees and FLCs share a number of fundamental characteristics: both are cross-disciplinary (small) groups of colleagues that have agendas for regular meetings scheduled to work toward the accomplishment of tasks and goals over a period of time, often at least an academic year. And while both groups may appear to share structural features—both need some sort of record-keeping (whether as minutes or more informal notes) and leadership (whether a chair or a facilitator plus rotating leadership from members)—there are essential differences in the character of these elements. The bureaucratic nature of many committees, a tendency to adhere to formal procedures derived from *Robert's Rules,* and a sense that committee work is neither optional nor (necessarily) personally meaningful distinguish them from the ideal FLC. FLCs will be most likely to succeed if they are personally meaningful, voluntary, and characterized by a sense of shared responsibility, a non-threatening and engaging atmosphere, and genuine inquiry.

Engaging in FLC Self-Analysis Using the Defining Features Matrix

Engaging in this exercise together can be valuable not only for preparing facilitators, but also as a means for the facilitator and members alike to achieve greater clarity about what an ideal FLC might be, to help everyone involved to understand their roles and the level of commitment necessary for the FLC to succeed, and to raise awareness of the potential for blurring the lines between committee work and learning communities or for falling into default behaviors.

For example, one group that formed to explore assessment of general education outcomes—a topic some would see as a fate worse than death in the form of a committee assignment—found that they thoroughly enjoyed what they learned, the work they undertook, and the camaraderie they developed. They reveled in the freedom to explore several areas that came to interest them, to undertake collaborative projects, and to work in the absence of externally imposed deadlines and an officially issued charge. They puzzled over the fact that other colleagues in a range of departments and programs outside of the learning community responded with easy willingness to their appeals for participation in scoring student writing

Table 1
Sample Defining Features Matrix
Comparing Characteristics of Committees and FLCS

Characteristic	Committees	FLCs
Cross-disciplinary group	+	+
Charge	+	-
Bureaucratic	+	-
Agenda	+	+
Robert's Rules	+	-
Boring	?	-
Meets regularly	+	+
Chair does most of the work	?	-
Busy work	?	-
Goes nowhere	?	-
Productive	?	+
Task and goals	+	+
Personally meaningful	-	+
Shared responsibility	?	+
Self-selecting/optional	-	+
Non-threatening	?	+
Genuine inquiry	-	+

Note.
+ = characteristic; - = not characteristic; ? = sometimes yes, sometimes no

(not characteristic of the same colleagues' responses to similar assessment committee requests). They wondered why they, themselves, did not resent participating in a bi-monthly two-hour meeting on late Friday afternoons devoted to a topic that was not initially of burning interest to half of the members. Midway through the year, the members used the defining features matrix (see Table 2) to self-identify overlapping charac-

Table 2
**Sample Learning Community Self-Analysis
With Defining Features Matrix**

Committee	*FLC*	*Both*
Charge	Shared goal	Meet regularly
Minutes	Notes	Agenda
Mechanical, impersonal	Creative, personally meaningful, chance to explore	Outside work
Chair does work, hierarchical	All share responsibility; collaborative	Cross-disciplinary
Driven by bureaucracy	Driven by genuine inquiry and curiosity	

teristics as well as differences between committees and FLCs. They then analyzed patterns to try to tease out what the most important similarities and differences were.

After coming to value and even look forward to the learning community experience, these participants recognized that it provided them with opportunities for exploration, growth, and a rewarding, deep sense of collegiality that committees often did not. Genuine inquiry, the freedom to explore, and collaboration were at the heart of the experience.

It is the facilitative attitudes of both facilitator and members alike that can ensure the group develops into a genuine learning community rather than a committee and that it safeguards 10 qualities Cox (2001) has identified as essential to the success of FLCs: safety and trust, openness, respect, responsiveness, collaboration, relevance, challenge, enjoyment, *esprit de corps,* and empowerment. The challenge for the facilitator is to model and coach the specific skills required by each of these essential qualities.

The Facilitating Process (or Dynamics) and Product (or Task)

How does one become such a facilitator? As Doyle and Straus (1976) have emphasized, there is no simple formula:

Since the role of facilitator is based on flexibility and accom-

> modation to the needs of the group members, it would be hypocritical and impossible to lay out a step-by-step procedure comparable to Robert's *Rules of Order*. Unlike the chairperson who can waltz to the regulated music of Robert's *Rules of Order*, the facilitator has to do a combination tap dance, shuffle, and tango to a syncopated rhythm produced by unpredictable humans. (p. 89)

The attitudes, skills, tasks, and knowledge of FLC facilitation must be learned through practice, though not all of this will be new to professionals in higher education who have prior experiences to draw upon as they practice a spontaneous and intuitive dance with their colleagues.

Attitude First: Core Commitments of FLC Facilitation

To begin with, effective facilitation involves a number of attitudes, an orientation, and a set of core commitments important to group success. Facilitative attitudes identified by Kelsey and Plumb (2004) include respect and compassion for all group members; a positive attitude and outlook; flexibility; a non-defensive posture; neutrality and a non-judgmental approach; and a willingness to operate as a servant leader, asking what would best serve the group as a whole. Other authors identify related characteristics and orientations, including steadiness, firmness, calmness, centeredness, confidence, adaptiveness, proactivity, responsiveness, resilience, assertiveness, openness, flexibility, authenticity, humility, optimism, neutrality, alertness, and a results-oriented disposition (Bens, 2000; Justice & Jamieson, 1999; Thiagarajan, 1999).

Beyond these foundational attitudes and capacities, FLC facilitators must balance their commitment to cooperating with the FLC program; maintaining their individual groups, group goals, and process concerns (such as interpersonal relationships); and resisting becoming so enmeshed in content discussions that they lose track of process. Helpful encouragement about the possibility of meeting these daunting demands comes from Eller (2004), who values intuitive practice:

> If you sincerely care about the success of the group and are able to communicate that caring to the group, you can be successful. While having a well-developed set of strategies can go a long way to making you feel competent, facilitation is a highly emotional activity. The best facilitators are in tune with their intuition and use this sense as their guide during facilitation experiences. Your own personal intuition is something you will have to build as you work with groups as their facilitator. (p. 13)

No facilitator can expect to possess equal amounts of these aptitudes and capacities; the key is to reflect on them regularly and share responsibility for them with FLC members and, possibly, with a co-facilitator.

Facilitative Responsibilities and Models

FLC facilitation involves two separate but interrelated responsibilities (Schein, 1988):

> • *Task:* Facilitators help group members do the intellectual work of exchanging ideas and experiences and accomplishing individual and/or group projects; they also manage details such as organizational and logistical tasks and/or make such labors shared.

> • *Process:* Equally important, facilitators help the group draw on individual member strengths, see that individual needs get voiced and addressed, and help mediate challenging personal interactions.

The facilitator, however, need not—and should not—do all of the work alone, nor must he or she necessarily possess every ideal attitude or orientation. In fact, one important way to build community and foster a sense of ownership is to draw upon the strengths members bring to the group as well as to share the work of facilitation. Work can be shared or delegated from the outset, be it note-taking, some organizational responsibilities, discussion leadership, active listening, questioning, or including all voices.

Responsibilities are sometimes borne equally by co-facilitators. Co-facilitators often find their skills, styles, philosophies, and perspectives complement each other's work with a group, but they must often also explore how tensions between their approaches may make their differences unproductive. As with team teaching (Smith, 1994; "Team-teaching," 2000), co-facilitators are encouraged to meet in advance to compare and align approaches and expectations, and to reconnect regularly to debrief about the FLC experience.

Finally, some FLCs designate a "convener" to oversee the work of the FLC, particularly to manage the logistics, but then have all members handle the work and success of the community and, thus, participate in facilitation. In this model, there is no one individual responsible for shepherding the task and process components of the group.

Whatever model an FLC adopts, facilitators should encourage members to take responsibility for the tasks and processes needed to foster effective

group work. As Bens (2000) has put it, "[f]acilitation is a way of providing leadership without taking the reins. As a facilitator, your job is to get others to assume responsibility and take the lead" (p. 7). This shared responsibility helps to take the burden off of any individual facilitator to be all things to all people and to give members the opportunity to develop a range of skills and to truly "own" the group.

It is clear that participants should increasingly engage in facilitative tasks and behaviors, but should a facilitator also be a participant in the life of the group, engaged with other members in wrestling with content and engaging in decision-making? Here, the FLC notion of facilitation departs from models that insist facilitators should not be members and should not opine on content or participate in decision-making, but rather should exclusively facilitate the process (Doyle & Straus, 1976; Schwarz, 2002). Such a clear separation of roles may be essential for some types of groups or for groups in some contexts—particularly for groups with important decision-making charges. But in FLCs generally, the fusion of facilitation and participation in the person of the facilitator does not tend to prove detrimental to the group so long as the facilitator manages both roles consciously and with some transparency.

Some experts on facilitation do make room for hybrid roles. Kelsey and Plumb (2004), for example, suggest moving between facilitation and participation (for example, by remaining very self-aware and by labeling the nature of one's involvement at any moment); Schwarz (2002) maintains that facilitators cannot be participants but, at the same time, does assert that any leader can take a facilitative approach. What remains important is that facilitating for the good of the group must remain a facilitator's number one priority, and that one's own investment in content or decision making must take a subordinate role. It can be very difficult to split one's attention between immersion in content and observation of interpersonal and work processes, and it can be challenging to put aside a passionately held position or a solid vision for achieving a particular outcome. But using co-facilitation and asking members to help notice when one shifts roles can help navigate this tension. Co-facilitators, for example, can alternate between participating and facilitating, cross-checking impressions and providing one another with constructive criticism and support to understand what is going on with the group.

Facilitation of Learning, Intellectual Exchange, and Project Work

A facilitator may lay the ground work for the content-related part of the group's work by preparing or obtaining a preliminary bibliography

on the group's topic; imagining and outlining possibilities for meeting structures and activities, projects, and goals; collecting samples of successful projects or publications in the scholarship of teaching and learning; establishing a skeletal outline for the year's work and progress; and assigning some reading or designing some topic-related activity for the first meeting of the group.

Some facilitators take a more prescriptive role in charting the work of the year. Others provide the barest of suggestions, preferring rather to create opportunities for commitment to the group, the process, and the projects by putting responsibility for negotiation and decision making about what will be studied and presented and how in the hands of group members. There is not one right way to approach this choice, but a facilitator should be conscious from the outset about potential trade-offs: allowing members to co-determine content and working structures can be extremely positive for instilling a sense of ownership and agency, but it can also result in overly lengthy deliberations and even a complete stalling of the sense of forward momentum and purpose, both of which can demotivate group members in the long run. On the other hand, however, having too strict an agenda or curriculum up front can make the experience feel more like a formal course and may lead participants to approach the experience passively and to view the facilitator as the leader or teacher, leaving less room for spontaneous turns in the direction of inquiry and, potentially, fostering less collaboration.

Some learning communities rotate responsibility for leading discussion of readings; some share insights spontaneously; some divvy up the work and report to one another in jigsaw fashion; some report on reciprocal peer classroom visits or share, analyze, and discuss teaching-related documents such as course syllabi or assignments; others feature reports or presentations by members on a rotating basis; still others undertake excursions related to the topic, for example, a group exploring service-learning may participate in a series of community service projects together. A group that travels to an academic conference gets an intensive short course that may lead to preparation of a conference presentation on work-in-progress. Above all, such "road trips" often provide a powerful turning point or bonding experience for the group, cementing a sense of camaraderie and community.

Whatever the format of projects, it is vital that they be authentic and not mere empty exercises, that they be of interest and value to participants (rather than assigned or charged by leadership), and that they allow for a great degree of exploration, creativity, and genuine inquiry. It is not uncommon for participants in a learning community to end up some-

where they had not expected to be at the outset. Balancing structure and structurelessness is but one of several tensions and paradoxes that can be leveraged to benefit an FLC.

Facilitation During Meetings

Facilitation consultant Sivasailam Thiagarajan ("Thiagi") conceives of the work of groups in terms of six tensions that lie along a continuum: (1) from tight to loose structure, (2) from fast to slow pace, (3) from co-operative to competitive interaction, (4) from focus on process to focus on results, (5) from concern with individual needs to concern with group needs, and (6) the type of control exerted by the facilitator, from obtrusive to unobtrusive (Thiagarajan, 1999). Thiagi provides a set of recommendations for facilitators looking to make adjustments on any one of these sets of continua (see Appendix A).

While one place along a continuum may seem to represent the "right" one for facilitating FLCs, it is important to keep in mind that different energies and different orientations suit different groups at different times. Sometimes it helps to slow down and take a detour; at other times, the group needs to push forward with more project-related and outcome-oriented work.

Facilitating Dialogue

Helping faculty engage in productive conversations—helping them to articulate what they are learning, to risk self-disclosure (as appropriate), to communicate clearly and to listen well to others—is a major facilitative responsibility (Kelsey & Plumb, 2004). As Covey (1989) famously recommends, "Seek first to understand . . . then to be understood" (p. 255). The following suggestions can help both facilitators and participants (adapted from Schwarz, 2002, pp. 90-91, and Schwarz, 2005, pp. 209-210):

Check your assumptions. Say back to others what you understand they are saying to see if you get it:

> "I'm thinking. . . ."

> "It sounds to me as if. . . ."

> "I'd like to check my understanding. . . ."

> "I'm getting the feeling. . . ."

Use specific examples, and agree on what important words mean. Avoid vagueness:

> "Can you give me an example of that?"

> "Here's an example of a time when the conversation was dragging for me. . . ."

Explain your reasoning or intent. Rather than assume your motives are obvious, share them:

> "My interest here is not to put you on the spot but to figure out what needs to happen so we can work effectively as a group."

Ask what others think to make certain you understand. For example:

> "Would you say what leads you to see the issue (or feel) that way?"

> "What's your ultimate hope here?"

Focus on needs, not solutions. Find out other people's interests behind their positions:

> "What is it about this solution that doesn't work for you?"

> "Putting the solution aside for now, what needs must be met for it to be effective?"

> "I heard your solution; can you say what about it is important to you?"

Rather than only advocate or push an agenda, invite questions about your point of view. Share your view, and ask what others think. State your view, and ask for reactions:

> "Here's my thinking; then, I'd like to get your thoughts"

> "That's my thought, but what am I missing?"

Discuss undiscussable issues. Address what reduces effectiveness, particularly when people believe they cannot discuss it without creating defensiveness or other problems:

> "This may be difficult to discuss, but if we don't, we may get bogged down and lose focus."

Each behavior above requires a shift in core values and assumptions from the opposite poles of "unilateral control" or "giving up control" to one of "mutual learning." That is, it helps to see that other people also have relevant information, that each of us may see things others do not, and that I as facilitator may be contributing to the problem and not seeing it.

In addition to helping participants communicate effectively, facilitators can draw attention to emerging themes or patterns in the group's process or in the content of discussions that otherwise might be overlooked or lost.

Point out common positions or threads in discussion that are going unrecognized. For example:

> "Both of you actually seem to be suggesting that. . . . Would you agree?"

> "Do you notice that we've returned to this concern each time we've met? What can we make of that?"

Also point out patterns that disrupt conversation or inhibit balanced interactions. For example:

> "Since only half of our group has had a chance to speak today, I wanted to check in with the others to see what they're thinking. . . ."

> "We seem to be bogged down. How about if we take about 5 minutes to each write out some thoughts before we proceed with this conversation?"

Help participants recognize the territory already covered. For example:

> "So far this year, we've. . . ."

> "Let me see if I can provide a thumbnail sketch of our work to date. . . ."

Remind participants of program and group goals, especially at key intervals if the group seems to be stalling or hitting a low point. For example:

> "Our overarching goal is to learn enough about e-portfolios—both theoretically and practically—that we each might use them in one class by spring quarter. Where are we, now that it's late January? What have we learned and what do we still need to do to prepare?"

The more skill a facilitator gains, the more imperceptibly he or she may perform these and other roles.

How Challenges, Conflicts, and Logjams
Can Improve a Community:
Staying With Tensions

Many of the greatest challenges of facilitation make the act an ongoing paradox: A facilitator at once provides a kind of structure and leadership *and* works to judiciously give up control, to cede leadership and facilitation to members as they come to work as a collaborative group. To Smith and Berg (1987), paradoxes drive group life continually. Conflict and ambivalence about the experience of working together, tensions between the individual and the collective, are not problems to be overcome. Rather, the tensions and paradoxes themselves are the *essence* of group life, as they spark the keenest learning and the best use of diversely varying personalities:

> Given that groups bring to the surface powerful contradictions
> in their membership, a major task of the group then becomes
> the "containment," or management, of these contradictions and
> their effects. The successful management of these tensions can
> provide members with a connection both among themselves
> and within the group. This connection can help bring into align-
> ment the work involved in developing a group's collective life
> and the development of individuals upon whose energies the
> group depends. When a group fails to 'hold' these contradic-
> tions and works to have them expelled from its midst or carried
> burdensomely by one particular member or a subgroup, then
> the preconditions for "stuckness" have been created. (Smith &
> Berg, 1987, pp. 14-15)

The facilitator can help the group achieve this tenuous balance by encouraging members to tolerate ambiguity and to adopt a "both/and" mentality toward the tensions that develop. While conflict that is petty, mean, personalized, or disruptive is detrimental to the work and the ethos of an FLC and should be addressed and de-escalated promptly, constructive controversy should be cultivated and encouraged. According to Johnson, Johnson, and Tjosvold (2006),

> [c]onstructive controversy occurs when one person's ideas, in-
> formation, conclusions, theories, and opinions are incompatible
> with those of another, and the two seek to reach an agreement.
> Constructive controversies involve what Aristotle called *deliber-*

> *ate discourse* (discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of proposed actions) aimed at synthesizing novel solutions (*creative problem solving*). (p. 66)

The much-touted synergy that collaborative work can provide has roots in creative controversy. In addition, such discourse tends to propel people toward more inquiry. Far from proving detrimental to community, research has shown that constructive controversy fosters positive relationships and regard among participants—more so than do debate, concurrence seeking, or individualistic efforts. Again, Johnson et al. (2006) assert that "[t]he combination of frank exchange of ideas coupled with a positive climate of friendship and support leads to more productive decision making and greater learning and disconfirms the myth that conflict inevitably leads to divisiveness and dislike" (p. 75).

When disruptive or destructive conflict does arrive—and at least some minor disruptive conflict is almost guaranteed to emerge, at the very least in certain phases of group development)—the facilitator should remain aware of what is brewing in order to be able to help the group analyze and manage or resolve the conflict. One of the most popular models of conflict management involves four memorable steps (adapted from Fisher, Ury, & Patton, 1991, pp. 189-193):

1. Separate the people from the problem:

    • Be hard on the problem, but soft on the people, saving face for them.

    • Acknowledge emotions as legitimate.

    • Prevention first: Build relationships before you need them.

2. Focus on interests, not positions:

    • Ask "Why?" and probe for deeper understanding.

    • Modulate tone to emphasize curiosity (and avoid perception of attack), and ask questions like "Can you tell me more about why that's important to you?" "How did you come to feel this way?"

3. Invent options for mutual gain:

    • Don't assume win/lose. Find win/win's in everyone's interest.

- Use brainstorming strategies (no criticism, get out lots of ideas, etc.); separate inventing from deciding.

- Use differences and different interests to the advantage of differing parties.

4. Find objective criteria:

- Reframe "problems": Frame each issue as a joint search for shared criteria, such as, "How can we both integrate the core learning experience of students and not lose touch with our mission?"

- Appeal to fair standards and procedures; ask how you will together decide on what is a fair agreement for all parties.

Many resources are available to help manage difficult moments and foster attitudes conducive to conflict resolution (Bens, 2000; Cloke & Goldsmith, 2005; Eller, 2004; Fisher & Shapiro, 2005; Kelsey & Plumb, 2004; Stone, Patton, & Heen, 1999).

Facilitation Across the Course of the Year

Breaking the Ice

Depending on the size of the institution (and surprisingly often, even at small institutions) and the nature of the group's membership, participants may not know each other, at least not well, and may not have developed a deep level of trust. Even if they do know one another, the "knowing" may be of an official and limited nature. To begin helping the group to form by fostering an atmosphere of safety and trust, some sort of an "ice breaker" is important in the first meeting of the group.

One simple, topical activity to help people get acquainted invites members to recount (briefly) how they became interested in the group's focus. For example, after members of a group dedicated to "global learning" recounted their first experiences with global issues, members who had known each other for years discovered much that surprised them about their colleagues. Revelations were biographical (two members had immigrant parents) and avocational (one coached synchronized swimming in her spare time and was traveling to help prepare for the Beijing Olympics) as well as academic (unexpected college majors, innovative courses taught, unusual scholarly pursuits and travels). Besides starting the experience

with a clear focus on the group's topic, this process helps members get to know each other as people with lives beyond the campus.

Decision-Making Procedures

Arguably the first decision that needs to be made in a group is how it will make decisions. The more collaborative the group is to be, the greater the sense of group ownership desired, the more all members should participate in at least some significant decision-making. The facilitator can help the group choose a decision-making approach or can facilitate decision making more informally or invisibly so as to respect the integrity of the group and each of its members. As with other norms of group work, members often vary in how much control they want over decisions.

Group Norms

From the outset, the facilitator can help create conditions and opportunities for establishing norms and surfacing mutual expectations. Should confidentiality be protected by removing identities when sharing outside the group? Will the group start meetings on time or when all arrive? How will differences of opinion be navigated? How will decisions be made in the first place? While the literature on facilitation urges the early and explicit negotiation and articulation of group guidelines or even groundrules (Bens, 2000; Eller, 2004; Justice & Jamieson, 1999; Kelsey & Plumb, 2004; Schwarz, 2002), faculty sometimes chafe at having to make expectations too explicit. Some resist an activity that feels too artificial, schoolmarmish, or "touchy-feely" in a group of colleagues. But by the very voicing of such concerns, the negotiation of shared norms has already begun. However informally and in whatever mode such voicing takes place, members need to deal with their differing sense of what makes a productive process, and then hold themselves and one another accountable for agreed-upon guidelines.

Three strategies we have found helpful, even with reticent or skeptical faculty members, include the following:

> **1. Participants write down memories of their best and worst group experiences.** Then, in the whole group or in pairs, they discuss experiences and note key themes. After this reflective activity, members suggest what they hope or expect for this group. A recorder captures individual contributions and group insights, to circulate later (see Appendix B).

2. **Each person anonymously writes his or her greatest hope for the group on one side of an index card and his or her greatest concern on the reverse.** Participants then drop all cards in a hat (or other container). Each draws one that is not his or her own and reads the concerns aloud. Participants discuss and detect themes. Each person then reads the hope written on the reverse. Again, participants discuss as necessary, concluding this norming activity on a positive note. The facilitator (or another group member) can collect the cards and type up the content along with any notes the recorder has made from the ensuing discussion. This exercise allows safety in anonymity for disclosing hopes and concerns and suggests guidelines the group may want in order to make the experience a positive one. It also gives the facilitator a good sense of participants' points of departure and goals.

3. **If these sorts of activities feel too forced, yet it seems important to make expectations or guidelines explicit, the facilitator may bring a list of suggested or possible guidelines for the group to discuss, modify, add to, or refine** (see Table 3).

Goals

Every FLC should agree not only on norms but on what people want to accomplish, individually and as a group. If aims align with broader programs or campus initiatives, one can avoid overload and instead dovetail multiple interests While only a few objectives are needed, each should be S.M.A.R.T.: <u>S</u>pecific enough to be memorable, <u>M</u>easurable (whether qualitatively or quantitatively), <u>A</u>ccountable to named volunteers, <u>R</u>ealistic enough to get done, and <u>T</u>ime delimited as to when exactly measures will be taken. Most important, and often neglected, the group should revisit its goals during the year and modify them as needed.

Assessment and Taking Stock

At key intervals (such as at mid-year or when a group is floundering), the facilitator can help the group to take stock of its progress toward agreed-upon goals and norms and recommit to these if necessary. Fur-

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Table 3
**Possible Guidelines and Groundrules
for FLC Discussions**

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1. Listen and seek to understand before speaking.

2. Ask clarifying and probing questions.

3. Assume that others speak from a place of good intentions.

4. Be willing to challenge one another's thinking and ideas.

5. Separate the impact a comment has upon you from the intent of the speaker.

6. Be discreet about any sensitive information other participants may share.

7. Provide a level of encouragement and support for one another.

8. Assume that everyone is here in good faith and has the interests of the institution at heart.

9. Be sensitive about time.

10. Do the work and take it seriously.

11. Keep focused on the goals and stay on task.

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thermore, the facilitator can invite participants to submit brief mid-year feedback anonymously ("What's going well? What could be better and how?") or a more formal survey on the FLC experience and, in the next meeting with the whole group, discuss themes that emerge. Often, the facilitator is also responsible for keeping records of the group's projects and process for purposes of program assessment.

Logistical Tasks: Setting (and Maintaining) the Stage

How and by whom a number of FLC logistical, administrative, and managerial tasks are handled will vary considerably from context to context. In some institutions, the FLC experience is spearheaded and overseen in its entirety by the facilitator; in others, administrative oversight and support exist in the form of a program or project director. Some FLCs are also fortunate to have support from an administrative or program assistant. In any case, organizational issues represent the third set of key responsibilities

for which the facilitator is responsible—alone or with the support of others.

A process for establishing the focus of a learning community and for inviting and deciding upon membership must be developed and executed before most of the other preparations are made. The experience of many seasoned FLC facilitators and program directors suggests that it is best, if possible, to identify a day and time to set for meetings in advance of calling for applications (otherwise, much time and energy is lost throughout the year in trying to align schedules that are impossible to match). The facilitator should develop a tentative overview for the year, regardless of to what degree the final schedule and plan will be approached collaboratively with the group's members. Before or during the course of the year, he or she must ensure that potential meeting places have been identified (preferably off campus) and reserved, if necessary; plan for refreshments; procure any necessary resources, such as articles, books, or other materials; keep clear communication flowing with schedules, meeting notes, and e-mail exchanges; ensure the group is keeping a record of its activities; manage the budget; invite members to provide formative feedback (anonymous or otherwise) during the experience; and conduct more formal evaluations at the end of the year. In addition, the facilitator should keep copies of members' work and contributions, electronic or otherwise. Successful facilitation, however, cannot be reduced to organization and logistics. It also requires working with the rhythms of a group's development.

What to Expect:
Common Patterns of FLC Development

The extensive literatures on group theory and on facilitation all reference and theorize stages of group development over time.

Tuckman's Stages Theory of Group Development

In what is, perhaps, the most well-known stage-based schema and model, Tuckman (1965; Tuckman & Jensen, 1977) conceptualizes a group's progression in terms of five stages: forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning. At each different but relatively predictable stage, a facilitator's role and challenges vary (Bens, 2000; Justice & Jamieson, 1999; Kelsey & Plumb, 2004; Komives, Lucas, & McMahon, 1998).

Forming

As the group first forms, members are likely to engage with hope,

optimism, and excitement, but also with some nervousness and concern about inclusion and about the nature or likely success of the experience ahead. At this point, the facilitator's most important tasks include providing and communicating clear structures and procedures as well as helping members to get acquainted and to develop and commit to group norms. As the novelty of the experience wears off, as inevitable conflicts among participants begin to surface, and, as some ennui may set in, groups tend to enter a stage that is more or less "stormy."

Storming

For some groups, storming may take the form of low energy, a feeling of going in circles, or a waning interest or commitment; for others, overt conflicts and disagreements may signal less about the possibility for the group's ultimate success than that participants are encountering a predictable stage involving negotiating power and norms. In this stage members may vie subtly or openly for leadership and power, and the facilitator, him- or herself, may experience challenges to one's (facilitative) leadership. It takes work by the whole group to support risk taking, learning from mistakes, self-disclosure, and creating a context where criticism and harsh judgment are absent or at least withheld. Whether this latter expectation about safety is an explicit norm or not, the facilitator can model a nonjudgmental posture from the outset. Likewise, he or she can welcome conflict and avoid excessive smoothing, to help members not only find common ground but also honestly examine and respect differences.

Norming

At this point, the facilitator's task is to assess the nature of the conflict and to listen well to all members, depersonalize challenges, and gently enforce group norms by reminding members of the goals for their common work. If adults' learning needs aren't met, Vella (1994) argues, they will vote with their feet. This "voting" may manifest itself in an FLC as spotty attendance, flagging interest, or poor preparation for meetings. The facilitator can invite all to play a role in deciding what such norms should be and in maintaining them; this invitation, in itself, suggests that responding to others' needs is a norm for the group. The facilitator can model good conflict resolution skills and mirror for the group its own struggles. At this stage a facilitator may decide it is timely to introduce members themselves to a model of group development (such as Tuckman's stages theory) as a way to encourage them to see that they are

experiencing a predictable phase and that recommitting to the work and establishing new norms together will move the group forward. In these ways, the facilitator guides the group toward norming: recommitting to the goals, values, and shared interests members have established or developing new and more appropriate ones. Once group members have regained equilibrium, they can move on to the high-energy and productive phase of performing.

Performing

Faculty, like most adult learners (Vella, 1994), generally are most satisfied and engaged when they can see the immediate relevance of what they are learning, whether it involves new knowledge, skills, or attitudes. As FLC members marry action to reflection, they get beyond the equally unsatisfactory quagmires of endless rumination, theorizing or student bashing, on the one hand, and unreflective and unsystematic action, on the other. At some point, members often begin assuming some facilitative and leadership responsibilities and begin truly collaborating. At this point the facilitator may play less of an active role in guiding the group and its work and, instead, help participants recognize progress and successes, assemble copies of finished work, celebrate achievements, and publicize outcomes.

As Vella (1994) emphasizes, "[a]ccountability is one of the foremost principles of adult learning" (p. 21). Faculty, like all adult learners, must emerge from a learning experience knowing both *that* they've learned and *what* they've learned. Thus, FLC members eventually want to account for their work, often as the end draws near.

Adjourning

Finally, a group needs to experience some sense of meaningful closure, or "adjourning." In a number of learning community programs, the year's experience in FLCs is celebrated and closed with a major event, such as an awards banquet or a luncheon, where those completing their FLC experiences present about what they have learned and are honored for their commitment to the program. Such celebrations may include not only participants from all other FLCs, but also representatives from university leadership, such as departmental chairpersons and deans. Often at this event, the new cohorts for the next academic year are welcomed and, in a sense, the baton is passed.

Johnson and Johnson's Sequence of Seven Development Steps

Building on Tuckman's (1995) work, which primarily drew from studies of groups that operated with non-directive group leaders, Johnson and Johnson (2006) have identified seven sequential developmental steps that *facilitated* groups move through: "(1) defining and structuring procedures, (2) conforming to procedures and getting acquainted, (3) recognizing mutuality and building trust, (4) rebelling and differentiating, (5) committing to and taking ownership for the goals, procedures, and other members, (6) functioning maturely and productively, and (7) terminating" (p. 28). Their model, differing slightly from Tuckman's, closely tracks the unfolding of FLCs over time.

Limits of Stage Theory

While stage theories suffer from the fact that our experiences do not always follow strictly linear development, they can nevertheless help to identify common patterns across groups. Knowing that a group's current struggle is a commonly experienced phase rather than the failure of group members or an individual facilitator can help depersonalize the experience and encourage the facilitator to try interventions that can help the group members recommit.

Many other factors can affect the interactions among a group's members, including external forces from the larger culture or organization, histories that members bring to the group, unspoken norms, and the size of the group (Kelsey & Plumb, 2004). What's more, the person who would like to spend more time conducting research and theorizing before beginning to develop a final group project will inevitably experience conflict with the person who works best and is happiest diving in and learning through doing. Activities, exercises, or frameworks that can help members recognize that their assumptions and preferences aren't necessarily shared by the others—and that these differences can be both resources and potential areas of conflict—can help provide team members with language through which to view their differences (see, for example, Komives et al., 1998).

Collaborative Learning as Resource and Model

A final resource and model for facilitators comes from the literature on collaborative learning. The higher education literature on collaboration can help facilitators recognize the components required to develop high-functioning collaborative groups. Johnson, Johnson, and Smith

(1991) identify five essential elements: positive interdependence, face-to-face promotive interaction, individual accountability, interpersonal and small-group skills, and group processing. First, positive interdependence asks team members to take full advantage of different people's strengths, rely on shared resources or receive shared rewards, and clarify how participants depend on one another to complete their work (by contrast, the typical "divide-and-conquer" approach to divvying up group work encourages rogue independence rather than interdependence).

Second, face-to-face promotive interaction means that members of the group are responsible and responsive in supporting one another's growth and development. This means that they must spend time interacting. Third, each member of the group must not only rely on the group but also be individually accountable for contributing to the team. That is, a learning community's plans should clarify things like who will do what when, and whether individuals will protect the group meeting times in their schedules. Fourth, to function effectively, members of teams need to have skills that help with small-group work. While participants may bring this expertise to FLCs, the facilitator may need to subtly model the behaviors the group needs at different times. Finally, group members should step back periodically to consider and assess the work of the group in terms not only of its products but also its processes. As with Thiagi's (1999) six tensions and Tuckman's (1995) five stages, understanding these five elements of group work can contribute to a facilitator's design and can help guide effective FLCs in terms of process and product alike.

Conclusions

Good facilitation is at the heart of successful learning community experiences. It is a rewarding, if challenging role, though not everyone is gifted and succeeds easily as a facilitator. Training and support can be helpful for those with little experience but some aptitude and commitment, though not everyone is gifted and succeeds easily as a facilitator. Because FLCs are predicated on characteristics and values such as safety and trust, openness, respect, responsiveness, collaboration, relevance, challenge, enjoyment, *esprit de corps,* and empowerment, they provide opportunities to develop a sheltered alternative space to the "hollowed collegiality" (Massy, Wilger, & Colbeck, 1994) many experience in higher education.

As Palmer (2002) observes,

> [t]he simple truth about community is that it gathers around
> such personal virtues [as respect, trust, love, and selfhood]

> shared and multiplied. The truth becomes more pointed when we turn it around: community cannot, and will not, gather around smallness of mind, tightness of heart, banality of spirit, frenzy masquerading as efficiency, myopic views of reality, faddish techno-babble, obsession with the bottom line, or the fear that is masked by arrogance in too many intellectuals' lives. (p. x)

FLC facilitators help create and protect the conditions and context for collegial learning to thrive. The more we, as facilitators, renew our learning from time to time—about both process/dynamics and product/outcomes—the more likely we are to help create significant learning experiences for faculty and help our colleagues together weave a rich tapestry of community and learning.

Footnote

[1]At some campuses, these collegial inquiry groups are designated professional learning communities, rather than faculty learning communities, as they include not only faculty members but also professional staff members and, sometimes, students. When we use the term "faculty" or "faculty learning communities" in this article, it is as shorthand and with the awareness that these groups often can and do include others.

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Appendix A
Six Tensions in Small-Group Activities
(Sivasailam "Thiagi" Thiagarajan, 1999)
(adapted by permission)

Structure: How rigidly or flexibly should the small-group activity be implemented?

1. Tightest: Explain the rules in detail at the beginning and enforce them rigidly.

2. Tight: Announce the rules in the beginning and enforce them fairly strictly.

3. Neutral: Give an overview of the rules and enforce them flexibly.

4. Loose: Explain the rules only when needed and apply them loosely.

5. Loosest: Make up the rules as you go along and use them arbitrarily.

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*Pace**: How rapidly or leisurely should the small-group activity be implemented?*

1. Fastest: Constantly rush the participants and impose tight time limits.

2. Fast: Keep the activity moving at a fairly fast pace.

3. Neutral: Keep the activity moving at a comfortable pace.

4. Slow: Keep the activity proceeding at a fairly slow pace.

5. Slowest: Constantly slow down the activity.

Cooperation/Competition: How do group members relate to each other?

1. Most cooperative: Maintain a high level of cooperation by focusing on external threats and obstacles.

2. Cooperative: De-emphasize scores and encourage the participants to help each other.

3. Neutral: Maintain a balance between cooperation and competition.

4. Competitive: Keep scores and encourage participants to outperform their opponents.

5. Most competitive: Encourage cutthroat competition by constantly pointing out that winning is the only thing, and announce a reward to be given to the winner.

Process/Product: Which is more important, a positive procedure/process or efficient results/product?

1. Most process-focused: Keep the activity interesting, playful, and creative.

2. Process-focused: Keep the activity enjoyable.

3. Neutral: Maintain a balance between an enjoyable procedure and efficient results.

4. Results-focused: De-emphasize the enjoyment of the activity and focus on getting the job done.

5. Most results-focused: Constantly emphasize the goals, results, and outcomes of the activity.

Individual/Group: Are we most concerned about individual or group needs?

1. Greatest individual concern: Focus on individual needs and ignore group needs.

2. Individual concern: Focus a little bit more on individual needs than on group needs.

3. Neutral: Maintain a balance between individual needs and group needs.

4. Group concern: Focus a little more on group needs than individual needs.

5. Greatest group concern: Focus on group needs and ignore individual needs.

Control: Where should group members look for direction and validation?

1. Most internal: Take an unobtrusive role. Let the group decide what is valuable to them.

2. Internal: Take a background role. Avoid giving suggestions and feedback.

3. Neutral: Maintain a balance between participating and withdrawing from group activities.

4. External: Take a consultant role. Give suggestions and feedback.

5. Most external: Take a leadership role. Provide authoritative advice and evaluation.

Appendix A
Six Tensions in Small-Group Activities
(Sivasailam "Thiagi" Thiagarajan, 1999)
(adapted by permission)
(*continued*)

Maintaining a Balance

When a newcomer to group facilitation asks me, "Should I keep the small-group activity moving at a fast pace or a slow one?" I usually answer, "Yes." The appropriate location of an activity along the six tensions depends on several factors, including the number and type of participants and the structure and purpose of the activity.

The secret of effective facilitation is to make these tensions transparent. This is achieved by maintaining a balance between the two poles of each tension. Unfortunately, however, "balance" resides in the perception of the participants rather than in outside reality. Thus, the balance between cooperation and competition may differ drastically between a group from California and a group from New York, or between a group of top managers and a group of technicians from the same organization (Thiagarajan, 1999, para. 8).

Tactics To Manage the Tensions

The first step in making the tensions transparent is to avoid the extremes (positions 1 and 5 in the rating scale continuum). Beyond that, you may use a variety of tactics to increase or decrease the elements in each tension. . . . The effectiveness of small-group activities depends heavily on the flexibility of the facilitator. Whether you are a newcomer or an old-timer, you can improve your effectiveness by attending to and adjusting structure, pace, interaction, focus, concern, and control of your small-group activity (Thiagarajan, 1999, paras. 8-9).

Appendix B
Sample Guidelines (created by members of a New Faculty FLC)

Participants considered the nature of their past group experiences that had been less than optimal and said the experience in this group would be negative for participants if:

- they felt threatened about really speaking openly,

- it felt like the group just became work for work's sake,

- the experience would devolve into no more than social chat,

- they would only talk about their weeks and their challenges but not actively seek solutions,

- they would only gripe and not emphasize what's positive, too, and/or

- they wouldn't be able to keep up with the amount of reading.

Guidelines

After reflecting and sketching out the preceding vision of what they *didn't* want this learning community experience to be like, participants developed the following guidelines and agreed to hold themselves accountable to them:

1. Maintain confidentiality about what goes on in learning community gatherings (both in terms of professional and personal information).

2. Try to keep the conversation as applicable and relevant as possible to all participants (across disciplines)—even in places where there aren't clear, immediate solutions to problems (e.g., don't just remain on a theoretical level).

3. Participants are encouraged (empowered!) to comment on and make suggestions about their experiences in the learning community and to help improve it for all.

4. Whenever possible, discussion leaders (or anyone else in the group) are encouraged to help participants grasp important themes and underlying concepts by summarizing, stating objectives, and teasing out underlying assumptions (*note:* some participants in this group find this process much more difficult than others)

5. Emphasize what's going well and what's positive in our classrooms as well as what's not going so well.

Appendix B
Sample Guidelines (created by members of a New Faculty FLC)
(*continued*)

6. Do the readings.

7. Call each other on breaches of this agreement and on behaviors that undermine the positive experience of the group.