



Exploring Planners' Facilitation Styles in Public Participation: An Inductive Analysis

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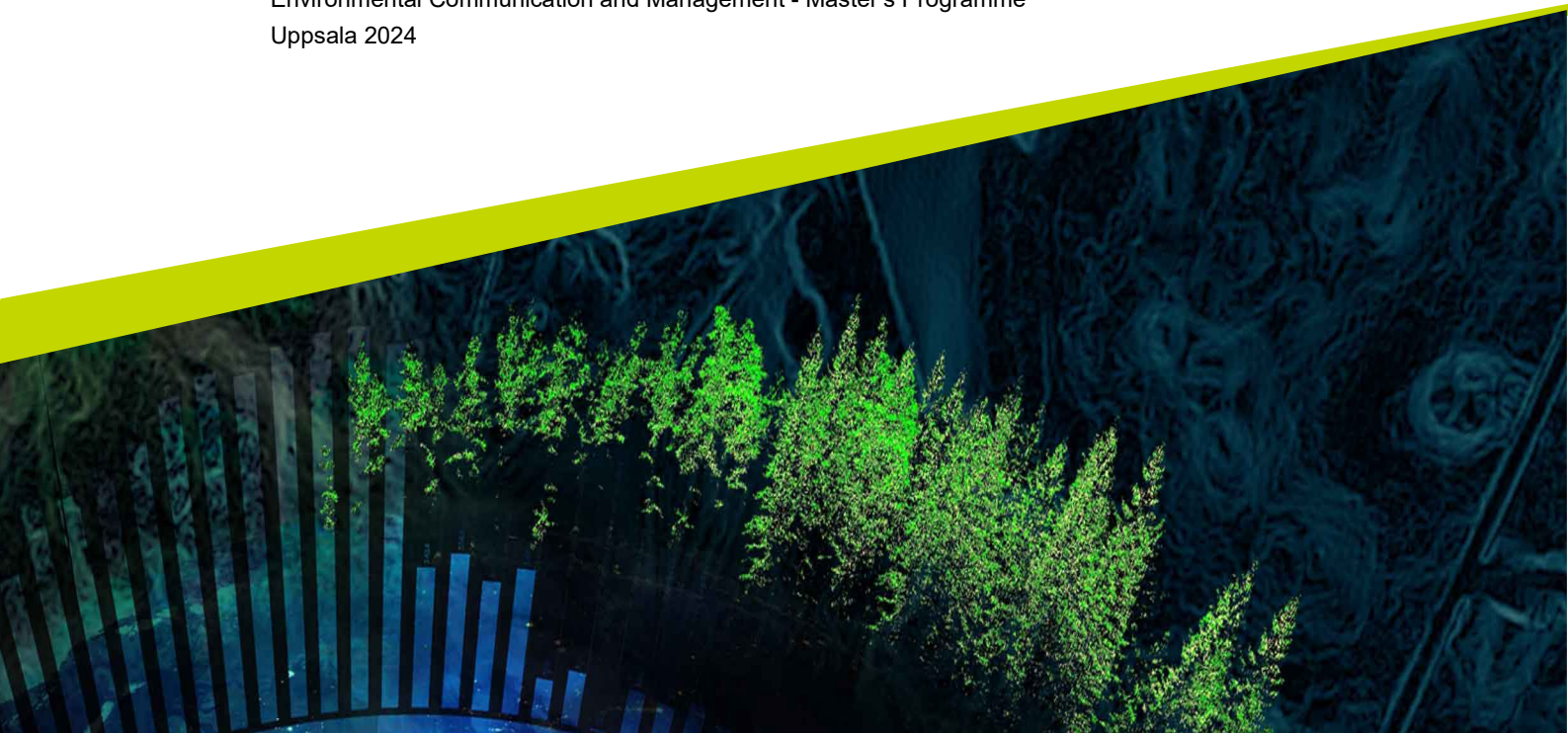
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Abstract

This thesis addresses the underexplored area of facilitation within public participation processes, particularly focusing on the strategic communication of the planners working as facilitators. Through inductive analysis with the help of grounded theory, this study developed a content analysis approach. It employs a set of analytical categories—*functional element*, *turn*, and *episode*—to track and make sense of both verbal and non-verbal actions of facilitators from a functional perspective. The research conducted a case study, reviewing the facilitation practice in public consultation of a large regional planning project in the United States. The results provided thick descriptions of facilitation styles and revealed various communicative characteristics in facilitation. This study proposes a preliminary categorization to describe and classify facilitation styles. In this categorization, different styles are categorized as variants with secondary characteristics under two primary types. Richness and complexity are introduced as new metrics to measure facilitators' strategic communication. This tentative categorization, combined with the analytical categories, can be seen as a step toward a more nuanced classification of facilitation styles.

Keywords: facilitation, facilitator, moderator, public engagement, participatory planning, deliberative democracy, collaborative governance, content analysis, communication

Table of Contents

List of Tables	5
1. Introduction	6
1.1 Facilitation in Participatory Planning	6
1.2 Literature Review	7
1.3 Research Aims.....	9
2. Methodology.....	10
2.1 Data Collection.....	10
2.1.1 Case Description	10
2.1.2 Ethical Considerations	12
2.2 Data Analysis	12
3. Descriptive Results.....	16
3.1 Formalistic style: reading, typing, but not facilitating	16
3.2 Arbitrary style: "I hope you could make us more active."	18
3.3 Procedural Style: to be documented, but not discussed	20
3.4 Inquiring Style: always ready to know more and better	21
3.5 Amicably Encouraging Style: stay engaged in multitasking	24
3.6 Vibrantly Encouraging Style: "I'm very very good at facilitation so I can handle anything you say."	27
4. Discussion.....	32
4.1 Categorize Facilitation Styles Beyond A Continuum	32
4.2 Reflection on Method	35
5. Conclusion.....	36
References	38
Popular Science Summary.....	40
Acknowledgements.....	41

List of Tables

Table 2.1 Overview of the session topics.....	11
Table 2.2 Examples of functional element	13
Table 2.3 Examples of turn and functional elements	14
Table 2.4 Example of episode.....	15
Table 4.1 Categorization of Different Facilitation Styles	33

1. Introduction

1.1 Facilitation in Participatory Planning

Since the 1980s, as public participation has become mainstream in planning practice, communication has gained a greater focus in both practice and theories (Healey, 1992). In this communicative turn, scholars and practitioners drew inspiration from Habermas' idea of communicative rationality to pose communication as the most important element of planning practice, emphasizing inclusive, open, equitable, and deliberative communication (Young, 2000; Watson, 2002). Such communication, along with the underlying communicative rationality, is recognized as exceptionally beneficial for public planning, and better suited to deal with today's increasing complexity in social and environmental systems than the traditional expert-driven, power asymmetric approach (Innes & Booher, 2010).

Methods and techniques of public participation have been developed by practitioners and researchers to embody the ideals of communicative rationality and deliberative democracy in participatory planning (Bryson et al., 2013) which requires more communication studies through empirical research. It has been recognized that research in this area is still understudied.

This inadequacy is partly reflected in the under-exploration of facilitation, a vital part of public participation. Facilitation, a technique for supporting and guiding discussions, is crucial in the shift toward communicative planning. In this communicative turn, the practice positions planners as facilitators within the context of deliberative democracy (Westin, 2019). In this new role as communication practitioners, planners design and conduct structured discussions, communicate and clarify the planning team's ideas, answer questions, and facilitate inclusive dialogues and deliberation (Afzalan & Muller 2018). Their work influences not only the process but also the outcomes of participation (Westin et al., 2023).

Despite the importance of the role of planners as facilitators, research on facilitation remains surprisingly limited which has been noticed by many scholars (see e.g. Forester, 1999; Loeber, 2004; Mansbridge, et al. 2006; Chilvers, 2008; Moore, 2012; Simard, et al. 2017). Rather, the concept of facilitators has been oversimplified in the literature, either implicitly associated only with the design and

structure of meetings or noted as a homogeneous group of neutral actors of inaction in discussions (Dillard, 2013; Westin et al., 2023).

1.2 Literature Review

In recent years, as the indispensable role of facilitators in organized deliberative practices has gained recognition, types and patterns of facilitation in deliberation have begun to be studied. In a study of national forums, Ryfe (2006) proposed a continuum of facilitation, going from weak to strong. Weak facilitation led to deliberative characteristics such as longer statements and more storytelling than strong facilitation. Although the sample size was limited to get systemic and conclusive results, this study provided insights into deliberative characteristics and a conceptual foundation for the facilitation continuum, which has informed subsequent research.

Stromer-Galley (2007) identified a research gap in that there had not yet been a content analysis method to study what actually happened during deliberative discussions. Therefore, in her study, a coding scheme for content analysis was developed to provide tools for later empirical studies of facilitation practices. In this coding scheme, six elements of deliberation were initially identified to measure deliberation: rationale, sourcing, disagreement, equality, topic, and engagement with other citizens. A set of types of talk was then categorized as an analytical tool to examine these six elements of deliberation and summarized into four types: on-problem, metatalk, process talk, and social talk. It was suggested by the author that this coding scheme can be utilized by practitioners and researchers to examine deliberation.

Later, Moore (2012) identified an inherent tension in facilitators' work which he called "following from the front", referring to a dilemma that involves leading the discussions without dominating them. This dilemma is seen as a fundamental characteristic of facilitation in deliberative discussions that influences facilitators' roles and styles. In the same year, Blong (2012) studied the facilitator's communication patterns drawing from personal experiences as a facilitator. This study made an adaptation of Stromer-Galley's method, incorporating Coordinated Meaning Management (CMM) theory's concept of episode work to describe facilitators' communication patterns using types of talk, moves, and discursive strategies as analytical categories. Blong also argued that facilitation styles can be differentiated by focusing on the above tension and the power of facilitator. This has been unpacked by Westin et al. (2023) in a recent study on facilitation by introducing the distinction between authority and argumentation to study different types of power use in facilitation.

Dillard (2013) extended Ryfe's (2006) continuum to classify facilitator involvement in an empirical study of national issue forums, revising it to include

passive, moderate, and involved categories and, like previous researchers, viewing the facilitation categories as a continuum of involvement. Drawing on Blong's method, this study examined how the different moves, types of talk and discursive strategies used by each of these facilitators and presented descriptive results.

However, several issues in the studies mentioned above complicate the application of their findings in the context of communicative planning.

The first issue involves the context. These studies on facilitation were all conducted within the setting of deliberative talks, specifically in national forums where people engage in in-depth discussions around controversial topics. However, in the planning processes, participation as an umbrella concept that encompasses a spectrum of levels, can vary in degree, type, and purpose to match the practical needs of different stages (Bryson et al., 2013). In other words, not all forms of public participation in planning processes are deliberative. For those participatory processes that are not aimed at deliberation but are still widely used, such as public meetings in consultative participation, empirical attention to facilitation practices has still been lacking.

The second issue concerns the method used for content analysis. The influential content analysis method in the field is Stromer-Galley's coding scheme, which, however, does not differentiate facilitator's communication from those of deliberative speakers. It does not consider the unique role facilitator takes: facilitators are not only part of the discussion but also part of its structure (Moore, 2012). Their discourse is highly strategic and functional, distinct from that of the participants deliberating on issues. Subsequent content analysis studies of facilitation seem to uncritically adopt this approach. Blong, in her study of facilitation patterns, partly adopted Stromer-Galley's analytical category of *types of talk* and added facilitator's *moves* and *discursive strategies* as supplementary analytical categories, but the definitions of the concepts of *move*, *types of talk* and *discursive strategies* were "in an unfixed manner", and seemingly overlapping in their scales. Dillard's study, based on Blong's approach, examined facilitator's discursive characteristics from the perspectives of types of talk, moves, and discursive strategies, also without questioning the original coding method by Stromer-Galley.

Another limitation of the methodologies in the studies mentioned above is that they focused solely on verbal communication, neglecting non-verbal actions that occur during discussions among both facilitators and participants, while many non-verbal actions, along with verbal communication in facilitation strategies, play a role and influence the dynamics of interaction.

1.3 Research Aims

Based on the literature review, there is a methodological gap where non-verbal actions and the facilitator's special role in discussions have not been adequately addressed and a contextual gap where facilitators' practices in consultative participation are still understudied; furthermore, there is still a lack of understanding of different facilitation styles and what different styles consist of. This thesis aims to develop an analysis method to capture and make sense of both verbal and non-verbal actions in public consultations, and to gain a deeper understanding of different facilitation styles by taking a closer look at communication processes. To this end, I propose two research questions:

1. What are the appropriate analytical categories for making sense of verbal and nonverbal actions in the communication practices of facilitators?
2. What are the different facilitation styles that emerged in consultative participation practice?

2. Methodology

2.1 Data Collection

In public participation practice, the structure, purpose, form, and duration of the process can all significantly influence facilitation practices. Therefore, a key to achieving my research aims is to ensure that the selected samples are comparable, preferably with a consistent format in the same setting. To this end, I conducted a case study of a regional planning project in the United States. I primarily reviewed the second public engagement phase of this project, in which online public meetings served as its main form of public consultation.

2.1.1 Case Description

In consultative participation, public meetings are often cited as one of the oldest and simplest forms where citizens can provide input, set agendas, and interact with others (Shipley & Utz, 2012). Despite criticisms regarding their lack of deliberative capacity due to their large size, scholars such as Adams (2004) recognize the crucial role of public meetings in the democratic system. They are valuable for both citizens and local officials. They give citizens the opportunity to influence participation and the sense of empowerment, and they enhance the legitimacy of the policy process which is valued by the local officials. Although public meetings themselves may not be deliberative, they serve as a preparatory step for more deliberative and constructive processes (Adams, 2004).

This role of public meetings is adequately demonstrated in the studied case. The chosen planning project is a ten-year master plan for a county on the East Coast of the United States. The draft plan followed a two-year planning process and was organized into three phases with two rounds of public input gathering. Broad visionary ideas from the public were gathered at Phase 1 through over 50 community engagement meetings for the planning team to draft goals. Then in Phase 2, the drafted goals and actions were presented at 7 online public meetings by themes, where comments and suggestions from stakeholders were collected by planners to refine the drafts. In Phase 3, the refined draft was deliberated on and adopted by the county's Planning Board.

My main study focus was the 7 online public meetings in Phase 2. Each meeting was structured into three sections: overview, main discussion, and report. These meetings provided me with an opportunity to study consultative participation which is facilitated through verbal and non-verbal communication. Since these meetings followed the same format with different facilitators, I was able to compare the facilitation styles and see how they differed.

Since facilitation was mainly practiced in the main discussion session of each meeting, in which a set of draft goals and actions on a specific topic were presented and discussed under the guidance of a facilitator, I selected video clips of this part as my dataset. One meeting was excluded from consideration because it was an extended meeting of another one and was facilitated by the same planner. Eventually, the dataset consists of 6 video clips from 6 online public meetings. The discussion sessions took place from January to February 2022, with each session lasting approximately one hour.

Table 2.1 Overview of the session topics

Facilitator	Discussion theme and keywords of the goals
F1	Responsible Regionalism: interconnectedness of nearby communities, systemic solutions to regional issues
F2	Harmony with Nature: natural resources, recreation, parks, open space
F3	Resilient Economy: economic development & redevelopment, commercial revitalization, tourism
F4	Livable Built Environment: land use, housing
F5	Healthy Community: public health, public safety
F6	Interwoven Equity: vulnerable population, arts and culture, community coordination, historic preservation

Despite their varied themes, all the sessions exhibited a consistent structure. Typically, attendees in each session consisted of one planner as the facilitator, who was generally also a member of the workgroup that drafted the goals for the theme to be discussed. Participants consisted of representatives of community groups, county residents, members from the planning team, and occasionally one or two councilpersons. The number of participants in each breakout room group was difficult to calculate, but a reasonable estimate would be between 40 and 60, according to the information provided in the overview sections.

In each session, the facilitator began by introducing the agenda and ground rules. They then presented the first drafted goal and actions on the shared screen, asking participants if they agreed with the goal and to share their thoughts on the actions. Discussion occurred as participants spoke up. Once the feedback dried up, the facilitator proceeded to the next goal and action points to initiate another round of discussion. Throughout the discussion, the facilitator was supposed to document feedback by taking notes directly under the action points on the shared screen.

2.1.2 Ethical Considerations

The video data for this study were sourced from archives on the county government's website, legally accessible under the state's Open Meetings Act and Public Information Act. These laws ensure public access to government records to promote transparency.

Identifiable information, including location and names, was anonymized. Participants' names were replaced with pseudonyms, while the facilitators were numbered from F1 to F6 for reference.

2.2 Data Analysis

This study is a secondary qualitative analysis. In the epistemological spectrum, this type of research is positioned towards the constructivist and interpretivist end (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and requires inductive reasoning and the researcher's interpretations of the meaning (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

I was seeking a method that allowed me not only to code directly on video clips instead of transcripts to capture both verbal and non-verbal actions, but also targeted on the explicit and implicit characteristics of the facilitator's strategic communication. Given the gap in the existing methodology to study facilitation practice mentioned above, I chose to build my own analytical categories with the help of grounded theory.

Grounded theory is an inductive research approach that calls for an interplay between data collection and analysis (Bowen, 2006). Rather than beginning research with a theory and then testing it, grounded theory allows what is relevant to emerge (Chun Tie et al., 2019). It is exceptionally appropriate when established theories of a phenomenon is inadequate as it helps investigate processes, actions, and interactions (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). In this tradition, two major methods, the constant comparative method, and sensitizing concepts, are used to build analytical categories.

The constant comparative method is used in analytical process for coding and developing categories. It was developed by Glaser and Strauss (Glaser & Strauss, 2017) to sort and organize snippets of raw data. Sensitizing concepts, which are emerged from constant comparative analysis, served as an interpretive device. With sensitizing concepts, researchers can find important features of social interaction and provide guidelines for research (Glaser, 1978; Bowen, 2006).

By conducting the constant comparative analysis, I first reviewed all the video clips in the dataset and then practiced open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Open coding is the process of taking raw data and breaking it down into individual snippets; axial coding compares snippet to snippet and creates new categories to link the snippets together; selective coding looks for connections

between categories found in the previous step, compares categories with categories, and creates a core category to connect them. This is an iterative process; in each coding procedure, the researcher categorizes and ascribes meaning to the data, comparing occurrence to occurrence, tagging emergent patterns, and beginning to look for comparisons between codes to identify similarities, differences, or contradictions (Glaser & Strauss, 1998; Bowen, 2006; Chun Tie et al., 2019). During the process, I created a database in Notion to manage the codebook. After finishing the three types of coding, I found three sensitizing concepts that could serve as my analytical categories: *functional elements*, *turns*, and *episodes*.

Functional element is the smallest unit to categorize facilitator’s actions. In the open coding process, I gradually noticed that most of a facilitator’s utterances and non-verbal actions served a range of purposes and therefore can be tagged from a functional perspective. In other words, it is possible to treat each small action as an element to examine what a facilitator wants to do with it. By an action I refer to an utterance, a nod, a smile, noting down a line on screen by typing, and so on. For a subtle action, if its function was not explicit, then a temporary descriptive tag would be given and wait for more comparisons with other tags until its connection with other codes was found. Functional elements helped me to observe the richness and diversity of communicative strategies applied by facilitators. Table 2.2 presents some examples of functional elements from my codebook.

Table 2.2 Examples of functional element

Facilitator’s Verbal/ Non-verbal Action	Functional Element	Description
“So let’s move on to the next goal.”	Agenda Progression	To try to move on to the next agenda item
“Is there anything else you want to talk about? Another goal, or action?”	Discussion Option Supply	To provide options for discussion to elicit thoughts
Facilitator added a new note under the actions: How to prioritize?	Documenting	To document the feedback
Facilitator took a note that said: all the actions are like <i>mother and apple pies</i> .	Verbatim Adoption	To adopt participant’s exact words in the notes
“So you just said [...], right? ” / “Does my note feel correct to you?”	Accuracy Check	To check accuracy of the notes with the speaker
“I see more people joining. ” / “I am noting it down, just give me a minute.”	Action Transparency	To let the group know what is happening on the facilitator’s side
“Please let me know if you need me to zoom the screen.”/ “I’ll read the notes because some of us are on the phone and can’t see the screen.”	Inclusive Consideration	To make sure everyone can access the information

The second analytical category I found through axial coding and selective coding is *turns*. A turn refers to the time during which a person communicates before another person takes over. For a facilitator, every single turn they take may include multiple functional elements, therefore can help me measure the complexity of their discursive strategies.

In selective coding, I also identified five fundamental facilitation turns in all sessions: *introduction turn*, *presentation turn*, *progression turn*, *documenting turn*, and *discussion engagement turn*. Every facilitator conducted fundamental facilitation tasks in these turns. Although there were many more turns in a session, a facilitator was always in either of the five facilitation turns. See Table 2.3.

Table 2.3 Examples of turn and functional elements

Turn by facilitator	Functional elements in a turn
<p>“Any other actions you’d like to discuss? I know you said No.10 is the most important action, but what about the other ones?”</p>	<p>(1: agenda progression) Any other actions you’d like to discuss? // (2: reference) I know you said No.10 is the most important action in here, // (3: discussion option supply) but what about the other ones? <i>This is a Progression Turn with 3 functional elements</i></p>
<p>“Hi Tina, good to see you! So can you elaborate on this housing thing? Do you want the housing to be free?”</p>	<p>(1: greeting) Hi Tina, good to see you! // (2: clarification request) So can you elaborate on housing? Do you want the housing to be free? <i>This is a Discussion Engagement Turn with 2 functional elements</i></p>

The third analytical category I found through selective coding is *episode*. I drew on the concept of episode work from Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM) theory (Pearce, 2007) to analyze facilitator’s practice. Episode is perceived as a concept for categorizing events or frames as a unified whole (Pearce, 2007; Blong, 2012). Blong indicates that facilitators are about the business of episode work, and they work to make desired episodes take place. In this study, episodes consist of one or more facilitator turns within a certain context and one or more subsequent reactions. Reviewing the episodes allows me to make sense of the interaction, to see what a facilitator’s turn brought to the discussion, or vice versa, to examine how a facilitator responded to a situation, therefore is helpful to understand the group dynamics.

To make sense of the process, in addition to facilitator’s communication, another part of interaction to be analyzed is the participant’s communication. Since it has been adequately studied in previous research on deliberative discussions, I drew on Stromer-Galley’s (2007) content analysis scheme and adapted it to the contextual setting of my dataset. Specifically, I adopted some of the deliberative elements from this scheme, including reasoned opinion expression, the use of personal narratives, metatalk in engagement, and interaction with other participants, and supplemented them with a set of interactive elements that I found through the constant

comparative method in the dataset, including option adaptation, comment on facilitator’s turn, and, in particular, silence, which is an important sign of reaction to measure the effect of facilitation, together to make sense of participant’s communication. See Table 2.4.

Table 2.4 Example of episode

Episode	Functional/interactive elements and turns in the episode
Facilitator: Any comments about the goal we’ve developed? [pause] Nothing? So we’re asking if you generally agree with it. If not, why, or if there’s anything that seems to be missing out of the goal statement. Participant: This is Sarah. I support this goal wholeheartedly.	(Turn)Facilitator: (1:general solicitation) Any comments about the goal we’ve developed? [pause] (2: discussion option supply) So we’re asking if you generally agree with it. If not, why, or if there’s anything that seems to be missing out of the goal statement. (Turn) Participant: (option adaptation) This is Sarah. I support this goal wholeheartedly.

With the three analytical categories, I was able to track and make sense of facilitator’s actions in all five *fundamental facilitation turns* throughout each session and to give descriptive results for each session in the next section.

3. Descriptive Results

In this study, the *style* of a facilitator's practice is defined as the sum of the communicative features. Overall, the six facilitators in the dataset contributed six different facilitation styles. In this section, these styles are presented in order of lowest to highest strategic complexity, and each style is labeled with a prominent characteristic that distinguishes it from the others.

3.1 Formalistic style: reading, typing, but not facilitating

The facilitation style observed at the Responsible Regionalism Meeting was characterized by a formalistic, detached approach throughout the process, with few communication strategies being applied.

The facilitator F1 presented the items by reading directly from the materials, offering no contextual or interpretive information unless specifically requested by participants. This led to consecutive rounds of questions on the agenda items at an early stage. Although F1 managed to provide brief information on part of them, she chose to note down the rest of the questions instead of answering them. The unanswered questions led to sporadic silence.

In the agenda progression turn, most solicitations were managed in a simple, general way, typically by asking only broad questions such as “Any thoughts on this?” with no variations.

During the discussion, the facilitator was notably detached by taking a hands-off approach, focusing solely on quiet note-taking without comment or intervention. Besides, as the facilitator did not try any action to slow down the group discussion to facilitate the recording work, her notetaking was constantly lagging, which hindered her from managing the discussion.

This hands-off approach led to frequent participant-led, self-lulled discussions. In these self-led conversations, although some deliberative elements can be observed, as the participants provided detailed reasons for their suggestions, commented on each other, and interacted with previous suggestions, these discussions tended to halt by themselves, because when members asked the facilitator to provide contextual information of certain actions to support the discussion, they always failed to get the needed input from F1 who was occupied with note-taking. An episode represents a typical scenario of this issue:

Participant: Is there a bullet in here? I thought I saw it does address forest management.

F1: [Busy finishing the previous note.]

Participant: [Calling F1 by name]

F1: [Still typing] Um, I don't, I don't think we did.

Participant: Because we talked about it in one of the earlier meetings...

F1: [Fixing the previous note.]

[Silence.]

The lack of necessary facilitation once led to self-facilitation by the participants. The following episode took place when a goal and actions on climate change were presented and the group had to decide whether to bypass the agenda:

Participant A: Well, we can see where the county tried to shut down our throat tonight. Everything is about climate, climate, climate. I don't want to talk about the climate, I want to talk about the infrastructure, our water system, and everything! [People chuckle, including F1.] I mean, gees, this has the most bullets out of all of them. Let's go back and talk more about these water systems!

Participant B: I'm with you, I'm with you! [Laughter ensues.]

F1: [Smiles and takes a note under the goal that reads: "This has too many actions."]

Participant C: I think they are both important. That's the tricky part. I live on the east side, but if I lived in [...] or anywhere along the bay, I would be very worried every time there's a storm warning about rising water levels. ...it's a long-term issue, so it's easy to kind of like 'oh well, we'll deal with it in the next plan.' Well, I think we gotta start on it now! It doesn't mean the infrastructure issues we were just talking about aren't important, but it is the county's job to prioritize them.

F1: [Listens quietly without taking notes.]

Participant D: I think it's also worth pointing out that climate change would put much greater increased pressure on our existing infrastructure, so we need to be working on both simultaneously.

Participant E: I agree. If we don't fix the current infrastructure that is supporting the current climate, ...we won't even be able to deal with any changes of any type of climate...We've got to fix the infrastructure. It is the baseline of everything for us to go forward! ["Yep!" "Absolutely!" More agreed.]

In this episode, faced with the choice, the facilitator chose to stay out of the way. As a result, it was participants C and D who facilitated the choice of staying in the

current item by highlighting the connection between the two topics and being supported by other group members.

This passive method was also represented in the timing when F1 handled the timekeeping. Most of F1's progression turns took place only when the participant-led discussions lulled on their own. As a result, this group did not complete the agenda items at the end of the session.

Regarding the overall discussion dynamics, in this session, this style of facilitation was linked with frequent requests for explanation from the participants in the early stage, and longer participant-led discussions in the later stage.

3.2 Arbitrary style: "I hope you could make us more active."

The facilitation style practiced by F2 at the Harmony with Nature Meeting was distinctly passive and arbitrary, with a palpable tension between the facilitator and the group, which brought a set of negative consequences to the group dynamics.

In presentation turns, similar to F1, F2 also only read the agenda items without providing necessary information or explanation. Consequently, participants frequently asked for more information about the agenda. However, the facilitator chose to note down the questions as the feedback itself, and left questions on the agenda largely unanswered with evasive statements such as "I believe it's been addressed in other meetings", "there will be a point in later section" and "again, I'm just taking notes". As a result, only concerns, questions, and brief suggestions were noted down. Reasoned, elaborated suggestions were rarely issued.

As a note-taker, F2 also took a passive approach. The facilitator only took brief, selective and sporadic notes, and never sought clarification or check accuracy with the participants during the process.

The facilitator's passive reaction contributed to an inactive, suppressed communication pattern filled with periods of silence. For example, when a participant shared an overall concern on the actions that he did not see any points about climate change, F2 said: "We do," claiming it would be addressed later, and was met with silence. Meanwhile, each time F2 faced silence, she practiced an arbitrary manner to advance the agenda. Instead of eliciting feedback, she chose to directly move on to the next topic without asking. Occasionally, participants had to stop the facilitator by telling her they still had something to say.

Overt inclusion issues emerged frequently in F2's facilitation, building increasing tension between the facilitator and the group. Several episodes involving the facilitator's exclusive manner marked the tension-building process:

At an early stage, the voice of a speaker joining by phone was weak and inaudible, F2 barely managed to write down a few short keywords, but neither

confirmed the accuracy with the speaker nor informed him that it had been documented, even in spite of the fact that the telephone participants could not see the shared screen.

When presenting a new goal, 9 bullet points were scattered across several pages in F2's Word document, with spacing and fonts that did not allow them to be fully displayed on the shared screen. F2 did not make any efforts to improve the presentation, resulting in participants asking F2 twice to scroll to a particular area.

Later, when a participant asked, "Where is the whole topic of litter and pollutant management?", F2 claimed it had been addressed elsewhere, but this was refuted by another participant who pointed out the issue had not been addressed anywhere. The speaker's words gained support from other members. But when the speaker elaborated with a personal narrative, instead of documenting the input, F2 started scrolling back and forth on the screen. When hearing the speaker angrily exclaimed, "I don't want to live in a pigpen!" F2 interrupted him, citing time constraints, and moved on to the next topic. Such a move led to a subsequent lull.

The tension finally peaked at the end of the session. When one participant revived the previous litter issue and initiated a self-led discussion, F2 remained silent, taking only sporadic, short notes. The conversation soon ended on its own. F2 then made general solicitation twice but both were met with silence. F2 turned to a colleague acting as timekeeper to check the time and was told there were still 15 minutes left. On hearing this, F2 made an unexpected move. She announced to close the whole discussion by saying "We've gone through everything". This action immediately provoked negative reactions among the participants:

Participant X: I was about to comment on [...], but you went to the next section!

Participant Y: I would love to talk to people about all these types of things which is why I joined the call. I really appreciate what everyone is doing here, and I really hope you could follow up with us all so that we become more active.

However, the facilitator had stopped sharing the screen. Although some participants continued to give feedback, there was no further facilitation or documentation. In addition, at the end of this prematurely terminated session, despite being told by the timekeeper that there was still a breakout room group that had not finished the discussion, F2 decided to start the report session without their presence. Throughout the discussion, only 7-8 members made comments, whereas the group consisted of more than 50 people.

The group dynamics under this style of facilitation suffered from passive, arbitrary facilitation. This style undermined the group discussion. Most discussions failed to gain the momentum to sustain. They either died down or could not be initiated.

3.3 Procedural Style: to be documented, but not discussed

The facilitation style practiced by F3 at the Resilient Economy Meeting was mainly focusing on diligent documentation. A number of limited communicative strategies were practiced to maintain a steady discussion flow, but not sufficient to support interactive discussions.

F3 also presented the agenda items by reading without offering explanation and sometimes met with hesitant silence. The facilitator offered general discussion options such as “you can elaborate on it, or add more to it”, and filled the silence with minor information including (1) repeating the ground rules and discussion options; (2) making the facilitator’s action transparent; (3) showing inclusive consideration, such as “let me know if I need to zoom the screen”. Although substantive interpretation of the agenda was still lacking, the filler information reduced the awkwardness of silence to a point and gave participants time to formulate thoughts.

When asked to explain the agenda items, F2 reactively offered information. However, she still used the formal language of the written agenda text and did not engage in accessible interpretation. The information provided was often quite repetitive.

As participant input began to flow steadily, F3 focused primarily on quiet note-taking, in the meantime facilitating her own note-taking with small actions such as nodding or short words like “OK,” “Thank you,” “I’ll take that,” to signal the completion of a note, thus allowing more time for documentation as participants waited for her signals to continue talking. The facilitator engaged in the discussion primarily by thanking the speakers and making sure that each input was fully noted.

A byproduct of such diligent note-taking mode was an orderly but non-interactive flow of discussion, especially as soon as the discussion became participant-led, speakers often spontaneously stopped speaking to assist the facilitator in completing notes. In the final phase, F3 used elicitation by pointing at the time. She told the group that there were only three minutes left, and as a result, speakers began to speak faster and more tightly so that their points could be quickly recorded. F3’s final move in this session was a countdown to gain consensus for the final goal: “Two-second rule. If I don’t hear anything, I’ll take it as a yes.” Indicating that the facilitator was more concerned with the quantity than the quality of the feedback collected.

Since F3’s facilitation was mainly procedural rather than exploratory, the group dynamics reflected that most of the input was raised to be recorded but not discussed, with little interaction between participants.

3.4 Inquiring Style: always ready to know more and better

An engaging, adaptive, and flexible facilitation style with a great focus on exploring the depth and breadth of the content was practiced by F4 at the Livable Built Environment Meeting. The facilitator demonstrated a variety of rich, well-integrated communicative strategies particularly involving inquiry, and cultivated and maintained a dynamic, interactive discussion flow. Due to the significant increase in strategic richness and complexity, from this section on, I will describe the different facets of the facilitation style under subheadings. It is noteworthy that in the dataset, F4 was the only facilitator who outsourced the note-taking to a colleague, which exempted this facilitator from intensive recording work, and partially enabled such facilitation to be performed.

Foresight

F4 presented the most prepared introduction in the dataset. Beginning with introducing the note-taker, F4 gave the group two tips to facilitate documentation, including slowing down when asked for clarification and referring to the bullet number when commenting on the action items, which soon proved its efficiency. To avoid any potential misunderstanding, she also stressed that bullet numbers do not mean anything in terms of priority. Thereby, by setting norms and promoting awareness in advance, the facilitator paved the way for upcoming discussions.

Fostering and managing meaningful thoughts

As shown in previous cases, typically, after each presentation turn, comments were mainly questions and concerns about the goal and action items before any real suggestions were made. While in this session, F4 facilitated an interactive pattern in which the facilitator and participants worked together to develop substantive thoughts. After her presentation, participants first engaged by raising questions and concerns, F4 then engaged by identifying and clarifying misunderstandings, interpreting the agenda, or shedding light on the interconnections between different points, to help the group get a better idea of the agenda. As more major concerns were adequately addressed, gradually, more substantial suggestions began to emerge. This pattern not only created a steady, active discussion flow, but also enlightened and encouraged the participants, who expressed satisfaction with comments such as “It makes sense now,” “I get it,” and “I’m happy we talked about this”. A positive atmosphere was cultivated and maintained through such interactions.

As the process went on, F4 exhibited inquiring skills in managing long, informative, or loose comments. The first long comment was filled with personal narrative and rationales, in response, F4 thought for a moment, asked the speaker

to clarify a category and then instructed the note-taker how to phrase the note; when another speaker made a loose narrative, F4 restated it in compact language to seek confirmation, and got a further explanation, then rephrased the explanation for the notetaker to facilitate documentation work. This also showed that F4 worked in a highly balanced way between engaging with discussion and facilitating documentation. Although F4 did not have to take notes herself, she participated throughout the process by constantly and promptly instructing the note-taker to ensure the accuracy of the documentation.

Dynamic elicitation techniques

Compared to earlier facilitators who mainly used basic, general elicitation for procedural purposes to advance the agenda, F4 used richer techniques to effectively elicit feedback, some of which were dynamic and tentative, rather than fixed.

For example, after a general solicitation, F4 quickly noticed the pause, and adjusted it by providing more discussion options:

F4: Any comments about the goal we've developed? [silence] Nothing? So we're asking if you generally agree with it. If not, why, and if there's anything that seems to be missing out of the goal statement.

Participant: This is Sarah, I support this goal wholeheartedly.

Another elicitation method applied by F4 was to highlight some of the discussion options to gather targeted input. See this episode.

F4: Anyone else on the action point about [...] I thought that would be the most talked about.

Participant: Can you say a little more about its rationale?

F4: Yes, it's actually about... [explains the policy consideration behind the action point]

[After a few seconds of silence, a late-joining participant made a lengthy comment, explaining that it was his organization that had proposed the targeted action to the planning team. F4 took the opportunity to ask the speaker to talk more about another proposed action by the same organization, then got another long input with detailed reasons.]

Another example of this technique is when the discussion had lulled for a while. F4 encouraged the group to discuss specific points by offering discussion options again: "Anyone else about anything on No.5? No. 6? No. 7?" and waited a few seconds. When a new comment on No.5 was made, F4 did not stop there but gave the group a little more time to think. When the inquiry was met with a brief silence, F4 pushed harder. She began proactively explaining a term in No.7, offering more contextual information, and eventually successfully elicited another relevant new input.

This inquiry technique was practiced until the end of the session, when general elicitation and a focused discussion option were offered together, and the last three additional contributions were extracted.

Flexible expansion on the agenda in real time

One of the most distinctive aspects of F4's facilitation was that she sometimes used insights gained from inquiry to expand the agenda in real time. Three examples evidenced how this approach was performed and what it brought to the discussion.

The first example emerged when F4 responded to an input that was too early for the current agenda. F4 pointed out that there would be a similar action item later, but did not simply exclude the comment, instead, she invited the participant to expand the agenda by offering an upgrade option: "Do you think it's a comment on that action, or do you think it's something that should be added as another specific action in itself?" As a result, she received an elaborate explanation from the speaker.

The second example of agenda expansion is more salient. The episode took place when a participant expressed an idea on improving the goal itself rather than the actions:

F4: [Participant James gave another version of Goal 2] OK, what other folks think about it?

Participant A: This is Amanda, I wholeheartedly agree with James' comment.

Participant B: Yeah, it's much stronger that way.

Participant C: But I'm not sure if the bullet points below would support that goal then.

F4: OK, well, let's say that the goal needs to be strengthened by... [A note was taken following F4's instruction, F4 waited a moment till the notes were finished]. Now we can get to other folks who have issues with the revised goal and how it relates to the actions.

Here, rather than simply thanking participants and recording their input, F4 initiated a new round of discussion, allowing the participants to propose new actions under a collaboratively revised goal. This move consequently led to a round of deeper, more nuanced discussions between the facilitator and the participants, during which F4 frequently sought clarification, confirmation by inquiry, or reiteration in order to determine if the suggestions were truly new actions or could be integrated with existing ones.

The agenda expansion was also practiced in F4's progression turns. Before moving on to Goal 2, F4 offered an option, "Is there anything you found to be missing in these actions?" which was uncommon in other facilitators' actions. In response, one participant contributed an additional action point to the goal. A subsequent effect was that when the discussion moved on to the next goal, this discussion option still served as an entry point for participants to start their

thoughts; they identified and commented on what was missing across all actions, and contributed new action points.

Moderated use of authority

During the process, F4 moderated her use of facilitator authority in decisions involving exclusions. She gently declined an action proposal that fell outside legal parameters, while still valuing the participant's contribution. As the discussion intensified, F4 adeptly managed turn-taking among speakers, interspersing her facilitation with amicable remarks and smiles.

3.5 Amicably Encouraging Style: stay engaged in multitasking

The facilitator at the Healthy Community Meeting exhibited a complex, skillful facilitation style. Overall, engagement and encouragement were the main highlights of this style, with considerable strategic complexity and richness. The facilitator always combined multiple functional elements in one turn and rarely finished a fundamental facilitation turn with a single functional element. In this way, despite heavy notetaking responsibilities, the facilitator was never detached from the group discussion but remained engaged in it. Through a variety of methods involving encouraging elements, such as acknowledgement with reference and greeting, consensus-seeking, sincere appreciation, and inclusive consideration, the facilitator effectively encouraged and maintained an active, inclusive discussion environment.

To better illustrate the complexity of strategic communication, from this section on, I will number and mark the functional elements for those very synthesized turns as I quote the facilitator's actions.

Stay engaged in multitasking

Compared to the previous cases, F5's group was quite active. Discussion in this group did not start from questions or concerns, but assertive, reasoned comments and active interaction among the participants. As a result, despite the very early stage, F5 had begun to take notes intensively. In this multitasking dilemma, F5 skillfully engaged in the discussion without getting caught up in documentation, as did the formalistic and procedural facilitators. The following episode provides an example to understand her strategy.

When F5 was occupied with heavy notetaking, the discussion gradually became participant-led, in which a question on the agenda was answered by one participant from a relevant sector rather than the facilitator. But F5 soon regained her involvement by commenting:

(1: **appreciation**) I'm happy that you're here to help me with this, [pause] // (2: **general elicitation**) Any other actions you would like to discuss? // (3: **reference to the previous input**) I know in here you just said No.10 is the most important, // (4: **focused discussion option supply**) but what about the other ones?

The timing of advancing the agenda was also remarkable: F5 effectively utilized the brief pause in her turn, so that she did not have to wait for the discussion to lull itself or interrupt it to initiate a separate turn. By blending the agenda progression into her friendly comment, the facilitator seamlessly transitioned from engaging in discussion to proceeding agenda in one turn.

Some inquiring elements that were previously seen in F4's facilitation such as seeking clarification, accuracy check, and agenda expansion can also be observed in F5's actions. For example, when a participant questioned how to prioritize actions, F5 asked in reverse, "Then if you were to prioritize them, which one tops your list?" and noted a new action item, "How to prioritize?" elevating the question to a new agenda topic. This invitation to prioritize sparked an intense discussion. However, the move was questioned by a participant who soon challenged the idea, stating that they should "always be really careful when talking about prioritization" and "I don't know if it's fair to ask about prioritization." In response, F5 practiced synthesized facilitation by acknowledging the concern, echoing the participant's reasoning, and outlining the planning team's approach to the issue, all within a single turn. The effect of agenda expansion was also very similar to that seen in F4's case: the prioritization discussion continued even after the group moved on to the next goal, with participants continuing to use prioritization as a discussion option to address their overall ideas.

Acknowledgement with reference and greeting

One unique element that marked F5's engagement method is the combination of reference and acknowledgement. F5 always referred back to the speaker's point, restating it with acknowledgement such as "You're right, as you said...", "I agree with you that..." "I get what you mean by..." to suggest the participants' ideas were being taken into account. This method was used especially when the facilitator responded to concerns, as the following example shows:

F5: (1: **reference**) Yes. So we have seen [refers to the problem the speaker mentioned] // (2: **acknowledgement**) Yes, you're right. // (3: **agenda interpretation**) We'll have to do this exercise and see which action fits better in which group [the participant starts nodding] and then move it to that group. // (4: **confirmation check**) You know what I mean? [The participant nods and smiles] // (3: **interpreting the agenda again**) So yes, this exercise will be done later...

F5 was also the only facilitator in the dataset who greeted participants. She interspersed greetings and friendly social interactions in her facilitation to

encourage participation. Occasionally, when F5 rejected a request, a greeting and a friendly smile were also applied to soften the power use.

Consensus seeking

In major agenda progression turns, consensus-seeking, along with other functional elements, were used together to push the agenda forward while at the same time inviting participation. Here is an example of how F5 proceeded by seeking consensus:

(1: general elicitation) Anything else on this goal? // **(2: offering contextual information)** [pause] Usually we will get a reminder from [the timekeeper] telling us time to move on to the next goal, but I don't think that's happening tonight. // **(3: awareness raising -- with "we narrative")** So, we have to make sure we manage our time. // **(4: acknowledgement -- with "we narrative")** And I think we're doing good so far. // **(5: agenda progression)** [short pause] [scrolling down to the next page] Alright. So, let's... // **(6: consensus-seeking)** you all agree to move to the next goal? [several members smile and say "Yes!"]

Sincere appreciation and inclusive consideration

F5 effectively acknowledged helpful feedback with comments such as "That will help us to..." and "This is something we usually don't think of". She also occasionally used personal narrative to appreciate, like "That's a good one, I wish my son could hear that." instead of merely saying "thank you" or "great". This approach fostered a more encouraging and engaging discussion atmosphere, as participants often responded with smiles and chuckles to her sincere appreciation. In this facilitation style, accessibility had been taken into account from the very early stage. F5 started the session by ensuring everyone could see the screen and hear her, and reminded people to unmute to join the conversation. When eliciting feedback, she would ask if there were any terms in the written text they did not understand.

Broader participatory consideration

At the end of the session, F5 encouraged not only additional thoughts but also further participation in and out of the session on a broader scale. "This is an ongoing process, so if you remember something, don't hesitate to email us," "If you know someone who wanted to attend but couldn't, please let them know it's available online."

Regarding the group dynamics, compared with other groups, substantive discussion in F5's group started quite early without going through several rounds of intensive questions on the agenda. Questions and concerns emerged sporadically during the discussion and were well addressed through F5's synthesized discourse. Throughout the session, the discussion was characterized by an active and interactive flow.

3.6 Vibrantly Encouraging Style: “I’m very very good at facilitation so I can handle anything you say.”

At the Interwoven Equity Meeting, facilitator F6 practiced a proactive and sophisticated facilitation style characterized by intensive and vibrant personal narratives. Overall, this facilitation style was highly engaged, focusing on creating a discussion environment in which participants received ample background information and encouragement from the facilitator to easily engage in discussion. In addition, advanced facilitation techniques such as managing the pace and expectations were also practiced in this style. The group discussions were spontaneous and lively, but also skillfully guided and controlled.

Proactive interpretation

A key feature of F6’s method was the proactive provision of information during the presentation turn. Unlike other facilitators in the dataset who provided information reactively after discussions had begun, F6 used accessible language to explain the formal terminology of agenda items in advance, which significantly reduced the common hesitation at the early stage.

F6 did more than any other facilitator in the discussion introduction part. He started the session by setting the norms. Instead of simply announcing the rules, he used a synthesized discursive strategy to explain and encourage, combining several functional elements in one turn:

(1:**norm-setting**) So, as always, I know for those who have already been in a group with me before, I’d just like to emphasize, please remain courteous. // (2: **contextual information supply**) Some of these topics are a little more controversial and you might have some more to say. // (1: **norm-setting**) But please just remember to be kind to each other if you feel yourself talking for 5 minutes or raising your voice, maybe consider that this isn’t the place for that. (3: **awareness promotion**) So, I don’t want to have to be the person to say we need to move on or something that sort. // (4: **“we” narrative**) So, we’ll work as much as we can together to keep this going.

Then, F6 continued proactively sharing background information to guide the group to get an idea about how to understand the draft goals, encouraging the participants to make themselves known when giving feedback. When F6 noticed his boss just shifted out the meeting, he made a funny comment about his relieved nervousness, which made the group laugh loudly. By doing this, a tone for the upcoming discussion was implicitly being set. This move will be presented again in more palpable ways at later stages.

During the presentation turn, F6 distinguished himself from other facilitators in the dataset by proactively sharing contextual information and interpreting the agenda with personal narrative without being asked. Before addressing Goal 1, he remarked humorously, “You are a little spoiled because I did help write most of

these [points], so I have a pretty good knowledge of them.” He humorously dismissed the formal language of the goals as “a bunch of nonsense,” to which a participant agreed with a chuckle. F6 then elaborated on the planning team’s intentions with phrases like “What we’re looking at doing is...”, “We really want to...” and “the idea here is...” Upon F6’s comment about the language of the action point— “alright, quite a mouthful...”—the participants eagerly jumped into the discussion, unable to hold back their thoughts any longer. This spontaneous contribution from the participants marked the beginning of the first round of discussion. Notably, owing to the facilitator’s proactive and ample interpretation, this session is the only one in the dataset where discussion commenced without explicit elicitation.

Engage with notes

From the first-round discussion, F6 creatively engaged in note-taking by using shared screen notes to not only document but also acknowledge and highlight valuable feedback. He wrote comments such as “This could be useful!” next to the input. Also, by making attention signals such as nodding and “right” or “yes” and making jokes about his typing (“I just can’t spell tonight!”, “Furious typing!”), F6 promoted the participant’s awareness of giving more time for him to take notes.

Vibrant Encouragement to promote participation

Combined methods that focused on encouraging participation were practiced frequently throughout the process. When a new participant entered the meeting and was hesitant about how to engage in the discussion, F6 first responded in a funny way to encourage free engagement:

New participant: I’m sorry, I apologize. I joined this meeting late. So I don’t know if...if anybody can talk and jump in or...?

F6: [smiles with gestures] Oh, it’s just me, and then you have to listen to me for an hour and a half...No, no! please! [people laugh]

The same participant made a tentative comment, but still not sure if it was on topic. In response, F6 made a stronger encouragement with another humorous reply.

New participant: Can I ask this... and please tell me if I’m taking this off-topic ... But maybe that’s not...in this section or...

F6: No. I’m very, very good at facilitation so I can handle anything you got to say! [both smile]

Then, F6 further encouraged the new participant by elevating her comment as a new action point in the note, checking the accuracy with her, and adopting the verbatim

in the notes. This combined method to promote participation was a recurring feature in F6's facilitation.

Discussion Environment Building

Before moving on to Goal 2, F6 gently highlighted the time left in his response to a question, "I can tell you—and I should move on a little bit as well, even though I do like talking about this..." When F6 noted down another feedback for the goal, he decided to move on, but softened his use of authority in the progression turn by providing an alternative discussion option that blended in with sharing personal enthusiasm on the topic:

(1: **agenda progression**) So I'm going to hop down [to the next goal], // (2: **personal narrative**) but I know I'm going to be too excited to talk about this if you bring it back up. // (3: **alternative discussion option supply**) But please feel free to bring it up again and I'll dive right back in! [people chuckle, nod and someone gives a thumbs up]

To this point, an inclusive, positive discussion environment was gradually built, and a pattern started reoccurring: The facilitator explained the agenda with approachable language, showed personal enthusiasm for the topic, and spontaneous contributions took place. Sometimes, agreement on the goal had been reached even before F6 finished reading it.

Throughout this discussion, participants consistently offered well-reasoned suggestions without significant pauses. This required F6 to multitask intensively, managing rapid note-taking, providing information, and reviewing previous points as promised. F6 interspersed these major facilitation tasks with appreciative and humorous remarks, like "music to my ears" and "well said, I'm going to steal that [word]," which helped keep the atmosphere engaging.

Advanced strategy: Pace and expectation management

Managing discussion pace and participant expectation, two subtle strategies were performed in F6's facilitation.

The participant expectation was managed when discussion dynamics met with a turning point. A few controversial action points about measures to ensure equity were discussed. One participant expressed frustration about the formality of the processes in the county, criticizing the lack of meaningful responses. "People don't get any response, they get 'thank you for the question, next question!'" With a smile, F6 interrupted to explain the existing procedures and their limitations, stating that certain outcomes were beyond their "pay grade". Hearing this, the participant stopped speaking and nodded slowly. F6 then suggested moving forward to the next point, stating this could make the agenda idea clearer. And when presenting the next point, F6 stated:

So I'm not going to reach all of this paragraph here. The general idea here is as many of you probably have known, if you've engaged with the county with anybody who isn't me and my lovely techniques of facilitation, sometimes it just can be difficult to work with different community groups, or community groups to work with different county agencies. [...] I don't know if it's a great time for you to tell us exactly how you want to be engaged with this one ... But if anyone has any thoughts on that, I'd love to hear them as well.

Then, when documenting a long comment, F6 only made a short note, although he checked the accuracy with the participant by admitting the short length: "I know that's definitely a lot shorter than what you said, does that feel correct?", and then announced a bypass of an item with only a short justification.

Here, the subtle statement, along with the succinct note-taking and the bypass, marked a departure from F6's usual upbeat and inclusive style. The facilitator gently lowered expectations on sensitive topics, but at the same time, carefully maintained a degree of encouragement. The strategy of adjusting expectations to boost or limit input was only seen in F6's facilitation.

In the discussion on Goal 3, F6 managed the pace, but kept maintaining an encouraging atmosphere. He started advancing the agenda more frequently, interspersed with a set of encouraging actions, including humorously assuring people of their opportunity to revisit the topics. Participants quickly adapted, shifting from personal, reasoned narratives to assertive, articulate suggestion points to ensure their contributions could be documented by the facilitator in the shortest time possible. The discussion on Goal 3 ended with F6 explicitly noting the additional time spent.

F6 practiced the expectation adjustment again when moving into Goal 4, but this time, he raised the previously lowered expectations. He told the group, "We have a good group that is willing to say whatever you want, whenever you want. So now is the time! For those at the meeting, it is a pretty inclusive topic!"

On the other hand, despite encouraging free speech, F6 soon gently rejected an input. "Do you mind if I save that for...umm, we'll have another meeting on the economy." F5 asked in his comments, and added, "I hate telling someone not to say something," while smiling and gesturing. This is another example of softened power use. In fact, throughout the process, encouragement practiced by F6 served not only as an end but also as a strategy for moderating his use of authority.

Group Dynamics

The dynamics of the group discussion on the last goal mirrored those seen in Goal 2, characterized by active interactions with participants commenting on and complementing each other's ideas. F6 effectively managed multiple tasks including recording, timekeeping, providing feedback, and checking accuracy. As agreed, he allowed participants to revisit and add input on previous action points when requested. When the time ended, F6 conducted a metatalk to thank the group members before concluding the session.

In terms of group dynamics, the extensive explanation and provision of information enabled participants to initiate discussions spontaneously without needing to be prompted, which kept the discussions lively and engaged throughout the process. However, when F6 imposed control over the pace of the discussion, the depth of the discussion was in turn reduced; the facilitator's actions to lower expectations and circumvent agenda items also limited further expression on controversial issues.

4. Discussion

4.1 Categorize Facilitation Styles Beyond A Continuum

In previous studies, different types of facilitation have been depicted along a certain criterion, such as the weak-strong/passive-moderate-involved continuums proposed by Ryfe (2006) and Dillard (2013) that focus on involvement, or the argumentative-authoritative continuum regarding power use introduced by Westin et al. (2023). In the dataset of this study, many attributes from Ryfe's weak-strong continuum and Dillard's passive-moderate-involved continuum are observable from the six facilitators' practices, and their facilitation types can be positioned within Dillard's continuum: three towards the passive end (F1, F2, F3) and three towards the involved end (F4, F5, F6). However, they still exhibit distinct features that fall outside the focus of the continuums; beyond the two primary types, each facilitator still displayed unique secondary characteristics that do not form a gradient and thus cannot be presented on a spectrum or continuum. In other words, a continuum may not be adequate to capture different styles.

Therefore, I propose a categorization (Table 4.1) to present these different facilitation styles using detached-engaged to define types, with secondary characteristics as descriptors to further differentiate the styles.

Table 4.1 Categorization of Different Facilitation Styles

Type	Descriptor	Overall approach	Richness & complexity of strategies	Group dynamics characteristics
Detached	Formalistic	Presents information by reading. Rarely provides contextual information or interpretation. Mainly serves as passive note-taker in discussion.	Very low (both)	Many unanswered questions and concerns at early stage; participant-led, self-terminated discussions at later stage.
	Arbitrary	Presents information by reading. Rarely provides contextual information or interpretation. Mainly serves as passive note-taker. Uses explicit, authoritative methods to cut off discussion.	Very low (both)	Many unanswered questions and concerns at early stage; passive, sporadic input and self-terminated short discussion at later stage. Palpable tension between facilitator and the group.
	Procedural	Presents information by reading. Reactively provides information and interpretation. Offers discussion options to elicit expression. Limited engagement for procedural rather than deliberative purpose	Low & moderate	Orderly, inactive input throughout the process. Little interactions between participants.
Engaged	Inquiring	Presents information by reading. Proactively offers information and interpretation during discussion. Engages in discussion to explore content using rich, adaptive inquiry strategies including elicitation, confirmation and probing.	High & moderate	Well-addressed questions and concerns followed by substantive feedback at early stage; deep, dynamic discussions with rich deliberative elements at later stage.
	Amicably Encouraging	Presents information by reading. Proactively offers information and interpretation during discussion. Engages in discussion to maintain an inclusive, engaging environment by using rich, synthesized encouragement strategies.	High (both)	Active, interactive input contribution throughout the process with sporadic, well-answered question and concerns.
	Vibrantly Encouraging	Proactively provides information and heavy interpretation. Applies rich and complex encouragement strategies to maintain engaging atmosphere with vibrant personal narratives. Manages the pace and expectations and softens the use of authority with subtle and complex discursive strategies.	Very high (both)	Spontaneously initiated discussion at very early stage, lively and interactive input throughout the process.

In terms of types, the results supported previous empirical evidence that more engaged facilitation is more likely to promote deliberation due to the communicative strategies applied (Reykowski, 2006; Dillard, 2013).

The secondary descriptor is indicative of a major finding of this study: there are different variants in the engaged facilitation. Inquiring and encouraging are both approaches that require involvement, but focus on different desired episodes (Pearce, 2007). The results suggested that inquiring approaches may contribute more to deliberative talks due to their focus on exploring meaningful content while encouraging approaches contribute more to participant satisfaction and create an encouraging and inclusive discussion environment, which is recognized as a more genuine goal than deliberative functioning for consultative participation such as public meetings (Adams, 2004).

Richness and complexity can be seen as a new analytical dimension to examine facilitator's work. The description of the richness & complexity of communicative strategies was directly measured by functional elements and turns. Richness was measured by calculating the total number of functional elements, and complexity was measured by the average number of functional elements used per turn. It suggests that there is a quantity issue in different styles and types. Different styles are not only about a series of different choices of actions. They are also about how many strategies are deployed and how intensive they are used.

Given the limited number of cases studied, my categorization cannot present all possible facilitation styles that may exist within the same context of online public meetings. This categorization only reflects the styles observed in the dataset. Rather, this categorization can be seen as a step forward to a more nuanced categorization to study facilitation styles, which is an important work to be done for future research.

4.2 Reflection on Method

The three analytical categories I developed were practical in content analysis, especially for an under-researched area where theories are not sufficient.

By focusing on functional elements, I was able to capture a wide range of verbal and non-verbal actions, especially note-taking and emotional reactions; it also enabled me to track the facilitator's subtle actions such as attention signals during note-taking, which made a thorough examination of the process possible. Functional elements and turns also enabled me to examine the richness of communicative strategies by counting the number of functional elements that were being applied. By comparing the same fundamental facilitation turn across samples and scrutinizing the functional elements in certain turns, I was able to identify variations of each facilitation method and examine the complexity of facilitation strategies. Episodes allowed me to see the effects and consequences of certain facilitation turns, thus helping me to observe what certain facilitation actions brought to the discussions. In general, owing to this inductive analysis method, I got a deeper and closer understanding of what really happened in facilitation practices and gained new insights.

However, I also experienced the shortcomings of this methodology. Inductive content analysis is known for being time-consuming. It is challenging to achieve a balance between immersing in the data and maintaining focus on the research question, which is exactly what I felt during the whole analysis process. As the coding categories are not predefined, this flexibility also brought a lot of weighing and uncertainty when I meticulously tagged each utterance and action as functional elements.

I also encountered difficulty when analyzing F6's facilitation in the dataset. One source for this difficulty is that inductive content analysis relies on the constant comparative method, and when I identified unusual utterances that lacked comparative instances across the dataset, I found it hard to make sense of all of them from a *functional* perspective. Eventually, when I managed to identify F6's subtle and complex strategies for managing the pace and expectations, it became apparent that when a strategy was intentionally downplayed by the actor, the discourse embodying that intention could be diluted by other types of discourse and may be dispersed among multiple discrete turns or even episodes, and difficult to identify, which is a limitation of the analytical categories.

5. Conclusion

This study conducted an inductive analysis to investigate facilitation styles in a public participation process. The thesis reported thick descriptive results and proposed a tentative categorization of facilitation styles. Six facilitation styles were identified under two categories, *detached* and *engaged*, with three detached styles: formalistic, arbitrary, and procedural; and three engaged styles: inquiring, amicably engaging, and vibrantly engaging.

While public consultations may be perceived as occurring at the same level of participation from a process designer's perspective, the findings show that in online public meetings, even within the same structure design and objective, facilitation still exhibits various styles that significantly influence the efficiency and quality of the discussion. The results illustrate how interactive, deliberative discussions require support from facilitators.

This research also reveals the complexity of facilitation as a communicative activity. The categorization suggests that high levels of involvement correlate with greater richness and complexity, while low levels of involvement correlate with less richness and complexity. The strategies used by engaged facilitators are far more varied and complex than those of detached facilitators. The engaged facilitators also handled an impressive workload in multitasking. The differences in facilitation styles are not only about techniques and methods but also about significant differences in workload. Achieving effective participation is an intensive and arduous task.

This thesis contributes to both methodology and empirical understanding. First, by reflecting on the existing content analysis method, this thesis made a contribution to the coding method. My study developed a method to capture and make sense of verbal and non-verbal actions in facilitator's communication, and contributed a set of analytical categories, *functional element*, *turn* and *episode*, to examine their communicative strategies.

Second, this study identified two metrics to measure facilitation strategy that have not been paid enough attention to: the richness and complexity of communicative strategies. It is possible for future research to conduct qualitative and quantitative analysis to examine the two metrics with functional elements and turns.

Third, by reflecting on the continuum model developed by previous research, this thesis proposed a preliminary categorization to describe different styles under the involvement categories, which can be seen as a step toward a more sophisticated classification of styles.

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Popular Science Summary

In recent decades, authentic and effective public engagement has been recognized as critical to good governance and democratic commitments. In response to the increasingly complex environmental and sustainability challenges, inclusive, equitable, and deliberative communication is seen as more effective than the traditional expert-driven methods. Despite the attention on methods and techniques, facilitation—a key element in both the design and execution of public participation—has not received adequate attention in both theoretical and empirical studies. Facilitation is a practice that involves a set of communicative skills to structure and guide group discussions. It has been widely used in scenarios that involve group discussion. In communicative planning practices, planners often take on the role of facilitators. Their facilitation can significantly influence the quality of public participation.

Exploring planners' facilitation styles through empirical study is beneficial for both research and practice. It can help researchers and practitioners get a closer and deeper understanding of what facilitators actually do and how they can better promote inclusive and deliberative discussions. This thesis reviewed the public engagement process in a large regional planning project to understand facilitators' strategic communication and how different facilitation styles affect group discussions. The research developed a set of analytical categories to examine the facilitators' work and reported descriptive results. Findings reveal that even when the purpose of the public meetings is only to gather public feedback, planners' facilitation styles can vary significantly and greatly influence the process. The facilitators who took a hands-off stance often failed to provide adequate support for initiating and supporting group discussions and exhibited other communicative characteristics such as formalistic, arbitrary, and procedural. In contrast, in the meetings where effective participation and deliberation were achieved, the facilitators were proactively engaged in discussion with a range of rich and complex communication strategies, showing varying focus on inquiry and encouragement. Based on the results, the thesis proposed a tentative categorization to describe and classify facilitation styles, which can be seen as a step toward a more nuanced classification for future studies.

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