

YOUTH WORK FUNDAMENTALS: FACILITATION

A Briefing Paper for Afterschool Professionals



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For many years, there has been a drive to improve the quality of afterschool programs and with it has come the expansion of literature, research, and tools to help aid afterschool leaders on their road to improvement. However, as decades of research and experience has shown, there are a few fundamentals of quality youth work that are unchanged over time. This briefing paper focuses on one youth work fundamental: the art of facilitation.

LET'S GET TO WORK

Imagine your afterschool program. Imagine young people coming to the program with all their energy, frustrations of the day, hopes for the afternoon, stress of homework, conflicts and intrigue of their relationships. You have three hours to channel all of that into the offering of homework help, physical activity and enrichment.

Program leaders are charged with a tall order in the afterschool: develop youth to their full potential, implement quality standards, pay attention to social emotional learning and youth development – all while keeping youth engaged.

We could talk about *what* to do in those three hours; the premise of this document is that *what* you do is less important than *how* you do it. If we pay attention to *how* we do this work, the *what* will follow. We are focused here on one important *how*: the art of facilitation.

WHAT IS FACILITATION AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

There are real values, practices and techniques that allow youth to participate fully. The bag of resources we are referring to is facilitation. The Association for Talent Development defines it this way, "Facilitation is the art of moving a group of people through meetings, planning sessions, or training, and successfully achieving a specific goal."ⁱ Facilitation skills are important because they ensure that the participants feel safe to express their thoughts and experiences, and feel accepted and valued.

Anyone can learn the skills associated with facilitation and the skills allow the implementation of quality standards, social emotional learning and are the foundation for good youth development practice.

FACILITATION TECHNIQUES

There are many facilitation techniques, each with value. We present you with several below:

Ask Questions

Deep dialogue is necessary for understanding each other, building relationships and empathy. Questions can be divided into categories:

- Topic Clarification Questions: These are questions that clarify the “what” of the topic we are discussing. Each of us holds a piece of the reality puzzle. When we ask these questions, we get to hear how other people are perceiving a common reality and it expands how I see that same reality. Example questions: What do you see? What is one thing you heard? Who are the people that were there? What colors do you notice? What shapes?
- Experiential Questions: These questions direct us to our feelings or memories in association with the topic. Each of us has a visceral, or gut reaction to topics. When we voice these feelings, we get closer to understanding the importance of the topic in relation to ourselves. Example questions: What do you like about the topic? What does it remind you of? What don't you like? Where are you confused?
- Interpretive Questions: These questions direct us to consider the meaning of the topic. Example questions: What is your understanding of...? What is significant about...? What principle do you see operating here? What are some pros and cons?
- Resolution Questions: This set of questions ask us to consider a decision or a new inner state of being from the conversation. Example questions: What will you do differently? What is a next step? How might we use this information in the future?

There are many conversation formatsⁱⁱ. You are encouraged to look at the different methodsⁱⁱⁱ in the End Notes.

If you are working with young children, you can adjust your questions so they are developmentally appropriate and begin with presenting multiple answers to your questions and invite youth to stand by the answer they choose. For example, if you ask, “What activity did you like today?”, you can have each activity written out on a sheet of paper that you place around the room. You can read the activities out and invite youth to go to the activity they liked best. Then you can ask them to talk about what about the activity they liked.



Listen for Understanding without Judgment

A simple enough thing to say and difficult to implement. It's hard to be neutral. As a facilitator we have opinions too! In our facilitator role, we are keeping our opinions to ourselves and encouraging conversation by listening. We need to remember that when we ask a question, people need time to think about the question before answering. That requires waiting for people to answer. This can be uncomfortable. If we take a deep breath and count slowly to 10, we can give youth time to think and formulate a response.

Without judgment means that we can thank youth for their response, but we don't say comments like: Good answer! Great idea! I love that! While those comments might be coming from a place of genuine feeling on the part of the facilitator, it can have the unintended consequence of shutting down other participants. We can say things like: Does anyone else have the same idea? Do we all agree with that? Who has another idea?

Become Familiar with Participatory Structures

Not all dialogue needs to happen in a large group. In fact, when working with large groups, other structures ensure that all voices are heard. Some examples of participatory structures are: small groupings in pairs (pair and share), threesomes, foursomes, individual writing, and role plays. Other structures presented in the End Notes.

Reflect, Reflect, Reflect!

Learning happens when we reflect on our experience, the skills we used and where we might use them in the future. A common format for reflection is: What, Gut, So What, Now What. What did we do? What was your experience of what we did? What did we learn? How can you use it in the future?

In this model it is important to understand what is coming next based on what we have accomplished today. We can both ask young people what are the next steps and tell them what is coming up tomorrow.

Use Visuals

Visual representation of concepts and ideas reinforces learning and contributes to a warm and welcoming environment. Consider using colorful charts with visual representation.

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

Interested in putting these skills to use? Below are some tips and program structures.

Believe

Start from the belief that the young people you are working with are caring, skillful, have important thoughts and ideas to share, and deserve to be heard by all.

Plan

It is important to plan ahead and to consider your meeting goals, agenda, and the collection of needed materials. (See Facilitation Case Study)^{iv}.

Develop group agreements

Conduct a meeting with the program participants early on to express the commitment that in your program "every person has the right to feel safe, be heard, and feel included and accepted." Ask participants to define what these terms mean to them, and what agreements and rules they want to make to ensure these rights. Decide together what happens when the agreements are broken. Train

young people in a process to resolve differences when they feel like these agreements are violated. Decide at what point an adult should be asked to intervene. When finished, these group agreements can be listed on a colorful poster, which can be created by participants.



Review your Group Agreements

If you already have group agreements, when was the last time you checked in with your group about the agreements in your program? Sample questions might be: (If your Group Agreements are usually posted in the room, take them down). Tell your group that you are going to have a short conversation to review the group agreements. Ask each youth to state one of the agreements they remember. Ask:

- “What agreement do you like the best?”
- “What agreement don’t you like?”
- “What agreement is hardest for you personally to uphold?”
- “Which is easiest?”
- “How do you think we are doing as a group around the agreements?”
- “What actions could we take to do better on the agreements?”
- “Thinking about the agreements, do we want to keep them the same or change them?”
- “What would we add or change?”
- “Do we need to make a new poster?”
- “Who would like to do that?”

End with, “Thank you very much for reviewing the agreements with me!”



Check-In Circles

You can start your day with a check-in circle. A check-in circle doesn't need to take very long and can greatly benefit both young people and program staff. In small groups (20 or fewer), begin the day by sitting quietly in a circle and letting each person speak briefly. Sometimes it helps to have a special item to pass around the group like a talking stick that identifies the one who has the “rapt attention” of the group.

When you first start instituting the check-in circle, it helps to plan a safe and interesting check-in question, such as, “What is your favorite thing to do at recess?” or “If you could go anywhere in the world for one day, where would you go?”

This gives you a chance to hear what has been going on in the young people’s lives and provides an opportunity to review what you will be doing together (you can also review your group agreements!). The end of the day is an opportunity to reflect and learn together. Remember to be open to hearing what the youth learned – it may not be the same thing you hoped they learned.

Activity Time

Try implementing different structures into your activities. Let pairs or threesomes work together and present their learning to the whole group. Set up stations and let youth rotate through the stations.

Training

There is nothing as good as a staff training in facilitation to really learn and embed the skills. Many organizations offer facilitation training. Here are two organizations: *Center for Strategic Facilitation*^v and *Community at Work*^{vi}.

Facilitation of Adults

It is important to note that the art of facilitation is appropriate for any group: young children, teens, and even adults. For those that are interested, you can review a facilitation case study^{vii}.



USEFUL WEBSITES

- *Cooperative Learning Strategies*: [https://www.t2tuk.co.uk/downloads/The Essential 5.pdf](https://www.t2tuk.co.uk/downloads/The%20Essential%205.pdf)
- *Tribes*: <http://tribes.com/>
- *Facilitation Tools*: <https://seedsforchange.org.uk/tools.pdf>
- *Liberating Structures*: <http://www.liberatingstructures.com/>
- *Conversation Formats*: <http://voicevoice.com/conversation-formats.php>
- *Morning Meetings*: <https://www.responsiveclassroom.org/what-is-morning-meeting/>

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About Temescal Associates

Temescal Associates is dedicated to building the capacity of leaders and organizations in education and youth development who are serious about improving the lives of young people. Our clients include leaders of youth serving institutions and organizations, school and youth program practitioners, public and private funders, intermediary organizations, and policy makers.

About the Expanded Learning 360°/365 Project

Expanded learning: 360°/365 is a collaborative project dedicated to promoting the development of critical skills beyond academics that research has identified as essential to young people's success in school, work, and life.

END NOTES

ⁱ <https://www.td.org/what-is-facilitation>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.cultofpedagogy.com/speaking-listening-techniques/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://voicevoice.com/conversation-formats.php>

^{iv} https://el360-365.weebly.com/uploads/1/1/0/6/110631901/a_facilitation_case_study.pdf

^v <https://strategicfacilitation.com/>

^{vi} <http://communityatwork.com/>

^{vii} https://el360-365.weebly.com/uploads/1/1/0/6/110631901/a_facilitation_case_study.pdf