

Explorations in critical systems practice: developing tools for facilitation

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ABSTRACT: *The paper explores some new avenues in critical systems practice. Recognising the importance of facilitation within critical systems practice, it examines the question of developing tools to assist in the facilitation of group work. In particular, the paper focuses on the question of emotion and feeling in group work, and discusses a range of tools, adapted from a variety of origins, that facilitators can draw on. The discussion is illustrated by examples from case studies in the field of group decision-making and action.*

Keywords: facilitation, critical reflection, postmodernism

INTRODUCTION

The paper explores some new avenues in critical systems practice. It begins by outlining briefly: 1. how the term ‘critical systems practice’ to be understood; and, 2. the arenas in which the author engages in ‘critical systems practice’. It will then review the contribution of three different (though interconnected and overlapping) strands to this practice: participatory rapid appraisal; participatory action research/action learning; operational research/management sciences/system sciences; and introduce a framework, known as PANDA (Participatory Appraisal of Needs and the Development of Action), which can be viewed as bringing together these three strands to provide a toolbox to assist in critical systems practice. PANDA is a multimethodological approach which emphasises processes which recognise, respect and respond to diversity, and which facilitate involvement.

Recognising the importance of facilitation within critical systems practice, the main focus of the paper is on the question of developing tools to assist in the facilitation of group work. In particular, the paper focuses on the question of emotion and feeling in group work, and examines a range of tools, adapted from a variety of origins, that facilitators can draw on. The discussion is illustrated with examples from case studies in the field of group decision-making and action.

‘CRITICAL SYSTEMS PRACTICE’

Space limitations preclude a lengthy discussion of ‘critical systems practice’ in relation to the literature. Instead I wish to note that my particular interest is in critical systems practice rather than critical systems theory and to offer the following four features which characterise how I wish ‘critical systems practice’ to be understood in the context of this paper, namely that it:

- recognises both structure and agency;
- recognises the existence of oppression;
- is poststructuralist, postmodern and postpositivist;
- is concerned with seeking change “for the better” (locally and contingently defined) and with understanding and theory, or rather theorising, as a route/stimulus to this end, and not as ends in themselves.

WHAT IS THE PRACTICE I AM TALKING ABOUT?

The first point is that although I write this paper as an academic (in that I hold an academic position in the University), it is a paper written about my critical systems practice. This is practice both during my job of being a Professor of Primary Health Care, and in activities undertaken outside working hours. This is thus theorising based on practice and a discussion of how my theorising links with, and draws on, other theorising and theories (some, but not all, of which are based on practice too). So what does this practice consist of? There are a number of different areas:

1. supervision of those undertaking PhDs and masters dissertations;
2. supervision of research/consultancy/other projects (i.e. where I am the project manager);
3. facilitation of research/consultancy/other projects;
4. execution of research/consultancy (i.e. where I am carrying out the research/consultancy myself)
5. membership of a variety of multiagency groups and management committees.

Included in the third, fourth and fifth of these categories are some projects/involvements that can be described as community operational research, all categories include health services operational research, as well as health service research more generally. What is common to all of the settings in which this work takes place is that they involve a multiplicity of agents and organisations - they are complex, and often conflict-ridden, systems.

I now turn to the contribution of three different (though interconnected and overlapping) strands from which I draw methods for working in such situations, and explain some of the reasons why each of the sources is particularly useful, and why it is that each is not sufficient on its own.

The first is the set of methods collectively referred to as participatory rural appraisal (PRA). PRA is very widely used in development, and finds considerable use in health projects. The criticism often levelled against PRA is that, while good at appraisal or needs assessment, it falls short in terms of not dealing adequately with the translation into action or implementation of recommendations or choices that may arise. What however is very positive about it, is its emphasis on methods that are visual (diagrams, pictures, photographs etc.) and vital (drama etc.) as well as methods based in verbal articulation. Particularly for involving groups with low levels of literacy, or those who feel uncomfortable with verbal abstraction and argumentation, such non-verbally focused methods are very important.

The second set of approaches to be mentioned is those referred to as participatory action research (PAR), action learning, or reflective practice. The advantage of these is their strongly practical orientation and the fact that they are practice/experience based, together with their emphasis on achieving desirable change. The drawback of these methods is that while they often are envisaged as a group endeavour, there is little attention paid to the question of appropriate processes by which groups may be enabled to work together.

The third group of methods to be mentioned are those drawn from operational research, management sciences and system sciences which take as their explicit focus the question of process and how group participation in decision-making and the implementation of action can be facilitated.

Taken together, these three sources form an extensive toolbox on which we can usefully draw in critical systems practice.

INTRODUCING PANDA - PARTICIPATORY APPRAISAL OF NEEDS AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF ACTION

The framework within which I work is a postmodern/poststructuralist one, based on a series of theoretical principles labelled as pragmatic pluralism (Taket and White 1996, Taket and White 2000). The framework itself is called PANDA, participatory appraisal of needs and the development of action (White and Taket 1997, Taket and White 2000). PANDA is a particular version of multimethodology (Mingers and Gill 1997). Leroy White and myself put together the PANDA framework to bring together methods from PRA, PAR and OR/MS and other sources to provide a toolbox to assist in work with/within groups. PANDA was a name generated by Leroy while undertaking work with NGOs in Belize, in response to questions from those he was working with about what he called the process they were undertaking together. PANDA is a multimethodological framework, which emphasises processes which recognise, respect and respond to diversity, and facilitate involvement.

PANDA is currently being used in a variety of different settings in Africa, Asia, Central/South America, Australasia, and Europe. A recent book describes the PANDA framework (Taket and White 2000), and a second, still in preparation, presents case studies in development (Friend, Taket and White 2000). There are also a variety of published papers discussing PANDA in action, for example: Taket and White (1997), Taket and White (1998), White and Taket (1997) and White and Taket (2000). It is also important to note that, as well as drawing on the three strands identified above, PANDA also draws on other sources which can not be classified easily into one of the three strands. Some of these are considered below.

DEVELOPING TOOLS FOR FACILITATION

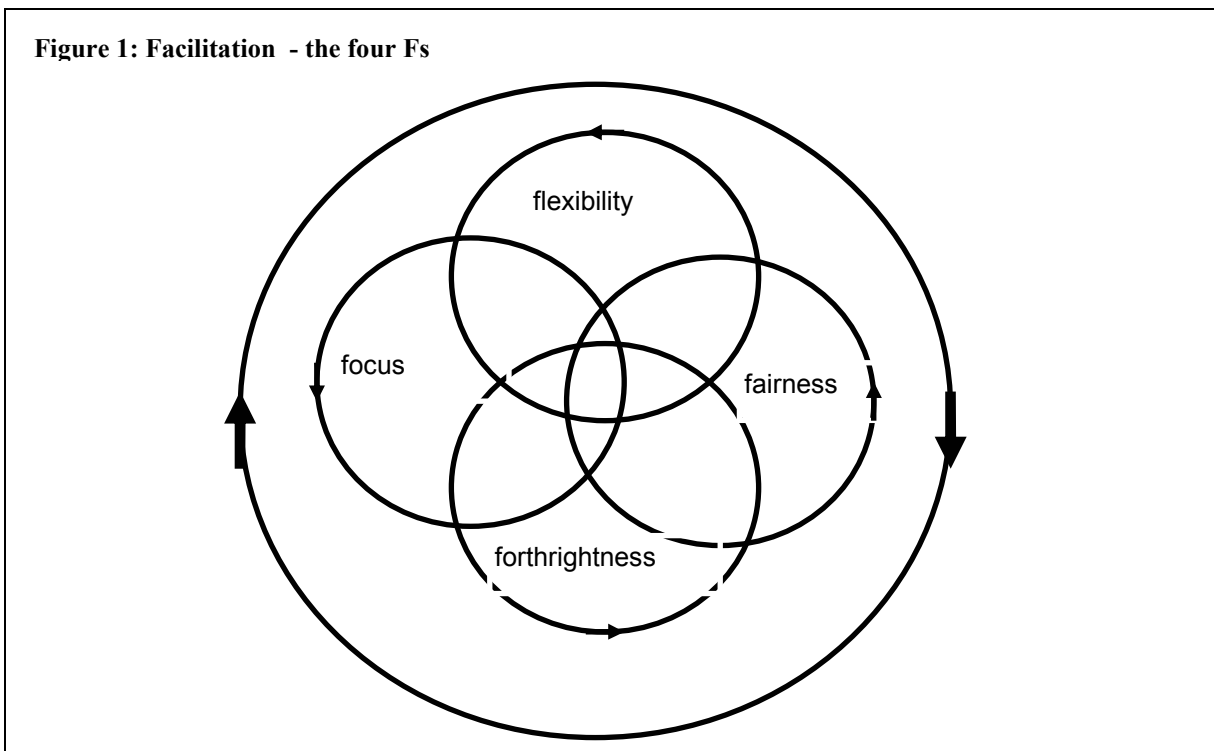
The starting point here is a number of observations. Firstly, no matter what type of critical systems practice one is involved in, facilitation is a necessary part of the process. Secondly, this is often not noticed, or is assumed to be true only for some types of critical systems practice. Thirdly, facilitation is not often written about within the critical systems practice literature. The central tasks of the facilitator can be seen (1) enabling access to participation in the proceedings by all those who wish to participate (2) helping progress to be made. This will involve paying attention to group dynamics, encouraging contributions from everyone in the group, and sometimes actively intervening.

Taket and White (2000, chapter 8) introduced the notion of the four Fs, four different features to be borne in mind while planning or reflecting on facilitation, see also Figure 1:

- flexibility - adapt facilitation to feedback, including feelings;

- forthrightness - be prepared to challenge and intervene, an alternative label for this would be forcefulness;
- focus - keeping a sense of purpose, progress and place;
- fairness - undertaking a process of critical reflection in order to ensure fairness, in particular access to participation.

Taket and White (2000) discuss a number of different tools and devices on which facilitators can draw. What I wish to do in this paper is to extend that discussion to talk about the use of these in terms of two additional areas, two additional F's: fun and feeling.



Building in fun

Building on the notion that hard work does not have to be unenjoyable serves as a useful stimulus to creativity and productiveness in group work. Facilitating for fun - in the sense of building in opportunities for enjoyment - is thus important. Seemingly mundane details like place and refreshments are important here, but may be subject to constraints and not controllable by the facilitator(s). Aspects that are controllable include the design of the opening and closing of work sessions. These provide important opportunities for setting and maintaining the tone for the work using appropriate warming-up and rounding-off exercises. Warming-up is useful for setting a good tone and atmosphere for the session. In addition, if the group has not worked together before, it can act as a good ice-breaker, and in this circumstance a rather longer time might be spent on it. The type of warm-up chosen will obviously depend on the particular group concerned. Some examples are given in Table 2, drawn from a longer list in Taket and White (2000). With all of these, the idea is to do them quickly. If this does not work the facilitator will have to diagnose why (on the spot) and take remedial action: reminding people to be quick; interrupting to thank someone (if they are going on too long) and ask the next person to start; changing the plan and substituting one exercise for another; responding appropriately if someone reveals something that is deeply distressing for them (recent bereavement, illness in family etc. etc.).

Closing a session is also important. There are a number of things that are important here, first is making sure that everyone is clear about the follow-up arrangements. The closing part of a session also provides an opportunity for critical reflection in the group, this is discussed at some length in Taket and White (2000) and also considered further in the next section. It is also useful to end the session on a positive note wherever possible. Table 3 contains some questions that can be used for this purpose. Again, the aim is usually to do this in quick rounds, using one, or maybe two questions, only. Again, the facilitator may need to encourage people to keep it short!

Table 2 Warm-up exercises for group sessions

Very simple exercises that can be used with almost every group include:

- a quick round of something new and good
- a quick round of something enjoyable that happened to them in the last week (or whenever)
- physically based warm-up exercises, such as ‘group laugh’ where everyone lies down in a circle with their head on someone else’s stomach, someone starts to laugh and this is transmitted around the circle (obviously only for use where appropriate: culturally; in terms of people’s physical abilities; and in terms of its acceptability to the group. This one is usually greeted with horror and embarrassment when suggested as being far too ‘touchy-feely’, however, once started it is usually extremely effective.)

Table 3 Closing exercises for group sessions to end on a positive note

- one thing you enjoyed about the session
- one thing you learnt from the session
- something that you thought worked well during the session
- something you are looking forward to
- one thing you appreciate about the group

Working with feeling

Critical reflection in and on group work is an important part of facilitation. Here we consider some specific tools that can be used for this purpose. Starhawk (1982) distinguishes between formal and informal roles in her description of groups (her work is oriented specifically at nonhierarchical groups), a selection from the informal roles is summarised in Table 4 (full details are given in Taket and White 2000). Formal roles are those that are often formally assigned, while the informal roles are ones that all individuals may adopt from time to time. Her categorisation of informal roles has been particularly useful on a number of occasions as a tool for critical reflection on the work of the group. I have used it as a diagnostic tool for myself when planning and preparing for group work which I am facilitating, and also as a tool for group use in critical reflection.

One specific example to demonstrate how this can work is taken from an informal group who met to plan and implement activities in support of women’s rights in a local area; the group was non-hierarchical, volunteer, and self-organising. The group’s members were a mix of employed/unemployed, high and low income, and diverse in age, ‘class’, ethnicity and sexuality. The activities we were involved in included: conferences, workshops, articles for local papers etc., responses to policy, direct action, training sessions. In our meetings, the formal role of facilitator was rotated between members. Critical reflection was an explicit part of all group meetings, although the length of time devoted to it and the tools used varied, in part depending on who was facilitating, and in part depending on perceptions about how well the group was working.

One of the groundrules that the group had agreed near its beginning was that for each of the different activities that the group was working on, individuals could agree to participate or not in work around the activity, and where they did not wish to participate, they then had no right to veto the activity or interfere. This groundrule arose out of the very early experience of the group where a lot of dissatisfaction was expressed over the time it took to agree a list of priorities, and the observation by many of us that there was significant difficulty in everyone adhering to a common list of priorities, which surfaced in a constant return to discussing priorities at the expense of working on planned activities. We also noticed that there was an unspoken expectation that everyone would contribute to each activity, something which, once recognised, was explicitly rejected as undesirable.

Categories in Table 4 were presented to the group for use in critical reflection at a point when a number of members had expressed the view that we seemed to be breaking our own groundrule. We used these for self-analysis and worked in pairs on the results. In pairs, individuals took in turns to analyse their own position in the group, the role of the other in the pair was to listen, to prompt with questions, but explicitly not to make any judgements - nor to give their view unless specifically requested. Towards the end of the time allocated, each individual would decide for herself a set of ‘next steps’ - things she wanted to continue to do or do differently. Later sessions served to review progress and make changes accordingly.

It is worth saying something about the role of the listener in this pair work. Here we were explicitly following a re-evaluation co-counselling format, involving affirmative, non-judgemental listening, with the role of the ‘listener’ being to facilitate the other in working out her own solutions and acknowledging and helping her deal with any distress that arose along the way. There is not space here to explore this aspect in detail, it is explored in more detail elsewhere (Taket, forthcoming). The critical reflection carried out was extremely productive. Individuals’ self-diagnosis remained confidential to their pair, unless they choose to share it more

widely; individual plans in terms of ‘next steps’ were shared in the group and reviewed after some time. What was observed was a return to adherence to the groundrule, and a considerable increase in the productivity of the group.

It is important to note the highly emotional nature of this part of the critical reflection, particularly for some individuals. Working with this was made possible, and productive, because of the use of the particular format adopted. A number of the key issues that emerged were around boundaries - between the self in the group and the self in other settings: work, home, education, etc. A recognition of the possibility and desirability of acting differently (in different roles) in different settings was common to many individuals’ diagnoses. For example, one woman commented that she thought her adoption of the ‘rock of Gibraltar’ position in the group came from her paid job as a co-ordinator which explicitly required that role; recognising that she’d been filling this role in the group - and did not need to - allowed her to withdraw from being involved in everything.

Table 4 Informal roles in nonhierarchical groups

the lone wolf	you don’t commit, but love to criticise Ask yourself: Why do I want to hang around people I consider inferior? Am I afraid of my equals? How would my criticisms be different if I said ‘we should’ instead of ‘you should’
the orphan	often from a background of loss and deprivation, wanting closeness from the group and terrified of vulnerability and rejection, feeling you have little to contribute Ask yourself: What work can I take on for the group, preferably in company with one or two others? What can I contribute?
gimme shelter	constantly demanding something from the group: advice; reassurance; help Ask yourself: What actual work can do for the group? What tasks can I take on - and do in such a way that my work does not require anyone else to expend time or energy on the tasks? Ask yourself: How would I act differently if I felt I had power? - and act that way.
filler	just take up space, and feel your opinions and ideas aren’t very interesting or valuable Try: speaking out, taking on a task (perhaps with an orphan).
the princess	so sensitive that the group process is never smooth enough, feel compelled to comment anxiously on slight tensions and minor nuances of conflict Ask yourself: Who am I competing with, and why? Refrain from commenting on group process until you can do so affectionately
the self-hater	perfectionist, harder on yourself than others, however escalating your standards for the group and outraged when they are not lived up to Be nicer to yourself. Sandwich your criticism between expressions of appreciation.
the rock of Gibraltar	takes on thankless tasks and gets them done, remembers what everybody else forgets, everyone brings their problems to you Ask yourself: Am I afraid of showing my weaknesses? What tasks can I delegate?
the star	talks a lot, interrupts, enjoys impressing people, feel nothing can begin until you are present Ask yourself: Do I want to impress people or help their empowerment? How do I feel about people who are constantly trying to prove to me that I can never equal them?

Source: adapted from Starhawk (1982)

CONCLUSIONS

In this final section, I offer some reflection on what has been presented above. In selecting the examples I have discussed here, I have deliberately chosen to focus on tools I acquired a long time ago, as a part of my non-working life, which at the time I saw as sharply separate from my working life (as an OR scientist). The tools came from a variety of sources, all however firmly situated outside the academy. Part of my development as a facilitator has been to recognise the relevance of these tools used in my non-working life to my working life and to find ways of incorporating them into that working life, alongside the more traditional tools of my OR trade. The notion of sharply separable spheres of life and clearly defined boundaries has been one that I have slowly eroded as inaccurate and undesirable, so that now I recognise my complicity in the construction of such boundaries. Instead of letting them police my actions, I prefer now to see such boundaries as inherently leaky, and drawing on Haraway’s (1991) paper, argue for “pleasure in the confusion of boundaries and responsibility in their construction”. The recognition of the permeability of those once taken-for-granted boundaries opened up the repertoire of tools that I now use in my working life, and similarly outside it.

The second feature I want to mention is that the example above illustrates something that the PANDA framework takes as being of fundamental importance for successful group work, namely recognising and working with diversity. The example discussed earlier was of a group that wished to work in a nonhierarchical fashion. Considerable power imbalances (based on whatever definition of power one wished to focus) existed however between the group members - many of which were played out in various ways in our lives outside the group. The tools adopted however allowed the achievement of equality of access to participation in the work of the group. Not all groups structure themselves on a nonhierarchical basis, but where those groups wish to facilitate participation, the same tools can play a role in enabling this to happen.

The third feature to mention here is the distinction drawn between explicit/implicit (or overt/covert) use of the various different tools. This is not to suggest any sharply separable binary distinction here, but rather to notice that there is a spectrum of possibilities. At one end is the case where a facilitator employs tools to assist in the task of facilitation, but without this being explicitly shared with the group. At the other end is the case where the tools are explicitly used by all the group in the course of their work. There are obviously a multiplicity of different positions in between. One point to be made here is that explicit use can be particularly powerful/empowering within groups, allowing transference of skills between members, effectively breaking down any sharp boundary between facilitator and group, and allowing participation of group members in the tasks of facilitation, and the creation of effective partnerships in facilitation. It remains of course a locally contingent decision as to whether this mode of work is appropriate in any particular situation, and I note here, without having the space to discuss in any detail, that there are many examples of situations where, as facilitator, I have decided that this is not appropriate, for one example see the case study I present in Friend, Taket and White (2000).

Finally, I would like to emphasise that what has been presented here by no means a comprehensive discussion of tools for facilitation, it is highly selective. As mentioned above, other parts of this much larger picture are presented in Taket and White (2000), and Taket (forthcoming), which in particular discusses the use of re-evaluation co-counselling as tool to increase effective, creative work, but much more of the wider picture still remains to be written down and reflected upon in the future.

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