

# Situational facilitation for trainers— a model for group learning

Many of us work with groups in training and learning contexts. People are unpredictable learners. They get what they want from a training session. Often they don't even know what will be the most significant lesson, until it jumps into their lap.

Here is a simple model for thinking about the skills and practices in working with groups. It has particular value when thinking about learning in groups. The simplicity is deceptive, there are many surprises beneath the surface.

## *Starting with the basic distinction - content and process*

Most trainers and facilitators know the basic distinction between **content** and process. **Content** is the 'what' of a group meeting. It may refer to the skills being addressed, the agenda, the issues being discussed, the information being presented. **Process** is the 'how' of the meeting. How will the information be presented, how will the interest of all participants be maintained, what is the process for decision making? Process acknowledges the feelings, interests and motivation of all the participants. For experienced facilitators and trainers, process is the focus for serious design work.

This model works with these two themes to distinguish a simple and effective way of thinking about options in group interaction, where learning is at stake - training workshops, professional development activities, information sessions.

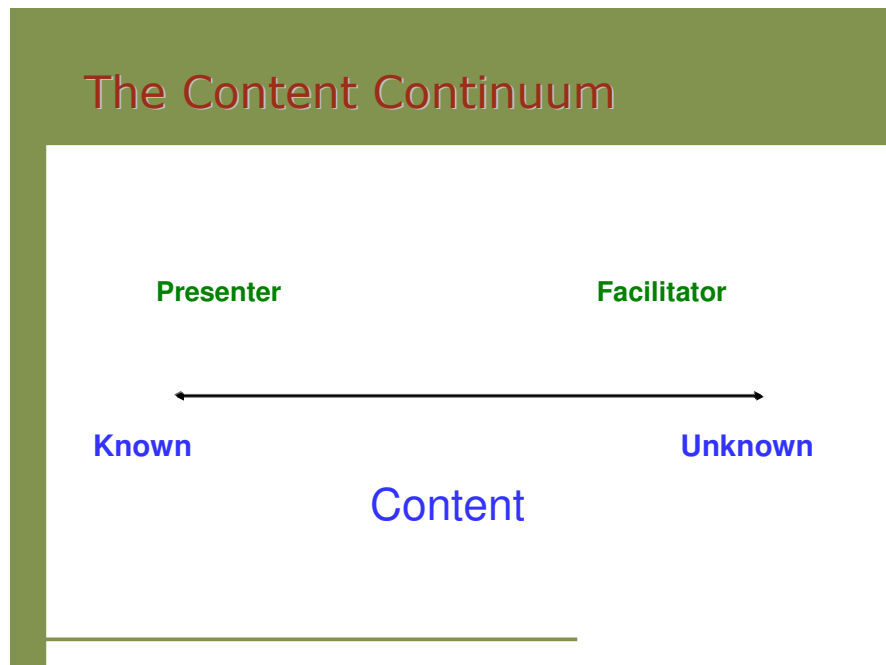
## *The content continuum – from Presenter to Facilitator*

In any group position the discussion leader moves between two poles. On one end is pure presenter - delivering information, presenting data, telling stories. The content is known to the presenter who is commonly a 'subject expert' and is transmitting this knowledge to the audience.

On the opposite pole, the group leader is in facilitator mode. She is asking questions, listening to responses from participants, seeking comments from others, encouraging

dialogue. At its extreme, the content is unknown to the facilitator, who is drawing on the collective knowledge and wisdom of the group.

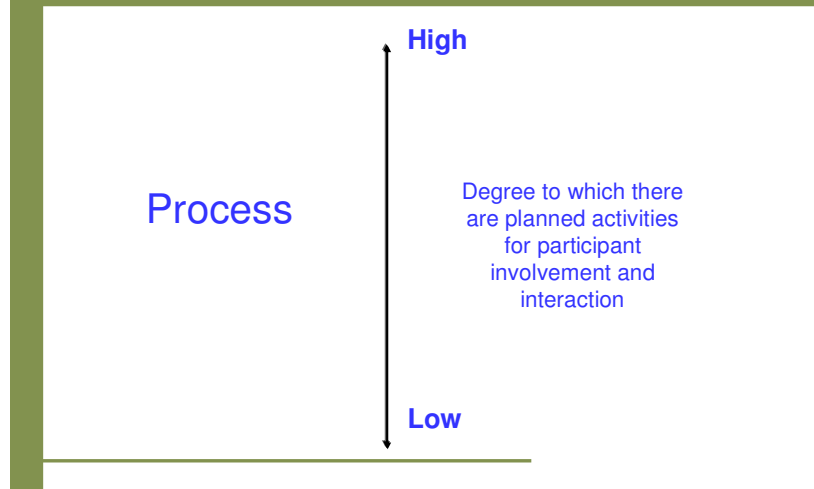
The continuum travels from more or less 'known' content to more or less 'unknown' content (certainly from the leader's perspective).



### ***The process continuum –participant interaction***

Let's move now to a second dimension and re-introduce the process distinction. It is possible to think about a continuum from a low level of participant interaction to a high level. At the low level, while the participants might be highly engaged by a charismatic presenter, there is no planned interaction. The participants are in passive mode - receiving input from the presenter. They are not actively and visibly contributing to the group's learning. At the high level, participants are interacting intensely with other members of the group and the content. And this interaction has been planned by the group leader through careful selection of engagement activities and exercises. It is high on structure even though the final content (decisions, results, directions) is uncertain or unknown.

## The Process Continuum

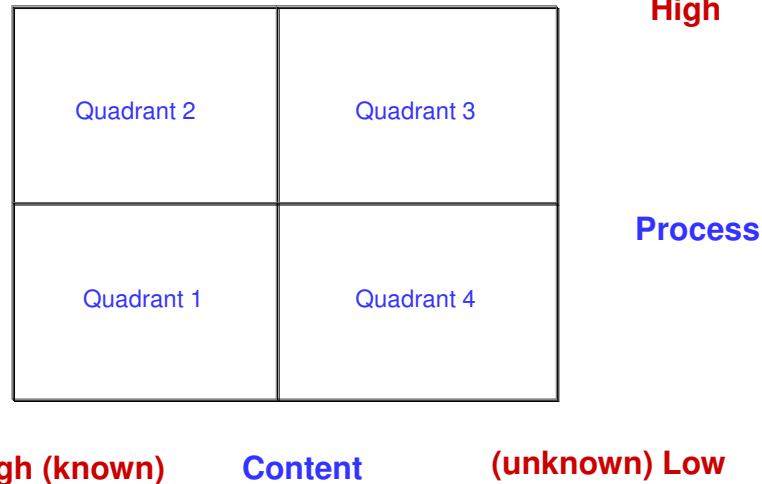


### ***Putting it together – the situational facilitation model***

So let's put these two axes together. We can see that there are four major quadrants that describe the field of possible activities.

Quadrant 1 is very high content, very low process. This is the classic presenter mode. A high level of known content is being presented (known to the group leader). The standard modalities for this quadrant are the lecture, the speech, the demonstration. It is the expert's moment. It is likely to be the realm of technical training, where the participants are unlikely to uncover useful information for themselves. They need to be told, shown.

## Situational Facilitation

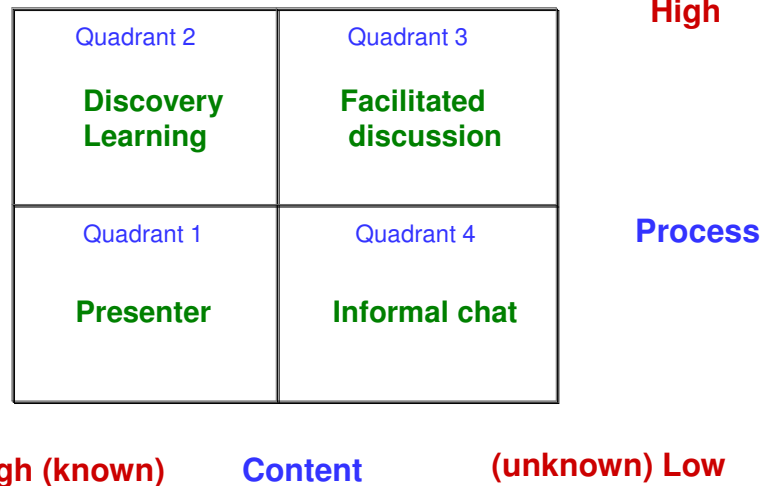


Quadrant 2 is high level of known content, and a high level of structure in the process of engagement with this content. The group leader has a detailed design for participant involvement in the session. While the content is more or less known to the group leader, she uses a range of activities to allow participants to discover, explore, refresh and review the content. This is the realm of discovery learning and experiential learning.

Quadrant 3 is lower level of content known in advance to the group leader, and a high level of planned structure for participation. This is the realm of facilitation.

Quadrant 4 is very low known content, but low structure or design for participative interaction. This is the realm of informal conversation, the dinner party, and while it might be highly engaging there is no plan or structure to achieve a particular outcome.

## Situational Facilitation



### *Using the model*

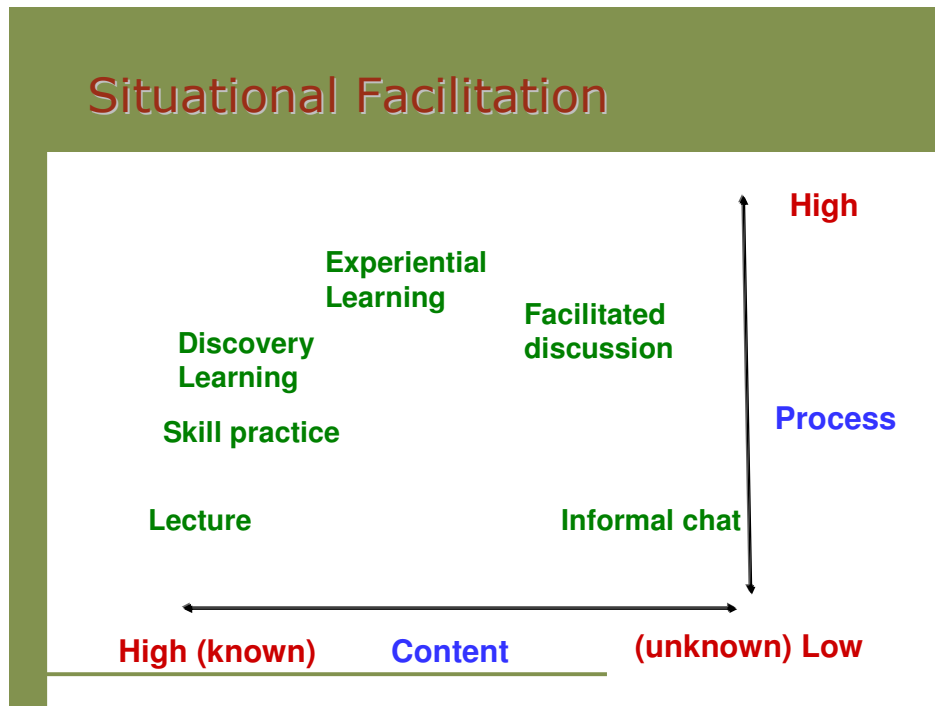
There are no right places to be in the model. It is situational. You may know that one position suits you better, and another is a challenge. Yet all the options are valuable at different times. The Presenter mode is critical for communicating information, instructions, demonstrating skills. Discovery mode strikes a balance between information dissemination and participants creating the information for themselves. In Facilitation mode the leader draws on participants' skills, knowledge and creativity, to build something new - a plan, an analysis, a product. Even the 'informal chat' mode is valuable in a workshop. It is where the participants get to know each other, share their own stories, review the value of their experience. I once attended a workshop that was so tightly structured with presentations and short activities, morning tea was the only place where the participants could get the work done that they needed to do.

A good facilitator will switch between quadrants depending on the outcome that needs to be achieved, and the response and engagement of participants. If a group discussion is losing impetus, then a short burst high stimulus presentation might be of great value. If the participants' attention to a slide show is waning, it might be time for a group discussion, review or energiser.

Certain types of workshop will feature more or less one modality. Detailed technical training for unskilled participants will dwell in quadrant 1, with recourse to quadrant 4

for relaxation and re-energising. A strategic plan will spend more time in Quadrant 3, in facilitation mode. Many soft skills training sessions will spend quite a bit of time moving between 1 and 2 and 3, from presentation to discovery learning/experiential learning.

Of course, all models are abstractions. There are no chart lines on life's powerpoints. No dividing lines are drawn on the sand. Things move and merge. Abstractions are just useful tools for drawing distinctions in how we choose to act. So another way of refining this model is to delete the quadrants and introduce a looser picture, a 'flow' of possible approaches that a group leader may use, even in the course of a single session. Imagine a bell curve line moving from the low left point upwards and into the middle then down again to the bottom right corner. A range of learning and teaching modes lie along these two dimensions. Feel free to add to the picture.



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