

The Art of Compassionate Facilitation

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As yoga teachers and yoga service providers, we are privileged to have the opportunity to facilitate transformational experiences for those we serve and are served by. With every privilege comes responsibility, and as facilitators, we have a responsibility to our students to *ahimsa*: to cause no harm. This paper is primarily addressed to yoga teachers interested in developing the skills needed to facilitate group discussion and transformational process in workshop formats that ask for student participation or emotional expression.

For example, I have used these skills on week-long retreats that led students through a process of healing old traumas, for three-hour workshops around developing positive body image, and for therapeutic yoga sessions where students share in dyads or small groups as they process emotions that arise in the moment. Here, I share knowledge, skills, and insights regarding how best to integrate our internal work as yoga teachers and human beings with our capacity to lead others safely through facilitated processes of healing, learning, empowerment, and growth.

Serving as Containers

Compassionate facilitation requires self-inquiry, or *svadhyaya*. In order for students to feel safe to explore and reflect upon their inner world, they have to first trust that we can bear witness to their processes without dictating, manipulating, invalidating, or exploiting them or their experiences. We must, therefore, arm ourselves with the tools and qualities that will set the conditions of safety for students to heal.

How do we develop the skills necessary to hold students' sensation, emotion, and potential transformation? How do we create opportunities for healing without being attached to the outcomes? What do we need to know in order to become available to contain our own responses and reactions without getting in the way of student needs? How can we be aware of our positionality and the impact it may have on our own and our students' thoughts, feelings, and behaviors?

When we are grounded, self-regulated, and self-aware enough to respond to our environment with compassion, when we can attend and welcome our own discomfort, when we can breathe deeply through moments that cause overwhelm for us, we are demonstrating containment. We then use this capacity to create and hold space for students that invites their own unfolding, transformation, or healing to occur without our intrusion.

The Being and Doing of Facilitation

Regardless of the kind of service you are facilitating, students will be more likely to recover or heal if you earn their trust by who you show yourself to be – not by what you do or how much you know. Compassionate facilitation includes being authentic, attuned, present, grounded, non-attached, calm, engaging, curious, flexible, empathetic, trustworthy, generous, receptive, open, and centered. Easy, right?

None of us are enlightened masters, and none of us have or can perfect these ways of being. However, we set our commitment in the direction of these attributes and to the extent we are capable, act in integrity with them. The more we are compassionate, attuned, and resourced, the more students will feel safe to do the work of healing.

In this sense, we prepare to facilitate by doing our own inner work on an ongoing basis. Our goal is then to arrive prepared to set up and maintain conditions that maximize student safety in whatever setting we're in. Key components of this set-up process include:

- **Obtaining Informed Consent.** “Informed consent” means that students are given information about what will be offered to them and expected of them during the course of your time together, and asked for their consent before participating. When students are minors, it is important to get the consent of their caregivers before offering an experience that may cause them physical, emotional, or mental harm.

Because you are likely not taking a full medical and psychological history of each student before engaging as their facilitator, it is especially necessary that you do not make assumptions that students are okay with

being touched, opening up about past experiences, or being asked to speak, read, or even move without consent.

- **Setting Community Agreements.** Community Agreements should be established before asking participants to share anything personal about themselves, including their names.

As facilitator, you should carefully select a few foundational Community Agreements to present, explain, and set before opening the process of establishing the full set of Agreements up to the group. Laying down basic parameters helps establish conditions of safety for students who may find it stressful to articulate the conditions needed to meet their own sense of safety from scratch. This is particularly crucial when folks from communities whose voices are often oppressed or marginalized are present. They should not have to assume full responsibility for creating safety, especially when most people in the room are from communities of power/privilege.

For foundational Community Agreements, consider explaining to students that as a group, you are individually and collectively agreeing to:

- o Welcome all voices and all experiences
- o Take a breath and pause before responding
- o Assume that everyone is participating with best intention
- o Speak from the “I” (e.g., “I feel that . . .” versus “you feel that . . .”)
- o Utilize “oops” and “ouch” (to flag moments of mis speaking or feeling hurt)
- o Make use of a “parking lot” for ideas that may be explored at a later time (e.g., by noting them on a whiteboard visible to the group)

After sharing your designated agreements, ask the group: “What do you need from me, the rest of the group, and yourself in order to feel safe in sharing your experiences today?” Then, compile their responses to create a commonly agreed-upon protocol. Allow time for students to discuss points others raise and come to agreement.

Be sure to refer to these group guidelines as “Agreements,” rather than “Rules.” Adolescents, especially, respond best when they co-create agreements. No matter the age group, you’ll get buy-in from the participants if they are the ones who name what they need in order to feel safe.

Examples of Community Agreements commonly used to create emotional safety include:

- o Confidentiality
- o Non-judgment/non-shaming
- o Active listening/no interruptions
- o Speaking from one’s own experience (“I” statements)
- o Not fixing/invalidating each other
- o All voices/experiences welcome

• **Managing the Room Sensitively.** Facilitation is an art and a science, involving both more subtle and concrete skills. The following short list of strategies will support the facilitation of any transformational experience:

1. Be organized and prepared. Know your curriculum or agenda before going into teach or share it.
2. Start and end on time. If you must start late, ensure students that you will finish on time, and do. It’s *asteya*.
3. Close the door or ritually enclose the space to ensure the physical space is safe from intruders, onlookers, or energetic openings.
4. Listen actively. Use open body language. Make and hold eye contact with students. You may lean in and nod to show that you are engaged.
5. Validate and acknowledge participation.
6. To assess for everyone’s comfort level and consent to physical touch, have everyone anonymously affirm that they welcome touch.

- a. If anyone is not okay with physical touch, do NOT have anyone touch one another in group at all, and do NOT point out who it is that is not comfortable with touch. This could re-traumatize them.
- b. Ask permission before touching a student, offering a hug, or certainly offering an assist.

7. Have tissues on hand. Trust me, I’m a therapist.
8. If a participant must leave early, be sure you time their leaving with their and the group’s emotional safety.
9. Show gratitude. Thank your students for their trust, for their courage, for their time, for their participation.
10. As you conclude each session, remind students of the agreements they made, especially confidentiality.

Subtle Skills for Group Process

When we are in the role of facilitator, we are in a position of power. It is necessary that we understand the interpersonal dynamics that may come into play so that we cause the least possible amount of harm to our students. While the above strategies build a foundation for student safety, we need to be ready to work on a more subtle level as well to navigate the complex relational dynamics that transformational processes generate.

• **Resourcing.** When we get triggered in a workshop, we are responding to an event that happened earlier in time. We are time traveling. Our reptilian brain goes into fight, flight, or freeze mode. As a result, we do not have access to the internal resources we need to navigate the present moment successfully unless we ground, breathe, and orient to present time. Understanding what these resourcing tools are and how to utilize them is necessary for you and your group to stay present, embodied, and aware.

- **To ground,** plant and root through your feet or whatever is touching the floor or chair. Feel the sensations in your physical body. Allow the earth beneath you to support you and hold you up.

- **To breathe**, offer instruction (especially to non-yogis) about how to find the breath inside them by drawing their attention to taking mindful, deep, slow breaths. An alternative for students who may find this stressful is to focus on the sensation of moving oxygen as it naturally occurs, without attempting to change it.

- **To orient** to present time, ask members to find something in the room that is not moving, or stationary. Let them know that sometimes we become overwhelmed by what is happening and may check out or disassociate into a previous time/place/experience. In order to bring ourselves back to present time, it helps to focus on an object that reminds us that we are not there/then, but here/now.

Attunement. Ideally, facilitators hold the experiences of their students in minds and hearts with presence, resonance, and empathy. If we want the members of our group to feel safe and secure, we must be attuned at the level of physical energy and comfort, emotional experience, and mental capacity.

Being attuned to each of these needs allows us to respond to what is being revealed to us in the moment-to-moment experience of our group. Attunement in action may look like:

- Offering a breathing exercise to get everyone back into the present moment and into their bodies if someone has become emotionally dysregulated or overwhelmed.
- Noticing that your group is hyperactive and distracted, and choosing to get them on the ground and settled, perhaps even lying on their backs, if possible.
- Recognizing that your group is lethargic or bored, and offering a movement or a self-care break.

Vulnerability/Self-Disclosure. When we facilitate workshops that ask students to explore vulnerability, we may choose to model this by sharing parts of ourselves that are imperfect and have seen struggle. However, we must do so without overwhelming students or making them feel as if they need to take care of us. Select what to self-disclose carefully. Choose only what is in service of the student.

When in doubt, always filter potential disclosures through this question: “Am I sharing this information about me in service of my students, or in service of my own need to be seen, healed, or validated? Only share what supports students’ growth.

Work through your own healing in other spaces, perhaps when you are in the role of student, client, or mentee. Don’t attempt to heal your wounds through them. Speak only about experiences that do not carry a strong charge for you in current time and space. When uncertain, practice sharing your experience with a colleague before disclosing it while facilitating. This allows you to experiment with your readiness to share vulnerable experiences without putting your students at risk.

Listening, Not Fixing. It is not your role to offer therapy. Do not give advice. Do not show judgment toward participants, nor those they mention in conversation. You do not need to have a good answer for all the questions they may have. There is no way we can possibly know what is best for each student, nor the level of resources they have available within them. Avoid being the expert or creating a power hierarchy with students; this is disempowering to them.

Instead, be available to listen with an open heart. Let them make statements about their emotions without trying to change their feelings. If you are uncomfortable with a student’s big feelings, such as rage, shame, or grief, find ways to work through your discomfort instead of invalidating their feelings by attempting to alter or close them down.

Let participants show their wisdom and share their brilliance. If all of the smart things are said by them and not you, you’re doing a great job. Remember, you are not the expert; you are the container.

If possible, do not ask participants more than one follow up question at a time or get into a dialogue with one individual. That person will feel on the spot. Observing students will be less likely to volunteer information, for fear they might be next.

Instead, make group-as-a-whole interpretations such as “Has anyone else ever experienced feeling ashamed/afraid/overwhelmed?” The best way to garner more participation is to look beyond the details of a story being offered and into the emotion underneath

those details. All people have felt embarrassed, lonely, fearful, sad, proud, excited, and curious, even if they have not experienced those feelings in the same contexts or with the same particular details. Go toward the level of feelings to gain more group participation and validation.

Creativity: Letting Go of the Script

Even if you are working from a specific curriculum that you or others have taught previously, let yourself be present with whatever is showing up in the room in the moment. Attune yourself to the unfolding experience to guide the content of your questions or the timing of your comments back to participants. The more you are stiff and rigid with following a class plan, the more difficult it is for students to feel connected to your presence. Be willing to be spontaneous in your communication to the extent that it allows you to meet them where they are.

The more that you practice trusting the group's organic process, the less necessary it will feel to follow a script or curriculum. By the same token, it is your anxiety, not that of the students, that drives the sense that you need to fill up space during silences.

Instead of asking question after question without leaving room for answers, practice grounding, breathing, and leaning back into present time. Give your students the space to process and self-determine when and what to share. Scripts can never predict what a particular group will need in the moment. Trust your intuition and insight.

Dealing with Defensiveness. When participants are aggressive or defensive (e.g. "I don't want to be here. This is stupid." Or, "I don't see why wanting to look like a supermodel is bad"), validate their feeling and pivot. Agree with them that their emotion is happening and is valid. Then, instead of defending the content, turn the conversation back to where you know you need to take the entire group.

If a student says something that you or others find offensive, don't offend back. Hear them, then get out of the way. Feel into the moment to craft an appropriate response. Often, neutral acknowledgement works well, e.g., "Thank you for sharing that. I totally hear you and understand why this feels stupid/important/like

_____ to you." Alternatively, in some cases it works well to use a defensive comment as a teachable moment by pivoting toward shared self-awareness: "Look what's happening even here, now, in this circle . . . _____."

Remember that while you are not responsible for students' reactions to your content, you are responsible for your responses to them. Every person is the expert of their own perception and their own internal experience. Trust your participants to speak for themselves, to act for themselves, to think for themselves. Do not invalidate or shut down someone's feelings, even if you need to redirect their behaviors.

Responding to Silence/Non-Participation. Be prepared to respond appropriately to unexpectedly long silences during group discussions, and to students who appear over- or under-engaged. Simple tools that help orchestrate a smooth flow of experience include the following:

- **Breathe.** Your sense of time while waiting for a student to respond to a question may be on a very different scale than theirs. Remember that they need time to process the issue and craft an answer. Stay present, calm, and centered by focusing on your breath.
- **Step Up.** When participants do not answer an open-ended question, such as "what was that experience like for you?" after some time, step up and take on the blame. Say something like "maybe that was too difficult of a question to answer" or "maybe I worded that question poorly." Then, ask a follow-up question such as "did that feel difficult to you?" or "what made that experience comfortable or uncomfortable?"
- **Lean In or Lean Back.** If some participants are not engaged, but others are overly engaged, remind the group of any Community Agreements that support "leaning in" or "leaning back" so that "all voices are heard." Encourage those who haven't spoken to do so. Remind those who are easily contributing to lean back and wait before offering again.

Be non-attached to outcome, to approval, to perfection. Perhaps one of the most difficult qualities of a facilitator is being non-attached. This means letting go of dictating or clinging to the ways that students feel about your content, or about you. We cannot determine whether or how students will be impacted by our offering. The timing of someone else's insight is not up to us. Being non-attached means that you remain objective rather than becoming emotionally engulfed by whatever situation arises.

Intersectionality

We live in a society where racism, classism, heterosexism, ableism, sexism, ageism, anti-Semitism and xenophobia exist, not only on an individual basis, but from systemic sources. If we are not aware of the existence of these systematic oppressions, we are likely not aware of the ways that we benefit and therefore participate in causing harm and marginalization.

It is your responsibility as a facilitator to educate yourself about the privileges that you carry based on your race, class, sexual orientation, gender identity, level of ability, sex, age, and culture or religious background. While this conversation has too huge a scope to delve into here, some resources to educate yourself on social justice and intersectionality are *Off the Mat, Into the World*; CTZNWELL; SURJ: Showing up for Racial Justice; HRC: The Human Rights Campaign; and the Alliance against Defamation.

Do not make assumptions about other people's anything (race, culture, beliefs, ability level, norms, beauty ideals, sexual orientation, gender identity, and/or ability). Do not use or allow racist, heterosexist, classist, or any othering language without confronting the language and correcting it yourself, so that all participants feel safe and radically welcomed.

Do not ever ask anyone to speak on behalf of a group of people that you think they represent. Do not speak on behalf of a group of people that you identify with either. You do not represent the whole.

Be aware of having everyone be physically able to participate in the exercises that you are facilitating. If someone is in a wheelchair, for example, have every-

one else at eye-level, in chairs, and adjust activities accordingly.

The Shadow at Work in Groups

All of us have unconscious aspects of ourselves that are unknown to our conscious mind. The shadow is simply that which we are blind to being, or being motivated by. This term does not, as is commonly misunderstood, refer to what is "bad" or "wrong" about us. It is simply the parts of our psyche that we do not – and without internal work, cannot – see. Our task is to not wish away, deny, or minimize our shadow. Rather, it is to bring to consciousness that which is unconscious.

As a facilitator, it is vital to understand that there are shadow, or unconscious operations at play in group dynamics, even in a 1-3 hour workshop. Three of the most common ways that the shadow manifests in group work are transference, counter-transference, and projection.

- **Transference** is the unconscious operation that occurs when a student's past or historical experience with someone else is transferred onto you, so the feelings that are occurring in the present are actually seeded in the past. Transference can be a negative or a positive experience that can be triggered by a person's voice, face, name, accent, clothing, etc. The direction of transference is from the participant to the facilitator, or from a student to teacher, patient to doctor, etc.

Example: If your participant was bullied in school by a girl from Alabama and you are from Alabama, she might transfer the "bully" onto you, and therefore feel anxious or angry in your presence, as she would in the presence of the bully from high school.

- **Counter-Transference** is the unconscious operation is similar to transference, except that it occurs in the opposite direction, from facilitator to participant, or teacher to student (etc.). This dynamic occurs when we make assumptions about the person based on our past experiences with someone of a similar name, appearance, background, etc.

Example: I knew a girl in school who talked like that and she was "x," so this girl must be exactly like her.

The danger in these unconscious operations is when they are left in the shadow and inform our actions or feelings without us knowing it. The key is to become aware of transference and counter-transference. Usually, this means recognizing you are treating a participant differently than the rest, or taking some response to you overly personally. Once you recognize what's happening, you can take action to bring yourself back into present time.

- **Projection** is an unconscious process where one psychically slingshots parts of themselves that they disown or disavow by projecting them onto someone else.

Example: *If I am comparing my worthiness to everyone else's because of my insecurity, I might not want to own that I am insecure, and so I would blame someone else for being insecure and project my feeling onto her/him instead.*

- **Projective Identification** is when we identify with what is being projected onto us and eventually act into the projection we've ingested.

Example: *If a participant projects onto me that I am angry with her or want to punish her, and then I begin to feel angry or annoyed with her, without cause. I have then identified with her projection.*

Self-Care

We cannot show up and hold space for others if we are depleted and undernourished. It's the wisdom of the airlines: you must place your own oxygen mask on first so that you have the breath available to offer masks to others.

Consider the actions that allow you to feel grounded, centered, and capable. These are always important, but especially necessary when we hold space for others. It's helpful to make sure you get enough rest, are nourished, practice meditation/yoga, and, if it's a part of your spirituality, pray.

Boundaries. As facilitators, we need to be aware of creating and holding strong boundaries for ourselves.

Boundaries are psychic walls that we use to protect our own psychological experience as ours. They serve as symbolic markers of where I stop and you begin.

Not all boundaries are healthy. Often, they are overly rigid or porous. As a facilitator, a core component of your ongoing internal work must be to assess the quality of your own boundaries and work to make them more healthy if needed. Primary patterns to look for include:

- **Rigid:** Some people create rigid boundaries to self-protect. Often, this is due to mis-attuned parenting that may have prevented healthy boundaries from forming. The internal walls they create serve as structured fortresses. In practice, this can manifest as isolation, defensiveness, rage, sarcasm, or shut down. Vulnerability is not available. Those with overly rigid boundaries are protecting themselves from potential harm. But in so doing, are also guarding against connection and intimacy.

- **Porous:** People who have overly porous boundaries don't know where their emotional experience ends and the other person's begins. Everything and everyone can get into this person's emotional experience and impact them deeply.

Example: *A mother is talking about her child and uses the pronoun "we," like, "We are so upset that we didn't get into UCLA!" Such psychological enmeshment is different from having empathy and caring. It is putting other people's emotional experience ahead of yours, and merging into it instead of being inside of your own.*

- **Healthy:** Those with healthy boundaries know where their emotional experience ends and others' begin. Healthy boundaries enable us to be available and attuned without being overwhelmed by the emotional experiences of others. Healthy boundaries allow us to choose when and how much to trust, and to feel safe sharing ourselves with those who have earned our trust. Healthy boundaries offer us a firm "no" and a healthy "yes."

Self-talk. The way that we speak to ourselves can be either supportive or detrimental to our being present as facilitators. All of us have internal critical voices that attempt to derail us and block us from our courage and presence. When facilitating, we must do our best to quiet or mute negative self-talk.

Practice speaking kindly and compassionately to yourself. Be gracious and generous with yourself even if you feel you have made a mistake. Before facilitating, give yourself time to ground. Encourage yourself for what you will be attempting to offer your group.

During the experience, if you know you've made an error, use your judgment. It may be best to let it go and move forward so that you can stay present. After the experience, do your best to be compassionate and gentle with yourself. You did your best!

Processing. Allow yourself the time to process what it was like for you to serve as the container, and perhaps process with a friend/therapist/sponsor/partner.

Conclusion

I am hopeful that this offering has supported you to be thoughtful about the role of facilitator in ways that encourage staying committed to presence, attunement, and compassion with yourself and your students. As containers, it is first imperative that we learn to invite, sit with, and welcome our own emotional experiences. The more comfortable and welcoming we can be with every aspect of ourselves, the more compassionate and generous we can be with others.

Students will feel and sense our capacity to be safe containers for them. And, they will benefit greatly from our commitment to doing the inner work necessary to hold the responsibility of the role of facilitator with regard for their physical, emotional, and mental safety, and potential growth.

This paper is part of a series of papers published by the Yoga Service Council, dedicated to maximizing the effectiveness, sustainability, and impact of individuals and organizations working to make yoga and mindfulness practices equally accessible to all. yogaservicecouncil.org

