

# Online Group Facilitation Skills

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## BACKGROUND

Traditional face-to-face (F2F) group facilitation is a well-evolved practice. Roger Schwarz defined it as “a process in which a person who is acceptable to all members of the group, substantively neutral and has no decision-making authority intervenes to help a group improve the way it identifies and solves problems and makes decisions, in order to increase the group’s effectiveness” (Schwarz, 1994, p 4). Like most practices, facilitation includes a wide range of techniques and philosophical underpinning. For example, while Schwarz notes that group members can’t formally fill the role of facilitator, or do not have decision-making power, there are other models that include both these conditions.

## CREATION OF A NEW ENVIRONMENT FOR HUMAN INTERACTION

Facilitation of distributed groups has been practiced since the emergence of telecommunications channels. It was implicit and present online in the early ARPANET. Katie Hafner, in *Where Wizards Stay Up Late: The Origins of the Internet* (1993), notes the emergence of the moderator role taken on by Einar Stefferud for the Arpanet mailing list MSGGROUP starting in 1975. “Before long, the bulk of the daily housekeeping chores fell to Stefferud, who began in the job by keeping the list of MsgGroup participants, signing up newcomers, cajoling them into posting introductory biographies of themselves, and sorting out bounced mail” (p 201). The role of moderator became even more visible when Usenet emerged in 1979 to become a central “online gathering space.” Groups were now regularly interacting in the computer-mediated environment.

Henry Edward Hardy, in his *History of Usenet* (1993), offered a number of examples about the evolving social practices that emerged in Usenet. “The Great Renaming” in 1986-1987 can be viewed not only as a taxonomic reorganization, but a way to move “talk” groups that were exhibiting behavior unacceptable to other users off to their own area. It ushered in the formal distinction between moderated and

unmoderated groups. Similarly, Ward Christianson’s invention of the first electronic bulletin board in 1977-1978 offered groups another way to “be together” and introduced new dynamics of the discussion board. With the explosion of e-mail, e-mail lists provided another group online interaction environment. With the development of e-mail list technologies such as Listserv®, moderation functions were explicitly designed into the software to support the very functions identified in USENET—approving or rejecting memberships, messages and enforcing group norms and agreements. The technologies started to provide functions for the newly emerging social practices. As the technologies evolved, more online interaction possibilities emerged. The two forces developed together.

This new and evolving medium called forth the need for new modalities and social structures, and thus, a new form of group facilitation. Andrew Feenberg (1989) was one of the earliest to write about the practices of online social interaction (without mentioning either facilitation or moderation). He noticed the differences between computer-mediated communication and F2F communication, with a particular focus on how the technology impacted the human interactions. Howard Rheingold (1993, 2000), in his seminal book, *Virtual Community*, offered more context about the social side of the interactions and the first close look from a group perspective. Both noted the differences in communication modalities and their impact on human communication, which still define the differentiating core of online facilitation. The differences were specifically around working in a mostly text-based, asynchronous environment that was quite different from F2F synchronous conversation. Body language and tone were reduced. More time for consideration was added in. More and different people could participate.

Hardy wrote, “People on the Net act differently than they would if they were to meet FTF [face to face]. In fact, the Net contains within it not merely one new human culture, but many. Different networks using different technologies have evolved different sub-cultures. Only the most foresighted scholars could have anticipated even part of the magnificent and peculiar structure which has been erected upon the modest foundations the origins of which have been outlined here” (1993, [www.vrx.net/usenet/history/hardy](http://www.vrx.net/usenet/history/hardy)).

## FROM MODERATION TO FACILITATION

In the early online groups, these initial roles were often called moderators (for Usenet and mailing lists) or hosts (for bulletin boards). Their primary functions were to enforce group norms and protocols, control access and determine which messages stayed and which were deleted. It was a gatekeeper function. The secondary role of stimulating conversation or interaction did not gain prominence until the emergence of “virtual communities,” most often exemplified by the Well ([www.well.com](http://www.well.com)), with its well-defined volunteer hosts structure that exists to this day. The most important role for hosts on the Well was to foster the conversation, individual and group identity, and sociability of the topical areas for which they were responsible. Similar developments occurred in the early commercial online communities of CompuServe, Genie, Prodigy, AOL and others. Early facilitators from these groups went on to describe and define much of the early practice in their community documents, including guidelines for hosting online communities and conversations. Interestingly, over time, the costs of supporting facilitated spaces may have led to many of them being shuttered by owners, such as Genie and Prodigy. Practices around welcoming and orienting new members, role-modeling acceptable behaviors, working through problems “behind the scenes” and supporting quality conversation, content and connection were key developments in this period.

The first instance using the term “facilitation” that can be found in the Usenet archives is in a post from 1993, in the K12.chat.teacher group. “Volunteers are needed, especially teachers experienced in online facilitation.” The term shows up again in 1994, in the comp.groupware.lotus-notes.misc; and in misc.business.facilitators in 1995, particularly around the emergence of groupware tools for business teams. By 1995, Zane Berge and others were looking at the specific application of moderation to scholarly discussion lists and learning settings, anticipating the explosion of the online learning sector.

In the rush to launch online communities for business purposes during 1996 and 1997, the emphasis was again on control and accountability more than fostering sociability or the accomplishment of specific group purposes. Hired to be “moderators” in online communities, many facilitators found themselves doing mostly custodial chores such as moving and deleting messages and reminding people of the rules. They often represented ownership (or were the actual owners) and had a vested interest in making sure that the rules were followed. Their role was to enforce rather than facilitate. It was at this phase that some community owners turned to “terms of service” or “acceptable use policies” as ways to enforce behaviors. For many sites, these policies did not effec-

tively replace human facilitation, allowing their online communities to be dominated by spammers and flammers, drowning out those who wished to engage in calmer discourse. The value of actual group facilitation often became clear only in hindsight, as sites closed down due to an absence of a true sense of community and shared purpose or interest. Facilitators played these roles in the more successful communities. Other sites created massive structures on the premise of “build it and they will come,” only to find that new users often needed an “on-ramp” to get comfortable, precisely the role that facilitators had played in earlier successful groups.

Quietly, another group started looking at how online tools could help groups accomplish their purposes, and found the need to look more specifically at group facilitation practices. Jessica Lipnak and Jeffrey Stamps focused on the team collaboration aspect of distributed work. Peter and Trudy Johnson-Lenz, originators of the term “groupware,” launched innovative experiments using Lotus Notes in 1996. Lisa Kimball and colleagues at the Meta Network, founded in 1993, ([www.tmn.com/](http://www.tmn.com/)), began to thoughtfully write about online group practices. Kimball taught what is thought to be the first workshop on online facilitation in 1997, followed by Michele Paradis and Nancy White. White continue to offer the workshop ([www.fulleirc.com/ws.onfaccourse.htm](http://www.fulleirc.com/ws.onfaccourse.htm)).

In 1997, Liz Rykert published *Working Together Online*, and the term “online facilitation” was making regular appearances across the Web. In August 1999, the Yahoo Group, “OnlineFacilitation” began. In December 2004, a Google search for “online facilitation” yielded more than 14,000 hits. Online facilitation had become a recognized practice.

## GROWTH AND DIFFERENTIATION

The domain of online facilitation started as a predominantly custodial function, with e-mail list moderation evolved to supporting group social interaction support; now it has four very broad sub-areas: facilitation of

- distributed learning
- distributed teams
- distributed communities
- commercial sites (e-commerce, gaming, etc.).

These in turn vary individually by the nature and purpose of the group, by the technologies applied, and the size and boundary definitions of the group, creating a complex mosaic of online groups and interactions.

What each of these four areas share in common is that they build on basic group facilitation. They also involve a certain amount of technical support, managerial func-

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