Managing Facilitation in Cross-Cultural Contexts: The Application of National Cultural Dimensions to Groups in Learning Organisations

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Abstract:

   This paper provides an evaluation of the literature pertaining to national culture as it relates to pedagogy and the management of facilitation processes within groups in learning organisations. National culture plays a pivotal role influencing the cognitive processes of individuals and their comfort levels with various methods of facilitation management. By incorporating cultural analytics into the preparation of cross-cultural facilitative processes, facilitators can ensure management methods meet the unique needs of the participants.

Key Words:

   Facilitation management, pedagogy, learning organisations, groups, training, national culture.

Introduction

   The following paper explores a pedagogical approach to managing facilitation in relation to the theoretical concepts of national culture as originally developed by Geert Hofstede in his book Culture's Consequences (Hofstede, 1980). Facilitation management is considered a core competency for those seeking to create and manage learning groups effectively and thus has become a popular pedagogical approach in the field of adult education and training. Developing and implementing facilitation management approaches in one's home national culture is a complex process. The process becomes heightened with the global nature of education and training as the movement of faculty, trainers, and administrators across national borders, requires mobile facilitation managers become familiar with the complexities and management

processes to be encountered in other cultural contexts. Conversely, with the movement of learners across borders, once culturally homogenous classrooms and training venues become a microcosm of the greater global community. It is sometimes assumed the management approaches developed in one culture will be valid in any other yet these cultural complexities can have a significant impact on the development and management of learning groups and their ultimate effectiveness (Bedward, Jankowicz, & Rexworthy, 2003; Gao & Prime, 2010; Laurent, 1986; Parrish & Linder-VanBerschot, 2010).

Facilitation management: Roles and Responsibilities

Facilitation management is a practice involving the management and improvement of procedural skills so a learning group can operate more collaboratively and effectively. According to Bens (2005), facilitation is a method of providing leadership without taking the reins of power. A facilitator's primary function is to contribute structure and process to interactions while encouraging others to lead the process. Facilitators need to be skillful in how they engage and empower individuals whilst offering support enabling them to define and achieve objectives. The facilitation management process seeks to foster learning and focus individual efforts, which benefit the group. However, individual cognitive processes differ across national cultures and extend beyond simple differences in language; teachers, trainers, and learners all encounter differences in cognitive ability (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010). These cognitive differences have developed from the formative years in the home culture and can have a significant influence on group performance due to the intensely social nature of facilitation, and will affect the type of management used for the facilitation process. Historically, learning was viewed as an individual endeavour, however, in recent decades the learning process has increasingly been applied at the group and organisational level and this focus on the group has led to the growth of facilitation as a method of effective group learning, organisation, and management (Retna & Bryson, 2007).

Knowledge, Skills, and Attitudes

To lead a successful facilitation, facilitators should possess a thorough knowledge of core practice and process tools having experience with their application in a variety of situations and cultural contexts. Core facilitation practices are rooted in the manner, style, and behaviour of the facilitator and include methods such as: staying neutral, listening actively, collecting ideas, and providing summaries (Bens, 2005). Process practice tools involve utilising structured activities performed by the facilitator to achieve the meeting objectives. According to Bens, some popular process tools include: visioning, brainstorming, multi-voting, and force field analysis. However, these facilitation processes, like most other social processes, are largely influenced by the cultural paradigms in which they were developed and may not find compatibility in other national cultures (Parrish & Linder-VanBerschot, 2010; Schwier, Campbell, & Kenny, 2004).

Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions and Facilitation management: A Balancing Act

In the 1960's, Geert Hofstede developed a cultural model based on a study conducted among International Business Machines' (IBM) employees in subsidiaries across 50 countries and three regions. He defined culture as the "collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others" (Hofstede, 1980). A Values Survey Module (VSM) questionnaire was utilised to uncover cultural *differences* between various cultural groups. This study yielded what Hofstede initially defined as four dimensions of national culture: 'power distance', 'individualism versus collectivism', 'masculinity versus femininity', and 'uncertainty avoidance'. A fifth dimension, 'long-term versus short-term orientation', was later included based on a study in Asian countries (Hofstede, 2001). Unique to the study of national culture, Hofstede's work offered a method to assign comparative numerical cultural index values to a group of people determined by a geographical boundary (Straub, Loch, Evaristo, Karahanna, & Srite, 2002). These dimensions of national culture were defined as aspects of a culture that can be measured relative to other cultures.

'Power distance' is defined as the extent to which less powerful members of an organisation or institution within a country accept and expect power be distributed unequally. This model suggests the inequality inherent in a society is endorsed by followers as much as leaders and consists of areas such as prestige, wealth, and power. 'Individualism versus collectivism' refers to the degree in which individuals integrate into groups. An individualistic society represents loose ties between individuals whereas collectivistic societies display strong integration between individuals within groups. 'Masculinity versus femininity' is recognised as the difference between the masculine-assertive pole and the feminine-nurturing pole. According to Hofstede, differing societies cope with the duality of the sexes in their own way. 'Uncertainty avoidance' indicates the extent in which a national culture influences a person's ability to feel comfortable or uncomfortable in unstructured situations. The 'uncertainty' identified within this dimension allows people to cope through various means such as technology, law, and religion. National cultures possessing high uncertainty avoidance have a tendency to minimise the possibility of unstructured situations by adhering to strict procedures and rules, whereas more accepting national cultures are tolerant of deviations from the norm. 'Long-term versus short-term orientation' focuses on supporting future values versus those oriented towards the present or past. Table 1 summarises and synthesises the elements of national culture that influence teaching, learning, training, and facilitation management.

SMALL POWER DISTANCE	LARGE POWER DISTANCE
Students have a tendency to treat teachers as equals	Students show teachers respect, even outside class, recognising their position in society
Teachers expect initiatives from students in class without asking for them	Teachers should take all initiatives in class
Teachers are experts who transfer impersonal truths and codified knowledge	Teachers are gurus who transfer personal wisdom and tacit knowledge
Quality of learning depends on two-way communication and the excellence of students to be able to participate.	Quality of learning depends on excellence of the teacher as the central provider of wisdom
COLLECTIVIST	**INDIVIDUALIST**
Students speak up in class only when sanctioned by the group. Speaking out of turn is frowned upon.	Students are expected to individually speak up in class and express their thoughts.
The purpose of education is learning how to do specific tasks.	The purpose of education is learning how to learn to make one independent.
FEMININE	**MASCULINE**
Average student is the norm; praise and compassion for weak students.	Best student is the norm; praise for excellent students and those that excel.
Jealousy of those who try to excel.	Competition in class; trying to excel.
Failing in school is a minor incident.	Failing in school is a disaster.
Students underrate their own performance: ego-effacement.	Students overrate their own performance: ego boosting.
Friendliness in teachers is appreciated.	Brilliance in teachers is admired.
WEAK UNCERTAINTY AVOIDANCE	**STRONG UNCERTAINTY AVOIDANCE**
Students are comfortable with open-ended learning situations and concerned with good discussions.	Students are comfortable in structured learning situations and concerned with the right answers.
Teachers may say, "I do not know."	Teachers are supposed to have all the answers.
Results are attributed to a person's own ability.	Results are attributed to circumstances or luck.
SHORT-TERM ORIENTATION	**LONG-TERM ORIENTATION**
Analytical thinking.	Synthetic thinking.
If A is true, its opposite B must be false.	If A is true, its opposite B can also be true.
Priority is given to abstract rationality.	Priority is given to common sense.
There is a need for cognitive consistency.	Disagreement does not hurt.
Students attribute success and failure to luck.	Students attribute success to effort and failure to lack of it.
Talent for theoretical, abstract sciences.	Talent for applied, concrete sciences.

Table 1: Summary of Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions and their Relationship to Teaching, Learning and Facilitation management (Adapted from Hofstede et al., 2010)

Hofstede et al. (2010) connected high-context and low-context communications to the individualism-collectivism index. Cultures leaning towards the individualistic pole have a propensity towards low-context communication with the magnitude of information being communicated through explicit code. High-context communication occurs when information passed through the physical environment may be tacitly known to the persons involved but is not transferred through explicit code; this is customary among collectivist cultures. The connection of high versus low-context communication with the individualism-collectivism index may be a strong indicator of a culture's predilection towards tacit versus explicit knowledge transfer and personalisation versus codification strategies. Usoro and Kuofie (2006) used the colloquialism of 'reading the fine lines' versus 'reading between the lines' as an analogy for low-context versus high-context cultures, respectively. Thiessen, Hendriks, and Essers (2007) used the analogy of 'narrow band' versus 'broad band' communication and its relationship to explicit and tacit knowledge transfer, respectively. Bhagat, Kedia, Harveston, and Triandis (2002) maintain the individualism-collectivism dimension strongly influences the type of knowledge people prefer and are likely to process; tacit versus explicit. Highly collectivistic cultures emphasise strong social relationships that are conducive to an environment of knowledge sharing; social networks and in-groups are the primary source of information in collectivist cultures.

Creating and fostering participation: Good or bad?

On the surface, creating participation within a facilitation session seems like a reasonable proposition. However, not all national cultures are equally comfortable with participation. Feminine national cultures embrace the need for social interaction to transfer tacit knowledge, preferring intuition and consensus to decisiveness and aggressiveness. Femininity espouses the maintenance of an environment encouraging cooperation. Masculine national cultures prefer individual decisions and decisiveness. A facilitation process creating participation within a group may run productively within a feminine national culture yet counterproductively within a masculine one. The level of comfort with a participative facilitation management style may vary across national cultures. Managing a facilitation process on different ends of the masculinity-femininity index can span from decisiveness and unilateralism to openness, encouragement and cooperation, respectively; quite different managerial philosophies.

Empowering and engaging individuals: Do we want the power?

Empowering individuals within a group can be a productive task for those individuals wishing to be assertive. A group member who sees the facilitator as the anointed head of the group will be comfortable with the balance of power. A high power distance national culture may see this as the 'natural order of things' while a culture lower on the power distance scale, may find empowerment unacceptable. Low power distance cultures may view authoritative facilitators as undesirable. Depending on the group composition, a facilitator may be better served by an authoritative or passive position within group management. Facilitation management within high power-distance cultures can take the form of a strict managerial hierarchy whereas low power-distance cultures may prefer a more even distribution of managerial authority across the group.

Time and meeting management: On whose clock anyway?

Certain national cultures value long-term perseverance towards achieving goals and display a higher personal adaptability and steadiness to changing circumstances. Other national cultures place emphasis on fast results with immediate impact and dividend. Persons within high long-term orientation national cultures make investments in lifelong personal networks. For those within short-term orientated national cultures, relationships are more ad-hoc and vary with business requirements. These perspectives on time even manifest themselves when trying to adhere to agenda items. Short-term oriented national cultures scrutinise time whereas long-term oriented cultures are more flexible towards adapting agenda items and timelines. This dimension is certainly an important cultural characteristic for a facilitator with a pre-determined agenda. The management of a strict agenda-based facilitation may be easier within a short-term oriented culture whereas future outcomes may take more priority in a long-term oriented culture over specific time allocations.

Conflict resolution: I prefer not to fight even though you are wrong.

Certain national cultures ranking higher on femininity will prefer avoiding conflict at all costs and may choose silence when someone in the group is perceived as incorrect. Masculine national cultures may seek confrontation where none exists or may overreact to relatively minor issues. Collaboration versus confrontation can certainly influence the style of facilitation management. Managerially, this cultural dimension has broad implications to the level of intervention that a facilitator has within the group. More masculine groups may require additional intervention to keep the facilitation process on-track. Additionally, based on this cultural orientation, a facilitator may need to praise all individual efforts regardless of their actual contribution within cultures that lean toward the feminine pole of this index.

Note-taking and follow-up: If I do not write it down, I do not feel comfortable.

A national culture uncomfortable with unstructured situations may require facilitators to provide extensive documentation regarding the group facilitation both pre- and post-session. Low uncertainty avoidance national cultures may feel less apprehensive placing little emphasis on formal documentation. This can affect the level of attention a facilitator and the group members spend capturing the details from all discussions. Placing unnecessary requirements for documentation may lead to frustration in those comfortable with unstructured situations, while lacking attention to documentation may make those with high uncertainty avoidance, focus primarily on note taking that the essence of the session be overlooked. Managing the facilitation process within a high uncertainly avoidance cultural group may place more demand on the facilitator trying to engage the group in discussion.

Research (both pre- and post-individual facilitation sessions): Should I come prepared? Should I go deeper?

The importance of preparation both pre- and post-group facilitation session can be influenced by the long-term orientation of a national culture and its uncertainty

avoidance. A long-term oriented national culture, especially if correlated with high uncertainty avoidance, will prepare for a group session to ensure the maximum benefit is obtained. Those with a short-term orientation towards time, correlated with being comfortable with unstructured situations, may see less need for pre-and post-research. A facilitator may be able to determine the level of preparation at the beginning of a session through a review of materials brought by individual members.

Discussion and Management Implications

The issues surrounding cross-cultural facilitation management are similar to general management issues across borders. Learning organisations are increasingly becoming global institutions providing services across borders. Within these services, facilitation management is a key pedagogical and administrative function allowing for the development and growth of knowledge among group members. Faculty members, corporate trainers, and others involved in knowledge transfer, skills development, and structured learning are often called into cross-cultural environments to practice the art of facilitation management. This places an added complexity to an already intricate balancing act involving organising discussions, managing inputs and outputs, and ensuring objectives are met. The skill of working in a common language does not guarantee a common cultural framework to ensure facilitation success, as deeply rooted cultural values often supersede the relative superficiality of a *lingua franca*. Facilitation management theories must be scrutinised in the context of the culture in which they were developed, and further scrutinised when being applied within organisations in other cultural domains. Values systems may indeed conflict with organisational practices outside the home culture. Compatible value systems may yield acceptable results whereas incompatible value systems may cause certain misunderstandings and poor group performance. Through incorporating a cultural analytic, such as Hofstede's dimensions of culture, a facilitator can better prepare for cultural idiosyncrasies likely to arise within an environment different from that known in the home culture. Differing levels of power distance, individualism-collectivism, masculinity-femininity, uncertainty avoidance, and long-term versus short-term orientation can influence a culture's perspective and comfort level with different approaches to facilitation. Hofstede's published Values Survey Module (VSM) questionnaire would provide a good preliminary assessment to compare a home culture to the destination culture prior to beginning the facilitation management process. The VSM results should not be compared directly to the numerical values in Hofstede's original research; this is not methodologically sound and Hofstede cautioned against this for absolute analysis of values. The use of the Hofstede numerical values results should be used to compare two matched samples, preferably at the same period in time. This can usually be done for a facilitator working within a common area of practice, albeit across cultures.

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Matthew Jelavic is a Professor within the School of Science and Engineering Technology at Durham College and Adjunct Assistant Professor within the Faculty of Business and Information Technology at the University of Ontario Institute of Technology (UOIT). He holds a Doctorate in Business Administration from the Grenoble École de Management and a Master's Degree in Management Sciences from the University of Waterloo. Research interests include knowledge, technology and innovation management, entrepreneurship, international business and global strategic management. Dr. Jelavic is National President and Chief Executive Officer of the Canadian Institute of Management.

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Dawn Salter is a Professor of Marketing Communications and Advertising Program Coordinator within the School of Media, Art & Design at Durham College. She has extensive account management experience in communications having worked at various leading advertising agencies on both national and global brands. She holds a Bachelor of Education degree in Adult Education from Brock University and is pursuing a Master of Science degree in Global Marketing at the University of Liverpool. She also possesses a Diploma in Advertising Administration and a Certificate in Aligning & Building Curriculum. Primary research interests involve monitoring the changes in consumer media consumption across various cultural segmentation variables to determine the impact on global marketing initiatives.

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