

# Facilitation in Australia

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This brief summary charts the origins and development of facilitation. It provides an overview of the many influences that have contributed to what we know as the craft of facilitation today. It lays no claim to being an authoritative study; it aims to summarise the cultural and historical framework on which the work of the Groupwork Centre and others in the field is built.

I hope it will be a thought-provoking ‘heart starter’ about the realm of facilitation.

## Introduction

Facilitation – as we practise it at the Groupwork Centre comes from the margins. It is not a mainstream craft. However, other facilitators who have been around for a while have had different journeys into the realm of facilitation. One such journey – that of Kevin Balm – is described later on in this article.

Facilitation as we know it largely comes from other shores. By ‘we’, I mean those of us steeped in our dominant ‘whitefella’ traditions.

## Going way back

But let’s start by going way back. The yearning for collaboration is deep within us. Hunter-gatherer societies are tribal, collaborative and egalitarian. Such groups were the home of Homo sapiens for all but the last 10,000 years of our 200,000 year existence as a species. It seems likely that we still have a lot of collaborative hard-wiring from those times. It is in our genetic memory.

It’s not just our Indigenous colleagues who have the hardwiring, although they may be more practised at collaboration than whitefellas. For most of us, our human experience is now overlaid by 10,000 years of hierarchy.

I have a sense that in 60,000 years or more of human life in Australia, indigenous collaborative practices have perhaps provided more of an endorsement that collaboration is a worthwhile pursuit, rather than being held up as a viable model for us to draw from. I feel we have largely overlooked the collaborative wisdom that is home-grown.

## Origins of facilitation as practised by the Groupwork Centre

So let’s go back to the origins of facilitation as we in the Groupwork Centre practise it. It has emerged from the groundswell of resistance movements that go back centuries – movements that were dedicated to resisting imperialism, slavery, poverty, tyranny and the like.

Many of these movements wrestled not only with the focus of their ire, but with how they could organise in ways that did not replicate the forces they were grappling with.

A good example of this is the anti-slavery movement. The Quakers were very active here. Alongside this, they have a 350-year history of collaborative practice – through their decision-making, equality for women and men, holding meetings sitting in a circle and not having those meetings ‘chaired’.

In the 1930s and 1940s anti-imperialist forces sought to work more collaboratively. Gandhi used non-violence techniques to free India from British rule. The influence of that movement slowly made its way around the world.

The Spanish Civil War in the late 1930s also made a contribution to the origins of facilitation. This was a unique period in which anarchists were just as influential – perhaps even more so in some areas – as socialists and communists in the grassroots opposition to fascism. Anarchists collectivised just about everything; industry, education and agriculture (there were more than 1700 agrarian collectives at one point), not to mention all the anarchist fighting brigades. All these anarchist groups would have functioned by using some sort of facilitated/consensus style – democratic and flat internal decision-making processes. These organising methods of the anarchists in the Spanish Revolution rippled out to other places. It is highly likely that this revolutionary movement made a significant contribution to the development of the skills and principles of modern group facilitation, although this is not well documented.

Then in the 1960s and 1970s came a wave of movements – black liberation, feminism, civil rights, the counterculture, social justice, anti-Vietnam War and so on.

These new-left social movements influenced and adopted the principles of deeply democratic, non-exploitative and egalitarian practices. A bundle of radical influences and practical processes sprang from these – collectivism, community organising, and small and large-scale affinity groups. An example is the Why! anti-nuclear blockage in Germany in 1975. The organisers used large-scale affinity-group organising models that gave rise to the burgeoning anti-nuclear and green movements throughout Europe and beyond.

By the 1970s a lot of nonviolent activist groups in the USA and Europe were using facilitation. Many of these were influenced by the ground-breaking, *Resource Manual for a Living Revolution* (nicknamed the Monster Manual) published in the USA by the Movement for a New Society. This organisation has its origins largely within the Quakers, whose long history of supporting collaboration found a home in a modern context.

I have asked a wise librarian, who did our Advanced Diploma of Group Facilitation in 2015 when ‘facilitation – the craft’, (not just the verb ‘to facilitate’) first appeared in a dictionary. The best answer they could supply was: ‘My 1970 copy of the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary (pages 666, 667) contains this entry: *Facilitation. The action, process or result of facilitating.*’

It is within such contexts that facilitation emerged as a valued activist skill-set. By the 1980s, facilitation could be commonly found in activist circles throughout the world.

I understand that in Australia, facilitation as a specific craft under that name, was first employed at the Franklin Dam campaign in the early 1980s. People were trained as facilitators to help establish an effective nonviolent resistance to the building of the Franklin Dam by the Tasmanian Hydro Electricity Commission. The skills taught came from the *Manual for a Living Revolution*.

Generally, back in the 1980s most people did not have a working understanding of facilitation. Yet facilitation was increasingly being sought out by people in other fields who were seeking to work collaboratively and step outside traditional hierarchical power structures. Two notable fields were Landcare and the community sector.

There was a growing realisation that facilitation skills were needed to bring collaboration to life. Too often people were seeing that sacrificing the means as a way of getting more quickly to their ends tore the heart out of why they were doing in the first place. Put simply there was a growing awareness that the means needs to support the ends.

The work of facilitation builds on a great tradition of collaboration. It is delightful to see the 'light bulb' moments when we observe people encounter some of the ideas that form the basis of facilitation for the first time. Lights are being turned on as the wiring in our brains from eons ago is reconnected.

### **The world of facilitation today**

Steadily, facilitation has gained acceptance and momentum as the decades have rolled by. In 1998 the Australasian Facilitation Network (AFN) was established when people largely from a Landcare background initiated the first conference in Melbourne. The AFN is a self-organising network without an organisational centre or a legal entity. It has used the craft of facilitation to sustain itself to this day. Their annual conference rotates to different regions each year, and is worth travelling for the opportunity to participate.

In 2005 a local chapter of the AFN was established in Melbourne. It was initially called the Melbourne Facilitation Network, until a regional participant piped up and said – what about us! The Victorian Facilitators Network meets monthly near the Melbourne CBD, and is a stimulating gathering place for all sorts of facilitators.

In 1998 the International Association of Facilitation was formed. In 2010 a chapter was set up in Australia to serve the Oceania region.

## **Kevin Balm's journey**

*The following section is from Kevin Balm, founder of the AFN. Here is Kevin's perspective – a different journey to the one outlined above.*

*My sense of the origins of facilitation, based on my first encounter with facilitation in 1975, was from a community development frame. The Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA) was the entity undertaking this community development project.*

*In 1962, 6-7 couples who saw themselves as an intentional community, who were the ICA in those days, moved into a community on the West side of Chicago to directly engage in development activities as the means to formulating replicable methods for development and transformation at an individual and community level. I recall members of this team talking about visits they made to other intentional communities around the world such as Findhorn in Scotland. One component of the comprehensive model of development documented by them by the late 60s is what we today call the ToP facilitation methods. So I trace my beginnings with facilitation to community development.*

*However in delving deeper into the ICA's early history before the community development phase, I came to understand that the pioneering work of the ICA's founder, Joseph Wesley Matthews, provided the seminar and study methodology used by student groups at the University of Austin, Texas. And that first methodology (today we call this the ToP – Technology of Participation – Focused Conversation Method) was based on the Socratic method of enquiry.*

*My own research into facilitation beyond the ICA's methods led me to the work of Kurt Lewin whose writings about process interventions is very much what I today call facilitation though I found no mention of the word facilitation in any of his work that I came across. He died in the late 1940s. My first sighting of the word facilitation was in something Carl Rogers wrote in the 1960s or 1970s. Both Lewin and Rogers were psychologists.*

*So in addition to activism, it would appear that facilitation was born out of psychology, experiments of intentional community, community development, and later organisation development.*

## **In summary**

Facilitation is still an emerging craft, yet is now much more widely understood and used. Today facilitation is applied to a wide spectrum of settings – from nonviolent direct action to the corporate world ... and everything in between.

## **Ed McKinley**

*Ed McKinley is Director of the Groupwork Centre. If he had a religion, it would be collaboration. He is a great believer in the idea that 'together we can achieve more'.*