Introduction: Why Is Facilitation Important?

Problem based learning and other collaborative group learning techniques change the role for the teacher and the student. In PBL, the fundamental roles of the teacher is to guide student learning by creating learning objectives and complex authentic problems, and facilitating the group process by encouraging interdependence and ownership of learning by the student groups.

Facilitation can make or break problem-based learning for your students. Good facilitation is an acquired skill. Facilitating PBL well changes the focus from the teacher and places the responsibility for learning on the students, and sparks the flame of motivation.

Memorization & content regurgitation do not spark motivation. And doing PBL is no guarantee either. If the problems are not well designed or the teacher provides the answers, PBL is no better than lecture. Facilitating PBL (or other active learning forms) WELL is your best chance of getting students engaged to the point that they take on learning for themselves.

"The mediocre teacher tells. The good teacher explains. The superior teacher demonstrates. The great teacher inspires."
- William Ward

“A teacher who is attempting to teach without inspiring the pupil with a desire to learn is hammering on a cold iron.”
- Horace Mann
Characteristics of Good Facilitators

Good facilitators: guide the learning process, listen carefully, ask open questions, observe carefully (who’s actively contributing, body language), challenge and probe for depth and breadth, set high expectations for performance, mediate conflict, give feedback, always use group and self evaluation, promote interdependence. They let the students own the questions and the learning.

“I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand” - Chinese proverb - Author unknown

Good facilitators DO NOT lecture, give content answers, allow slackers, ignore conflict. If you provide information and answers to the students, they will not learn how to learn for themselves. Good facilitators guide the performance of small groups by providing motivation, encouragement and most of all challenge.

‘It must be remembered that the purpose of education is not to fill the minds of students with facts... it is to teach them to think, if that is possible, and always to think for themselves.’ --- Robert Hutchins

Students must be challenged both by difficult, complex problems and by the demand for evidence for their position. Good facilitators use open-ended questions that probe the depth of the students understanding of concepts and probe whether they understand the validity of the evidence.

“The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn”. --Alvin Toffler

Good facilitators must ensure that each group is functioning well and that all members are participating. The facilitator monitors the group and helps them resolve any conflicts. They assist students in developing communication skills and in negotiating and resolving conflict.
Tips For Making Groups Work

Start early in the course. Even on the first day you can begin to build group dynamics by having the group take an individual test and then a group test, by having them complete a learning styles inventory to show them individual strengths or by having them get to know one another through interviews or group biographies.

Create a master list of names and contact information and distribute it to members.

Share information and insights on objectives and work styles.

Share your understanding of the project objectives and requirements

Have the group establish its own ground rules and penalties for violation of the rules. You may wish to establish minimums as the teacher/facilitator.

Brainstorm characteristics of best and worst group experiences. The outcome of this conversation can be used to establish more formal ground rules for group interactions.

Identify preferences for which roles each group member would like to take on and negotiate responsibilities.

Determine the quantity, length, and protocol of all group meetings outside of class. Then establish a regular meeting time. If you can’t meet face to face, establish a chat time or a time to all use the LearnLink conference.

Some groups work best with some roles and responsibilities.
(i.e. leader, note-taker, trouble-shooter, detail person, big picture person, creative input, progress-chaser, reviewer, discussion leader, accuracy coach).

Remember that patience and communication are essential to good group dynamics.

Try to make collective decisions professionally and democratically.

Deliberately take turns presenting ideas or updates. Limit the amount of time each person has to talk and discourage any interruption during the presentations

Complete an individual and group assessment at every session!
So, what happens if it is just not working?

- First contact the facilitator or teacher for assistance
- Encourage people to contribute. Ask why they haven’t been participating? Check in on progress frequently.
- Check to see if the group member is stuck and needs some advice and direction in order to move forward.
- Have a progress-checker. Some people simply need to be reminded to meet deadlines or conform to expectations.

Tons of resources re: groups and group dynamics
http://www.has.vcu.edu/group/gdynamic.htm
http://www.ncsu.edu/felder-public/Papers/CLStrategies(JCCCT).pdf
http://cte.umdni.edu/active_learning/active_group.cfm
http://faculty.uwb.edu/mgoldberg/students/groupskills.html

Good facilitators ensure that groups constantly monitor their progress. They promote an atmosphere of trust, support and respect for all members.

Adapted from University of Guelph Library Learning Services
http://www.lib.uoguelph.ca/assistance/learning_services/fastfacts/group_work.cfm
Sample Forms For Self and Group Assessment

Session: ____  Date: ________________________________

**Self/Peer Evaluation Form**

Rate each group member on a scale of 1-10 (“1” being failed or not fulfilled, and “10” being excellent)

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<tr>
<th>Group Member</th>
<th>Provided Significant Contribution</th>
<th>Completed Assigned Task</th>
<th>Overall Participation</th>
<th>Total Score</th>
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Evaluate your group members’ performance and contribution to today’s activities. List specific roles, responsibilities, and tasks performed by each group member and the quality of the contributions.

Rate yourself on a on a scale of 1-10 (“1” being failed or not fulfilled, and “10” being excellent)

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Evaluate your performance and contribution to today’s activities. List specific roles, responsibilities, and tasks you performed and the quality of your contribution.

Additional comments: