

Making Room for Complexity in Group Collaborations

The Roles of Scaffolding and Facilitation

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Abstract

This thesis has a dual objective: the theoretical aim is to analyse how developmental scaffolding influences the way that group participants' conceptions about societal issues of concern, appropriate goals and courses of action change as their awareness of the interconnectedness between different issues, conditions, causes and consequences increase. On a practical level, the thesis aims to contribute insights into the craft and role of facilitation for facilitators, project leaders, dialogue designers and other practitioners whose engagement in group processes involves scaffolding the understanding of issues that have a considerable degree of complexity. This thesis is based on adult development theory and integrates the concept of 'scaffolding' – in the form of assisted learning – with a developmental view on the hierarchical complexity of task performance. To date, there is little empirical research that uses adult developmental perspectives on collaborative group-work, or on the role of developmental scaffolding in group processes. The thesis contributes to the discourse on group facilitation and the use of facilitated methods to assist groups' collaborative efforts on complex societal issues.

The thesis is based on five papers. Paper I offers conclusions and reflections based on nine empirical studies that were carried out over the course of seven years and provides a broader context for the studies reported in the following papers. Paper I focuses on capacities for managing complex issues in terms of scaffolding group efforts through structured methods and facilitation, as well as in terms of individual capacities.

Paper II reports on a multi-stakeholder facilitated process in the public sector. The study shows how the conceptions of an issue and of strategies for managing it transformed by working on the issue in a structured and stepwise manner. The process also functioned as an awareness-raising method for generalised learning about task complexity, which was evident in follow-up interviews that were carried out three years later.

Paper III elucidates patterns in the relationships between hope, motivation, and awareness of task complexity. The contribution of the paper is in drawing attention to the consideration that increased task complexity awareness may affect the hope and motivation of participants in complex ways.

Paper IV examines a case-study conducted with a voluntary climate action group. The paper concludes that in order to integrate complex knowledge, the facilitator and the group need to collaboratively determine adequate discussion boundaries.

Paper V adopted a microdevelopmental perspective in order to examine how the participants, the facilitator and the method coactively scaffolded the generation of new and more complex knowledge. The paper concludes that knowledge development between stakeholders and within stakeholders prospers by moving through phases where understanding can sometimes diverge and conflict. A facilitator can play a significant role by tracking the dialectics of the process and encouraging ways to link the participants' contributions of information.

The action research in this study involved testing a deliberative method for developmental scaffolding. The overall conclusion is that there is great potential in methods that functions to facilitate the development and integration of complex knowledge. The results from this thesis are an example of how facilitated group processes supported the emergence of more complex action-logics, when adequate structured scaffolding is adopted. By using a structured approach for critical reflection, the analysis also shows that the method supports the building of a collective representation of groups' issue-landscapes, but also that the individual group members develop their own knowledge and perspectives within the shared frame. However, adopting an unfamiliar process style can elicit momentary discomfort in the group, and therefore other kinds of scaffolding functions may need to be attended to with equal, and sometimes even more thoroughness. The action research with the groups in this study concludes that continuous reflections, integrations and re-evaluations over the course of the process is needed, in order to enable new strategies, motives, and goals to emerge over time.

Key words: Action research, adult development, awareness, coaction, collective efficacy, complexity, group facilitation, hope, metacognition, methods for complex issues, scaffolding