The responsibility and artistry of facilitating intersectional and inclusive conversations

> “Intersectionality is a way of understanding and analyzing complexity in the world, in people, and in human experiences. The events and conditions of social and political life and the self can seldom be understood as shaped by one factor. They are shaped by many factors in diverse and mutually influencing ways. When it comes to social inequality, people’s lives and the organization of power in a given society are better understood as being shaped not by a single axis of social division, be it race or gender or class, but by many axes that work together and influence each other. Intersectionality as an analytic tool gives people better access to the complexity of the world and of themselves. (Collins & Bilge, 2016, pg. 2).”

Throughout the years of our work, we’ve come to see facilitation spaces as caring containers where every expression of self is encouraged to the extent and pace of every person. Group participation which is framed by feminist principles is contained and held, while safety and care are firmly maintained and balanced throughout the interaction and conversations. We are also responsible for making the space welcoming, accessible and meaningful to all participants.

Bear in mind that the points we are sharing here are not finite, as we have been reflecting and working for the past period on developing our guidelines on facilitation that are based in our values and experience. The points and content shared here are drawn from our lessons of facilitating our online events and convenings and are drawn from our notes, modules, templates, reflections, and our bucket reading list as a source of inspiration. Building this work remains a collective work-in-progress for us.

Your position as a facilitator

There is a high level of responsibility and power that come hand in hand with being a facilitator. Your position is never neutral. The main part of your role is being responsible for keeping the conversation participatory, dynamic, inclusive, balanced and safe at all times - while being aware of power dynamics within the group. This is not an easy task, as obviously, you will not be able to perceive all parameters on the spectrum of privileges and disadvantages for each and every one of your participants within the group.

However, you will be facilitating the group process by bearing in mind that the levels on the spectrum of privilege and oppression are different for each and every one of the participants, including yourself. Your baseline for this process is primarily to safeguard the space with all the power and the responsibility you have as a facilitator. That means that your intervention serves to maintain the boundaries that protect people's sense of autonomy, self-expression and integrity at any point of the conversation.

Your position as a facilitator is by no means devoid of your own lived experience. Self-reflect beforehand and think about your multiple identities, advantages and disadvantages that come with them, your overall background, as well as your limitations or weak spots. If you've never facilitated a session and this will be your first one, it's always good to be honest if you assess that the content shared will not be too demanding or if you feel you have the support of your fellow co-facilitator. All these points might have to be transparently addressed and acknowledged throughout the process. This is an important segment and depending on how you handle it - it can obstruct or support your facilitation process.

From our experience, it's best to have two facilitators as your dynamic of exchange can be supportive and encouraging to those who participate less. It also contributes to more equal workload distribution, meaning that one person doesn't have to carry the entire weight on their shoulders. Having one facilitator in general creates an impression of a "central guide", "a leader" and can feel intimidating for some people.

Finally, try to release yourself and your group of perfection. Be willing to make mistakes, take responsibility for them and don't hesitate to correct them throughout the process.

Facilitating inclusive and intersectional conversations

Let people know you "see" them and manage energy. Have regular check-ins about the level of energy in the room, how people are feeling. **Be mindful that some content can provoke feelings of anxiety, guilt, aggression, sadness and/or remind of past/current trauma.**

- **Be prepared for emotional and political labor.** There is a whole spectrum of emotions, responses and resistances that will arise when talking about social justice in the context of addressing and unpacking privilege(s), disadvantages, oppression, and many terms that translate to people's (and your own) lived experiences. You will be responsible for holding and supporting the group, and at times, to challenge and dislocate some of the individual positions, beliefs, stereotypes.
- **Honor people's emotional state in their current context.** Be aware that the capacities of investment and participation are also situational, meaning that they vary depending on what is happening in one person's life.
- **Welcome self-reflection throughout the session, and/or allocate time for self-reflection and open sharing.** Invite people to reflect on their positions, what resonates with the content shared and what is challenging. People can also do this as an exercise in groups of two or more, or do an individual writing, drawing or any creative exercise**.** This can facilitate the learning process about themselves and within the group, and foster

empathy.

- **Support different pace of participation.** This especially applies if language used is not the native language for all participants. Be mindful that some people might need even more time to express and participate in real time or have different accessibility needs, trouble with focus, vision, hearing, situational capacities, neurodivergent needs, etc. Speak slowly (also if you have interpretation during your event) being mindful that people need time to process new information. Never push for participation and contribution. Respect the pace of your participants.
- **Encourage various ways of participation and reflection.** Invite people to participate by using comments or symbols over chat, or share a drawing or even a song as a reflection are some of the ideas.
- **Use trigger warnings** when issues or content around violence and different discrimination forms will be presented or discussed. Trigger warnings allow your participants to prepare for discussing the topic, decide on participation or support them in managing their reaction and response. Remind other participants to also announce trigger warnings beforehand if they will share content around violence.
- **Support every participant** who reacts, says that they feel triggered by an ongoing discussion, or they are struggling. Acknowledge their feeling, be compassionate and provide holding and support.

Language is a tool of reinforcing power. Use inclusive language and examples supportive of people of diverse identities, gender expressions, bodies, experiences, etc.

- **Use inclusive and supportive language when talking about diverse identities.** Think about the terms and concepts twice. Use nouns that are gender adjusted and gender inclusive when discussing particular topics. Be aware of your use of metaphors, acknowledging that some of them are rooted in war, ableism, racism and sexism. Check out our resources and reading bucket list below.
- **Be mindful of pronouns** your participants wrote next to their names. Name the importance of using correct given/written pronouns when interacting in the shared space. If you notice misgendering, gently remind everyone to pay attention to using correct pronouns.
- **Use diverse and inclusive examples, images and content** that will not reinforce the cisgender, heteronormative, ableist, racist and sexist standards of family, relationships, body, work roles, gender, age, etc.
- **Remind all speakers to speak slowly** as this gives additional time to your interpretation team and especially to your participants to be fully present and engage. If the session is held in non-native language, some of the participants might be struggling or they might need more time to process information.
- When using humor and jokes, be it in illustrations, text or spoken word, do it gently, considerately and most of the times - at your own expense. **Recognise that jokes reinforce many of the stereotypes that support the oppressive systems within our lived realities** and that they should not be tossed around the space as they already do real harm on a daily basis.

- **Use simple language and avoid acronyms.** I there really is an essential need to use acronyms - explain the term you are using or share a note with all of your participants so that you are all on the same page. If some of the participants are using acronyms or some special terms, remind them to explain or elaborate.

Read through our FTX module Intersectionality that emphasises using a both/and framing instead of either/or, that you can use for your guide in facilitating difficult conversations:

- It is important that we use our intersectional analysis not to place blame or guilt on each other to the point that conversations become defensive or impossible, but to **make visible both individual privileges and discrimination as well as systems of privilege and discrimination**.[1]
- **One of the practices that intersectionality brings is about interaction, about using a both/and framing instead of either/or.** It is not about establishing if sexuality or gender matter more than caste or race, it is about looking at their relationship, at where they intersect, augment and reinforce discrimination and/or privilege. Exploring, questioning and making visible the simultaneous, dynamic intersection of one's positionality works for social, cultural and economic context, as well as for understanding power.
  - Privileges and how those privileges can be used to help bring about a more socially, politically, economically and technologically just society.
  - Disadvantages and how those disadvantages are reinforced both structurally and systemically.[2]
- **Encourage people to recognise when to step back and listen by de-centering their individual positions.** This is especially relevant when you have a diverse group of people where some of them face multiple discrimination on a daily basis.
- **Track participation and distribute time with a sense of justice.** Allocate time to all participants, and do it with a sense of justice, welcoming different ways of participation. Some participants might engage more or less, depending on their level of language/speaking/digital literacy skills and some other parameters based on their privilege(s) and disadvantages.
- **As to prevent several participants taking over the space and time**, and to allocate time for everyone, remind your participants to share one or two points when participating.

  Read Power Dynamics and Inclusion in Virtual Meetings on some of the ways people hold power and privilege in online events and practices how to handle the process.
- **Steer gently and in the spirit of mutual learning and honoring the stories shared.** Remind of your objectives and purpose, reflect on work flow and celebrate accomplishments made.
- **Acknowledge that everyone brings knowledges (yes, in plural) to the table**. Remember that people are experts of their life and extend gratitude for the stories they share. Don't validate people's lived experiences, and show compassion and appreciation for the trust you've all been given. Respond if minimisation arises by any of the participants.

- **Facilitate from a space of compassion to self and to others.** The more personal and attuned you can get - you can also encourage other people to connect or reach out. That means to dilute competitiveness and shame as to bring out the unique gifts each person has and wants to share.
- Attempt to create an environment where participants can step in and take responsibility.
- **Have clear team and tech protocols for serious violation of principles of participation, including disrespect, discrimination, harassment.** Be ready to name and handle the dynamics of aggression and also know when it's time to remove the person. Have your tech team on stand-by for serious violation of participation principles.
- **Respond to participants who are engaging in discussions in problematic ways** - making someone feel unsafe, or subtly not being cooperative and collaborative, or taking over the space by inserting their knowledge and opinions continuously throughout the session. Redirect and distribute energy. Remind of participation guidelines, session goals and objectives.
- **Understand online silence.** There is a real need to invest additional effort to facilitate online engagement and this can sometimes put (un)necessary burden on facilitator's shoulders to continuously provide content and keep people engaged. It's easier and faster to feel the energy of people during physical events when people are sharing the physical space. Understanding the dynamics of the group is supported by abundance of visual cues, and silence is more easily felt as part of the process. However, be aware that people use silence online just as they would during the physical event. It is a form of situational reaction when people process new information, reflect on what was being said or simply think about their own position or experiences. Practice honoring the silence and try not to rush or intervene in advance.

Footnotes

[1] APC. Intersectionality | FTX Platform. FTX Platform. https://en.ftx.apc.org/books/intersectionality

[2] APC. Intersectionality and Sexuality | FTX Platform. FTX Platform.

https://en.ftx.apc.org/books/intersectionality/page/intersectionality-and-sexuality

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Revision #2
Created 2021-10-28 05:52:49 UTC by Cathy
Updated 2021-11-03 03:18:23 UTC by Cathy