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FACILITATION CAN BE COMPLEX (AND IT CERTAINLY SHOULD BE)

VIVIENNE (VIV) READ

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Based in Australia, Viv Read was one of the first independent practitioners to be trained in Cynefin and associated methods in 2003. An experienced practitioner, facilitator, trainer and mentor, Viv has incorporated the tools and methods into her consulting practice, and has developed a reputation for her skills and expertise in complex facilitation processes. She undertakes collaborative projects with Cognitive Edge and other independent consultants working in Australia and internationally. She is an active member of the practitioner community.

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FACILITATION CAN BE COMPLEX (AND IT CERTAINLY SHOULD BE)

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This chapter is for those who facilitate groups to make sense of complexity in order to act, and who use complexity-based processes to do so, or are interested in doing so. Our focus is on the Framework's decision support role and its complexity-based tools and methods. Herein, fundamental concepts and principles will help you decide whether this is a path you may wish to pursue.

Every tool and method that we use, or policy that we develop, has assumptions, values, and sometimes the history of the originating culture attached to it. It has been designed to meet a particular purpose and comes from a specific context, and often a particular point in history. Some of these may not be explicit and can get lost or obscured. Some may be sufficiently universal for it not to matter too much. Others have a significant impact. Not knowing what these conditions might be, or taking the time to understand them often makes the tool or method less than adequate.

There is both a skill and an art to revealing a tool's embedded values and assumptions. Similarly, this also applies to how we moderate the tools' impact in the context in which we are using it.

As facilitators, if we work with tools without context, in other words we don't know enough to know the tool doesn't fit the situation, the intervention will suffer, as will the overall outcome.

In my home country of Australia, there had been a revolution in workplaces from the mid to late 1980s. It culminated with the introduction of enterprise bargaining. This move – from a system of standardized terms and conditions of employment for similar job classifications to processes that recognized context, including geography and the specific industry and skills-based career paths – revolutionized industrial relations and workplace practices in all sectors of the economy.

I was privileged to work alongside the late Professor Bill (Gordon William) Ford as he pioneered new approaches to support this new focus. We undertook assignments in some of Australia's leading organizations, including Lend Lease, Carlton United Breweries, Sydney Opera House, ICI, and Westpac. We had developed a language and an integrated and consolidated set of principles and heuristics that helped me make meaning of my own experiences in ways that enabled me to converse effectively with colleagues and clients.

I had already been working in organizational change and workplace reform for some 25 years when I met Dave Snowden and learned about the Cynefin Framework and its complementary tools and methods. Dave's Framework and tools confirmed the importance of understanding context when interacting with systems. I realized later that Dave gave me the theoretical underpinnings of what I intuitively had felt and observed in my work.

Here are a few examples that illustrate what can happen when you don't consider the impact of context.

- The design of imported German equipment for breweries assumed that the workforce consisted of highly skilled operators and technicians. Australian breweries employed operators who were often unskilled immigrants with minimal literacy and numeracy in English. There was a separate technical workforce to deal with more technical issues. Consequently, productivity was always less than 70% on the same equipment compared to German factories.
- Some years ago, Australia purchased submarines that were severely at risk of ever going out to sea. The design assumed sub-mariners were skilled in mechatronics – a combination of skills unheard of in Australia. There wasn't sufficient room on board for the 50% larger crew needed to set sail.
- My attempts to explain Australian terms and conditions of employment to a U.S.-based mining company were somewhat fraught. Australians, who have permanent employment, are entitled to long, paid service leaves – 13 weeks that fall due after ten years of service. Why? Because when Australia was a penal colony, it would take that long to sail home to England to see the family and sail back to resume duties. The reasons are long gone, but the entitlement is embedded. And, no, these terms and conditions are non-negotiable.

These examples repeatedly show that the problems were far more complex, not complicated in terms of the Cynefin Framework, than was initially thought. And workplaces are complex human systems. Because context matters, we also have to rethink how we facilitate in a Complex domain.

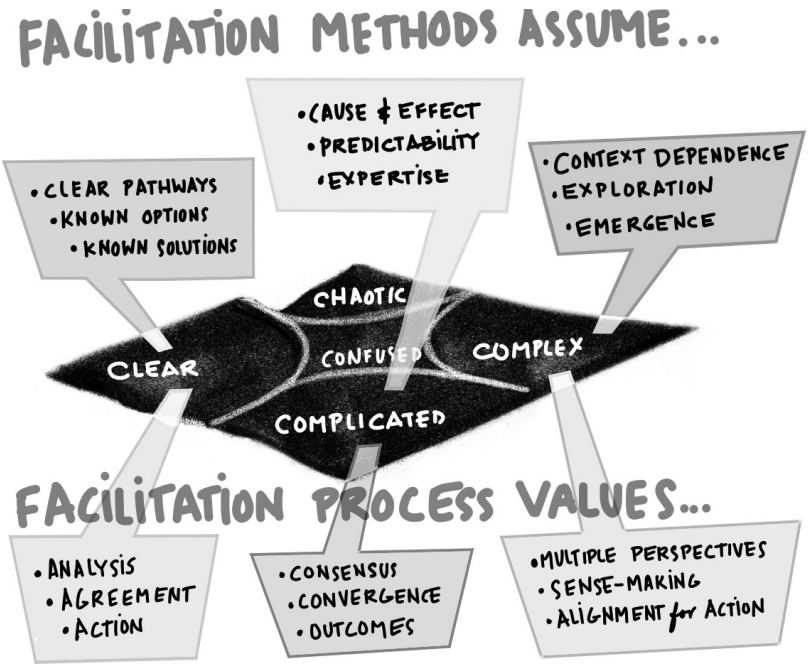

Figure 1. Process and methods... What to use when

THE CYNEFIN FRAMEWORK AND COMPLEX FACILITATION

Over the years, I have become an advocate for the value of complex facilitation. Dave confirmed what I already intuitively knew: when problems are complex, you need to facilitate the people who are entangled in the problem using a complex facilitative approach. Traditional facilitation methods, comparatively, impose an ordered approach on complex issues, often leading to dysfunctional or "same old, same old" solutions.

Let's start with a definition:

Complex facilitation is "the facilitation of complex methods to make sense of complex issues in order to take action..."

Contrast this to the definition of traditional facilitation:

- "Supporting everyone to do their best thinking, a facilitator enables group members to search for inclusive solutions and build sustainable agreements." (1)
- "...contribute structure and process to interactions, so groups are able to function effectively and make high-quality decisions. A helper and enabler whose goal is to support others as they pursue their objectives." (2)

The Cynefin Framework indicates that methods and approaches are valuable yet have limitations - i.e., they work well in one or two domains, but seldom in all domains (bounded applicability). Traditional facilitation methods are useful in ordered systems where outcomes are known. In complex systems, where we deal with messy, tangled problems and messy relationships, they are far less valuable.

The basic principles of complexity we need to understand to facilitate complex processes

According to Cynefin, the way we act in complex systems is by probing, sensing and responding. We shape the interactions with the people in the system, and the system itself, to make space for emergence. Complex facilitation focuses, therefore, on inviting and allowing for opportunities to emerge.

The intent of complex facilitation

To sustain an environment for a group of people that enables a socially constructed shared understanding of complex issues to emerge with sufficient agreement to take action.

This approach is fundamentally different in every way to how traditional facilitation has been taught and practiced. For example, in traditionally facilitated workshops, participants often play a relatively passive role, working towards a particular outcome, and deferring to experts. Or they may be used to being the experts in workshop situations and have others defer to them. Complex facilitation does not allow these patterns to play out but disrupts participants' previous patterns of expectations and expertise. Over the years that I have been practicing complex facilitation, I noticed it could be confronting and uncomfortable for both facilitators and participants at first, however it can also lead to new insights and highly effective workshops.

For participants it means...

They move from known patterns of engagement, where facilitators are responsible for the direction, problem-solving and conflict resolution, to processes with ambiguous instructions, no predetermined outcomes, and minimal to no engagement with the facilitator in the content. The responsibility for producing an outcome shifts from the facilitator to the group.

For facilitators, it means...

A shift from being the expert who is in control of a process and its outcome, to designing and supporting social constructions for participants. That allows for meaning to emerge, with no engagement of the facilitator in content at all. And this means that the facilitator needs to embrace ambiguity and uncertainty as well.

THE PRINCIPLES OF COMPLEX FACILITATION

The various workshop methods and software tools that rely on parts of the Cynefin ecosystem have Cynefin organizing and complexity principles threaded through them. To apply complex facilitation, one needs to understand these principles and how they play out in practice.

Design principles

- Avoid Pattern Entrainment: The initial activity sets the 'pattern' for what will follow. Suppose you start with a traditional activity like setting ground rules (i.e., the facilitator is in charge) or a presentation by the most senior expert in the room. What happens? People fall into old thinking patterns, and nothing new will emerge.
- Design for Distributed Cognition and Multiple Perspectives: As best you can, ensure a variety of perspectives and overall diversity in the group. A facilitator would often be tempted to keep these diverse groups separate to avoid unnecessary conflict, but this also limits the emergence of novelty.
- Enable descriptive self-awareness:
    - Design processes in ways that enable participants to "see the system" and discover insights for themselves i.e., about differences and/or similarities in perspectives, rather than being told or led by the interpretations of external consultants/facilitators.
    - Use different colors, hexagonal post-it notes, and various clustering processes to reveal emergent patterns to participants. These provide insights into different perspectives or aspects of the system. (For those wondering why we use hexagonal post-its: hexagons cluster in ways that squares do not, and help people break out of thinking in categories.)
- Ensure requisite levels of ambiguity and uncertainty:
    - Design processes to be ambiguous so that participants enter into a state of uncertainty. Participants will be uncomfortable, and facilitators need to be prepared for that. This allows for new ideas and meaning to emerge that will enable new actions.
    - Some of the ways we do this include:
        - Ensure multiple processes are run in parallel to increase levels of ambiguity and opportunity to disrupt small group dynamics by moving people between activities.

- Never provide detailed agendas or give all the instructions for an activity up-front. People should not know what is coming next.
- Instructions are slightly ambiguous to allow meaning to emerge from the group.
- It is not the facilitators' role to rescue or give answers.

The facilitation role... 'the heuristics' for a light footprint

- Provide no direct examples or personal experiences, use metaphors instead
- Resist direct comments on behavior, i.e., if someone is dominating a conversation or not participating, the facilitator creates a change in the system to enable a new behavior, they don't comment on the behavior.
- Do not engage with content, only the process, i.e., make changes to the process or the environment that allows different behavior to emerge.
- Apply complex domain principles: make small changes, monitor what happens, dampen or amplify patterns – all at the level of the system.
- There should be more than one facilitator to monitor what is happening to amplify or dampen, and make sure other facilitators are not succumbing to the temptation of engaging with content or providing examples (it is very easy to fall into this trap!).

In sharp contrast, a traditional facilitation role emphasizes [3]

- Leading. A facilitator must be able to keep the training or meeting focused toward achieving the outcome(s) identified beforehand.
- Problem-solving. A facilitator should be skilled at applying group problem-solving techniques.
- Empathizing. A facilitator should be able to "walk a mile in another's shoes" to understand the learners' or team members' feelings.

COMPLEX FACILITATION IN ACTION: A REAL-WORLD EXAMPLE

I offer an example of working with Cynefin and complexity. While it's from an experience I had in 2004, it is particularly noteworthy both because it stands the test of time and is considerable in its scale (and it's a story that also involved Dave).

It was 2004 somewhere in Australia

Some 350 people were gathered in a basketball stadium to discuss the future of the educational system in their state. They were a mixture of teachers, school principals, (government and faith-based) public servants (State and Federal government), parents, and community leaders.

The facilitation space served as a complex human or social system for as long as it was operating. To manage the boundaries of the system, facilitators led and monitored the process as it played out in the whole system. Everyone was always in the same space, so while we had many small groups, there were no separate breakout rooms.

There was enough space to move people around comfortably and sufficient wall space to accommodate a large amount of flip chart material and other data. Only one facilitator (Dave Snowden) had a microphone, Sonja Blignaut and I (Viv) remained on the mezzanine floor with an elevated view of the overall group, i.e., the system.

A step-by-step playbook for complex facilitation

1. **The purpose of this gathering**

   We had contracted for a two-day process. We needed to help participants develop enough shared understanding of the current context of the education system, and its challenges, so that two things would happen. 1) there would be agreement on recommendations for action that would move the participants toward the desired new direction and 2) this would emerge throughout these two days.

2. The participants

The participants were from metropolitan, rural and remote localities and included some 30 indigenous representatives from the State educational system. They were very diverse in terms of status and levels.

The new chief executive (CEO) of the Education Department had been in the role for about six months and was from another state. Nobody knew everybody, everybody knew somebody, and everybody had an opinion on what should happen, as well as who was to blame for what had happened so far. For some of the 30 indigenous representatives, English was a second or third language. Narrative data had been collected from some, but not all, of the participants.

The three facilitators met the CEO the day before the workshop and I briefed the indigenous participants on what to expect from the process. The Minister would speak on day one of the workshop.

3. The process

There was no presentation to open the session. The Minister, at our request, made his presentation later on day two. There was also no check-in or ground-rule setting. We just dove straight into the first activity.

Several Cognitive Edge complexity methods were used in addition to the pre-collected narrative data. These included Future Backwards and Archetype Extraction. Each method enabled participants to:

- Generate data from their own experience
- Make sense and attribute their personal meaning
- Seek patterns and themes
- Share insights and develop a shared context
- Use the Cynefin Framework as the decision support tool to determine priorities for action
- Develop recommendations based on the principles contained in the Framework

The critical elements of the design of this end-to-end process included:

- Seeking the Minister's permission to move his contribution to day two to reduce the impact and lessen the effect of pattern entrainment.
- Allocating different colored hexagonal-shaped sticky notes (hexies) for different cohorts for all activities. These different colored 'hexies' from the various activities provided visual patterns of the different perspectives in the room, especially once they formed part of mixed clustered outcomes later on in the process.
- Starting with groups of people from similar organizations/professions (i.e., organizing for similarity) and then mixing across different cohorts (organizing for diversity) later.
- Multiple activities happening in parallel.
- There was a regular sharing of information across groups to socialize and share insights, but not to the whole group.
- Introducing the Cynefin Framework as the integrative decision support tool.
- Supporting the process by using artifacts like 'action sheets' based on the domains of the Cynefin Framework. They were used to capture recommendations for the final session. (In Cynefin-speak this is called 'scaffolding.')

4. **Managing the process – complex facilitation principles in action**

As facilitators, we had multiple activities happening simultaneously and we were using deliberate disruption to prevent premature convergence (coming to decisions too quickly). We achieved deliberate disruption by giving instructions like:

- Please select in each group the person who has contributed the most. Ask them to come to the front of the room for an important task. (This is also how we manage dominant voices).
- Move two people at random intervals from each group counterclockwise to another group.
- Form new groups by having one person step out from each group and have them come together in a new group(s).

On average, a group did not have consistent membership longer than 15 to 20 minutes. One or more members were regularly changed to another activity and/or another group. Of course, this contrasted sharply with more traditional approaches and contributed to rising levels of frustration.

With 40 different small groups, the whole system was monitored from the mezzanine level by Viv and Sonja, where one of the additional activities took place. There was constant communication with Dave on the floor of the stadium.

5. **Be prepared for the unexpected**

A common defense for the anxiety created by the ambiguity, is to ask multiple questions and attempt to defer to the facilitator's authority. It can be hard to resist, but the facilitator cannot compromise his or her role by giving in. Some of the questions we encountered included: "Can you give me an example of what you want?" Our answer: "No." "Is this what is expected?" Answer: "Is that what has meaning for you and your colleagues?" "What is the expected outcome?" Answer: "There isn't one".

At one point on the first day, a small group of around 25 school principals looked anxious and somewhat angry. Their concerns were about not knowing what was expected and the anticipated outcomes. When told, "we don't know,' "it will emerge," and "trust the process," they became increasingly angry and decided they would not come back the following day. They were protesting, in their words, "being treated disrespectfully."

They did not come back on the second day. The CEO, who thankfully was a very pragmatic individual, commented, "At least I now know who is not comfortable with ambiguity." In contrast, at the end of that day, representatives from the indigenous community expressed their thanks for creating a process where, "for the first time we have been able to participate equally in a planning process." That was significant because indigenous communities often feel locked out of effective engagement by processes that privilege those who have been trained in complicated methods. The principles of social construction and embracing diversity embedded in complex methods, allow for all perspectives to be included with equity of participation.

THE POWER OF THE CYNEFIN APPROACH

The methods and approaches we used culminated in self-selected workgroups developing action-based recommendations for issues across the Cynefin domains. At 4 p.m. on day two, on mobile stands, 70 recommendations were posted on action sheets representing the Cynefin domains. These had been 'tested' with at least two other workgroups and refined based on feedback.

The CEO and her executive team walked around, read, and had brief (max 3 minutes) conversations with some of the workshop participants for clarity. Each had three different colored dots they could allocate to help them decide when to implement the recommendations:

- Now
- Not now
- Needs further time to consider (one week was the deadline for a response)

Issues that were mapped to the Framework, but not yet considered, were collected and retained in the 'needs further consideration' list. The different colored hexies that created the themes and informed the actions were attached to the recommendations for context – the different colors visibly indicated the different voices for different issues.

The output of these two days was a pleasant surprise. In an elapsed time of two days, 350 people representing multiple perspectives and views, reached a common understanding and enough agreement to agree on 70 specific recommendations for action. All of the ideas were captured in ways that made it easy to address them later. And, people had self-selected and indicated interest on issues they agreed to continue to work on.

HOW DO YOU KNOW IF COMPLEX FACILITATION IS FOR YOU?

This case study illustrates what is possible when you use complex facilitation. To achieve these kinds of results, the actions and behaviors of facilitators need to be congruent with the complexity principles, the processes, the methods, and the tools. That means that the facilitator needs to become comfortable with uncertainty and be willing to accept unexpected developments, disruptions, and a shallow dive into chaos during the intervention. That is what we ask from the participants – and it also applies to the facilitators! When we do this, we enable groups of people to collectively make sense and meaning of complex issues, and we invite the emergence of novelty.

In order to become proficient in complex facilitation methods, you need more than just a step by step playbook. You need to understand the complexity principles embedded in each of these methods i.e., why it works the way it does. You need to let go of the need to design for a particular outcome. Instead, we focus on understanding the purpose and intent of what we are doing, know what kind of participant experience is needed to disrupt old patterns, and enable the emergence of novelty. And throughout, you need to show up in a way that is congruent with the above.

Before you decide if complex facilitation is for you, consider these perspective differences

Traditional facilitation perspective	Complex facilitation perspective
Facilitators are responsible for giving clear and unambiguous instructions so that participants 'get it right and do not fail.'	• There is no right answer. It is about exploration, insights, discovering options and alternatives, not searching for the 'right' answer. We cannot even be sure of what the "right" question is. • Complex issues are not resolved. They are nudged, danced with, managed, and monitored but never resolved.
As a facilitator, I am responsible for the experience that participants have – their level of engagement, comfort, and enjoyment.	• Facilitators are responsible for providing the environment and processes that enable engagement and participation in complexity. • To minimize the realities of disruption, ambiguity, and discomfort would be dishonest. • People may experience the process as frustrating and fail to see the tangible value in the experience for some time – maybe never.
My identity as a 'good and competent' facilitator is directly linked to the visible contribution I have made to the outcomes.	You are not the expert in the room – you don't comment on content, you don't answer questions and you don't ensure a particular outcome. If your identity requires feedback about your role in solving problems and being an expert, then complex facilitation is probably not for you.

Table Traditional and Complex facilitation perspectives

After encountering Cynefin, and its approach to complex facilitation, I have applied its principles and practice extensively in my work. A common experience for me and my colleagues is that using the Cynefin Framework is an approach you "settle into." While it is generally uncomfortable at first, the more you use it, the more you trust the process, and it soon becomes your own 'business as usual.' Above all, working this way provides significantly more effective outcomes for the participants.

I have little desire to go back to any form of traditional 'expert' facilitation. If so inclined, I recommend that any facilitator dip their toe into the adventurous waters of complex facilitation and use the Cynefin Framework as your GPS.

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