

Provocative Facilitation

Here are some of what we may call the principles of provocative facilitation, in no particular order:

- ◆ Dialogue is not consensus
- ◆ Comfort must be hard-won, not worshipped
- ◆ Learning means going to visit
- ◆ Push for “authentic speech”
- ◆ We live with questions that can’t be answered

Dialogue is not consensus

In order for us to learn and to grow, we need to meet others. The deeper the nature of these meetings, the greater the potential for us to grow. In recent times, the term “dialogue” and its strange invented verb, “to dialogue,” has come to signify “coming together.” This isn’t entirely mistaken, but the “coming together” that is imagined always seems to be that of long-lost lovers running towards each other for the mythological embrace at the end of the movie, rather than the wary approach of two boxers from their opposite corners. It’s the latter image we should pay more attention to, since the word dialogue comes from the idea of there being different ideas in conversation, not one. Dialogue can involve conflict. This is fine, since dialogue is not consensus. When we are wishing to learn and to grow, dialogue is far more valuable than consensus. (It is true though, that dialogue requires focused and active listening. But like dialogue, “listening” doesn’t have to mean “agreeing”!)

Comfort must be hard-won, not worshipped

Sometimes we value comfort over truth. This is totally understandable. Problems only arise when we confuse one for the other. As Al Gore pointed out, some truths are inconvenient. Sometimes, when a group is in disagreement, it feels uncomfortable. In order to escape the discomfort, we rush to skip around the disagreements and forge a shell of comfort. All facilitators will appreciate their own threshold, and we would be the last to suggest that participants’ entire experience of this program should be uncomfortable. We would simply suggest that wherever your threshold is, at whichever point you would choose to jump for comfort out of conflict, just try to raise that threshold a little higher, postpone that jump a little longer. Don’t make the desire for comfort, into the enemy of honest disagreement in the search for truth.

Learning means going to visit others' opinions

Deep engagement with Israel is likely to bring us into contact with opinions that are in conflict with our own. We are under no obligation to change our opinions in order to reach consensus. But we should view ourselves as committed to imagining – even for a second – how the world might look and feel if we did hold these opposing opinions. This has sometimes been described as “going to visit.” Feeling confident that you can “come home” afterwards allows one to safely visit other views. This is different from “assessing” others’ opinions. We tend to assess others’ ideas by working out “why not”. The visiting approach suggests asking “why yes.” The chances are that we’ll emerge from the process still in disagreement, but we’ll have reached disagreement through generosity.

Push for “authentic speech”

A common problem with talking about Israel-related issues in the Jewish community is that the discussions tend to be monopolized by those who see themselves as experts. The enemy here is not the amount of knowledge these people have in comparison to others'. The problem is that when we talk about something we know a lot about, we tend to say the same old thing we always say. And when we say the same old thing, it means that we are not even listening to ourselves – so no surprise it's tough for others to listen, too! Anna Deveare Smith talked about “authentic speech” – the kind of talking that people do when they find themselves expressing something they have never expressed before, or expressing something in a way they have never done before. As facilitator we need to push participants in this direction. One way of helping this happen is by firmly (but charmingly!) making sure the group attends to the programmed questions, and don't veer off into political generalizations. The more focused the discussion emerges from the art and its issues, then everyone is an equal expert, and the chances for authentic speech are increased.

We live with questions that can't be answered

The most interesting questions in life are the ones that either have no answer, or have several conflicting answers. Don't feel that every discussion of every question must lead to an agreed answer. Sometimes the most important thing we can do with some questions is to learn to live with them.

In conclusion, we know that the word “facilitator” comes from the Latin meaning “easy”. That doesn't mean a facilitator has to make everyone's life easy, and it certainly doesn't mean that a facilitator's job is easy! The adventure of our job is often to make it easier for participants to work through that which is difficult.