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## Exploring the *soft* side of capacity development

The international debate on capacity development has long recognised the importance of *soft skills*, such as the ability to engage in negotiation or dialogue, to create a feeling of trust, to network and partner, and to facilitate process or change management. A myriad of manuals have been produced containing *tools for collaborative work* that are designed to develop such skills. What these publications often fail to discuss, though, is what is needed to put these tools to work and in particular, what skills facilitators need to possess to 'lubricate' collaborative change processes in order to make the wheels turn.

For this issue of *Capacity.org*, we invited students from the University of Guelph, Canada, to highlight some of the learning processes that facilitators undergo in adapting tools to ever-changing organisational contexts. We tried to look behind the scenes and examine an aspect of capacity development that is often taken for granted. The tools in question were used in three applied community projects in Guelph during the period between September and December 2004. Ricardo Ramirez, the course instructor, introduces the student contributors, who go on to discuss the role played by facilitators, how to set up participatory processes, and how to deal with time and conflict in facilitation.

As a secondary point, we would like to take this opportunity to draw your attention to the growing number of resources on capacity development available on the Internet.

A *thematic subsite* on *Capacity.org* presents the capacity dimensions of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). It features updates on the Development Gateway Capacity Development page, an initiative taken by UNDP and the World Bank Institute to enhance the network surrounding MDGs.

Another subsite highlights the ongoing discus-

sions on capacity development for ICT. We have also included a link to the Canadian CIDA-run extranet site on capacity development and its e-alert service, which disseminates the latest publications on policy-making for capacity development.

There is also a *related sites section*, linking into a multitude of very rich websites dealing with particular aspects of capacity development, such as NGO training, the environment, public sector reform and governance. In addition, we have created a *viewpoints section*, in which brief contributions from readers are posted. The latest postings include one from the International HIV-Aids Alliance, presenting a practical tool kit for designing, delivering and evaluating targeted capacity-building. Another posting presents various realities of community work in South Africa.

We should like to conclude by mentioning the next issue, in which we will be responding to comments made in the recent readership survey. The issue will also include accounts of experiences of government-donor agency coordination, from the perspective of central government units in various Asian countries. The next issue should be out in April 2005.

# Facilitation: the key to adapting tools for development

The list of manuals and booklets containing tools for facilitating collaborative work with communities is constantly growing. What these publications often fail to discuss, however, is what is needed to put these tools to work. What learning do facilitators need to undergo before they feel confident enough to use the tools? Who is best placed to use the tools? How can we ensure the tools are appropriate? How can facilitators explain the tools to their partners? How do facilitators adapt to changing organisational contexts? Are the tools really the answer? This issue highlights the learning processes that facilitators undergo in adapting tools to an ever-changing organisational capacity-building context.

I will never forget the time when a Kenyan farmer asked me - at the end of a long workshop - whether I ever used the same facilitation tools in my own country: 'Do you practice at home what you preach out here?' Although I was in fact working on similar lines with Canadian rural organisations, I have often found it harder to use the tools in the North. The experiences reported here are about adapting tools that are often developed for the South in the context of the North.

All the articles in this issue describe lessons from recent practical projects that took place as part of a graduate university course in Canada. The setting is the City of Guelph, in Ontario, located 90 km west of Toronto with a population of 110,000 and home to the University of Guelph. The 18 students in the 'Foundation of Capacity-Building and Extension' course took part in three projects in the neighbourhood of Shelldale between September and December 2004. The course is taught as part of the Masters programme in Rural Extension at the School of Environmental Design and Rural Development.

One group worked with Shelldale Services, an agency that provides child-care, counselling, breakfast for children, adult education and various health-care services in Guelph with

27 language groups within a one-kilometre radius. In other words, this is a part of the city where many immigrants settle. A second group sought to involve 10 community organisations in future 'service learning' projects to integrate work in the community as part of students' university courses. This emphasis on university involvement in the community is known locally as 'service learning'. The third group worked with librarians at the University of Guelph, helping them develop better tools for instructing students of social sciences and international development in the use of electronic library resources.

All three groups were encouraged to use the tools presented in the draft manual entitled 'Institutional development: Learning by doing and sharing', compiled by the ECDPM and the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs (see *Capacity.org* no. 20, January 2004), as well as other tools that looked promising. The articles in this issue present the lessons that emerged from the fieldwork in Guelph.

- The process of facilitation is not straightforward. Facilitators may find that they do not necessarily have enough credibility to introduce and use the tools. Some of the field partners may be more suited for this role, which means that the facilitators will become tool 'adaptors' and providers instead. The situation is comparable to that of a nurse handing instruments to a surgeon during an operation, and only actually helping if the surgeon needs 'more hands'. The facilitator has to play a new role: identifying needs, appreciating an evolving situation, and suggesting options.
- The participatory process is the key. It is the process more than the tools that matter. This means making commitments as transparent as possible. The time dimension is also important. Are we using tools to facilitate a process that has a long-term dimension? Do all the partners perceive the length of engagement and the stages of the process in the same manner?

- Time is a major challenge. Many tools require a time commitment that is unrealistic. Tools will often need to be adapted and this in turn requires a flexible approach.
- What can we do if we realise that not all parties are clear about the scope of what can be achieved? How can we accommodate conflicting views on what the capacity-building event is all about?

*Communication* emerged as a common theme throughout the projects. Communication can have many dimensions, but one common conclusion is the importance of reflecting on our use of language. Do we use terminology that all can understand? How do we build-in review points to confirm that we are all working in the same direction? As simple as it sounds, communication remains a key challenge as well as an opportunity for effective capacity-building.

One of the recurring notions in the social sciences is that of *soft systems*, i.e. the processes of negotiation that people need in order to work and co-create together. In our experience, the *soft system* is the learning that took place as facilitators attempted to use tools to help people work together. The tools were less important than the process of adjusting them to the situation. What was important was the *soft* side of capacity-building: the adaptation, the instinctive change of plans to respond to new circumstances, the attention for communication, and the constant effort to make sure that everyone was making sense of the process. In a nutshell, we learned that the *soft system* is what is needed to adapt tools for development. We hope this issue of *Capacity.org* helps sharpen the focus on the *soft* side of facilitation.

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# Who is an appropriate facilitator?

Facilitation can be a scary word, especially for those who have never done it before. Not surprisingly, therefore, some of us - students attending a course in capacity-building - were uncertain about what a facilitator is and needs to do. Learning from hands-on experience gave us a new insight into the purpose of facilitation. We were fortunate in being able to work with Kate Bishop, the Coordinator of the Shelldale Centre, who helped delineate the facilitation processes. Our role worked best when we identified and adapted new tools for Kate to use when arranging meetings with community members. Our experience taught us that Kate is the appropriate facilitator for the Shelldale organisation. However, we also became facilitators ourselves by providing her with tools that she can use in the future.

Rather than offering advice or personal opinions, the role of a facilitator is to guide people in discovering new approaches to problems. According to Keith Coriell (2001), the key characteristics of a good facilitator are:

1. asking others for their opinions rather than advancing their own;
2. compromising rather than dictating;
3. building relationships rather than being task-oriented;
4. adapting to changing situations;
5. maintaining objectivity;
6. effectively using skills to invoke participation and creativity;
7. being knowledgeable about client issues;
8. understanding and dealing with group dynamics.

All facilitators need to possess these characteristics. However, it is equally important to know who is the appropriate facilitator in a given situation. The basic requirement is that the facilitator must have some sort of relationship or familiarity with the client and

A key lesson that we learned from this experience is that facilitating does not necessarily mean actually running a meeting or mediating in a conflict. It can also mean helping someone else to do so. For example, we provided Kate with facilitation tools that she could use to plan her meetings with the community more effectively.



Photo: Ricardo Ramirez

The Guelph team

their issues. This enables the client to feel comfortable enough to provide adequate feedback and honest responses to questions.

When we first found out about Shelldale, our group was really keen to work with the community. However, after speaking to Kate Bishop, we realised that certain barriers needed to be overcome first. There were time constraints, we lacked an established rapport with the community, and we needed to be aware of ongoing tensions within the Shelldale Centre. We realised early on that it was not appropriate for us to be involved directly with the community. It was more appropriate for Kate to facilitate community meetings rather than have us as students acting as external facilitators. This was a more appropriate approach because Kate had already established a close rapport with community members, which meant they were actively engaged during the meeting.

As a result, we reformulated our strategy for capacity-building within the Shelldale Centre through Kate rather than the community members. We still had to go through the process of building trust with Kate, but this was a more achievable goal compared with trying to establish a relationship of trust over a short period of time with the communities living in the neighbourhoods served by the Centre. Once we had gained Kate's trust, we were able to supply her with tools that would enhance her facilitation skills during community meetings. We never imposed our

ideas, but rather suggested various tools that we felt might be helpful for her situation. We did this because we felt that, as the appropriate facilitator, *she would be more capable of deciding what would and would not work within the community and what modifications or combinations of tools would be needed.*

One of the suggestions we made to Kate was to combine a stakeholder analysis tool with a colour-coding tool. The combination of these produced a third tool known as an institution-gram. We suggested that Kate use this tool in order to satisfy the curiosity of community members as to how the Shelldale Centre was structured. So as to heighten the tool's effectiveness, we guided Kate through the process and listened to her reactions. For example, she did not want to show a hierarchical organisational chart, so we suggested using a diagram with concentric circles to show the Centre's key stakeholders.

Looking back on the experience, it is clear that external observers and facilitators need to ask themselves whether they are the right people for the task in hand. It is important to build relationships of trust with clients in order to obtain the right response.

Aliya Pardhan & Pamela Lamba.

With thanks to Marshall Gallardo Castaneda, Peter Sykanda, Heidi Braun, Kimberly Robson, Cassie Barker, Kate Bishop and Lorna Schwartzentruber.

### The disadvantages of external facilitators

Though facilitation is an important (yet often overlooked) aspect of organisational problem-solving and development, facilitation skills are often seen as assets that are not required in-house. Instead, organisations regularly use outside consultants for facilitation purposes on account of their assumed objectivity and experience. However, this tendency to use external facilitators fails to acknowledge the leadership skills and capacity already available among staff and

volunteers, and neglects opportunities for enhancing the capacity of these individuals.

Kate Bishop, our project contact and the Coordinator of the Shelldale Centre, felt that, whilst external facilitators may indeed provide objectivity, they tend to lack understanding and sensitivity. Though they may know about the latest facilitation tools, they do not always have the wisdom to use them in the right way. And, whilst they may have experience in a

variety of contexts, they are not likely to be familiar with the specific circumstances in hand. Hence her decision not to see this group of graduate students as unknown academics attempting to bring their facilitation message to the Shelldale community, but rather as partners helping to respond to issues and challenges that had recently arisen within the Centre.

Cassie Barker

## Building bridges through community service learning

'Community service learning' (CSL) means the integration of students into the community as a part of their university education. The goal is to bring universities and their communities closer together by providing opportunities for collaboration between students, faculty and community organisations. In this case, 'collaboration' means organising projects that help student to acquire certain skills by responding to the needs of community organisations. Great care needs to be taken to ensure that both sides benefit. This article describes the experience of a team of graduate students who developed a collaborative process for engaging ten community organisations in developing community service learning opportunities. This is just the beginning; we expect the process to evolve over the coming months and years. University-community linkages may be needed in many other countries, so readers of this newsletter may want to stay in touch as the journey unfolds.

Early on in the project, as we listened to the community voice, we realised that we were beginning to build a metaphorical bridge linking the two worlds of academia and community. The keystones here are honesty and trust.

As the University of Guelph plans to expand the number of its CSL courses, the need for enhanced community partnerships has become evident. After consulting a sample of community agencies about the most

realistic approach to creating the consultation process itself, our student group decided to embark upon a *process of active listening*. What emerged was very much the section of the ECDPM/DGIS manual on the Process Approach. Our primary goal was to give community agencies an opportunity to review their experiences and voice their understanding of what should be the characteristics of a healthy, long-term partnership with the university. These included the roles and responsibilities of both community and university, the resources both could share, and the challenges both would face. We offered as much flexibility as possible as to the method and degree of participation.

The first bridges had to be built within the facilitation team itself. A *process consultation approach to facilitation* requires a certain way of thinking and interacting that is more suited to certain personality types than to others. At the outset of the project, it became clear that our group members had very different perceptions of the task at hand. To resolve this problem, we used the *Insights Discovery Preference Evaluation Tool* (see Additional Resources) to position ourselves and get a sense of how each member perceived their role in the project.

As facilitators, we saw our role in the partnership building as 'interventionist', though with the aim of reshaping institutions and social relations that had sometimes failed to live up to expectations. The ten community organisations involved were first identified

from a list of over thirty, using the Stakeholders' Analysis tool. After a series of planning consultations, several semi-structured interviews were held. The purpose of the interviews was to identify the community organisations' expectations about their involvement with the university in 'service learning' activities. Those organisations which could not participate in the dialogue were contacted by means of open-ended questionnaires and phone interviews. The conversations and questionnaires allowed us to listen and interact with each other and become aware of each other's needs and assets.

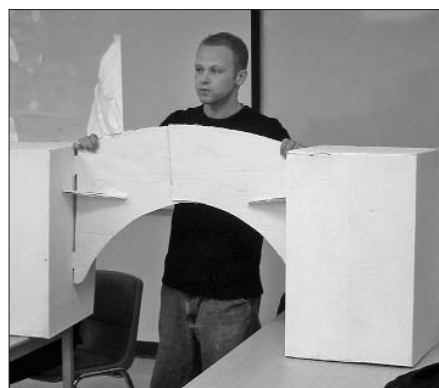


Photo: Ricardo Ramirez Adam presents the bridge as a metaphor

The interview process generated a large amount of data that required categorisation and prioritisation. In keeping with our desire to listen and to build relationships and trust with our community partners, we wanted to take a participatory, democratic approach to

data analysis. The tool best suited for this task was Visualisation in Participatory Programming (VIPP) from a UNICEF manual in Bangladesh (see Additional Resources). We modified the format of VIPP to suit our needs, particularly with respect to maintaining a relatively brief time frame for meeting with community partners.

The community organisations were brought in to review the flip charts (see text box) and make any necessary changes. Having thoroughly reviewed the charts, the stakeholders were invited to draft a concept map that would reflect their true sense of partnership. A concept map integrates the various interrelated issues that the participants contribute to a discussion.

A mind map revealed a need to appoint a liaison officer to coordinate future activities involving the community organisations and the university. The need for an effective communication channel also emerged, as the stakeholders expressed a need for a forum to exchange views on issues that did not require formal meetings. In addition, the stakeholders proposed meeting at least once a year, about the progress made and any additional steps that needed to be taken to strengthen the partnership.

We learned from the project that partnership is about effective collaboration through consultation and empowerment of all stakeholders, working together towards common goals and creating opportunities for

all voices to be heard. A primary goal of our project was to begin to neutralise the power imbalance that has arisen as universities have drifted away from their communities and their social responsibilities. We felt fortunate to be part of the early stages of what will necessarily be a long-term process.

*Adam Morrison, Richard Marfo, Rachel Farahbakhsh, Cheryl Rose and Donna McMillan.*

*With thanks to Janet Loveys, Lorna Schwartzentruber, Tracey DeMolder, Elizabeth deBergh, Mary Bridges, Bronwyn Smith, Sandra Pady, Sabina Chatterjee and Janet Brewster.*

#### Visualisation in Participatory Programming (VIPP).

The VIPP tool can be used for structuring large volumes of feedback. The response cards are transferred to flip charts (with one chart for each question). As themes emerge, they are given names and cards are grouped under each theme. Individual respondents are asked to verify that their input has been integrated appropriately. This means that each participant is a witness to the wealth of perspectives on offer and has an opportunity to verify where their contribution is located in the big picture, as well as to correct any problems of interpretation with their feedback.

#### How we used VIPP

Every single idea gathered from our discussions with community partners was written on an individual piece of coloured paper, with each question having its own colour. For example, question five asked for the respondents' views on healthy, effective partnerships. Each idea from each response was written on a gold piece of paper. All gold papers were collected and collated into groups based on content. So for question five, six categories resulted, including building reciprocal relationships, good communication, and sharing resources. Categories were posted on flip charts so that meeting participants would be able to browse categories and view the individual responses within each category. This format enabled participants to make any changes they felt to be necessary.

#### Insights Discovery Preference Evaluation Tool.

The Insights Discovery Preference Evaluation Tool is used to assess people's personalities and preferences. It is based on Jung's psychological types, which are grouped by colour: blues tend to be observers, reds are directors, greens play supportive roles, and yellows are inspirers. The tool came from Insights Canada in Toronto, who also provided an online form for completing the "evaluator" (see: [www.insights.com](http://www.insights.com)). Everyone who fills in the form receives a personalised assessment outlining their strengths and weaknesses and explaining how best to work with team members with different personalities.

## Resources / Further reading:

**Coriell, Keith J. 2001.** *Facilitator-A Definition.* Southwest Facilitators Network. [http://www.southwestfacilitatorsnetwork.org/\\_disc5/0000006.htm](http://www.southwestfacilitatorsnetwork.org/_disc5/0000006.htm).

**UNICEF Bangladesh. 1993.** *VIPP, Visualisation in Participatory Programmes: A manual for facilitators and trainers involved in participatory group events.* Programme Communication and Information Section. Dhaka: UNICEF Bangladesh.

**Lothian, A. 2003.** *Insights - A Brief Journey: The Condensed Insights Extract.* Calgary: Insights Learning & Development Ltd.

**Denning, S. 2002.** Technical cooperation and knowledge networks. In: Fukuda-Parr, S.; Lopes, C.; Malik, K. (eds). *Capacity for development : New solutions to old problems.* London and Sterling, VA: Earthscan Publications and UNDP.

On [www.capacity.org/resources](http://www.capacity.org/resources), section Tools, the following Facilitation Tools are described in more detail:

- Stakeholder Analysis
- Defining the Objectives of the Diagnosis
- Visioning or Realising Dreams
- Institutigramme

Download a PDF draft Booklet Institutional Development: Learning by Doing and Sharing from [www.capacity.org/20](http://www.capacity.org/20)

# Reflecting on TIME for facilitation

This article considers how socio-cultural perceptions of time affect the use of facilitation tools. A growing number of participatory tools are available to help facilitators, but how much account is taken of time when these tools are developed? Participatory processes that seek to engage communities take time to unfold, gather strength, and promote change. How long should this process take? How much time do participants have and how much are they willing to give? Where time is a concern, these are important questions to ask.

Rural life in Southern countries generally resists strict deadlines and time limits. Northerners working in the South find they must adapt and embrace a more flexible outlook on time, relaxing their expectations about departure times, appointments and schedules: 'No hurry in Africa!' While this may seem like a caricature, there is no denying that socio-cultural attitudes to time in the South value social interaction above punctuality. Failing to greet neighbours and friends is considered rude, and cultural norms virtually oblige people to take time out for regular social engagement.

In stark contrast, life in the North is governed by the clock. Punctuality is the expectation and wasting time is considered unacceptable. In the cities in particular, the pace is rushed and no one has time for anyone else. The Northern socio-cultural outlook on time values productivity above social engagement: 'Time is money!'

In both contexts, facilitators hoping to engage a community in a workshop or meeting must take account of the available time when planning their approach. A facilitator working in the North must pay particular attention as most participants are protective of their time and invoke considerable time pressures.

Our project at the Shelldale Centre centred on the preparation of a community meeting by the Centre's coordinator, Kate Bishop, for the purpose of presenting a revised Action Plan for the Centre's future activities.

The session needed to include:

- time to identify the individuals present;
- an opportunity to outline the background to the new plan;
- a chance to present the revised document; and finally,
- an evaluation component to gather community feedback.



Photo: Ricardo Ramirez Visualisation in Participatory Programming (VIPP)

The facilitator team working at Shelldale consulted the ECDPM Draft Booklet to see which tools could be used in planning the session. Although many were attractive, no single approach stood out as being entirely appropriate. As a result, we constructed the session by selecting bits and pieces from several different tools.

The 'Stakeholder Analysis' tool had appeal, and could be used to systematically identify the key actors present and assess their needs. The recommended time for this exercise is three hours. In order to revisit the past and present the new document, we turned to the 'Defining the Objectives of the Diagnosis' and 'Visioning or Realising Dreams' tools. Both were attractive as they focused on opportunities and positive factors in current situations. The 'Visioning or Realising Dreams' tool focuses on people's vision of the future. We used it to illustrate how the

Action Plan would lead Shelldale into the future. The time recommended for this tool is 60 to 90 minutes. The meeting was to conclude with an opportunity for community members to evaluate the session.

A session that combined the above tools would require at least 90 minutes and possibly more than four and a half hours. In reality, the coordinator had 45 minutes at her disposal, borrowed from a regular community neighbourhood meeting. Realising that the session would be constrained by time, we incorporated the key questions from each of the tools to plan a session that would achieve the goals and allow for an effective presentation of the revised Action Plan.

Interestingly, the coordinator in turn adapted our plan for the session. The Stakeholder Analysis and evaluation components were not actually implemented due to lack of time.

In our experience with Shelldale, time constraints limited our choice of tools. We used our creativity to adapt and combine tools and planned a session to meet the coordinator's needs. While the coordinator was able to present the Action Plan to the community using the adapted tools, the question is: what was lost by making the session more time-sensitive? Moreover, given the strict time constraints, how appropriate are these tools when employed in a Northern context?

When we decide to facilitate an intervention, do we implicitly assume people have the necessary time to give? What are our assumptions when we are working with a community in the South? How do these assumptions change if we are employed in a Northern context? The tools described in the Draft Booklet require time that people in the North are not accustomed to giving. Does this suggest we assume people in the South have an abundance of time to give?

*Heidi Braun, Marshall Gallardo Castaneda and Peter Sykanda.*

*With thanks to Kimberly Robson, Cassie Barker, Aliya Pardhan, Pamela Lamba, Kate Bishop and Lorna Schwartzentruber.*

# Using facilitation to solve an ICT problem

## Context

This article reports on a project to support the University of Guelph library in its efforts to train social sciences students to access its increasingly sophisticated on-line systems. This project was undertaken in an attempt to narrow the gap between students' 'information literacy' skills and a technology that is developing extremely fast. Our experience illustrates the challenges involved in helping people use new information and communication technologies.

## The difficulty of setting goals

Our experience illustrates the difficulties involved in building the capacity required by students to take full advantage of information technology. Both our own experience and our brainstorming session with classmates suggested that most students had difficulty fixing the point at which to start their research. Also, critical information about research tools was either too general to be helpful or too widely dispersed throughout the library website. As a student team, we tried to respond to the needs of both other graduate students and the librarians. We proposed developing a web portal for graduate students to help them navigate the library's website. The rationale for this was that students needed to search for relevant information across a range of different sources. This portal could help them focus on proven sources of relevant information. Our discussions with librarians indicated that they also supported the idea of creating a 'getting started' portal for students.

Misconceptions about the scope of the challenge and inconsistent communication led to assumptions about roles and objectives that were not clear to all stakeholders. This, in turn, led to our stakeholders feeling left out. The problem was compounded by the fact that the technology and services were constantly evolving, and we were trying to become familiar enough with them to assist others in learning to use them. We came to think of this challenge as a moving target.

We became very task-focused in designing this portal in response to the needs of our

A draft booklet called 'Institutional Development: Learning by Doing and Sharing' (ECDPM and DGIS: 2004) describes a process approach. It claims that a valid and effective solution to complex problems can be found only if all relevant stakeholders are involved to a greater or lesser extent in the entire process, from the definition of the problem right through to the solution. In our case, we failed to secure the full participation of all stakeholders due to poor communication. The booklet sets out various reasons for using a process approach to deal with complex problems. Three of these reasons, commitment, dynamics and transparency in decision-making, were essential to our project. Stakeholders must be committed to the process for it to be implemented effectively. A process approach adapts to changing contexts and focuses on the 'how' as much as on the 'what'. Transparency of decision-making: all stakeholders must know what stage the process has reached and how decisions are taken. The crisis forced us to review these aspects and drove home their importance to us.

peers. In doing so, however, we neglected to thoroughly clarify our goals with our librarian partners. Our librarian partners increasingly realised that our portal would be rendered obsolete as the library refined its website technology. *In a nutshell, we had developed goals that our partners felt were unrealistic.* When we realised this was the case, it was clear we had a crisis on our hands.

The crisis proved to be a learning opportunity that prompted us to redefine our goals.

## Recovering from a conflict

Recovering from conflict can be difficult and confusing. Hearing that stakeholders feel left out of a process can easily result in frustration, confusion and disenchantment. Initial enthusiasm and energy can quickly sour as they are displaced by questions about people's roles.

Recovery, to some degree, can come through the intervention of a third-party facilitator with skills in mediating conflict - in our case, our course instructor. By using a variety of methods - reflecting, drawing and, of course,

the meta-plan technique (using slips of paper that are posted on a wall) - stakeholders can visualise each other's expectations and views, and at the same time highlight key weaknesses in communication between parties. In our case, we followed a step-by-step process:

- We first visualised what the end product should look like.
- We then visualised how the end product would be used. The resultant diagrams exposed assumptions that had not been made explicit before.
- We then listed the stakeholders in the project to see how many parties were actually involved.
- Finally, we developed a matrix showing the activities on the Y axis and the stakeholders on the X axis. Although we did not complete this matrix, it did underline the need to consider the nature of the parties involved in each activity.

As one of the outcomes of this process, we decided to redefine our goals. In particular, we realised that we could be more inclusive of the needs of our librarian partners. We refocused on documenting the challenges faced by students in attempting to access information resources. We organised a computer-based focus group session at which students recorded the strategies they used and the difficulties they encountered when performing searches. We gave our librarian partners a copy of our report on the focus group session, to assist in the library's plans to introduce new web technology in the near future.

Our objective shifted from the organisation of an instructional workshop for our peers to the formation of a focus group on the research challenges experienced by our peers. The focus group made clear that our peers wanted further opportunities for guided use of the library's research interfaces.

## Lessons learned

We reframed the project in the wake of the group session with our facilitator. At the start of the project, our understanding of our task

was that we would be adding to the existing library website. After our conflict, we realised that the library was in the process of adopting a whole new concept of web-based access. Other lessons included:

- As effective communication is the linchpin of any successful project, so miscommunication is the most common cause of the downfall of collaborative processes. It is important to make sure that all stakeholders have a common understanding of every aspect of the project. By creating an enabling environment that fosters effective communication, a project team can gain the trust, commitment and collaborative participation of all stakeholders.
- It is extremely important to define the needs and goals of all clients before embarking on a project. The transition from group brainstorming to a group task needs to be undertaken with enough time to ensure that all uncertainties and confusions have been dispelled. Our experience suggests that the role played by a facilitator is very likely more complex and challenging than we had assumed. In some instances, defining specific goals is not as simple as one might expect; the client's context may be rapidly evolving, and the facilitator may be basing his or her assumptions on limited information.
- We learned that conflict and negativity can have devastating effects on any working partnership and that both can occur in any setting and to any degree. The need to over-



Photo: Ricardo Ramirez

Concept map developed with the partners

come such hurdles is critical to the success of any capacity-building project. Indeed, their presence emphasises the need for clarity about roles and expectations from the very outset. A common language does not remove all potential terminological barriers. Libraries are technologically complex entities undergoing continuous systematic growth. Changing technology and barriers associated with systems create a terminology gap between librarians and their clients (i.e. students and faculty).

Denning (2002) describes the importance of social facilitation in enabling people to take full advantage of information technology. In our context, we were trying to help students

improve their information literacy. This is a skill that allows learners to become problem-solvers in exploring electronic information sources. Acquiring this skill requires the type of facilitation described by Denning. Denning also points out that the acquisition of tacit know-how (i.e. the unconscious domain of how we learn to act) is more likely to take place in settings where people can informally exchange views with knowledgeable practitioners. This was certainly our own experience.

Roslynn Brain, Kathleen Hyland,  
Franklin Kutuadu, Elizabeth Kent, Krista Moyer and  
Claire Pitt

The European Centre for Development Policy Management (ECDPM) launched Capacity.org as a tool for development researchers, practitioners and decision-makers. As a website and a newsletter, Capacity.org combines information on capacity development policy and practice within international development cooperation with debate on policy issues and practical experiences. It acts as a platform for dialogue by providing a channel for informed review and synthesis of the complex issues faced by development practitioners and policy-makers.

Focusing on both the 'why' and the 'how' of capacity development, Capacity.org seeks to unravel the complexity of ideas and practices underpinning the term 'capacity development'. To achieve this, the editors particularly encourage the exchange of perspectives and experiences from the South, so as to ensure that discussions are rooted in reality.

Our aim is to make Capacity.org a joint effort, mobilising and sharing a range of capacities and expertise. Interested individuals and organisations can help make Capacity.org an effective communication tool for people seeking to alleviate poverty through capacity development by contributing information, lessons, ideas, opinions and feedback. Any offers of co-finance or for linking up with related initiatives are very welcome.

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All the articles in this issue describe lessons from recent practical projects that took place as part of a graduate university course in Canada.

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