Exploring the Language of Facilitation

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Abstract

Whilst language is the means by which facilitation is realised, there has been little research to date investigating language use in facilitation.

Through the design of an online reflective practice survey, this paper explores facilitators' perceptions of language use in facilitation. The paper presents results from the online reflective practice survey involving 140 facilitators from around the world.

The paper establishes that like the language of business, or the language of politics, there may be an emerging language of facilitation, with facilitators implicitly understanding what it means to "speak facilitatively". Indeed, speaking facilitatively appears to be based on respect and can be characterised by the use of linguistic politeness devices.

While spoken language plays an important part in facilitation, our survey participants strongly indicated that body language is as important as spoken language, and that spoken language is only a part of the 'complete facilitation package'. Finally, the use of metaphor for investigating facilitator styles is found to be a useful tool for revealing core facilitator values.

Keywords: Speaking facilitatively, politeness, metaphor, spoken language, body language

Introduction

"When **I** use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean, neither more nor less."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you *can* make words mean so many different things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master – that's all."

--Lewis Carol, Alice in Wonderland

Language is all around us. Like a fish in water, we are immersed in language, through words, every day. As Hall (2005) describes, one may think of language as a spell. "In our daily lives, we operate as though under a spell, content to know that language is there, but not able to see it plainly or penetrate its mystery... The

language spell keeps most of the extraordinary nature of human language tidily in the background as we concentrate on the messages it conveys." (Hall, 2005)

In business and organisations it may come as no surprise that there is an attitude favouring action over talk (Weick, 2004), yet in many ways it is through the very act of talking and speaking that sense is made and action enacted (Weick, 2005).

Recent popular press publications such as Management Speak (Greatbatch et al. 2005), CEO Speak (Amernic et al. 2006) and Don't think of an elephant (Lackoff, 2004) all point towards the uniqueness of language use and "speak" within specific contexts such as by management "gurus", business executives and politicians.

As Koestler (2004, p. 2) mentions, "institutional talk" differs from ordinary conversation in a number of ways:

1. Goal orientation – participants in workplace conversations usually focus on specific tasks or goals
2. Turn-taking rules or restrictions – in some professional contexts (eg. the courtroom) there are special turn-taking rules in operation. But even if no special rules exist, there may be unwritten restrictions on who speaks when
3. Allowable contributions – there may be restrictions on what kinds of contributions are considered 'allowable'
4. Professional lexis – the use of professional jargon specific to the work place
5. Structure – workplace and professional interactions may be structured in specific ways
6. Asymmetry – workplace and professional interactions are often asymmetrical, that is often one speaker has more power and/or special knowledge than the other.

In nature the concept of an ecosystem refers to a community of plants, animals, and microorganisms that are linked by energy and nutrient flows that interact with each other and with the physical environment. Similarly, we could consider language use in different domains such as business, politics and facilitation to form specific ecosystems. In the same ways that "institutional talk" may be considered different from ordinary conversation, this research paper has grown from the question – "Is there such a thing as facilitator talk/speak?" or even "Is there a language of facilitation?" and "how might 'facilitator speak' be contrasted to other language ecologies such as those found in business or politics?"

To "speak facilitatively" one might say is more than communicating information or a task; more than an exchange between individuals. It is also a tone that is set by the facilitator to provide an environment in which individuals, and the group, can do whatever it is they need to do. This appears to be common across all styles of facilitation, no matter what process is used. The Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA) might describe this as the Experiential Aim (Spencer, 1989). This can be described as 'what the group needs to experience in the workshop'. The language a facilitator uses is one way of meeting the experiential aims of the meeting.

In many ways, the language of facilitation may be expected to reflect core values held by facilitators. Such values are reflected in the IAF's statement of values, one which involved extensive dialogue and a wide diversity of views from IAF members from around the world and one which involved a consensus being achieved across regional and cultural boundaries (IAF Statement of Values @ www.iaf-world.org).

"As group facilitators, we believe in the inherent value of the individual and the collective wisdom of the group. We strive to help the group make the best use of the contributions of each of its members. We set aside our personal opinions and support the group's right to make its own choices. We believe that collaborative and cooperative interaction builds consensus and produces meaningful outcomes. We value professional collaboration to improve our profession." (IAF Statement of Values @ www.iaf-world.org)

Although there are some works exploring the asking of questions in facilitation (Hogan, 2003; Strachan, 2001; Gregory et al 2001; Stanfield, 1997), and also some exploration of cross-cultural facilitation (Hogan, 2005; Charles 2004), where language issues can be clear challenges to facilitation, to date there has been very little work exploring actual language use in facilitation (see Clifton, 2006; Garmston, 2003 and Yeung, 2004 for exceptions[1]).

Whilst spoken language within facilitation may arise through facilitator competencies (Hogan, 2003) such as active listening, paraphrasing, questioning and summarising, non-verbal communication such as body language must also be considered. As described in (Fails, 2003):
"The facilitator's interest in what is being said will be communicated through his or her body language. For example, holding your hands palms up when asking something of a participant indicates openness. Positive body language demonstrates energy and enthusiasm. Meeting participants will take their cues from the facilitator and respond accordingly."

Through the exploration and analysis of results from a world-wide survey inviting facilitators to reflect and share their thoughts, attitudes and perceptions around language in facilitation, this paper explores three key areas from the results of the reflective practice survey. These are:

1. Developing an understanding of what "facilitator speak" may be and the construction of a glossary of facilitative language;
2. Exploring facilitator values through the use of metaphor indicating six key facilitator styles; and

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[1] A search was conducted through the databases of ABI/Inform Global (ProQuest), Academic Search Premier (EBSCO), AIM Management and Training (Informit), Business Source Premier (EBSCO), Emerald, MEDGE Management and Environment (Informit), Social Sciences Citation Index (ISI) with the terms "facilitation and talk", "facilitation and speak", "facilitation and language" and "facilitation and discourse". This search returned a total of 794 records of which 178 records were deemed of any relevance. The final relevant papers have been presented.

3. The apparent importance of congruency between the spoken word and facilitator body language.

Methodology

In January 2006 the authors sent an invitation to facilitators to join in a world-wide reflective practice focused around language in facilitation. The reflective practice initially invited the community of facilitators interested in the praxis of facilitation to complete a 'reflective practice template' (See Appendix B) either during or after a facilitated session and send the completed template in to the authors. As the saying "We only know what we know when we need to know it" reflects, many facilitators found this approach to the reflective practice difficult to engage with, and this initial approach had a very low participation rate.

The authors decided, given the difficulties of trying to explore language use through this template approach, that personal interviews with facilitators may provide a deeper way of exploring language in facilitation. The authors conducted interviews with some well known facilitators such as Sandy Schuman, Brian Bainbridge and Larry Peterson. These interviews commenced with an exploration of the authors' notion of "open language", a style of language which may be considered to "open" up conversation. For the authors, these interviews revealed 4 core areas:

1. To speak facilitatively involves saying something and inviting more thought, as compared to a phrase that might close things down such as "what do you think?"
2. Language is behavioural and incorporates elements of body language.
3. "Open language" is an attitude style which then emerges in language.
4. Engaging words are ones that relate to opening, opening things up, opening the "possibilities" is another word, "exploring" is another word, using words that open things up do that. There are words like "givens" that tend to close things down. When facilitators say that there are "givens", there are some things that create the boundaries for a certain conversation.

From listening and analysing these interviews the authors designed an online reflective practice survey (see Appendix A) which substantially broadened the facilitator enquiry of language in facilitation. The survey was designed to provide an opportunity to further explore these core areas with facilitators. The online survey was designed using SurveyMonkey and the link distributed by email listservs such as the Australian Facilitators Network (AFN), Open Space List (OSLIST), and Group Facilitation (GF) list as well as to those facilitators who had joined the initial praxis community.

To analyse the qualitative results from the survey, the authors used a common methodology where the data sets were analysed to provide units of meaning which were grouped to provide categories from which themes were abstracted (Stringer, 2004).

Results

The survey respondents

Out of the 140 facilitators who responded to the reflective practice survey on language in facilitation (see Appendix A for survey questions), Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of facilitators' experience. Almost 60% of our participants had more than 10 years experience. Given that 10 years is the time recognised as developing expertise in an area (Leonard et al. 2005), the online reflective practice survey appears to contain many experienced practitioners' views and perspectives.
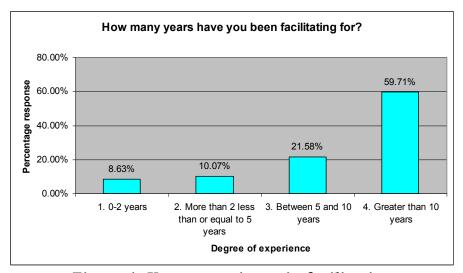
How many years have you been facilitating for?

Degree of experience	Percentage response
1. 0-2 years	8.63%
2. More than 2 less than or equal to 5 years	10.07%
3. Between 5 and 10 years	21.58%
4. Greater than 10 years	59.71%

Figure 1: Years experience in facilitation

Table 1 lists the types of facilitation approaches that our reflective practice members selected as those they regularly used. The majority of the facilitative processes used included Open Space Technology, Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA) methods (Technoloy of Participation), Appreciative Inquiry and World Café.

Table 1: Facilitation approaches used

Facilitation approaches	Number of respondents
Schwarz "Skilled facilitator"	3
Visual & Graphic Facilitation	3
Action Learning	5
No such thing! (Depends on requirements)	5
Future Search	6
My Own	6
Story/Narrative approaches	7
Experiential styles	7
Conventional approaches	10
Other	12
World Café	23

Appreciative Inquiry	24
Technology of Participation	26
Open Space Technology	45

Understanding facilitator speak

Responses to the question "What do you understand by the term *speaking facilitatively*?" (see Appendix A, Question 2) were analysed by the authors to produce categories and themes as described in the methodology. For the facilitators who contributed to the reflective practice survey, their understanding of speaking facilitatively fell into two broad themes of **what the facilitator does** and **the effect on the group**.

What the facilitator does

The following categories illustrate in detail the broad themes abstracted around what the facilitator does. The categories are supported by examples.
The categories are:

- Honouring/respecting (paying attention) to the group and individuals in the group;
  - "Speaking in a way that honours each person in the group and invites them, in a variety of ways, to enter into deeper awareness with the collective spirit of the group"

- Providing a climate of safety/trust;
  - "Inclusively, questioningly, collaboratively, speaking in a language and tone that encourages people to feel comfortable and to contribute to a conversation in a safe, non-judgmental environment"

- Being neutral/objective/unbiased;
  - "Using open-ended, neutral questions – and keeping myself and my views out of the discussion"

- Encouraging inclusiveness;
  - "Opening, inclusive and explorational"

- Enabling engagement (in a process);
  - "Using language to invite participation and interaction"

- Ensuring clarity;
  - "Speaking using clarity, questioning, and supportively"

- Being instructional; and
  - "Language that tells people where they should go next (in the process)"

- Generating understanding
  - "Asking questions – proposing links".

Effect on the group

The following categories illustrate in detail the broad themes abstracted around the facilitator's effect on the group. The categories are supported by examples.
The categories are:

- Opening up;
    - "Encouraging the members to open up and connect to the issue at hand"
    - "Using language that supports dialogue rather than debate"

- Reaching an end point;
    - "Speaking or using language which helps the group gain clarity and encourage movement towards their stated objectives"

- Surfacing diverse ideas/thoughts;
    - "Stimulating dialogue while at the same time opening the dialogue up to others"

- Being part of the whole; and
    - "Engaging others to be a part of the group's conversation enabling participants to have a space for sharing and being a part of the greater conversation"

- Enabling participation
    - "Offering maximum choice and maximum participation".

For six people, a small minority, the term "speaking facilitatively" was unheard of or made no sense.

A glossary of facilitative language

As described in the introduction, this paper seeks to start the exploration of the ecosystem of language in facilitation and provide a possible contrast to other forms of language use found in other contexts such as the language used by business executives, management gurus or politicians. From the results to the question "List some words or phrases you use to engage/connect with others in your facilitation practice" (see Appendix A Question 4) the authors have commenced exploring the ecosystem of language in facilitation. Table 2 provides a proposed glossary of facilitative language and their corresponding facilitative behaviours as analysed using the categorical and thematic approach described in the methodology.

Table 2: Glossary of facilitative language

Facilitator Behaviours	Examples of facilitative language
Setting of ground rules	"Our purpose today…" "What is the purpose of our meeting?" "What would be the ideal outcome?" "Where do you want to have got to when we go out that door?" "Relax and enjoy the journey" "Everyone's opinion is valued, there are no wrong answers" "All ideas are valued" "It's an honour to work with you"
Acknowledging participants' contributions	"That's an excellent thought. You are very (sincere praise)." "That interests me, say more" "Thank you for sharing" "Great- good- I like it- excellent- Spot on"
Probing	"Say more…" "Can you say more about…" "Could you say more?" "Tell me more about that…" "Can you tell me more about that?" "Please, tell me more about that." "Yes, please go on." "Say more about that if you will…" "Please tell me more about what you mean when you stated…" "Tell us a little more about this."
Garnering participation	"I'm wondering how this might look/appear/feel/seem to you?" "I invite you to…" "I'd like to invite you to participate in…" "Tell me about a time when…" "I'm curious to know what others think" "What do others think?" "Does anyone else have [something]?"
Reflecting and clarifying	"What I have heard is…" "Am I correct in observing that…" "So what you're saying is…" "What I'm hearing is…Is that right?" "Please clarify" "What I hear you saying…" "Can you help me be more clear in my mind about…"

Facilitator styles

While the use of metaphors undoubtedly are a part of a facilitator's tool kit (of the 67% respondents who answered Question 9 in Appendix A, many claimed "too many to list"), the metaphors describing their style of facilitation provides insight into facilitator styles and may also provide a way of exploring core values held by facilitators.

Analysis of the metaphors provided by facilitators that described their styles of facilitation produced an emergence of six key styles. Those were:

- movement with the elements;

This is the most common metaphor used to describe the facilitation style: "a fluid river"; "surfing, sailing, going with the flow"; "flight of an autumn leaf"

- grounded but flexible/responsive;

"a willow tree"; "orchestra conductor"; "dancer"; "performer"

- catalyses a change or shift;

"yeast"; "a drop of soluble oil"

- has 'special' or seemingly 'magical' properties;

"amazon chameleon"; "babel fish"; "anablep fish"

- a guide; and

"midwife"; "tour guide"; "parent holding a bicycle and letting go"

- is in charge

"dictator"; "traffic cop".

The three most popular metaphors where 'movement with the elements' (18% of respondents), 'grounded but flexible' (12% of respondents) and 'a guide' (12% of respondents). Figure 2 illustrates the results from asking respondents to self-rate their visibility as a facilitator (See Appendix A Question 2). It is interesting to note that from our analysis 11% of facilitators used metaphors that could be classified as 'movement with the elements' to describe their style of facilitation and also self-rated themselves to be 'invisible' in their degree of visibility in facilitation. Noticeably low are self-ratings in the 'highly visible' area. This could raise an interesting question regarding the perception or expectation of facilitators being extroverted performers.
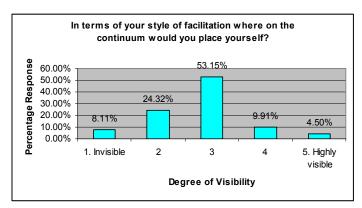
In terms of your style of facilitation where on the continuum would you place yourself?

Figure 2: Spectrum of visibility of facilitation styles

Relationship between the spoken language and body language

With the recognition of body language being an important if not integral component to facilitation and the exploration of language in facilitation, Figure 3 presents the results to Question 5 in Appendix A. This question asked for facilitators to rate the relative importance of body language with respect to spoken language in their facilitation practice. Overwhelmingly, facilitators described the importance of a congruency between spoken language and body language. That is, body language is as important as spoken language.

Please rate the relative importance of body language with respect to spoken language in your facilitation practice
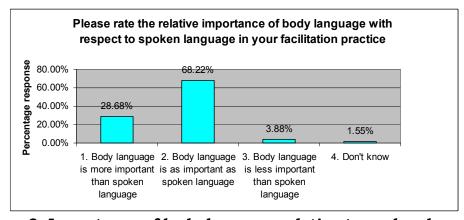
Figure 3: Importance of body language relative to spoken language

Question 6 in Appendix A provided the authors a way to delve deeper into the relationship between spoken and body language by inviting facilitators to describe the relationship between spoken language and body language when they are facilitating. While there were some facilitators who were either unaware of their body language or didn't know, the broad themes unearthed some interesting perceptions around congruency, authenticity, presence and rapport building with a group. These themes, which emerged along with their supporting statements, are:

- Body language needs to be congruent/consistent with spoken language

"There is a general belief that it is important to be sending the same or consistent messages to a group – both verbal and non-verbal."

- Body language is equally as important as spoken language; sometimes it's more important

"I don't privilege either of these. I see them as both equally important but in different ways."

"They are both ways of communicating – to ignore one or the other would result in a lesser outcome that (sic) may have been possible."

"Often I am not quick on my feet with language, so my body language often carries the day. When my body language signals quiet confidence, open engagement and curiosity, the group stays with me despite stumbles and lapses."

- Body language and spoken language help contribute to facilitator authenticity

"People judge you (the facilitator) on how you look, how you sound and how you organise what you say."

"Both spoken language and body language flow directly from presence, authenticity, and devotion to the role of being a space holder."

- Some pay attention to body language (their own and others) as a way of building group rapport

"I tailor my body language according to the group needs."

Discussion

As suggested by Sandy Schuman in the authors' early interviews, "language is a behaviour". Language within facilitation can be considered to emerge through facilitative behaviours. Hogan (2003) has described common facilitative behaviours such as active listening, maximising participation and probing. From the online reflective practice survey results it appears that spoken language can provide a window into facilitator effectiveness and also provide insight into facilitator styles and their core values.

The reflective practice survey results provide evidence of facilitators, at their best, being polite, effective communicators. As described by Holmes (1995, p. 222), polite effective communicators exhibit behaviours such as:
- they are responsive, active listeners, giving support and encouragement to their conversation partners;
- they ask facilitative questions which encourage others to contribute to the discussion;
- express appreciation regularly (positive politeness strategies); and
- lessen the force of potentially face threatening acts such as directives, refusals and criticisms.

Polite communication is based on mutual respect between speaker and listener, respecting each other's face needs (Brown & Levinson, 1987). The concept of 'face needs' refers to the desired public self-image that every person wants to claim for themselves. This concept can be most readily understood in the everyday enactment of the expressions "to save face", "to lose face" or "to have egg on your face".

Brown and Levinson (1987) have identified two forms of linguistic politeness: positive politeness and negative politeness. A speaker who uses a positive politeness strategy is showing respect for the listener's positive face (the need to be liked), and builds solidarity between the speaker and the listener. For example, "Great example Joan!". On the other hand, a speaker who uses a negative politeness strategy is showing respect for the listener's negative face (the need not to be imposed upon), and is showing restraint. For example, "Would you be able to offer an example please Joan?".

Within this study we have found facilitators to use both positive and negative politeness strategies within their facilitation practice. Positively polite facilitative behaviours from our study include acknowledging participants' contributions, as in "Thank you for sharing" (see Table 2 for further examples). Most facilitative behaviours within our study appear to be negative politeness strategies. For example, in encouraging participation "I'd like to invite you to participate in…" or when probing "Please tell me more about what you mean when you stated…".

With these negatively polite utterances there appears to be a politeness spectrum (see Table 2), with utterances ranging from less polite, (eg. "Say more…") to intermediately polite, (eg. "Say more about that if you will…") to most polite (eg. "Please say more about what you mean when you stated…"). The degree of negative politeness is related to the directiveness of the request, with the least polite utterances being the most directive, and the most polite utterances being the least directive.

Hedging is a linguistic device that softens the force of an utterance such as a request. Take for example the request, "Could you please, possibly, tell me more, if you will?". The words "possibly" and "could" act as hedges in the most polite form of "tell me more". Increasing the number of hedges results in the statement becoming more indirect, and hence more negatively polite. Hedging forms a heuristic that facilitators can use as a means of achieving greater politeness in their communication.

In addition, much facilitator language incorporates 'embedded commands'. This is described by James and Shepherd (2001) as a 'command wrapped up or embedded in a longer sentence, so that it communicates more to the unconscious mind. In that way it is more likely to create compliance. In the examples above the embedded command is 'tell me more'.

While spoken language plays an important part in facilitation, our survey participants strongly indicated that body language is as important as spoken language. Hence spoken language is only a part of the 'complete facilitation package'. This study of language in facilitation has highlighted, in particular, the

importance of the relationship between facilitator and group – whereby it's necessary for effective facilitation for there to be open and effective communication (Luft, 1961).

Beebe et al (2002) describe non-verbal communication as the primary way in which people communicate feelings and attitudes toward each other; and that these messages are usually more believable than verbal messages. Furthermore, they suggest that nonverbal communication plays a major role in relationship development. This study confirms that facilitators either implicity understand this, or explicitly use nonverbal communication (body language) as a part of their approach to facilitating.

Finally, this survey invited facilitators to describe a metaphor which they felt described their style of facilitation. Given the problem of espoused values versus values in action, or, what we say we do versus what we actually do (Argyris et al 1974), this metaphor question appeared to provide a direct entry into facilitators values in action.

As presented in the introduction, the IAF core values suggest that "as group facilitators, we believe in the inherent value of the individual and the collective wisdom of the group". It is interesting to note that the top 3 metaphors of 'movement with the elements', 'grounded but flexible' and 'a guide' all seem congruent with these core values. Only one specific metaphor appeared in direct opposition to these core values and that was the metaphor of "Dictator".

Conclusion

This research paper developed the question of "Is there is such a thing as 'speaking facilitatively'?". Thinking in terms of ecologies of language use, it is asking whether there may be a particular style of communication, and language, inherent within the practice of facilitation. Our findings indicate that facilitators do have an implicit understanding of what it means to 'speak facilitatively'. Furthermore, this style of speech appears to be based on respect for the group and encompasses linguistic politeness devices. Whilst the survey focussed on spoken language, our participants clearly indicated that facilitation depended as much on body language as spoken language. Finally, for the majority, the facilitator styles revealed through the question in regard to metaphor appeared to indicate core values in congruence with the established IAF core values statement.

A key limitation of this current study should be noted. This study was conducted through the use of an online survey tool. As a result, the survey depended on facilitators reading, interpreting and recalling answers to the survey questions. The authors would like to note the difference between "what we say we do", and "what we actually do", as noted in the discussion. Especially in regard to spoken language phenomena, it is conceivable that there is a considerable gap between

what facilitators think they do with language as opposed to what actually happens in 'the heat of the moment' during a facilitated session. This research paper provides a clear benchmark and starting point to which further work can extend and explore.

Increasing our awareness and understanding of facilitator language is a part of the continuing journey towards effective facilitation. Future studies and research in this area could investigate the interplay of spoken language and body language as they actually appear in the unfolding of real life facilitation through the use of video and audio recordings.

Given a facilitators position, relative to the group participants, there is the chance the facilitator may be perceived to hold, or exert high status/power. To this end, the facilitator may often need to lower their status, and in effect hand over the floor to the group. By using polite language and embedded commands, facilitators may have a means of lowering their status in a group. Future research could investigate these links of status/power and language in facilitation.

This study hopes to have served as a starting point for future exploration and discussion on language in facilitation.

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Appendix A: Reflective practice survey on language in facilitation

1. How many years have you been facilitating for?
    1. 0-2 years
    2. more than 2 less than or equal to 5 years
    3. between 5 and 10 years
    4. greater than 10 years

2. In terms of your style of facilitation where on the contiuum would you place yourself:
    1. Invisible
    2.
    3.
    4.
    5. Highly visible

3. What do you understand by the term "speaking facilitatively" ?

4. List some words or phrases you use to engage / connect with others in your facilitation practice.

5. Please rate the relative importance of body language with respect to spoken language in your facilitation practice:
    1. Body language is more important than spoken language
    2. Body language is as important as spoken language
    3. Body language is less important than spoken language.
    4. Don't know

6. Describe the relationship between spoken language and body language when you're facilitating.

7. Describe how you adapt your language to different groups or situations

8. Realistically, how conscious are you of the language that you use while facilitating?
    1. Not Aware!
    2.
    3.
    4.
    5. Very Aware!

9. What metaphors, if any, would you use when facilitating?

10. Is there a metaphor that describes your style of facilitation?

11. What facilitation approaches (eg. Open Space, World Cafe etc) do you commonly use?

12. Do you use different language for these different approaches? If so, please describe.

13. Please feel free to make any other comments or suggestions

Appendix B: Facilitator Reflective Practice - Language Recording Sheet

	Type of Group	No. of people in the group			Main purpose of the discussion
CONTEXT	ρ Corporate ρ Government ρ Board ρ Community ρ Other ……………… ………………..	Male………………………………… Female……………………………. Total………………………………..			ρ Planning ρ Decision-making ρ Indiv/group development ρ Info exchange ρ Other …………………… …………….
	Word/phrase	**Open or closed language**	**Observed effect on group**	**Your feelings towards the observed effect**	**Other comments**
LANGUAGE USE					