

CHAPTER 10

Learning from Emotions



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Unlocking
the
MAGIC
of
Facilitation

Unlocking the Magic of Facilitation:
11 Key Concepts You Didn't Know You Didn't Know
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Learning from Emotions

"I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."

- Maya Angelou

There was an auditorium full of college students, and Sam had just finished performing a show about navigating the concepts of identity and social justice. After some claps, Sam moved into an open Q&A with the crowd, where his general rule is “You can ask me anything, as long as it’s not about my nipple¹.”

¹ Sam sometimes tells a story onstage about how his mom double-dog dared him to do a big jump on his rollerblades, he fell, and ripped his nipple off. Then it grew back. So there. Now you know, and don’t have to ask.

A student raised his hand. He identified himself, then explained that he often offends people by accident, by using the wrong language, though his intentions are always kind. He said “It really sucks when it happens. What am I supposed to do?” Sam could hear an intense sadness in his voice.

Sam replied, “How does it make you feel when that happens?”

“Like I’m a bad *person*.”

At this point, Sam was forced to put his facilitator cap on and make a choice we often make: between the two roads of intellectualizing or emotionalizing. And like in Frost’s poem, we are sorry, but you cannot travel both.

The intellectual road (where Sam might lay out steps to help the student rebound, or explain why intentions don’t matter as much as the outcome, etc.) is often the one we choose. It feels safe. That path is worn, the steps are marked, the view is clear. But this chapter is about the road less traveled by, the road Sam chose that night.

WHY WE WALK THE EMOTIONAL ROAD

In our upbringing, we² were socialized against showing emotions in public, professional settings, or learning spaces. We were taught that emotions would get in the way of our ability to contribute or benefit. In some ways, this is true: creating a space for and acknowledging emotions does get in the way of intellectualizing, but that’s not always a bad

2 The “we” here is meant to refer to us, the authors; however, a broader “we” encompassing “those of us in the United States,” or “those of us in the West,” or even “those of us socialized against emotions in public” could also work. We didn’t want you, the reader, to feel lumped into a “we” against your will.

thing.

Remember the “gut feeling” difference between hearing “And” and “But” when someone doesn’t agree with you? In tapping into that, we’re learning from an emotion. When we talk about emotions in this chapter, we’re talking about all of the responses you have to a stimulus that aren’t explicitly intellectual: sometimes we hear them in our heads, sometimes we feel them in our bodies.

The benefit of taking the emotional road in facilitation is that, if it is done well, it can lead to integrated, persistent learning. We remember emotions, and emotional experiences anchor memories for us, even while we forget some of the details³. The experience of being personally affected by something in the moment, compared to just thinking about it hypothetically, plants deep roots, which, if nurtured, can grow into powerful learning.

The risk is that you’ll get lost in the woods and not see a clear way out. This is the reason why a lot of us avoid exploring the emotional road in our facilitation, and this chapter will give you some tools that we hope will muster your courage. First, we’ll discuss how to invite emotions in, then how to recognize when they’re present, and finally what to do to make the most of them.

3 The phenomenon of better remembering an emotional experience, but losing some of the details, is discussed in the world of psych as an “affective memory trade-off.” In this chapter, we’re talking more about the power of localization that emotional learning has (i.e., it makes the learning important to the learner), and how that learning will be remembered. But if you’re curious to read more about affective memory trade-off, here’s a great starting point: <http://bit.ly/UTMrpn>

INVITING EMOTIONS INTO THE TRAINING

Throughout this book, we've been sprinkling breadcrumbs that will help you find your way as you venture down the emotional road.

In *How to Read a Group*, we discussed the various ways you can check in with participants, a skill you'll rely on in helping folks learn from emotions. In the *Both/And* chapter, we talked about how important it is to hold the space for your participants' varied realities. The "Yes, And..." Rule and *Asking Good Questions* will both be drawn on constantly as you invite emotions into the room; think of them like flashlights to illuminate your path. To invite emotions into the training, you're creating a call for vulnerability, where folks are likely to be triggered—this goes for facilitators as much as participants—and in the past couple of chapters, we discussed both of these ideas at length.

We have this chapter here, at this point in the book, because we believe emotional learning to be risky, necessary, and uniquely powerful; and doing it well demands every trick in the book.

If you're convinced that emotions are essential for learning, it's important to intentionally invite emotions into the setting. Remember, as we discussed earlier, many of us have had prior experiences with learning environments where it wasn't okay to be emotional, so we must make an effort to explicitly state that it's okay in this space.

HOW TO INVITE EMOTIONS INTO THE ROOM

We've mentioned a couple of times that it's important to actively invite emotions into your training, if you want your participants to feel comfortable accessing and sharing them. A lot of the ways you can do this well are right at the start of any group experience, when the participants are still in the process of figuring out their place in the group, the norms, and what they're going to share or not share.

You can communicate to the group that their emotions are welcome in the space, or that the training might stir up emotions. Both messages are ways of inviting emotional learning. Below are a few more specific approaches you can take.

Acknowledge that the topics we are going to be talking about today can bring up emotions for all of us and that it is okay to experience those emotions and to share those emotions in the training if relevant. Do this by stating it verbally, by including the message in any materials you pass out to the group (or deliver to the group before the training), or by asking the group "Does anyone foresee this experience bringing up emotions? Would you care to share more about why?"

Refer to other times you've done the training and let people know that getting emotional is a normal occurrence. You can tell that group that you, as the facilitator, were comfortable with people expressing and sharing their emotions, and that it's a happy occurrence when it happens. This "it happens all the time" sentiment will take the pressure off of anyone who might be the first

person in this training encountering emotions, and allow them to feel like they're one of many, instead of on their own.

Name specific emotions (anger, discomfort, vulnerability, shame) that may come up for folks during the training and normalize the experiencing of those emotions. Share with participants that these emotions can often be a starting point for learning and exploration, and provide an example or two of how that might be. If the trainings you do often invoke a particular emotion, or you're hoping to stir up a particular emotion, use that as the example.

Encourage other participants to share why they think creating a space for emotions may be important. You can do this by building on the question at the end of the first point above, through an activity, through anonymous reflections, or any other way you can think of. Participants hearing from other participants that emotions are welcome, helpful, and wanted is often more meaningful than hearing it from the facilitator.

RECOGNIZING WHEN EMOTIONS ARE PRESENT

So you've invited emotions into your training. Now it's time to sit back and let the seeds you've planted take root. If you know what to look for, you'll see that emotions will bloom in many shapes and colors. While it is different for everyone, here are some common things to look for when trying to identify emotions (reflect back on Reading a Group for more pointers).

Shifts in body language often happen when someone is feeling a physiological reaction to emotions, and is trying to make their body more comfortable (consciously or unconsciously). Instead of trying to interpret what the shift means (e.g., “They close their arms, so they must be mad”), because many of us communicate emotions differently with our bodies, we’re suggesting you just notice the change. If you see a distinct shift in a participant’s posture, it might mean they’re experiencing an emotional reaction.

Tone of voice changes when folks are speaking from a place of emotion, or trying to hide an emotional response. Many of us use a particular tone when we are speaking purely intellectually about a subject, but sound quite different when we’re scared, sad, impassioned, angry, uncomfortable, shut down, or elated.

Speed of reactions change often in one of two directions when folks get emotional. If we are incited or excited, we are often so compelled to get our thoughts out there that we’ll interrupt others (e.g., responding very quickly to a question before it’s even finished). On the other hand, if we are shutting down or confused, we may react much more slowly to a prompt—so slowly it’s viewed as a non-reaction—or mentally excuse ourselves from the engagement entirely. If you notice a participant who has been quick to respond become despondent, or a slower-to-respond participant cutting people off, there’s a good chance emotions are at work.

WHAT TO DO WHEN EMOTIONS ARE PRESENT

This is the moment we've been waiting for. The emotions were invited in, we noticed them cropping up, and now it's time to make the most of them. Below we have a several-step process, and while we're presenting it numerically and ordinarily, know that this can be an *a la carte* menu as much as it is *prix fixe*—each item is great on its own, the dessert can come before the appetizer, and different diets and preferences (your facilitation preferences and skills) might make some of these items more appealing than others.

1. Name. You don't have to dig into emotions in order to assure someone that it was great that they brought their emotional experience into the workshop. Sometimes we may not have time to dig into the emotions, but still want to provide a space for folks to share that part of the experience. Simply naming an emotion you notice in a participant, or asking them to name it themselves, can accomplish a lot of that, and also start the learning process for other participants. Knowing that someone else is experiencing an emotional reaction to training might, in itself, be enlightening, challenging, or expand one's empathy for the material being covered. By naming the emotion, you're also giving the participant a chance to confirm or correct what you're perceiving, a helpful step before trying to build on that emotion.

Examples: "It is a really hard feeling, when we feel like a bad person." or "Bill, I noticed you clam up a little bit during that activity. What were you feeling?"

2. Validate. This is a two-parter. Here, we're encouraging that you validate both the person's emotions (i.e., it's okay you're feeling that way) and that they are sharing them with the group (i.e., it's okay that we know you're feeling that way). Sometimes, just naming the emotion will serve as validation. Letting emotions go unacknowledged can make someone feel invalidated, and can undo the trust you created at the beginning of the training that emotions were okay to bring into the space. It may feel like you didn't swing out to meet them when they jumped. The first time a participant shares something emotional, it is especially important to validate their emotion, and that it is okay that they brought that emotion into the space.

Example: "You just shared with all of us that you felt vulnerable in that moment, and I wanted to say that it can be challenging to feel vulnerable, and feel very risky to share that with others. I really appreciate you sharing that with us and taking that risk. Vulnerability is something we all feel, and I can understand why you felt vulnerable in that moment. Again, thank you sharing that."

3. Explore. Follow up your validation by asking questions to explore the emotion—the key word here is “explore,” because this will be an adventure of a process. These questions can be directed at the emo person⁴ themselves, or at the entire group. You may invite others to share similar experiences, or ask the person to share more about their particular experience. Think of every question as being a little gust of wind that will move the sails of the

4 Please direct all questions to Sam in grade 7 through yesterday.

entire group toward a particular learning outcome you have in mind, and know that it's okay if you go off course.

Examples: "When have you felt that same emotion, outside of this training? And why is it important for the work we're doing?" or "Has anyone else experienced this who would like to share what it was like?"

4. Integrate. Now it's time to make some meaning. The emotion you recognized, named, validated, and explored is just waiting to be integrated into the training, the overall learning, and [with some luck] your participants' lives after the training. Integrating the emotion is taking every important element that popped up, tying them together, then attaching them to the material you're covering⁵. This is an art as much as anything else in facilitation, but here's a general formula you can use: "So, [Participant] was feeling [Emotion], and we learned [Key Learning from Exploration]; this is important to [Field/Profession/Learning Subject] because it helps you [Goal of Training]. We'll talk more about that as the training continues." What we're doing here is taking something abstract and making it concrete (i.e., answering the question "Why is it important that we acknowledged that emotion?").

Example: "So, Dr. Braff was feeling vulnerable, and we learned that a lot of you feel vulnerable frequently in your work, and you're afraid to admit this to your supervisors;

5 If you've seen the movie *Up*, you can think of all the elements as the balloons, the training as the house, and your integrations being the strings connecting the two. If this analogy is making you cry, that's okay. A lot of people cried during that movie, and so did we. Want to tell us a little more about why that movie made you cry?

this is important to being health care providers because being vulnerable helps you admit when you don't know something, and prevent making a mistake that might harm a patient."

ASKING GOOD EMOTIONAL QUESTIONS

When we mentioned above that learning from emotions is risky, we see the “explore” step as being where most of that risk lives. Probing into someone’s emotional reaction can be downright dangerous, but there are safer ways to proceed, and to create the learning we so desire (instead of a triggering, harmful scenario we hope to help you avoid). In light of this, we want to take a moment to speak more about exploring emotions, all in the form of asking good emotional questions.

If you do have time and are ready to dig into the emotions present in the space, asking questions is a good place to start. To begin with, if you’re unsure if the participant is game to share more, you can ask them a gauging question like “Is it okay if we dig into what you just shared?” If “Yes,” then moving forward with good emotional questions is a go! If “No,” then move along; these aren’t the droids you’re looking for.

Start broad. “Tell me more about that,” or “Can you explain what you were experiencing in that moment?” can be a great starters to dig a little deeper into what was going on for that person. These prompts will often surface additional emotions, and uncover more paths for you to explore. As we explained earlier, you don’t need to direct these to the participant experiencing the emotions: sometimes just as much can be gained from opening up the conversation to the group as a whole.

After you've heard some broad reactions, narrow your focus. "What was challenging about that feeling?" or "Why is it hard to acknowledge that emotion?" may be a great follow-up to get folks to dive in a little more. The hope here is they'll start to get a sense for why these emotions came about, why they're sharing them with the group, and what impact they may have on the training or their life.

With emotional questions, the thing to keep in mind is that these questions can often feel too personal too fast, and that for a lot of participants, talking about their emotions is not something they are comfortable with or practiced at doing.

As a rule, when asking emotional questions, as opposed to the general lessons in the Asking Good Questions chapter, constantly check in on if it's okay to move forward. Active consent, in the form of primers like "If this makes you too uncomfy that's okay, but I am wondering..." or "Nobody should feel pressured to answer this..." or "Let me know if y'all want to move on" are invaluable. It might feel like you're being redundant, and that's okay.

If you notice more emotions being stirred as you explore, which will often be the case, also be checking in with yourself mentally to determine if these are helpful to your training goals. Sometimes they are, and it's worth the time and risk to continue exploring, and sometimes you might get the feeling that the additional emotions being stirred up are leading to a landslide of emotions⁶, which will get in the way of the learning and have the potential to derail the entire training.

⁶ It might sound dramatic, and, if you've ever experienced this, you'll recognize it's aptly dramatic. It would also be a great name for a pop folk album or a timeless country song.

In all of this, be ready to bail at any moment—even if you haven't accomplished what you hoped to accomplish. You often don't realize that you've crossed a line until you've crossed it, and continuing to push won't help anyone. Apologize gracefully, create a space for folks to rebound (sometimes this requires a brief break), and carry on.

TWO ROADS DIVERGED AND I—I TOOK THE ONE MORE CRIED UPON

When Sam heard that person at his show respond, the guy in the audience who said he felt like a “*bad person*,” he didn't just feel the pain in those words, but he felt the pain in his own chest. Sam, too, has felt that way: that when people don't see your intentions when you make a mistake, that they're not just saying you *did something bad*, but that you *are something bad*. In choosing to make some learning from that emotion, he was also choosing to bring his own emotions into the room.

The conversation went from being about inclusive language to being about the social justice movement, identity, and society as a whole; about the difference between guilt and shame, and how we so often wield one when we should be reaching for the other. There were tears, there were deep confessions, and there was a lot of learning—for folks in the crowd, and for Sam on the stage.

It was exhausting, as these conversations often are. It was also risky, as these conversations always are. And it was worth it. The learning that came from the emotional reaction to *bad person* was likely more meaningful than anything else that happened that night—at least it was for Sam, and it's something he's carried into his work ever since.

And to us, this is what facilitation is all about. The emotions that present themselves when you're in physical proximity with other people—in ways reading a book or watching a video rarely accomplish—can catalyze powerful learning.

It's what everything in this book, used with the right flourishes, luck abound, amounts to: a moment that was, by all accounts, magical. Learning happened that the crowd—that Sam himself—couldn't have anticipated happening, as though it were influenced by some mysterious or supernatural force.



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