

# Facilitating Change: Examining Honors Students' Perceptions of Learning Facilitation Techniques

CONNER W. SUDDICK AND LINDI DICE

Idaho State University

**Abstract:** Despite advancements in global communication and interpersonal networks, in-person discussions and scholarly discourses often falter in the classroom—stifling innovation and preventing opportunities to foster deeper human connection. This study explores the remedy of facilitation: the art and science of enabling a group to unleash its creativity, address conflict, and unlock collective wisdom. Authors present a variety of facilitation techniques used in teaching honors students ( $n = 13$ ) and closely examine how students articulate their personal learning outcomes after practicing effective facilitations. Liberating structures, which engage everyone in problem-solving, practicing self-discovery, and envisioning potential solutions, are used. Reflective assessments indicate student growth and skill development, including flexibility, adaptability, and communicative agility. With honors programs and colleges as loci for multidisciplinary learning and holistic leadership development, authors encourage practitioners to take active roles in fostering the next generation of facilitators. Ideas for future curricular adaptations are presented.

**Keywords:** higher education—honors programs & colleges; peer facilitation; educational innovation; cognitive presence; Idaho State University (ID)—Honors Program

**Citation:** *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council*, 2023, 24(2): 67–94

But here is the great paradox of gathering: There are so many good reasons for coming together that often we don't know precisely why we are doing so.

—Priya Parker (2018, p. 1)

I found that facilitation isn't to make meetings and gatherings more complicated, but gives them a sense of purpose and the freedom needed to be open [to] that purpose. —Honors Facilitator #13

## INTRODUCTION

In the digital age, the world is more interconnected than ever, yet when people convene in-person or online, gatherings can easily falter. The efficacy of professional gatherings is imperative given that in the United States, approximately 11 million meetings take place per day yielding over four billion meetings per year (Flynn, 2023). Prior to the Covid-19 global pandemic, employees in a variety of sectors were estimated to spend anywhere from 17% to 47% of their time in meetings (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2017; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017). Amid the pandemic, the average number of meetings increased by 12.9% (Flynn, 2023). These figures demonstrate that professional gatherings remain a core facet of contemporary professional life.

Higher education can engender skepticism about important gatherings; what might be the beguiling allure of a “faculty/staff retreat” can result only in sitting in the exact same meeting space but for 2–3 hours longer than a regularly scheduled meeting. A study conducted at Boise State University found that faculty participants worked on average 61 hours a week—50% more than the average 40-hour work schedule—with approximately 17% of that time in meetings (Ziker, 2014). Based on that figure, these faculty spent more than 400 hours in meetings over the course of nine months. Mrig & Sanaghan (2014) argue that as program budgets and personnel allocations dwindle, time is one of the most precious resources in contemporary university settings and that it must be employed effectively. Consonant with Mrig & Sanaghan, Harvard University education scholars Kathryn Parker Boudett and Elizabeth A. City (2014) contend that meetings in higher education are often maligned because of unproductive planning, which negates the unique opportunities for meetings to generate learning and growth for stakeholders throughout a university. In accordance with Boudett and City, Ronald A. Berk (2012) argues that ill-equipped leadership reinforces the poor reputation of meetings, and he recommends several guidelines for improving the productivity of meetings by holding them only if necessary and, in doing so, preparing an agenda and ensuring participants adhere to that agenda. Yet, amid ongoing political, economic, and social volatility, leaders may not have the capacity to hone best practices for holding meaningful meetings no

matter how fruitful they might be in harnessing the capacity of everyone on a given team.

In the context of honors education, the pandemic necessitated modifications to traditions like graduations, award ceremonies, retreats, and meetings. Rather than designing new modes of convening, many programs in higher education transposed their ritualized formulae of signature events to an online environment. Consequently, while the motivating purpose of a gathering may have been clear, the techniques and mode of delivery were not in alignment. We suggest how gatherings and meetings in honors education can be designed more innovatively through teaching students facilitation techniques. Specifically, the animating question motivating this study is “How do honors students articulate their personal learning outcomes after practicing facilitation techniques?” The study also explores the program-level changes that resulted from honors students’ facilitating a variety of gatherings within the Idaho State University Honors Program.

From my facilitation, I learned about the value of structure: It’s critical to formulate an appropriate string of techniques that conforms to the meeting’s purpose; it is the skeleton upon which the meat of the gathering is built.

—Honors Facilitator #2

Facilitation is a flow of energy, creativity, and unheard voices being brought forward.

—Honors Facilitator #12

## FACILITATION AND HONORS INNOVATION

Scholars and practitioners conceptualize a “facilitator” as a skilled individual who shapes group dynamics and conversations; a guide who can provoke deeper thinking surrounding assumptions, beliefs, and values; and a collaborator in endeavors to implement systemic improvements (Cranley et al., 2017; Kaner, 2014; Parker, 2018). The etymological history of the word “facilitate” validates these conceptions: it derives from the French *faciliter* (to render easy) and the Latin *facilis* (easy to do) (*Online Etymological Dictionary*, 2013). Consonant with existing literature, facilitators provide an inviting and collaborative space for groups to do their best thinking. Practitioner Michael Doyle asserts that facilitation constitutes a “constellation of ingredients,” including listening, creativity, respect, patience, and flexibility (Kaner, 2014, p. xv). In practice, facilitation addresses the following tensions: emergence/structure, improvisation/planning, leading/

collaborating, and not knowing/trust. In this context, facilitation is both an art and a science. While one could have natural facilitative instincts, professional development is needed to develop facilitative skills that augment the capacity of organizations.

In the context of higher education, facilitation is not only useful within administrative settings but is a core pedagogical competency in the classroom. Facilitation has proven to support the holistic development of college students through in-class interactions that promote a “reasoning-centered classroom” rather than identifying the “perfect” answer (Knight et al., 2017). Many facilitation techniques are promoted as active learning strategies to improve students’ cognitive and behavioral engagement in classroom settings (Foster, 2023). To provide opportunities for meaningful career development, faculty members can train students to facilitate purpose-filled conversations relating to their professional settings (Gibson et al., 2020), so facilitation is not only a tool but a key professional skill set to promote deeper learning among students and faculty.

Given the importance of the skills that college students learn from facilitation, honors programs—as centers for multidisciplinary learning and holistic leadership development—should take an active role in fostering the next generation of facilitators. The National Collegiate Honors Council endorses modes of honors learning that are leadership-oriented and experiential through practical engagement (National Collegiate Honors Council, 2013). If the goal of honors education is to generate effective leaders, the ability to influence others and guide groups in a generative manner is a crucial asset.

Honors programs are already sites of pedagogical experimentation that are conducive to the style of teaching needed for a facilitation-oriented course (Chaney et al., 2020; Das et al., 2021). Both inside and outside of honors spaces, honors educators use innovative strategies to promote community engagement and constructive civil discourse (Garrison & Parish, 2020; Horton, Corbitt, & White, 2021). From a programmatic perspective, honors programs model effective outcomes to engage students as peer leaders who support the overall success and vitality of their program (Walters & Kanak, 2016; Watkins, 2020). Teaching facilitation within an honors classroom builds on the demonstrated success of honors programs’ pedagogical innovation, peer leadership, and programmatic excellence. Our case study is both explanatory and exploratory, providing concrete examples from an honors facilitation course while gleaning key learning outcomes from honors students.

A facilitator is an individual who enables groups and organizations to work more effectively; to collaborate and achieve synergy.

—Sam Kaner (2014)

The structure of facilitation techniques ensures that focus on the purpose is maintained and each attendee is shown that they are valuable to the meeting.

—Honors Facilitator #3

## **AN OVERVIEW OF “FACILITATING CHANGE”: CONNER W. SUDDICK’S NARRATIVE JOURNEY**

Prior to serving as an honors faculty member, I served as a restorative justice practitioner within secondary schools to design and implement processes to proactively address conflict. As a result, schools reduced the use of suspension and expulsion, thus preventing further entanglement within the juvenile punishment system. Through my professional work, I benefited from several profound mentors who modeled facilitation techniques to solve problems, practice self-discovery, and emphasize possibility. When I assumed my faculty position at Idaho State University in 2022, I began to incorporate the techniques I used throughout my peacebuilding practice into honors gatherings and during my courses. I heard upper-division honors students commenting that they felt they were engaging at a deeper level than they had previously. A few students approached me to learn more about my background and my methods for process design. Rather than hosting multiple independent meetings, I worked to develop an upper-division, two-credit, experimental course—Facilitating Change—to launch the following semester.

While designing Facilitating Change, I wanted to ensure that the course provided multidisciplinary learning outcomes to engage students in a variety of professional fields. I used the Center for Creative Leadership’s fundamental leadership skills framework, which emphasizes the importance of self-awareness, communication, influence, and learning agility (Center for Creative Leadership, 2022). The course centered on the following learning outcomes: 1) develop the practical knowledge to select appropriate facilitation techniques based on a gathering’s purpose; 2) demonstrate competency in the theories and principles of facilitation by designing an inclusive, creative, and participatory gathering; and 3) understand the purpose of conflict as a healthy and natural component of group endeavors. Over sixteen weeks, students both examined and experienced a “menu” of forty different facilitation

techniques that could be used in a variety of group settings to effectively engage anywhere from three to three hundred participants simultaneously (“Liberating Structures”).

Beyond being mentored in each of these techniques during class, students had two major assignments. The first assignment required every student in the class to serve as a “scribe,” practicing reflective listening in order to capture the key learning outcomes of their assigned week. Students would then practice a key professional skill of facilitators by writing up their notes electronically and sharing them with the instructor to post on the course’s learning management system. The culminating assignment required students to serve as co-facilitators (Table 1) to aid an assigned “client” by designing, implementing, and evaluating a gathering with their peers and program leadership as a “guest facilitator.”

Following outreach with students during our program’s biannual honors meeting, the class garnered thirteen students from five different colleges, including six students from the College of Health Sciences, four students from the College of Arts & Letters, two students from the College of Science and Engineering, and one student from the College of Education. These students

**TABLE 1. THE VARIETY OF CLIENTS STUDENTS SUPPORTED AND THE PURPOSE OF THEIR GATHERING**

<b>Internal Honors Student Facilitations</b>	<b>Classroom-Based Facilitations</b> (Four teams) <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>– Guiding the honors peer mentor class through designing the honors new student induction ceremony</li><li>– Guiding the honors peer mentor class through assessing logistical elements of the honors new student meet-and-greet</li><li>– Guiding the honors peer mentor class through crafting their 2023 honors peer mentor evaluation survey</li><li>– Guiding an honors arts-based research class through a course evaluation about the efficacy of the course</li></ul> <b>Meeting-Based Facilitations</b> (Two teams) <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>– Guiding the leadership team of the University Honors Program club through an assessment of the effectiveness of their activities over the past year</li><li>– Guiding honors program leadership and students enrolled in an event-planning course to assess opportunities for growth of the program’s annual fundraiser “An Opportuni-Tea”</li></ul>
<b>External Honors Student Facilitations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>– Guiding the board of a local nonprofit, “The Comedy Project,” through an evaluation of their fundraiser “The Improvathon”</li></ul>

represented a variety of student leadership positions (some holding multiple leadership roles on campus), including honors peer mentors ( $n = 8$ ), student organization leaders ( $n = 7$ ), and student workers/interns ( $n = 3$ ). Given the average size of an honors course at a medium-sized public institution like Idaho State University, the course exceeded my anticipated enrollment.

Liberating Structures are transformational because they are purposely designed to make it easy to accomplish what is missing in most organizations. —Henri Lipmanowicz and Keith McCandless (2014)

The techniques that we have done within this course offer a much wider range of understanding for those involved. They provide individuals with the opportunity to communicate and express their ideas in a more creative and thoughtful way. [These techniques] also allow space for people to communicate differently than just in the frameworks of ordinary conversation.

—Honors Facilitator #1

## **UNDERSTANDING “LIBERATING STRUCTURES” AND APPLICATIONS WITHIN HONORS LEARNING**

The course primarily focused on “liberating structures”—facilitation techniques that emerged from a critique that conventional modes of organizing spaces were out of alignment with how groups produce their best thinking. Liberating structures range in complexity from simple conversations to rigorous strategic planning. A strength of teaching liberating structures is that these techniques are open-access and can be used in a variety of settings from team meetings to classroom settings (see the full menu of techniques at “Liberating Structures”). According to Lipmanowicz & McCandless (2014), liberating structures provide more opportunities for all participants to influence the outcome of a conversation by expanding who is participating through different iterations of interaction.

In higher education, liberating structures have demonstrated their efficacy in multiple classroom settings for both faculty and their students (Singhal, 2013, pp. 138–144; Singhal et al., 2020). To use liberating structures effectively, facilitators examine the macrostructures, microstructures, and other structural elements of a gathering (Lipmanowicz & McCandless, 2014, pp. 10–11). Macrostructures are more permanent and embedded fixtures of an organization, such as a building or an organizational structure. In contrast, microstructures are the tangible and intangible ways in which



routine interactions are organized. Examples of tangible microstructures include the meeting space (e.g., a classroom or board room) while intangible microstructures include the techniques used to structure a gathering. In essence, microstructures are more malleable. Often, leaders use the following intangible microstructures: a presentation, open discussion, or status report. Finally, structural elements can be tangible (e.g., tables, chairs, and materials needed for the gathering) and intangible (the purpose of a given gathering).

Lipmanowicz & McCandless (2014) identify the five crucial design elements for facilitation:

- 1. a structuring invitation,
- 2. arrangement of the space and needed materials,
- 3. how participation is distributed,
- 4. the configuration of groups, and
- 5. the allocation of time for the sequence of steps. (p. 22)

Table 2 illustrates these design elements by using two default techniques in higher education: lecture and open discussion.

Presentations and open discussions, though not inherently ineffective, are insufficient to serve every purpose that prompts people to gather in higher education. Common techniques like presentations and open discussions are overused in higher education when other approaches can unleash innovation and catalyze participation. While presentations are highly structured, they

**TABLE 2. COMPARING THE DESIGN ELEMENTS OF LECTURE AND OPEN DISCUSSION**

In-Class Lecture	Team Meeting’s Open Discussion
<b>1. Structuring Invitation:</b> Listen to the presenter	<b>1. Structuring Invitation:</b> Reflect on given prompt
<b>2. Arrangement of Space:</b> Rows of seats facing the speaker—usually with A/V equipment	<b>2. Arrangement of Space:</b> Circle or rows of tables, usually authority figure in the front or at the head of the table
<b>3. Participant Distribution:</b> ~99% Speaker, ~1% audience (Q&A)	<b>3. Participant Distribution:</b> One speaker at a time—everyone else listens
<b>4. Configuration of Groups:</b> Speaker(s); audience	<b>4. Configuration of Groups:</b> Large group
<b>5. Allocation of Time &amp; Sequence:</b> (Mostly presentation, remaining time for Q&A)	<b>5. Allocation of Time &amp; Sequence:</b> Discussion of a prompt until a transition to a new topic



lack the capacity to fully engage participants. Conversely, open discussions do provide a considerable opportunity for engagement but typically lack the structure to capture the wisdom of a group. Open discussions fall prey to domineering personalities, fatiguing circular discussions, or immobilizing silence. Instead of relying on only these tools, liberating structures invite educators and higher education administrators to design endless permutations of “strings”: a process of ordering different facilitation techniques in a strategic manner to achieve a gathering’s purpose.

In *Facilitating Change*, after honors students learned approximately 28 different liberating structures, they were provided with an applied case study. Instead of concentrating on an individual technique from the liberating structures, students were challenged to think about how they could sequence a string of techniques to fulfill a collaboratively drafted purpose. Using a technique called “Design Storyboards” (see the technique in “Liberating Structures”), students worked in groups to design an orientation session for incoming honors students. The conventional structure of this gathering usually involved a PowerPoint presentation about the benefits of joining the honors program and provided time for questions. Instead of honors faculty/administrators designing a program for students, current honors students designed a gathering for their future colleagues. Appendix A shows the storyboard that one of the student teams designed for their colleagues, and a storyboard template can be found in Appendix B.

A month after one of the groups designed this gathering, the honors leadership team implemented one of the team’s designs and noticed a complete change in the group dynamics of the honors information session. Following an informal debriefing of our observations, we noticed that the string’s intentional progression—from building familiarity to providing space for individual reflection and finally to an engaging alternative to the conventional question and answer session—transformed the experience. While prospective honors students blearily entered the meeting space following several hours of mandatory orientation presentations, they left much more energized. While the presentation-style session from the previous year was not unproductive, attending to the design elements of each facilitation technique provided an entirely new experience for students orchestrated by other honors students. By having student facilitators guide the orientation session, honors faculty felt a sense of relief so that they could focus on addressing urgent registration questions.

## METHODOLOGY

While the changes in incoming student engagement were evident through observation, the research team of this study—consisting of the honors faculty member who taught the course (primary investigator) and a trained honors student research assistant—aimed to delve into how honors students articulated their learning journey with facilitation techniques. To ascertain core learning outcomes, we analyzed an open-ended questionnaire that included a total of ten questions. During the final class session, students were made aware of our research study and informed that participation (or lack thereof) would have no bearing on their grade. Of the 13 students enrolled in the inaugural offering of HONS 3399: Facilitating Change, 100% of the students opted to submit the questionnaire for qualitative data analysis. However, there were unanticipated variances between how many students responded to each prompt as some responded to all ten and others responded to between five and seven.

The responses were aggregated into ten sections in order to disidentify the data and ensure student privacy given that one of the students' colleagues is a member of the research team. We used multiple rounds of inductive qualitative coding to allow the learning outcomes to emerge more organically throughout the analysis process. We individually coded excerpts from all thirteen student facilitators using a combination of descriptive coding (our words) and *in vivo* coding (directly using the participants' words) (Saldaña, 2021). To ensure validity and reliability throughout this analysis, we employed consensus coding, an approach to qualitative data analysis where we examined the same excerpts of data and compared our findings to generate themes (Richards & Hemphill, 2018).

[T]his class will be the class where you find the confidence within yourself that was previously hidden with fears of what other people might think of you.

—Honors Facilitator #4

I was pushed into a space where I needed to learn to accept the silence, which is something uncomfortable for me, and not control the conversation but instead let it develop organically without my input.

—Honors Facilitator #6

## FINDINGS

Our qualitative findings, illustrating how honors students described their journey in learning facilitation, yielded the following outcomes: 1) enhancing communication skills, 2) serving as a guide 3) cultivating adaptability and flexibility, and 4) developing intentionality.

### Enhancing Communication Skills

Facilitating Change emphasized the importance of working within small and large groups. We discovered that 100% of respondents described different scenarios of communicating within group settings as a core skill they felt to have been enhanced. On an individual level, students stated that practicing facilitation prompted them to better engage with interpersonal conflict, involve a broader audience in discussions, and strategically intervene in uncomfortable dynamics. In a team setting, students expressed appreciation for facilitation because it taught them how to work more productively with people, which several students acknowledged as a challenge in academic and professional settings.

For some, practicing facilitation skills resulted in an organic self-awareness that led to developing an impulse to intervene or redirect the energy of a space. Facilitator #3 described a situation where they needed to practice thoughtful exclusion, redirecting someone's interruption of a colleague by asking them to wait until everyone had had an opportunity to contribute. Facilitator #3 found this "scary to do" but realized that this action resulted in everyone being heard. Likewise, Facilitator #6 said that the process prompted them to deviate from their script in order to respond to emerging conversation. As a result, they changed their design as the process emerged by retooling their timing. In accordance with Facilitator #6, Facilitator #10 asserted that "understanding your audience beforehand is a must" since the process of meeting their clients made them realize how much information they needed to collect in order to design an effective, purpose-driven gathering.

Moreover, students described how facilitation provided an opportunity to practice and enhance their competency in a variety of communication styles. In regard to group work, Facilitators #1, #2, and #13 specifically addressed how this process changed their lens for viewing conflict. Facilitator #13 asserted that learning facilitative skills "allowed me to see [the full circle] of conflicts rather than only my side" and "provided a way for me to view the world in a wider spectrum rather than the one I've been sitting in my

entire life.” Consonant with Facilitator #13, Facilitator #1 described their new mindset toward asking for help, self-advocating, and communicating healthy boundaries after working with a partner who had a very different organizational style from their own. Finally, Facilitator #2 contended that quality facilitation design “transmutes dynamism into a force for good” by providing a setting where more people can express their thoughts collaboratively. Ultimately, facilitation design and implementation provided a medium to practice a variety of communication skills with colleagues and large groups.

## **Serving as a Guide**

Facilitating Change students studied facilitation as an art and a science in order to become not just presenters, people who deliver content to a group, but guides who lead a group through a conversation by harnessing their thoughts and wisdom on a given subject matter. Students articulated the art of facilitation as the interpersonal skills necessary to design and implement successful strategies for guidance. Facilitator #1 argued that the art of facilitation includes the wide variety of interpersonal skills necessary to guide a conversation. Facilitator #5 extended Facilitator #1’s argument by describing how “facilitation requires a creative sense when it comes to pairing structures together, creating riffs, and implementing them to create the best string [of techniques] for the particular event.” By contrast, students described the science of facilitation as becoming knowledgeable about microstructures and macrostructures in order to develop an optimal design within the dynamics of a given space. Facilitator #13 made the following observation:

To me, facilitation is a practice that not only provides structure to meetings but frees them from the pressure that they can succumb to. I found that facilitation isn’t to make meetings and gatherings more complicated but gives them a sense of purpose and the freedom needed to be open in that purpose.

With the competencies of both art and science, facilitators articulated how they could make voices known, bring voices forward, and create generative spaces.

Beyond learning the art and science of facilitation, students encountered the challenges required in developing these skills. Facilitator #12 described the “uncomfortable transition from a presentation style to a guide” and how the constant unknowns in working with groups prepared them “to think on my feet and adjust plans accordingly.” Specifically, students asserted that this

course allowed them to become guides as opposed to presenters. In accordance with Facilitator #12, Facilitator #4 said that facilitating is not “teaching” or “pushing your own ways, views or perspectives on others” but being a resource for other people as they work toward a commonly articulated purpose. Likewise, Facilitator #6 described how facilitation prompted them to shift from speaking “at” people to speaking “with” people by “allowing them to move the conversation, especially within topics I have strong opinions on.” Facilitating invited students to shift from their own conventional modes of communication (e.g., presenting) to guiding groups in producing conducive and collaborative outcomes.

## **Cultivating Adaptability and Flexibility**

Beyond collaborating with others and transitioning from presenters to guides, student facilitators described how they developed adaptability and flexibility. The term “adaptability” here refers to a person’s ability to respond to changing circumstances and conditions, while “flexibility” refers to one’s willingness to adapt. Adaptation can be a challenge for honors students, who may struggle with perfectionism and can demonstrate symptoms of imposter syndrome (Feenstra, 2022; Lee et al, 2021). Students explained that the process of learning facilitation imparted the importance of asking for help, accepting advice, and demonstrating a willingness to try new things, which was challenging for several students who said that feelings of frustration or anxiety impeded their adaptability. For example, Facilitator #9 asserted that one of their opportunities for growth was dealing with the fact that they “did not like dealing with [what is] unknown.” Facilitator #6 described learning how to adapt to inevitable changes in facilitation:

Giving up control and allowing for a natural flow rather than requiring everything to be perfect will work out much better than fearing where the conversation will go. Likely, where the conversation goes is where it needs to go, whether it be a comfortable one or not.

A fundamental reality that many student facilitators grappled with in the course was how to plan something that would likely not go as planned. Therefore, the course focused on developing their capacity to adapt to dynamics such as late start times, technological difficulties, challenging personalities, or low energy. As part of being able to adapt, students recognized that they needed to be able to acknowledge when they were not sure of themselves. For some honors students, this was extremely challenging. Initially, some

students found the novelty of the information in the course disempowering as they had no previous knowledge base to draw from.

Moreover, when asked to reflect on what capacities they wished they had had at the beginning of class, students specified more flexibility. According to Facilitator #7, “no facilitation will be absolutely perfect, and I learned to let that go in order to keep the conversation going . . . this experience has helped show me that I need to let go of perfection.” Additionally, Facilitator #1 reflected on how their impulse was to “overplan” and to desire an environment with “more structure.” On a broader scale, Facilitator #2 described how their willingness to be flexible “allows the room to fill, people to process, and the experience to be smoother.” Whether facilitators named themselves “planners” or “procrastinators,” they described the need for some level of flexibility and adaptability in order to execute their facilitations.

## **Developing Intentionality**

A final theme that emerged was how student facilitators described a main facet of leadership as learning new ways to listen and lead or, in their own words, be “intentional.” Some students described instances of generous authority, defined by Priya Parker as “using power to achieve outcomes that are generous [and] that are for others” (2018, p. 82). One student facilitator described a moment when they needed to strategically intervene in a conversation that became disruptive. Another student facilitator faced this struggle when they used their “position of power to allow space for people to have a voice who wouldn’t have otherwise.” By intentionally intervening, this student invited others to have an opportunity to share their wisdom. In that same vein, another student facilitator articulated their observations about being upfront about the purpose of a gathering so that they did not invite people who had no need to be present; this process taught them to be purposeful and intentional in gathering people together because “by inviting unrelated individuals, the purpose of the gathering is null. . . . [I]n other words, inviting everyone means no one is invited.” Finally, another student commented that some of the techniques they learned prompted moments of internal self-reflection and grasping new ways to listen to others:

Most classes are focused on you sharing [your] thoughts without space for specific people to speak. These techniques provided all of that, and I really appreciated the ways that it made me focus less on myself and more on those around me. It expanded my ability to listen and to appreciate others’ opinions more.

Several students commented that the techniques of the class taught them new ways to listen to others and invited them to “sit with silence” or, in other words, to use the time allotments within each technique to allow moments for space and contemplation. In a meeting, people often respond to silence by hastily moving on to the next task instead of letting the room breathe. By learning how silence can be useful, the student facilitators recognized that silence and space are necessary ingredients of meaningful interactions. To craft thoughtful and purpose-driven gatherings and meetings, students were invited to practice being intentional both in their facilitation design and their own ways of embodying the role of facilitator.

## Summary

In answer to the research question of how “honors students articulate their personal learning outcomes after practicing facilitation techniques,” our qualitative findings suggest that learning facilitation had the following impact on honors students’ leadership capacity: 1) enhancing communication skills, 2) serving as a guide, 3) cultivating adaptability and flexibility, and 4) developing intentionality. Students’ responses to a variety of reflective questions demonstrate that they developed individual leadership styles. In their reflective surveys, all students alluded to developing one of the Center for Creative Leadership’s core competencies: self-awareness, influence, learning agility, and communication (Center for Creative Leadership, 2022). Through developing self-awareness and learning agility, students were able to make intentional choices about future professional gatherings, seek feedback, internalize opportunities for growth, and apply lessons learned for future facilitations. Additionally, by developing their capacity to influence and communicate, students more effectively engaged others through their abilities to build trust, lead others, actively listen to feedback, and be attentive to group dynamics.

The first day we did concentric circles and from then on I grew a new level of comfort around my peers. I also found confidence within myself to be okay with sharing more personal feelings. In my opinion, addressing my issues in this class helped me in my own world. I was able to recognize my stress about school and direct my brain to a more positive space. Throughout my life of being a student I have always struggled with test anxiety and the techniques in this class and my peers helped me grow in that respect. I now walk into tests more confidently and tell myself that no matter the outcome I am going to be okay.

—Honors Facilitator #11



## IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

### Affirmations of Liberating Structures

In Singhal et al. (2020), the research team examined the efficacy of implementing liberating structures within a university setting in Norway. One key implication of their study found that “small shifts in interactional patterns can lead to rippling systemic changes” (Singhal, et.al, 2020, p. 49). In the context of Idaho State University, students and faculty were positive about the simplicity of liberating structures that can be combined (in the words of Facilitator #2) into “endless permutations” of strings. Several student facilitators commented that small shifts resulted in major changes in their own student organizations outside of class. One student already approached the instructor with ideas for facilitating their summer school sessions at another university using liberating structures as a basis.

Beyond academia, students commented on the applications of facilitation in healthcare settings. Facilitator #6 described using liberating structures to invite fellow counselors to debrief challenging cases they had with their clients. Facilitators #2, #7, and #12 discussed how liberating structures like “TRIZ” could invite patients and their families to achieve their health goals and formulate a treatment plan (Liberating Structures Including and Unleashing Everyone). Liberating structures not only invite more productive gatherings in higher education but invite students to see the implications of changing the way they conduct conversations in their professional lives.

### Program-Level Implications

Informal debriefs with faculty members in the university honors program revealed that the student-designed facilitations that occurred in the spring of 2023 resulted in several unique changes within the program. One focus group facilitation used several techniques to collect over 130 pages of arts-based and qualitative survey data to augment a survey sent to all students about how to make strategic improvements to university honors at Idaho State University. Moreover, the different evaluation sessions for signature honors events, including the Annual OpportuniTea Fundraiser and the New Honors Student Welcome Celebration, generated several recommendations that will change how these events are planned in future iterations. In addition, students guided conversations to assist honors faculty with assessing new program evaluation tools, ranging from an experimental course to the design of the peer mentor program survey. Within the student club, the

facilitation helped mitigate conflict dynamics that were unproductive for students. In particular, the faculty advisor was able to receive important feedback in order to onboard future club members more effectively. A final program development included a key shift in the program's communication plan after one facilitated focus group illuminated that many students would prefer the honors program's deadlines and updates be moved to the learning management system as opposed to email; this will be implemented in the coming academic year.

## **Challenges and Future Implications for Research**

Despite the success of the class, teaching facilitation comes with a few challenges. One key realization from informal debriefs with students is that they struggled to communicate what facilitation is and how to communicate this effectively on résumés, curricula vitae, and graduate school applications. Future iterations of the class should give some time to teaching students how to communicate this experience to future employers and colleagues.

Additionally, while students could articulate immediate applications of facilitation, further research is needed to examine and explain how the efficacy of learning facilitation impacts leadership development among honors students. Longitudinal studies need to be developed to collect more robust data sets. The qualitative emphasis of this study allows substantial exploration of students' perceptions and reactions to the course content; quantitative data would illuminate the measured behaviors that students demonstrated before and after learning facilitation techniques. Future studies could design a quantitative or mixed-methods approach to understanding how outcomes of facilitation produced positive and measurable results for a program beyond observational data.

A key challenge is that it may be hard for faculty in other honors programs to conceptualize a facilitation course, especially as a standalone class. From our program's experience, we recommend beginning by incorporating a couple of liberating structures into existing gatherings in a program, including leadership team meetings, classrooms, student events, and more (see Appendix C for an outline of how Facilitating Change strung together different techniques). Then, as proficiency with different techniques is enhanced, the design of a course like Facilitating Change can be incorporated into many different contexts depending on the available expertise of the honors faculty. Because of the nature of the class and the field of facilitation, the content is amenable to people with wide ranges of subject matter expertise.

## Course Revisions

Despite the successful student learning outcomes communicated by the students, the next iteration of Facilitating Change is undergoing significant curriculum revisions. In the first iteration, students learned how facilitation involves the following tensions: emergence/structure, improvisation/planning, leading/collaborating, and not knowing/trust. Since flexibility, adaptability, and willingness to let go of control were named as opportunities for growth and development by all of the student facilitators, we are adding a new unit to the course that connects those tensions with improvisation: a crucial skill to quickly problem-solve and adapt to emerging circumstances. By partnering with another honors faculty member at Idaho State University who specializes in improvisational comedy, the co-taught version of Facilitating Change will not only explore thirty different facilitation techniques but also use the tenets of improvisation to help students respond to unexpected obstacles without the instinctive panic many feel. In light of this addition, the teaching team will introduce a new course learning objective: to understand the purpose of improvisational comedy/theater as a professional skill set to augment facilitation practice. As a result, the teaching team will need to design a new assessment tool to analyze the effectiveness of incorporating this skill set into a course like Facilitating Change.

## CONCLUSION

As centers for multidisciplinary learning and holistic leadership development, honors programs should take an active role in fostering the next generation of facilitators. This qualitative case study explored the Idaho State University Honors Program's approach to teaching honors students about facilitation, focusing specifically on how the students articulated their personal learning outcomes and on how the process led to program-level changes in a variety of gatherings within the Idaho State University Honors Program. The findings demonstrated four core themes: 1) enhancing communication skills, 2) teaching students to serve as guides as opposed to presenters, 3) cultivating adaptability and flexibility, and 4) developing intentional leadership. In addition, the University Honors Program at Idaho State University benefitted programmatically by having trained student facilitators design and guide different gatherings. For those interested in bringing this work to their own programs, honors faculty and students at Idaho State University recommend being bold, being brave, and being open to experimenting with

endless possibilities for stringing together different liberating structures and other techniques. Facilitation is a democratic endeavor; through practice and patience, anyone willing to learn can reap the rewards.

## REFERENCES

- Berk, R. A. (2012). Meeting in academe: It's time for an "extreme meeting makeover." *Journal of Faculty Development*, 26(1), 50–53.
- Boudett, K. P., & City, E. A. (2014). *Meeting wise: Making the most of collaborative time for educators*. Harvard Education Press.
- Center for Creative Leadership. (2022). Liberating structures. <<https://www.liberatingstructures.com/lis>>
- Center for Creative Leadership. (2022, November 24). The core leadership skills you need in every role. <<https://www.ccl.org/articles/leading-effectively-articles/fundamental-4-core-leadership-skills-for-every-career-stage>>
- Chaney, B. H., Christensen, T. W., Crawford, A., Ford, K., & Godwin, W. W., et al. (2020). Best practices in honors pedagogy: Teaching innovation and community engagement through design thinking. *Honors in Practice*, 16, 71–92.
- Cranley, J. A., Cummings, G. G., Profetto-McGrath, J., Toth, F., & Estabrooks, C. A. (2017). Facilitation roles and characteristics associated with research use by healthcare professionals: A scoping review. *BMJ Open*, 1–18.
- Das, B. M., Christensen, T., Hodge, E., Darkenwald, T., Godwin, W. W., & Weckesser, G. (2021). Human-centered design as a basis for a transformative curriculum. *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council*, 22(2), 71–86.
- Facilitate. (2013). In D. Harper (Ed.), *Online Etymological Dictionary*. <[http://www.etymonline.com/word/facilitate?ref=etymonline\\_crossreference](http://www.etymonline.com/word/facilitate?ref=etymonline_crossreference)>
- Feenstra, J. S. (2022). Perfectionism and honors students: Cautious good news. *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council*, 23(1), 237–249.
- Flynn, J. (2023, February 14). 28+ incredible meeting statistics [2023]: Virtual, zoom, in-person meetings and productivity. Zippia. <<https://>

[www.zippia.com/advice/meeting-statistics/#Meeting Trends and Predictions](http://www.zippia.com/advice/meeting-statistics/#Meeting_Trends_and_Predictions)>

- Foster, S. (2023, January 23). Facilitating and assessing student engagement in the classroom. University of Colorado Center for Teaching & Learning. <<https://www.colorado.edu/center/teaching-learning/2023/01/23/facilitating-and-assessing-student-engagement-classroom>>.
- Garrison, S., & Parish, C. (2020). The campus improvement project: A high-impact practice to stimulate honors community and empower student leadership on campus. *Honors in Practice*, 16, 234–236.
- Gibson, C., Rennie, K., Dewing, J., & McKinlay, L. (2020). Developing facilitation skills amongst undergraduate nursing students to promote dementia awareness with children in a higher education institution (innovative practice). *Dementia*, 19(8), 1–10.
- Horton, L., Corbitt, D., & White, B. (2021). Tough talks: Student-led programs to facilitate civil discourse. *Honors in Practice*, 17, 109–118.
- Kaner, S. (2014). *Facilitator's guide to participatory decision-making* (3rd ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- Knight, J. K., Wise, S. B., Rentsch, J., & Furtak, E. M. (2017). Cues matter: Learning assistants influence introductory biology student interactions during clicker-question discussions. *CBE Life Sciences Education*, 14(4), ar41. <<http://doi.org/10.1187/cbe.15-04-0093>>. PMID: 26590204; PMCID: PMC4710402.
- Lee, L. E., Rinn, A. N., Crutchfield, K., Ottwein, J. K., Hodges, J., & Mun, R. U. (2021). Perfectionism and the imposter phenomenon in academically talented undergraduates. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 65(3), 220–234. <<https://doi.org/10.1177/0016986220969396>>
- Liberating structures including and unleashing everyone. Making space with TRIZ\*. <<https://www.liberatingstructures.com/6-making-space-with-triz>>
- Lipmanowicz, H., & McCandless, K. (2014). *The surprising power of liberating structures: Simple rules to unleash a culture of innovation*. Liberating Structures Press.
- Mrig, A., & Sanaghan, P. (2014). 8 keys to improving task forces and committees in higher education. *Higher Ed Impact*, 13–26. <<https://www.academicimpressions.com/PDF/TaskForcesDiagnostic.pdf>>.

- National Collegiate Honors Council Board of Directors. (2013, November 6). Definition of honors education. National Collegiate Honors Council.
- Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. (2017). Hours worked: Average annual hours actually worked. *OECD employment and labour market statistics* [database]. 10.1787/data-00303-en.
- Parker, P. (2018). *The art of gathering: How we meet and why it matters*. Riverhead Books.
- Richards, K. A. R., & Hemphill, M. A. (2018). A practical guide to collaborative qualitative data analysis. *Journal of Teaching in Physical Education*, 37(2), 225–231.
- Saldaña, J. (2021). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (4th ed.). Sage Publications.
- Singhal, A. (2013). Creating more substance, connections, and ideas in the classroom. In H. Lipmanowicz & K. McCandless (Eds.), *The surprising power of liberating structures: Simple rules to unleash a culture of innovation* (pp. 138–144). Liberating Structures Press.
- Singhal, A., Perez, L. E., Stevik, K., Mønness, E., & Svenkerud, P. J. (2020). Liberating structures as pedagogical innovation for inclusive learning: A pilot study in a Norwegian university. *Journal of Creative Communications*, 15(1), 35–52.
- U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2017). American time use survey. <<https://www.bls.gov/tus/home.htm>>
- Walters, G., & Kanak, A. (2016). Effects of peer mentorship on student leadership. *Honors in Practice*, 12, 59–76.
- Watkins, A. (2020). Owning honors: Outcomes for a student leadership culture. *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council*, 21(1), 103–124.
- Ziker, J. (2014, March 31). The long, lonely job of homo academicus. *The Blue Review*. <<https://www.boisestate.edu/bluereview/faculty-time-allocation>>

---

The authors may be contacted at  
[connersuddick@isu.edu](mailto:connersuddick@isu.edu).

APPENDIX A

Sample Storyboard

A sample storyboard prepared by students in Facilitating Change for a new student orientation session using liberating structures and other miscellaneous techniques as discussed in this article. *The research team edited this storyboard to serve as an example for others.*

**New Student Orientation:** June 2nd | Pond Student Union Building

**Session Length:** 60 minutes

**Session Purpose:** To create a space for incoming honors students to de-stress from registration through connection with current and fellow incoming students.

**# of Participants:** 28 Incoming Students, 5 Honors Peer Mentors (Current Students, 4 Honors Faculty/Administrators)

Timing	Goal(s)	Method	Design Sequence	Materials Needed
1:00pm – 1:20pm	To invite incoming students to become more familiar and comfortable with each other	Concentric Circles	1. <b>Structuring Invitation:</b> Questions are posed by a student facilitator—students are invited to both listen to their partner and provide a response to the question. 2. <b>Arrangement of Space:</b> Tables and chairs pushed to the side to provide an open space in the room. The facilitator is by the A/V equipment. 3. <b>Participant Distribution:</b> 95% participants, 5% facilitator (to ask the questions and keep time). 4. <b>Configuration of Groups:</b> Two equal groups: An inner circle and outer circle facing each other.	Slides with prompts Bell (to break through discussion) *Restructure room after activity for next technique*



1:20pm–1:30pm	<p><b>[Goal #1]</b> To prime students for celebrity interviews by giving them a moment to reflect on questions</p> <p><b>[Goal #2]</b> To collect written information about their needs for honors program leadership</p>	Spiral Journal	<p><b>5. Allocation of Time &amp; Sequence:</b> Facilitators ask a question, and participants are given two minutes (~one minute each) to respond to the prompt. When the time is up, the facilitator rings the bell and instructs one of the circles to move a certain number of places to find a new partner (e.g. inner circle, 5 spaces left!)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What has been bringing you joy lately?</li> <li>What is the story behind your full name?</li> <li>Describe your dream meal?</li> <li>What is something from your senior year you're proud of?</li> <li>Why did you decide to come to ISU and join honors?</li> <li>What is something you're looking forward to this fall at ISU?</li> </ol>	<p>Paper</p> <p>Pens</p> <p>Instructions on slides</p> <p><i>Play instrumental music during free writing</i></p>
---------------	---	----------------	---	--

			<p>b. Facilitator invites them to fold the paper into fourths and draw a tight spiral in the middle of the paper</p> <p>c. Facilitator provides the prompts and offers 5 minutes to free write about the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>i. How are you arriving today (mentally, emotionally, physically)?</li><li>ii. What are you curious about honors student life at ISU?</li><li>iii. What questions do you have about the honors program?</li><li>iv. What do you need from ISU Honors to have a successful/enjoyable Fall Semester?</li></ul> <p>d. Facilitator collects spiral journals at the end to compile for honors program leadership</p>		
1:30pm-2:00pm	To invite current honors student leaders to answer student questions that arose during New Student Orientation	Celebrity Interview <i>(Liberating Structures Technique #22)</i>	<p>1. <b>Structuring Invitation</b> Invite panel of “celebrities” composed of current honors student leaders to answer incoming student questions in a “talk show” format</p> <p>2. <b>How Space Is Arranged</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. Facilitator (interviewer) and celebrity in front of the room with microphones</li><li>b. Audience seated across the room</li></ul> <p>3. <b>How Participation Is Distributed</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. <b>Part I:</b> Interview: everyone has an equal opportunity to listen</li><li>b. <b>Part II:</b> Questions: everyone has an equal opportunity to engage with one another to formulate questions</li></ul>	Microphone Index cards for audience questions	

			<div>4. <b>How Groups Are Configured</b> a. <b>Part I:</b> Large Group Individuals, pairs b. <b>Part II:</b> Small groups for <b>Think/Pair/Share</b> to generate follow up questions  5. <b>Sequence of Steps and Time Allocation</b> a. Interviewer welcomes and introduces the panel and topics being discussed. <b>3 min.</b> b. Interviewer asks questions generated from the previous technique. <b>15 minutes.</b> c. Invite participants to generate additional questions in a <b>Think/Pair/Share</b> conversation and then on 3-by-5-inch cards. <b>5 min.</b> d. Interviewer sifts the cards, looking for patterns and asking additional questions to the celebrity. <b>10 min.</b> e. Interviewer closes the session.</div>
--	--	--	---

APPENDIX B

Template Storyboard

A template storyboard for programs to use in their own context.

Event Title: Month Day, Year | Location/Zoom Link

Session Length: \_\_\_\_\_

Session Purpose: \_\_\_\_\_

# of Participants: \_\_\_\_\_

Timing	Goal(s)	Method	Design Sequence	Materials Needed

© Bridget Mullins (Free use with attribution, [bridget.tm.mullins@gmail.com](mailto:bridget.tm.mullins@gmail.com))

## APPENDIX C

### Course Outline

A course outline of the next offering of “Facilitating Change” to demonstrate how different liberating structures are weaved throughout the course. Please note that this outline does not include weekly readings.

Unit I: The Art & Science of Facilitation	
Week 1	<b>Building Our Learning Community</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Technique #1) Concentric Circles</li> <li>• Technique #2) Sociometry</li> <li>• Technique #3) Echoductions</li> <li>• Technique #4) Human Spectrum</li> <li>• Presentation: Syllabus Overview</li> <li>• Technique #5) Spiral Journals</li> </ul>
Week 2	<b>Why We Gather</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Technique #6) I Now Pass . . .</li> <li>• Technique #7) <i>Appreciative Interviews</i></li> <li>• Technique #8) <i>Conversation Cafe</i></li> <li>• Technique #9) Chalk Talk</li> </ul>
Week 3	<b>Improv Basics</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improv Technique #1: Yes And!</li> </ul>
Week 4	<b>Microstructures: The Ingredients of Liberating Structures</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Technique #10) String Me A Story</li> <li>• Technique #11) Collapsing Stories</li> <li>• Technique #12) <i>Troika Consultations</i></li> <li>• Recap: Microstructural Debrief</li> </ul>
Unit II: Expanding our Facilitator Toolbox	
Week 5	<b>Analysis of Personality</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improv Technique #2: Working with Challenging Characters</li> </ul>
Week 6	<b>Cultivating Wisdom from Large Groups</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Technique #13) Fabricating Fables &amp; Gallery Walk</li> <li>• Technique #14) <i>Wise Crowds</i></li> <li>• Technique #15) <i>25:10 Crowdsourcing</i></li> </ul>
Week 7	<b>Facilitating Creative Engagement</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improv Technique #3: 3rd Thought</li> <li>• Middleditch and Schwartz Discussion</li> </ul>

<b>Week 8</b>	<b>Generating Ideas</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Technique #16) Portkey</li> <li>• Technique #17) 10 x 10 Writing</li> <li>• Technique #18) <i>Wicked Questions</i></li> <li>• Technique #19) <i>Impromptu Networking</i></li> </ul>
<b>Week 9</b>	<b>Creative Destruction &amp; Intentional Planning (Zoom)</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Technique #20) <i>TRIZ</i></li> <li>• Technique #21) <i>Eco-Cycle Planning</i></li> <li>• Technique #22) <i>Celebrity Interview</i></li> </ul>
<b>Week 10</b>	<b>Feeling out the Space</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improv Technique #4: Exploration of Space</li> <li>• Body Keeps the Score Discussion</li> <li>• Technique #23) <i>1-2-4-ALL</i></li> </ul>
<b>Unit III: Building Resilience in Facilitation</b>	
<b>Week 11</b>	<b>Designing Storyboards</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Technique #24) <i>Design Together Part I</i></li> </ul>
<b>Week 12</b>	<b>Designing Storyboards</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Technique #24) <i>Design Together Part II</i></li> </ul>
<b>Week 13</b>	<b>Clarifying Purpose</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Technique #25) <i>I Am From Poems</i></li> <li>• Technique #26) <i>9 Whys</i>: Clarifying our Facilitator's Stance</li> <li>• Technique #27) <i>From Purpose to Practice</i></li> </ul>
<b>Week 14</b>	<b>Proactive Conflict Transformation</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lecture: Conflict as Energy</li> <li>• Technique #28) <i>Tiny Monsters</i></li> <li>• Technique #29) <i>Inner Cast</i></li> </ul>
<b>Week 15</b>	<b>Reading Body Language</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improv Technique #5: Object Work</li> </ul>
<b>Week 16</b>	<b>ImprovX Final &amp; Technique #30) <i>Positive Gossip</i></b>