Strong Emotions in Online Community Engagement

Facilitation Tips and Reminders

The surfacing of (strong) emotions in online groups during Online Community Engagement Activities (OCEAs) provide a great opportunity for facilitators to foster connections, relationship building, deep learning and transformative experiences. Showing emotions, vulnerability and authentic sharing are likely to be experienced as an unfamiliar way for a group to connect and engage with each other in an online environment. Especially as this stands in strong contrast to other ways of online interaction where strong emotions are often blocking communication between people with the risk of polarisation.

*The main take-away is that emotions in OCEAs should be valued as a great **opportunity** for relationship building, deep learning and transformation. But only when handled with care and managed constructively.*

Emotions are an indication of importance. When emotions are expressed, the facilitator (and the group) should realise that what is being addressed matters to the individual expressing the emotion. Exploring 'what' it is that matters and 'why' this is the case deepens the interaction and offers a strong opportunity for critical thinking as well as empathy building, reflection skills and awareness.

It is therefore imperative that facilitators are able to recognize emotions and assess the situation, act to the group's needs and consequently intervene accordingly. Only then the interaction is deepened in a constructive way. Not doing so is likely to negatively impact group dynamic, levels of participant engagement and thereby the overall quality of your OCEA.

The advice and facilitation practices below are in many cases relevant for group work and handling strong emotions in both offline and online settings. However, practical tips for online facilitation are included when possible. This guide can therefore be used as a refresher and inspiration for managing strong emotions during facilitation of OCEAs.

The Role Of The Facilitator

As a facilitator in an OCEA you are a process leader. One of the main tasks is to create and protect a safe space for participants to engage with each other. This is key for groups to develop empathy and allow for open and in depth interactions, especially about sensitive topics. To create a safe space, a facilitator must acknowledge emotions as they surface. Acknowledging emotions ensures participants feel safe, heard and recognized. OCEA facilitators are multipartial, meaning they give attention to all participants and perspectives expressed equally. When possible missing opinions from communities that are not represented in the group should be brought in by the facilitator to enrich conversations. As an OCEA facilitator you should not express your own views or participate in exercises or discussions. Staying neutral and multi-partial helps you to stay a process leader and foster an inclusive environment valuing all opinions.

As an OCEA facilitator you are NOT ....
- ☒ Teacher or instructor: you are not responsible for transferring knowledge
- ☒ Counsellor: you do not provide advice or support to participants
- ☒ Trainer : your are not responsible for skill set or competency development
- ☒ Mediator : you do not necessarily work towards (re)solutions or consensus

As an OCEA facilitator you are ....
- ☑ Group process leader
- ☑ Neutral and multipartial
- ☑ Responsible for fostering a constructive group environment

Facilitating Strong emotions in OCEA: Four Steps to Follow

1. Noticing emotions when facilitating online groups

How do you notice emotions in an online space? Unfortunately, picking up indicators of emotions is much harder online than offline. However, there are opportunities to notice emotions in online spaces. As a facilitator you should pay careful attention to participant's body language, tone of voice, and levels of engagement (ie active participation or lack thereof). As such, it is very important to use both audio and video during your group sessions. Monitoring body language and levels of engagement is not only useful when participants are engaged and active (while they speak for example) but also very useful when they are not speaking or not engaged as these may be moments when participants show emotions such as anger, disappointment, disengagement, or general frustration. Of course, word choice or the use of defensive language can also be signals of emotions.

2. Acknowledging emotions when facilitating online groups

Simply noticing emotions isn't enough. How can you acknowledge them appropriately as a facilitator?

★ Use language that explicitly states that you have noticed and heard the participant's feelings. For example by saying "Thank you for sharing that with us. I can hear that it is an emotional issue for you and I believe it is important to acknowledge this." While explicit acknowledgement is useful and often works well, to some this might sound condescending. As such. be mindful of this and assess whether this use of language is appropriate for your group.

★ Try to stay away from labelling the emotion for a participant. This is patronising and can be experienced as offensive. When you notice a participant getting very upset and angry, do not say "I see that this is making you very angry", but instead say something like "This seems to be bringing out strong emotions, would you like to talk more about this with the group?" or "This issue seems to be important to you, do you want to explain why this matters to you?"

★ Express empathy through body language towards the emotions displayed and to the participant experiencing these. For example by leaning forward, looking into the camera, nodding or tilting your head. Use a calm and friendly tone of voice to reflect empathy.

★ Give positive feedback to normalise emotions in the virtual space. Thank the participant for sharing, being open and honest. You could even explicitly state that it is OK to express emotions in the group during your time together.

3. Responding to emotions when facilitating online groups

After acknowledging the emotion and giving space to the individual participant to elaborate and voice their feelings, it is important to include the rest of the group in the conversation:

★ Give room for the group to respond. How are they feeling about the situation? Would they like to share or say something? What type of emotions are triggered at other participants during the expression of strong emotions. Inviting participants to speak to their own emotions gives other participants the opportunity to show empathy or bring their own need's to the conversation. If you don't provide the space for this, it will leave the other participants unsatisfied. Failing to provide space for the group to respond could also lead to participants claiming space to respond. If this happens, the facilitator runs the risk of damaging its role as process leader. At the same time, as a facilitator you need to assess whether giving room for group responses is suitable and won't lead to an unhealthy environment, for example where the participant that expressed strong emotions feels unsafe, singled out or attacked by responses from group members.

★ Check in with the group's needs. What is the 'group temperature'? Would people like to take a short break, or use the momentum for a deeper exploration? Are participants triggered? You can do this by observing body language and facial expressions, ask people to share how they are doing directly or use a simple check-in exercise.

★ For further engagement in line with your OCEAs objectives it can be useful to connect the expressed emotions to the broader theme of the OCEA or the group session. Starting a meta-discussion on what role emotions play in the OCEA, and why they are an important part of how the group communicates and engages with each other can be helpful to this end.

You can also let the group reflect on their comfort level with emotions, and discuss which role emotions play in their lives or their broader communities.

★ Slow down the pace of the conversation or discussion to create space for reflection, processing and thinking. Silences can be instrumental to this objective, but it is then helpful to make explicit that the group can take its time to digest and reflect.

★ Dive deeper and use critical thinking and reflection to explore where the emotions came from and what they mean. Do certain emotions that surface indeed signal that a subject is of special interest to participants? Why do participants feel a strong emotional connection to this? Unpacking this can lead to in-depth conversations about identity, formative experiences, and people's views on life.

4. Aftercare

Finally, make sure you do not forget to take appropriate steps for 'Aftercare'. The following steps might be helpful in safeguarding the constructive group environment for future online sessions (and beyond):

★ Follow up and communicate after the session with the participant(s) individually. Do this directly or soon thereafter, making sure to check in on the person and their needs for future sessions. As such, you ensure that participants feel safe to reach out to you if they feel the need to. Don't use this as a way to counsel or provide advice or help with the specific topic or emotions that surfaced during the session. If necessary, provide information where the person can seek further support to the end.

★ Communicate to the group entirely, for example via email, and provide positive feedback about the experience and everyone's effort. Praise openness and honesty and possibly emphasise why this is meaningful for the group process and the overall experience (or objectives) of the OCEA. In any case, try to normalise the experience and thereby the presence of emotions during your group sessions

★ Don't forget yourself and debrief! It is likely that you feel some kind of way after an emotional online session. The situation might have been triggering, overwhelming or concerning for you yourself. Meanwhile you had to stay professional, neutral and attentive to the group. Make sure you connect with a colleague, supervisor or coach to express your own feelings, reflect and debrief. As an online facilitator, this might not be as simple as walking into a coworkers office next door, so make sure that structures for support are in place when setting up your OCEA.

Published February 15, 2022