

# Facilitation

FEET: Fit for European E-Training is an Erasmus + project No.2015-1-DE02-KA104-002248  
Learning Mobility of Individuals/Adult Education

The aim of this course is the acquisition of new knowledge and skills for becoming effective online trainers (e-trainers) by the training professionals collaborating with E@W. They will study and practice the fundamentals and learn how online training is designed, implemented and evaluated. They will be trained to become e-trainers so they can provide online and blended learning to their learners in Germany and worldwide.

The training course is developed based on the contract between the FEET project coordinator **English at Work GmbH, DE:** E@W [www.englishatwork.com](http://www.englishatwork.com) and **Global Knowledge Development Ltd, UK:** GKD - [www.gkd-online.com](http://www.gkd-online.com)

# A. Theoretical part

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# 1. Facilitation: Checking in with the participants

Nowadays one of the best ways to guarantee an informed, efficient studying and working generation is through e-learning. Learning in online Virtual environments and virtual teams is preferred for many reasons, but mainly because of the obvious technological and economic advantages. Additionally online courses with anytime, anywhere opportunities offer important benefits in learning.

The art of facilitation in online learning is not an easy one and demands frequent communication with the participants in the learning/training process. Active

listening and questioning skills are fundamental to facilitation.

Participants in online training are often widely separated geographically - many located in different countries and in different time zones. It's not unusual to have students from different cultures, working for different organizations, having unknown standards and models of behaviour. Another factor that should be considered is that such learning groups may also consist of participants with varying technical proficiency.

Recognizing that English is not the first language for the participants in an online training is an important milestone. Messages may be easily misunderstood or used in a wrong way.

It's a good idea to keep language simple and culturally neutral in the context of online training. The teacher/trainer and the students should avoid using idioms, slang, colloquialisms, irony or jargon.

When answering questions from students during the training process, the trainer (and facilitator) should paraphrase the questions to ensure that he has understood what is not clear and that the other students also understand the question. This will help the learners to better understand the answer.

Some participants may be uncomfortable or inexperienced with the environment of online learning. Please take extra time with these students - this will result in a fuller team experience for all the people involved.

Don't forget to remain actively engaged as a facilitator.

Ask frequent questions to spark discussions within the group.

Try to keep everyone engaged in the training process as much as possible. You can use frequent feedback, repetition of information to ensure retention, interactive materials, surveys and detailed follow-ups for this purpose.

According to research an important part of the facilitation of online learning is the skill to encourage the bonding of the participants into a successful virtual team.

Some further tips to take into account:

- consider the cultural background, learning styles, potential learning disabilities, language proficiency and previous online training experience of the students
  - provide them with a range of different learning experiences
  - encourage them to get to know each other and actively listen to their suggestions or complaints
  - avoid stereotypes or assumptions
  - provide different ways for anonymous or informal feedback
  - actively discourage racist, sexist and homophobic language or behaviour during the online training
  - keep questions and interactions simple and straightforward
- regularly check the level of understanding of the training materials.

## 2. Specificities of on-line communication

The online environment presents unique challenges, especially for virtual training. Often participants lack face to-face interaction on which we all depend in our everyday communication. Its importance should not be underrated. Without this physical presence students can sometimes feel isolated from their instructors as well as from the other students.

Therefore, it's very important to encourage communication, interaction and collaboration among participants in online training.

It's not surprising that online relationships without the benefit of body language and nonverbal behaviour can

make building trust very difficult. According to Smith (2008) virtual groups can be challenging, with obstacles related to trust, communication, dependence on technology, time management, and team cohesiveness.

However, more often than not students are very inventive in finding ways to communicate and work together. Depending on their personal preferences they can use both synchronous and asynchronous technologies to interact with one another.

For example, web conferencing can engage the training participants in live conversations and responding to questions. Students usually love such interactive and captivating sessions. They can help in overcoming the isolation of distance in online learning and the students

can feel the presence of their trainer and the rest of the participants.

### 3. Being an effective on-line facilitator

Sandor Schuman (1996) suggests four important basic skills in a facilitator:

- The ability to anticipate the complete problem-solving and decision making process.
- The ability to use procedures that support both the group's social and cognitive processes.
- The ability to remain neutral regarding content issues and values
- The ability to respect the group's need to understand and learn from the problem-solving process.

In order to build a successful online course a trainer should be an effective facilitator as well. To avoid

problems during the training process and maintain high level of satisfaction among participants you can consider the following tips:

- get to know your students well
  - set clear expectations among students
  - give them a chance to introduce themselves to each other
  - provide them with tools to communicate
  - encourage them to be both leaders and followers
  - don't allow domination
  - discourage lurking and not contributing to the learning process
  - encourage full participation and communication
  - serve as a mediator in cases of conflict
  - be proactive
  - embrace diversity
- stay positive
  - ask questions
  - encourage information sharing
  - create a positive environment for all participants

## 4. Dealing with challenging participants

Facilitation in online environment requires trainers to work with a very wide spectrum of people. There are no set rules for dealing with difficult or challenging behaviour but prevention is one of the main components in online facilitation.

The trainer needs a variety of tools and techniques for facilitation and if one doesn't work in a certain scenario he should stay positive and try something else.

Managing dysfunction requires the trainer's total neutrality.

## 5. Encouraging virtual teamwork and motivating participants by using social networks for on-line group training

In order to have successful virtual teamwork trainers should encourage learners to acquire and practice collaborative skills. Some of them include giving and receiving help, sharing information, explaining content, offering feedback, participating in constructive discussions, and etc.

Communication is a key element in all types of virtual collaboration. The trainer should keep the participants constantly engaged in the training process and remind

them to communicate with each other regularly. Positive attitude, active listening, and clear precise language are vital aids in establishing successful and rewarding communication across the training group.

Research shows that recognition improves motivation and also sustains greater levels of performance in individuals (Burt, 1987; Cohen and Bailey, 1997). As a trainer and facilitator, your role is to make sure that all the participants encourage each other's input and promote mutual and inclusive understanding.

Social networking and social media web sites (Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, FriendFeed) provide great ways of keeping in touch with team members. Social media are an excellent way to strengthen ties between students and improve teambuilding in online training.

Social networking has become a big part of people's everyday lives and can boost communication, interaction, satisfaction and engagement in the virtual settings of the learning process.

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## B. Practical part

### 1. Make a list of what challenge participants bring into a group discussion.

What behavior would surprise and challenge you as a facilitator?

Are there any specific behaviors that seriously challenge you?

Discuss your list with colleagues.

### 2. Which of the following you **should** or **should not do**:

- Allow participants to introduce themselves
- Set up ice breaker activity.
- Use a language or behaviour that will exclude certain participants from the discussion.
- Use inclusive language.
- Make sure from the beginning what are the expectations amongst participants and you.
- Assume all participants have the same level of experience and expectations.
- Establish basic rules.

### 3. Divide your group in two: **facilitators** and **participants**. Facilitators should think of ways to

encourage participants. Participants will rate each suggestion giving marks from 1 to 5, 5 being the highest.

Make a list of all suggestions that got the highest marks.

Encourage participants to discuss the results.

After the discussion make them switch roles - facilitators should become participants and vice versa. Let them talk about their experience with difficult behaviour from the point of view of trainers or students.