

Facilitation as composting the self

A practice of dying into the
emerging aliveness

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Potsdam
April 2026

RIFS Discussion Paper

Zusammenfassung (DE)

Dieses Discussion Paper begreift Facilitation nicht als methodisches Vorgehen, sondern als relationale und existenzielle Praxis. Ausgehend von gelebter Erfahrung in transformativen Kontexten reflektiert der Text die inneren Bedingungen von Facilitation, insbesondere Präsenz, Hingabe, Macht und die eigene Verstrickung der Facilitator:innen in das Geschehen.

Er macht deutlich, dass Facilitation nicht auf Gruppen angewendet wird, sondern sich in einem relationalen Feld vollzieht, dem die Facilitator:innen selbst angehören; dass ihre innere Haltung entscheidend dafür ist, was im Prozess entstehen kann; und dass transformative Prozesse die Bereitschaft erfordern, Kontrolle und vorgegebene Ergebnisse loszulassen.

In dieser Perspektive wird Facilitation zu einer Praxis des „Kompostierens des Selbst“ – als Bereitschaft, Identität, Agenda und Gewissheit loszulassen zugunsten von Lebendigkeit und kollektivem Werden.

Summary

This discussion paper offers a practice-based reflection on facilitation as a relational and existential practice rather than a set of methods or tools. Drawing on lived experience in transformative contexts, it explores the inner conditions of facilitation, including presence, surrender, power, and the facilitator's own involvement in the field.

It suggests that facilitation is not something applied to groups, but something that unfolds within a relational field to which the facilitator inevitably belongs; that the facilitator's inner posture becomes a decisive factor in what can emerge; and that transformative processes require a willingness to relinquish control and predefined outcomes.

In this view, facilitation becomes a practice of “composting the self” — a willingness to let go of identity, agenda, and certainty in service of aliveness and collective becoming.

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1 How this Text Wants to be Read

This discussion paper does not follow the conventions of an academic article. It does not present a theoretical framework, empirical findings, or a systematic argument in the usual sense. Nor does it aim to offer tools, methods, or prescriptions for facilitation practice.

Instead, this text is written as a first-person, practice-based reflection emerging from lived experience in facilitation and transformative processes. It is a collaborative dance, originating in years of relationship and a conversation that surprisingly surfaced something that felt essential to us. It moves associatively rather than linearly, works with metaphor and narrative, and draws on embodied, relational, and experiential knowing. Its mode of inquiry is not explanation, but attunement.

The intention of this paper is not to convince or instruct, but to open a reflective space. It explores facilitation as an existential and relational practice, asking what it demands of those who engage in it, not only professionally, but personally. In doing so, the text deliberately remains close to uncertainty, ambiguity, and vulnerability. These are not treated as deficits to be resolved, but as constitutive dimensions of transformative practice.

Readers are therefore invited to approach this text slowly and generously, allowing both resonance and resistance to arise. Rather than asking whether one agrees with its propositions, the more relevant questions may be:

- What does this text evoke in my own practice?
- Where does it irritate, unsettle, or open something new?
- What does it make visible about my own positioning, assumptions, or longings?

As a contribution to this discussion paper series, the text expands the understanding of knowledge production beyond analytical abstraction. It offers experiential reflection as a legitimate and necessary complement to more formalized modes of inquiry, particularly in fields concerned with transformation, sustainability, and relational practice.

This paper is thus best read not as a finished statement, but as an invitation into dialogue: with the text, with one's own practice, and with others who are similarly engaged in navigating the uncertainties of transformative work, hopefully contributing to the refinement and progression of the field of facilitation of transformative spaces.

We are also authoring more theoretical and argumentative academic content in parallel. This is not that. Dance with what we offer here. Enjoy.

2 Our Starting Point

Amit's experience:

I was hosting an emergent dialogue in which participants shared stories of suffering and grief. One word was giving the other. One sharing followed upon another. Then suddenly, I heard a screaming from the outside. It expressed something primal. It gripped the air of the space. The 150 people in the fishbowl paused. It ruptured the sharing. Then it subsided and I began speaking. Then again. Another scream. Echoing into the night. It shifted the space. There was a glimmer of possibility. A fragile connection with the field. Then it closed again. A final story. Still stuck in the personal. But those screams had offered something, sparks of the field.

Only later did I learn that it was one of the participants that had screamed. That the screams were related to the space I was holding and the dialogue. In hindsight it seems that those screams manifested an invitation to call it in. The field. The transpersonal, the non-dual space that some of us connect to in offering our service as facilitators. In that moment, however, I did not call it in. The conversation among the participants continued and the screams were not further noticed or considered. Was this a missed opportunity? Maybe, yet in that moment there was simply no capacity to dive into it. Even without inviting this into the process, the space unfolded its potential in its own way: After the session, the participants were rejuvenated. They felt the liberation of being able to offer stories to a room full of people that did not collapse into drama. The group simply remained steadfast, through stories of genocides and deep personal loss, like when one's child dies. That is, in itself, an act of healing. An offer of solace. And yet, I can't help but wonder what would have happened if we could have accessed an even deeper metabolic capacity of the field? If the intention of inviting the participants into an emergent dialogue would have been more fully realized. What if I could have conjured the portal to one of those spaces where groups get in direct contact with the mystery? That magic when the space takes over and gently offers its wisdom, where it speaks through us instead of us speaking into it.

In our understanding, facilitation is a practice of serving the potential of a process and enabling its emergence. For us, facilitation consists of preparation, initiating the space, catalyzing, tuning or increasing its potential, holding the space and then gradually making oneself obsolete as the group moves into its own leadership and steps forward. A successful process has called forth the inherent capacity of the group to continue its path of becoming. Any subsequent work with the same group would be done from a new starting point. A potential next invitation would not be a result of dependence but a new longing to go further.

In the following, we will move through 8 different aspects of this approach offering a landscape for facilitation understanding and practice.

3 The Posture of the Facilitator

“If the facilitator also pursues his own agenda, then the space becomes about fulfilling the need behind that particular goal. And that significantly influences what the space can be and become.”

All intentions in a space shape it. Not the least the facilitator's. That's why we want to reflect on the presence and posture that a facilitator contributes to a process. Actually, experiencing a facilitator who is leading confidently and simultaneously serving the group process selflessly can be a rare bliss. Some facilitators step into their role to feel powerful and in command. Others may choose to facilitate a group to feel needed and connected. Or appreciated. Others again step into spaces with a heroic posture. Perhaps they have identified a problem or challenge and see that whatever will unfold as a means of fixing, fighting or fleeing that issue. The heroic posture is rather common, it seems benign, but the process does not allow the group to unfold into what it needs. Instead, the facilitator often ends up imposing his or her agenda.

The posture of the facilitator is crucial and shapes how much focus can be placed on tending the field. How well have you done your work? Are you ready to face whatever may appear? How far does your capacity to discern stretch without collapsing into judgement? How willing are you to surrender to the field? Who or what are you committed to? Are you providing a "service" to someone in particular, or do you feel obliged to fulfil their expectation of an outcome? Are you afraid to "fail" – whatever this might mean for you?

These and similar questions are ones the facilitator needs to have clear and nuanced awareness of. In our understanding, the field contains everything that is there. This means that the process of facilitating will surface your ego, maybe your subconscious desires to control or to perform, to be the hero. This is why facilitation in this framing is probably not your job. It is your art or vocation.

As we point to this influence of the facilitator's posture, we do not want to suggest that you should try to take yourself out of the equation. It is not possible to stand outside. We are unavoidably entangled. So, if we cannot be outside, we are instead invited to dance with and in the relationality of the field, as consciously as we can.

Our perspective here is radical: unless you're willing to let go fully and submit to what is already here – willing to get intimate with all of it, the group, the place, the field, the mystery, yourself – you're not facilitating.

4 The Field and the Unspoken

“Point towards the somatic... that they are there, those things not yet expressed.”

Attunement. Trusting one's intuition. Moving towards and into what is stuck. No matter the cost. This is a practice of deep trust. Both in terms of a trust that your sensing is real, no matter what is spoken by the participants, but also that you are in the space for a reason.

To stay with the raw metabolic flow or emotion is a powerful technique. To point to the subtle somatic and energetic shifts of the group without explaining them or storying them. Simply pointing to the shift. Trusting that as it shifts in your body, you serve the field by making that type of sensing tangible. The orientation one may take is towards freedom i.e. looking for relaxation, space and release but moving through the tension – not by avoiding it.

It is diametrically opposed to escaping tension by making grand explanations or jumping into fancy frameworks or exercises. This is an invitation to move towards the fullest intensity of the tension that the group (and you) can handle and let it play out. Sometimes staying with an interpersonal dynamic or letting go of the structure for participants to meander and discover their own incoherence is exactly what is needed. Trusting that whatever comes through one, in the right frequency, is in service of the field. Even if it breaks the plan.

These types of practices are present in Circling and the Art of Hosting. They are there in the various lineages of Bohmian dialogue. Let's practice voicing what is here. Trusting that it is part of the coherence but not assuming that we know what it is about.

"I need to express that I feel a strong tension in relation to what you just shared. It is at the pit of my stomach and it radiates up towards my chest and heart." That's all I said in the call where my intended co-founder had just spoken. "What do you mean? With what?" I resisted the urge to make up a story and instead I told them I didn't know. About a month later we realized that we were not supposed to work together. That we were on different projects. That moment of expressing the tension without story was the moment it shifted."

Speaking what is there but what was not previously able to be said is powerful. Exercising discernment, to speak it or to simply act from the invisible flows that you sense is part of the art of facilitation. Sometimes voicing it yourself and sometimes simply inviting the one that holds the experience. This too is dependent on a high level of individuation on the part of the facilitator. We need to know which response we're dealing with. Is this lesson for me or for the group? Who is sourcing it? Revelation always contains an element of risk, does one verbalize it or simply continue to attend to the tension unspoken. What does it take for you to take that risk? What is your practice for tuning your instrument, clearing your clutter so you can be a mirror? In the approach we are currently discussing, these questions are central.

5 Dying Into the Role

"You hospice yourself while guiding others into their aliveness."

Submit yourself. Surrender. Surrender into the field. Orient to that which is bigger than you. Invite the mystery. Hospice. Midwife. Be fully present. And be willing to die so that it can become more alive – just like yourself.

In its most radical form this is the invitation to be willing to go to your edge and release. (Though not every space requires it.) Sometimes your capacity is sufficient, you have what it takes to let the field unfold inside you. Other times the process will take you to your absolute edge. Those are the moments that will reveal who you are as a facilitator. As a human. Are you willing and able to fully surrender and be surprised?

If your reason for acting as a facilitator is about acquiring identity, this is probably challenging. In that case, surrendering to the unknown means that you're being asked to give up everything you are, to cease to exist. That might be tough and too much to aspire for. If your orientation is towards potential however, the space's as well as your own, these moments that invite compost may be exhilarating. In essence it is an opportunity to familiarize yourself deeper with the essence of aliveness.

The ability to die into a role is an existential exercise. It is based on an orientation towards becoming that allows you to let go of those things that are rigid, that which does not increase the potential. And doing so with intuitive precision and discernment.

At the same time, dying into your role, does not mean to become absent or "neutral". Being no-body is not helpful. Rather the opposite, fully present and authentically engaged and simultaneously empty and detached to outcomes. Facilitation, as much as it is about mirroring the group, sometimes it is also about stepping in. Being willing to take on the leadership and the role that this group or space requires so that it may begin unfolding (developing) into that higher potential that is latent in it. Facilitation is neither about rigidly guiding a group through a pre-structured plan or softly stepping back letting anything unfold. It is the ability to fully become and be what the space needs at this juncture. The shape we are willing and able to take will influence which potential the space reaches. A need for a more active stance may manifest during the process too but usually it is most pressing at the start. Before we see clearly what seems to want to grow. Ultimately, facilitating means turning to and leading in service of the flow of aliveness – in the field and simultaneously ourselves. This is why our own practice is crucial. Being sensitive to the aliveness in ourselves – as we relate to the field we facilitate – is the foundation for being a channel for that aliveness. Put more bluntly it's an invitation to "do your thing and then get out of the way".

Facilitation has served its purpose when the role of the facilitator is composted. When the space is strong enough to hold itself, the participants able and willing to complete the movement. The highest praise for the facilitator may be the client wondering what you did in the first place. And yet as you leave, the context has shifted to a higher potential. Beyond what you or any of the individuals in the space knew was possible. This posture contains the willingness and ability to become redundant. It is a posture of radical responsibility, a willingness to serve beyond yourself, alongside a well-developed (self-)compassion and the capacity to skillfully navigate the shifts between.

6 Codependence, Manipulation, and Hidden Purpose

“That’s black magic... when you’re trying to do the thing without it really having a cost for you.”

The dark side of facilitation – especially in transformative processes – is the risk of manipulation. If we have not composted ourselves. If the project has its hooks in me on any level. Whether an economic uncertainty, a hope to get another gig or a preferred outcome. These are recipes for invoking the dark side of facilitation. When we tactically open people and then insert our solution – sometimes even ourselves as the solution – then we are not serving the field. We are using the field for our own objectives.

This is fundamentally the definition of manipulation. In such situations, we are not showing up in service of aliveness but on a mission to achieve a specific self-serving outcome that we prioritize over the potential of the field. In our view such approach to facilitation is unethical. If there is a pre-defined desired outcome, or an invitation to participate in a specific agenda then one way to deal with it is to be explicit about it. That way participants can choose to participate, or not.

The presence of such self-serving agendas can be obvious or subtle. Conscious or unconscious. The invitation to a gathering or workshop may be formulated as an open invitation to co-create with few frames or boundaries. But as you enter the space with a certain sensitivity you might realize quickly that there are many preconceived notions. What is welcome is judged by how it fits with those notions. If we are honest: facilitators or communities are rarely able to hold spaces that are truly open-ended, prepared for true pursuit of the potential of the field. The stakes and interests of those who initiated (and funded?) the space in the first place often dominate.

For a facilitator these external conditions mix with internal aspects mentioned in section 1. If you’re there for affirmation, if you became a facilitator to be seen or because you lack an intrinsic feeling of self-worth then that will also be feed into the process. Unless your practice is a sincere desire to unfold beyond this it will stick you. It becomes black magic. You are trying to conjure transformation in other bodies without offering your own. Unless you show up willing to also transform, to live the consequences of what was discovered, to accept that you too might be subject to change - you’re not facilitating a transformative space.

Transformation is omnidirectional. It does not mean that every space you facilitate will fundamentally change you, but it means that you are asked to accept the possibility that it may happen. It is a practice of deep trust as well as a stance of service.

7 Identity, Orientation, and the Willingness to Transform

“Who am I? Who else can I be? Who am I willing to be? How open am I to become new selves as I surrender to the dance?”

We reflected on our willingness to transform. At the same time, we’re invited to be conscious of who we are, as we begin to facilitate. We are human. We are conditioned. We are limited. And that is okay. The facilitators invitation is to be like water. Fluidity is important as is the competence to respond to our surroundings. When the temperature drops we freeze and take a solid form that is not easily shifted, as the space warms up and there is more movement we may even vaporize, dissipate into their space. This is not something you do by checking off the steps, marching a group through your predetermined methodology, this is what happens when you engage in an intimate dance with the space you have within, around and in front of you.

As we engaged in conversation about our facilitation practice, we noticed how our approach to facilitation relates to the multitude of facets, identities and characteristics that we have experienced and lived in our biographies so far. We have experienced ourselves as artists and businessmen, as scientists and activists, as contemplative nature-lovers and wild party-animals, as listeners in the background and radiant showmen in the limelight. The list of identities is long. Why is this important and how is it relevant for facilitation?

A key capacity to facilitate the aliveness of a field is our ability to go into relationship with the field we facilitate. To play our full range. Show up with what this field is asking for. Members in a group will feel whether you relate with them or not. A group will only trust our leadership if all members feel seen, appreciated and integrated. And – in turn – our sensitivity to guide a group depends on our ability to adjust our channel of sensing and communicating in ways that ideally touch everyone in the field.

In order to weave this relationality, the ability to dance with the different identities that we hold in ourselves is an asset. Activating the full range of different voices, channels and faces that we have in ourselves allows the group, in its diversity, to accept us as a mirror and temporary guide. Stepping into these identities is not technically performance. Rather we make ourselves available to the group by revealing aspects of self, and therefore of us, acquired through experience. It sets a standard for the process and implicitly signals the group: It is okay to be different. It is okay to hold ambiguous or even controversial aspects in ourselves simultaneously. We do not have to choose either-or.

Sometimes facilitators address this by assembling a larger team of facilitators, bringing together people of sufficient diversity so that participants find their matching resonance partner. Often this may serve the purpose well. Yet, a danger is that it may lead to certain participants being more engaged in the sessions or phases that are led by the one facilitator who speaks “their language” and are subtly less engaged in the phases facilitated by someone they feel less aligned with. This is an entire topic that we will not delve further into.

We’ll settle with conveying the point that: a facilitator dynamically engaging in this internal dance between identities becomes a resource not only for the group but also a starting point for the facilitator to discover new aspects and identities in themselves through the relationship with the group. This posture allows us to fully engage in the process of transformation, together with the field, transforming with ‘the other’, through them, for them, into us.

8 From Individuals to Organism

“It’s really as if the entire field is my body. I have breathed you into my inner space. Now let’s dance.”

As we begin understanding the subtleties of self, the next level is to become an instrument for the field itself. For that purpose, it is key to overcome the potential distance or separation between us and the field. We are invited to fully embody the entire group, the place, the field. Taking what is there, all of it, into the innermost of ourselves and then gently inviting it to dance and unfold its aliveness. The facilitator as conduit for whatever is moving in the field.

This may seem paradoxical since we’ve spoken of the need to become redundant. The composted self. There is a temporal component here. A willingness to scaffold. A process of decomposition. To orient towards what is needed to unfold the greatest potential of the space we’re working with. An ability to take form in such a way that this potential is realized.

For a group to become a quasi-organism, boundaries and scaffolding is crucial. Things to grow along and within. Something to orient us. And an initiation or spark that starts the movement. It may be a gentle push, pull or simply removing an obstacle. To let the group flow into the space you’ve created. As the space is filling up, it is also our job to invite the group into the shape that is authentic for them. Potentially beyond the limits of our imagination.

There are several practices included here. It is about orienting towards the potential, looking at what may grow organically. In the becoming of organisms, we will use techniques: like co-regulation (perhaps breath or ritual), listening practices, mirroring or witnessing. We bring tools to bring out the rhythm of the field. Listening to the heartbeat of the organism. Allowing the space to dynamically unfold. Expand and contract. Accelerate and pause. Whatever is appropriate for the dance we are there to dance. To create conditions that allows the group to transcend the container we initially set.

9 Thresholds and the Art of Knowing When

“We have breathed in enough. Now we must breathe out.”

Time is a resource. It is a precondition. If we are in tune, we will be able to sense what is possible. At some point we need to shift. The facilitator's ability to shift a process into the closing phase while making sure that the space has time to clearly prepare for what is coming is important.

It is comfortable to be in the continuity of the process but without contraction there will be no birth. We will not be able to translate the potential we've cultivated into movement. As facilitator this is another challenge. Fixed shapes in forms of commitments and actions are a crucial part of the process. It is a condition for something new to emerge. To ensure that the movement continues. Any process will stay imperfect in some sense. There will always be something left unsaid. That is okay. It is important to acknowledge early enough: This is what it can be this time. The rest will unfold in its own time – if you commit to continuing.

Skillfully nudging a space towards this is necessary. Sometimes this part of the process will remain fully in the hands of someone in the space like a manager. Sometimes it needs the facilitator. As a rule of thumb: the more of it that can rest with the group the better. This is the moment for us to actively compost ourselves. Hand over the different aspects and tendrils of energy so the important ones are held by members of the group. Making it explicit enough for them to act upon it. Ensuring that there are enough care and resources for the sprouts to grow.

There are traps here. We want enough energy to move the space, and it is important to still listen for what is possible. Working with the constraints – not against them. If we push it too hard, we're forcing the field. This is a form of violence that creates karma. Karma as happenings and actions that others will then have to resolve. This is where the story we started with may partly fit. We need to be willing to take the excess potential and offer it to the universe in a primal scream if the field does not have the capacity to move with it yet. Pushing too hard here will create a backlash or dependency. It incapacitates the group. Yet, too little power and we've simply been boiling the ocean.

There is subtlety here. This might be the point where we can really separate the experienced facilitators from those with less experience. This is the point where we've failed over and over in our careers. This is also the point of true release, where the individuals in the process (participants and facilitators alike) are called in, and the organism that we were here to birth has the potential to come into being.

10 Aftercare and the Disappearing Facilitator

“I have made myself obsolete... and then it takes a day or half a day before I'm up for new things.”

Finally, there is the aftercare. We've successfully made ourselves obsolete. But we were the instrument. If we did our job, the process has touched us and moved us. To complete the learning, we need space to care for the remnants and metabolize the discoveries. Take them in and let them change us. Making space after the process to deal with consequences is important. No, it is imperative! The cycle of aliveness is not healthy and not complete without resting. After the child has been born, the mother rests. As facilitators, our entire being has been involved in a process of becoming and letting go. Our way of being has been moved and potentially transformed.

Walk around the place. Remember the various phases and dynamics of the cycle. Feel the feelings that still want to be felt. Sleep, so your unconscious can integrate. And when the process feels round, then lift your eyes, get up and move forward, opening yourself to a new, unknown future.

Unless we integrate, we will carry unfinished and unprocessed residue with us. These are small dissonances that may over time come to compromise the harmony of our instrument. We are after all, as we've argued for in this piece, also the substrate of these transformations. As much as the processes are about the groups and their becoming it is also about our becoming as well as our dissolution.

11 Outro: Invitation to Practice

With this piece we invite you to reflect that as facilitator your highest service may be to offer your death. We invite you to consider facilitation as a vocation or spiritual practice, growing deeper into the experience of aliveness. And this miracle of aliveness includes the process of dying.

That is why we like to think of facilitation as a process of composting. Submission. It requires a willingness on behalf of our profession to truly make oneself fully superfluous. An invitation to be like water, both in terms of taking shape but also to respond and transform depending on what is there. It involves the courage to see ourselves also as substrate alongside the participants, unable to separate ourselves. To work to clarify and humbly realize that also your limits and edges will be part of shaping the space. It is an invitation to take seriously that you are multitudes and the question you might have to sit with to do this work is: are you willing to sacrifice (etymologically: make whole) yourselves to increase potential?

We've reflected on the posture of the facilitator, the field of the unspoken, the willingness to die into the role. At the same time, we have looked at the dark sides of the practice, as well as our biographical identities and our willingness (or lack thereof) to transform. Finally, we spoke of what it takes to midwife, to bring groups across thresholds and finally to rest and regenerate ourselves, making ourselves both obsolete and whole again. Taking on the consequences of our work. Maybe these reflections resonate with you and spark insights or impulses that will inspire your further development and practice.

So. What lies between you and the other? Which some(-)body will you pick up in service while you dance to unravel yourself into no(-)body? What shit will you have to compost as you are cultivating the art of nourishing the aliveness of the spaces you facilitate? We are curious, what wants to die and emerge from here – for ourselves, for you and the world we are embedded in.

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The Research Institute for Sustainability (RIFS) conducts research with the goal of understanding, advancing, and guiding processes of societal change towards sustainable development in Germany and abroad. The Institute is embedded within the GFZ Helmholtz Centre for Geosciences and is thus part of the Helmholtz Association. Its research approach is transdisciplinary, transformative, and co-creative: RIFS cooperates with partners in science, political and administrative institutions, the business community, and civil society to understand the problems of sustainable development, identify appropriate solutions, and support their implementation in cooperation with relevant actors and affected communities. Its central research topics include the energy transition, climate change and socio-technical transformations, as well as sustainable governance and participation. A strong network of national and international partners and a Fellow Programme support the work of the Institute.

RIFS Discussion Paper

April 2026

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DOI:10.48481/rifs.2026.007

