

Briefing for facilitators

Using this resource

The GULL system is used in many different contexts and situations. Increasingly GULL action learning groups are self-directed and facilitated and if your group operates in this way, every member of the group is likely to be involved in aspects of facilitation with shared responsibility for leadership and peer reviewing of output work. If however, the action learning group is supported by a specialist facilitator, it is likely that he or she will lead and manage the activities listed below.

What does an action learning group facilitator do?

The facilitator plays a key, linking role with responsibility for the implementation of an action learning pathway and supporting the team of learning coaches.

Interpersonal aspects of the role

The process of action learning is demanding for facilitators because each learner must take responsibility for their own learning. At times, the facilitator may need to stand back and watch what is going on but not directly influence events. To establish credibility and earn the respect of the group, you will also have to be frank and open about the contributions which you are (and are not) able to make. Aim at all times to enlist the support of the group and draw on the knowledge and skills of its members. Empathy is also an important quality; the ability to put yourself in someone else's shoes. You are, after all, dealing with fellow professionals and you need to be able to see things from their point of view. Above all, the role requires a desire to help others learn and by using the action learning process, to become more effective practitioners. This is the basis for job satisfaction – seeing learners learn for themselves, and in so doing, become expert action learners.

Preparing for your role as facilitator

To gain insights on the action learning process, you should ideally shadow or work alongside an experienced action learning facilitator. You should also familiarize yourself with the pathway design and resources. To obtain a feel for the level of study, you may be able to look through outputs from previous groups (if available). Take every opportunity to meet other facilitators. Talking to them about their experiences with other groups is a quick and effective way of gaining insight into your role. Although your prime concern is the learners' learning, you must, of necessity, be familiar with the administrative procedures too.

Working with the group

In some circumstances, you may have the support of a separate internal reviewer. If not, you are likely to be responsible for internal reviewing and providing feedback. The facilitator normally: Organizes or helps at the pre start-up stage by recruiting and interviewing applicants (as appropriate); Draws up the initial group timetable and briefs the internal reviewer (if there is a separate internal reviewer) and learning coaches. The most effective way of doing this is to organize briefing meeting(s) during the start-up phase. At the start-up you should also finalize the timetable with the learners.

You should lead the start-up meeting and facilitate all formal group meetings, even though you may not be present all of the time. In so doing, you can: Introduce specialist advisers (who might provide specific inputs at the request of the learners); Ensure effective internal review feedback; Facilitate the learning processes at all times and deal with all administrative matters. Finally, at the end of the pathway (level 5 only) you should be present at the external review meetings to support each learner and assist the external reviewer.

Facilitator feedback

Whenever you are facilitating a group, you should compile a quarterly group report (using the Group report form) (if requested to do so). This provides a complete cross-sectional view of progress, any issues arising that need resolving, corrective action and your own thoughts and reflections. The Group report form has a facilitator review section to enable you to reflect on what is going well and, in the light of experience, what might be done differently in future.

Guided learning

A key role of the facilitator and the learning coach is to help the learner to articulate his/her solutions to work-based problems using action learning techniques and reference to external data and good practice. You are not expected to be an 'expert' in any particular topic area, but you can help during one-to-one sessions (with the learning coach) or group meetings (with the facilitator) by asking questions! For further details, please see the resource: Briefing for learning coaches.

Writing outputs

Here are some tips to help learners to submit good work:

Start promptly. It is a good idea to collect ideas and thoughts in a computer file or scrapbook; otherwise the ideas might be lost. This gives longer to reflect on the ideas and polish them later.

Brainstorm. This means jotting down ideas and/or talking to other members of the team.

Be selective. Try to avoid information overload. Aim to rate your ideas according to how important and relevant they are.

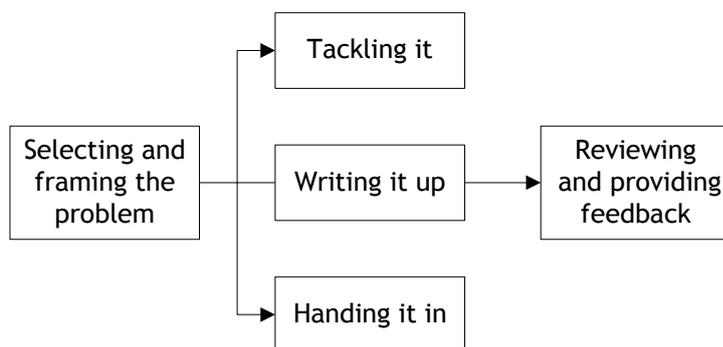
Sequence. It might be easier to write the middle section of your output first, and then add the ending and finally the introduction. If this appeals, ensure that you have clear objectives for the output from the outset.

Structure. Decide on the most logical structure that will enable you to get to the desired end point.

Drawer it! It is often a good idea to put the output into a drawer for a few days and then come back to it before finishing it off. This probably means that the learner will need to plan their timetable carefully.

For the learner, the act of preparing and writing an output (Please see Figure 1) helps with: The reflective process; getting thoughts in order and teasing out credible solutions; thinking logically and objectively; communicating with others; sharing and team working. The learner needs to consider what to research, how to structure the output, and then how they will write it up. Although written outputs take time to produce, they provide an opportunity to reflect on events and activities and to develop new skills and behaviours. In so doing, they consolidate and formalize what we are learning and provide the evidence of learning that forms the basis of certification.

Figure 1: From questions to outputs



Good outputs can:

- Focus the work via a format that is rigorous and credible.
- Be shared with others in the organization.
- Be captured as permanent records and used as knowledge management applications.
- Be used for benchmarking or turned into articles for internal or external publications.
- Form the basis of action for the department or function.
- Help the learner develop a number of skills - including critical analysis, reflection and writing.
- Enable the work to be verified by others, such as the external reviewer.
- Formalize the work and enable the learner to be granted an externally recognized award.

What are the characteristics of a good output?

You probably read quite a lot of internal and published material and will have some ideas about what, for you, are a clear and readable format. The reviewing criteria include:

Presentation:	Clarity, easy on the eye, concise and not rambling.
Structure:	Has well thought out aims and achieves them.
Objectivity:	Looks strategically and with a certain detachment at the key issues.
Convincing:	Has looked at what experts say about the topic and /or good practice.
Analytical:	Takes the time and trouble to look in depth at the issues and provides an evidence-based argument for the proposed action. Not mere description.
Definitions:	Sets out the real problem, not the symptoms.
Options:	Generates and evaluates possible options to solve the problem.
Conclusions:	Summarizes the main points and offers credible conclusions.
Implementation:	Presents the implications of the plan including timings, resources and possible problems.

Internal reviewing

Internal reviewing is an integral part of the facilitator's role. Reviewing written work can be challenging, but it is a skill, like others that can be learned and improved upon. The aim of this section is to offer some guidance. Internal reviewing involves:

1. Reviewing outputs.
2. Providing constructive feedback on graded work, including suggestions for future improvement.
3. Helping the learner to link his / her work in a relevant and appropriate way to workplace issues.

Ideally, the facilitator will assist the learner by listening and reflecting, as the learner interprets organizational questions, challenges and problems during group meetings and converts these issues into an appropriate vehicle for learning and implementation. In this context, the vehicle for learning takes the form of an output, and guidance is most helpful at an early stage, not least because the learner is expected to complete the work without specific direction as the facilitator must review the output as objectively as possible. If the facilitator is too close to the work, perhaps because he or she has 'told' the learner how to prepare the output, then it becomes much more difficult to review the work in an objective way. It is for this reason that group members should build their own web of support to include one or more specialist advisers who can assist with clarification and directions on input work, thereby separating specialist input from the reviewing process.

Ideally the facilitator (supported by the individual learning coach) should aim to assist the learner to:

- Select a suitable problem that meets both personal, career development and organizational needs
- Frame and define the problem so that it is feasible and 'do-able'
- Plan a timetable - from initial idea to final submission
- Consider suitable methods for collecting data and shedding new light on the topic
- Source people and information that might help (as appropriate)
- Consider the outline structure of the output
- Read, review and grade the final submission, providing concise written feedback
- Offer personal support and encouragement as appropriate.

Reviewers need to assess the work, and not the person, so they must try to be objective and fair. To assist with this, the review criteria (B and M levels 3-5 inclusive and D levels 1-5 inclusive) are as follows:

Presentation and organization: Is my work clearly written and carefully presented?

Action: What action has been taken and is being taken at work?

Analysis and interpretation: What benefits have been derived from the work undertaken and how will the action and implementation points arising be taken forward?

Verification: How does the work compare with similar work elsewhere in the current setting (compare with the literature or unpublished reports) and how have the outcomes been verified?

Application: What else is being done to apply the learning and what else needs to be done?

For details of the reviewing procedures and the forms used, please see the [reviewing guide](#)

Sampling and verifying outputs

Although front line reviewing and grading is undertaken by the facilitator, he/she may occasionally want a second opinion from another facilitator, the administrator or the representative. Please note that the representative has the authority to amend any marks that he/she thinks are mis-aligned and it is the facilitator's responsibility to ensure that outputs for external review have been checked and amended (as necessary) prior to the external review meeting. If a learner is unhappy with the mark and grade awarded or feedback comments received, an appeals procedure can be invoked which entails the following steps:

1. The learner should discuss their grade, mark and/or feedback comments with the facilitator in the first instance.
2. If the learner is still not satisfied, he/she should state the reasons for their appeal in writing to the representative within 21 days of receiving the output feedback, who will undertake to respond to the complaint within 21 days of receipt, and his/her decision is final.

Giving feedback

After reviewing and grading have been completed, the reviewer should arrange to provide the learner with feedback on their work. The reviewer is not expected to give face to face feedback on every single output - unless the schedule of meetings allows for this.

Here is some general advice for giving feedback:

- Prepare for the feedback session and think about how learners might respond.
- Ask first for the learner's view of the work.
- Begin with the positive and then suggest what might be done to improve the work.
- Ask questions and listen to the responses.
- Make positive suggestions for improvement that are feasible for the learner.
- Check that the learner has understood and agreed.
- Offer your on-going help and support.
- It is good to finish on an upbeat note, perhaps anticipating the celebrations for a successful conclusion!

The external interview

The external review interview is used to verify the learner's learning journey prior to successfully completing level 5 study. The interview is conducted by an external reviewer who is a fellow practitioner with experience in business or community organizations. The external reviewer will have read the learner's work and will have prepared some questions that they would like to explore. The interview is not intended to be an adversarial experience where an 'outsider' asks difficult questions about the learner's written work. Certainly the external reviewer will want to probe, but is an opportunity to verify what the learner has really learned and what they intend to do next. In so doing, the external reviewer can recommend that individual marks are adjusted (by a margin of ten percent) in line with the outcomes of the interview.

Here are some briefing points to prepare learners for external interview:

Don't panic. The learner may not know the external reviewer, but the facilitator will be in attendance.

Consider some questions that might be asked, for example, on the approach, findings, learning process or what was learned.

Practice giving spoken answers. Ask another person to pose the questions prepared and to comment on how they think they were answered.

Avoid waffle. It is often better to admit ignorance than invent answers!

Regard the interview as an opportunity to improve the grade. If you perform well, it is possible that the external reviewer will increase your mark.

Be confident. This is a chance for the learner to talk about his or her work, and the ways in which they have applied their learning at work.

Summary

- The task of reviewing a learner's work is a serious business, but skills can improve with practice. This can often help the internal reviewer too.
- It is important to be aware of the purpose of reviewing, especially as it relates to learner development.
- The learning coach helps the learner by listening to the learner's ideas on researching and writing up their work. The facilitator (in their capacity as internal reviewer) then reviews, grades and comments on the finished piece of work.
- There are general and specific criteria to be borne in mind when reviewing written work.
- Good reviewing is not completely scientific because it involves judgement, so the learning coach should aim to be objective and serious about grading and commenting.
- Giving feedback to learners is a key part of the process that should be planned and sensitively handled.
- Coaches can offer practical tips on writing outputs as well as suggestions about content, although they are not expected to be subject or technical experts.
- The external interview is the final hurdle. The external reviewer's aim is to verify that the learner has attained an appropriate level, in keeping with the level of study certification. The external review meeting offers the learner an opportunity to improve their grade by performing well, and most learners enjoy the process.