

On Facilitating: Micro-Practices for a New Gentleness *Adelheid Mers*

Abstract

It is becoming increasingly clear that facilitating is widely present across the arts, emerging where practitioner-driven discourse integrates creation and mediation, often in cross-fertilization with practitioners' experience as arts educators and arts administrators, professions that design and deploy communicative systems. Facilitating has steadily moved to the centre of my artistic practice, too, both in how I make and present work. At SAR 2022, I offered a workshop titled 'Respectful, Detailed, Ethical Engagements: Facilitating Micro-Practices for a New Gentleness', to facilitate a focused conversation on a topic participants select. Drawing on practice-centred modes of artistic discourse in co-creating the *Diagrammatic Instrument* called *Micro-Practices for a New Gentleness*, I claim an extended capacity for propositionally and performatively articulate professional practice, of mediating risks associated with being sensitized to structure. I think about this capacity to articulate as a prerequisite for institutional imagination, and ultimately, action.

Keywords: facilitation, articulation, institutional imagination, studio critique, professional practice, diagrammatic instrument

1. Introduction

1.1 Facilitation Field Scan

While definitions of facilitation remain fluid, significant efforts have been made to outline a professional field. The International Association of Facilitators (IAF) was established in 1994 and has developed 'foundational tools of the facilitation profession', including statements on ethics and core competencies. In 2007, the United Nations published *Participatory Dialogue: Towards a Stable, Safe and Just Society for All* (Hammati 2007), a substantial paper that includes examples of dialogic tools and methodologies, described in terms of process, setting, time frame, as well as the quantity and characteristics of participants. One example given is the open dialogue process conceptualized by physicist David Bohm, who himself is wary about outcome driven adaptations of his concept (Bohm 2004 [1996]: 49). A sizable bibliography is appended, reaching from John Dewey's early writing on pedagogy to the *IAF Handbook of Group Facilitation* (Schuman 2005), emphasizing best practises for business communication. In the performing arts, a marker is Sheila Preston's recent work assembling voices on facili-

tating with a focus on social change through *Applied Theatre: Facilitation* (Preston 2016). Read widely across arts organisations, Adrienne Maree Brown's *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* (Brown 2021) deploys black feminist perspectives on facilitating justice and liberation. While the field is indeed outcome-driven, who sets goals and how outcomes may be described or measured varies greatly. Governance, civil society, business, pedagogy, and the performing arts are implicated. In describing the role of a facilitator, leading, teaching, and helping are invoked. Many questions arise. What motivates a facilitator? Which expertise may a facilitator require? How can it be achieved? Which responsibilities come into play? Is there a better term when considering facilitating as a creative practice?

It is becoming increasingly clear that facilitating is widely present across the arts, beyond Applied Theater. For one, facilitation emerges where practitioner-driven discourse integrates creation and mediation, often in cross-fertilization with practitioners' experience as arts educators and arts administrators, professions that design and deploy communicative systems, be they lesson plans and syllabi, bylaws, surveys, or rules that govern meetings. As part of the art world's exhibitionary complex (Bennett 2017), practitioner-driven discourse arises where artists are compelled to narrate and theorize their work until it reaches a market, at which point others become available to additionally propel narratives. In an academic framework, discursive self-articulation is contextualized as research, beholden to its associated methodologies and economies. These arenas do of course intersect. To offer North American instances, community organising and urban planning in the work of Rick Lowe and Theaster Gates facilitate structural opportunity and socio-political discourse. Artist Shaun Leonardo's workshops are a recent example of a facilitating practice that is participatory, generates works and stimulates civic discourse. Gabrielle Civil's *Experiments in Joy* is an example of facilitating collaboration and community expansion, in conjunction with a publishing practice. In addition to publishing themselves, facilitating artists draw on cognitive, social and political theory, mitigating economic and epistemic violence (Bell 1988; hooks 1994; Verran 2014; De Sousa Santos 2016), reframing methodology (Smith 2008; Wilson 2020), enacting participatory sense-making (De Jaegher and Fuchs 2009), complicating narrative and translation (Simpson 2014; Chavajay and Clavo 2021), and more.

1.2. Diagrammatic Instruments

Facilitating has steadily moved to the centre of my artistic practice, too, both in how work is made and presented. Formally, I derive the impetus for the need to centre facilitating in my work from my inclination to work diagrammatically, overlapping with categories such as 'operativity' and 'own spatiality', (Bogen and Thürlemann 2003: 22; Krämer 2010: 30), and aligned with the Peircean diagrammatic sequence (Stjernfelt 2007; Mers in press 2023). Contextually, I am situated as a German immigrant to the US, intentionally living between multiple languages, models of cultural value, definitions of research, and generational narratives, and working as an artist and as a professor of cultural management, a field containing arts administration and arts policy. Attention to professional and discursive contexts

has driven my interest in how practitioners articulate propositionally and performatively how they work, as opposed to how practitioner perspectives are interpreted by others. This in turn generated a focus on forms of conversation, which I am enacting by drawing on the operativity of diagrams, and on intersecting forms of expertise. I design contexts for facilitation, which I call *Diagrammatic Instruments*.

At SAR 2022, I offered a workshop titled 'Respectful, Detailed, Ethical Engagements: Facilitating Micro-Practices for a New Gentleness'. The immediate goal of a workshop using the Diagrammatic Instrument, *Micro-Practices for a New Gentleness*, is to facilitate a focused conversation on a topic participants select. Below, I address the making of *Micro-Practices for a New Gentleness* and its use. Both making and using *Diagrammatic Instruments* centre facilitating, albeit differently.

Diagrammatic Instruments consist of drawings, their substrates, additional objects, guidelines, and instructions. They serve to facilitate performative and propositional interactions with general and specific publics that take place in exhibition, conference, and professional retreat settings. The outcome of these conversations and encounters is on the one hand the participant's experience, and on the other hand documentation and reporting, and rarely, a stand-alone video artwork. *Diagrammatic Instruments* are instruments not as devices that reliably deliver similar outcomes, like a measuring device, for example a barometer, or like a precision tool, for example a scalpel. Instead, I think of them as akin to musical instruments, which may have multiple parts, can be tuned, modified, and activated with various, intermediate objects. Such instruments are operated with care, as part of an intimate, corporeal relationship, involving one or multiple players. *Diagrammatic Instruments* are the construct at the centre, and quite literally the 'middle term' of my artistic practice of *Performative Diagrammatics*. In developing *Diagrammatic Instruments* and facilitating their use, *Performative Diagrammatics* attends to co-articulating and thinking among individuals in small groups, through conversation and physical play. Four *Diagrammatic Instruments* exist. They are the *Fractal 3-line Matrix* (2011), *The Braid* (2016), *Performative Topologies* (2018), and *Micro-Practices for a New Gentleness* (2020), the last one of which I will focus on below. It was titled after Guattari's request in *The Three Ecologies* to 'organize new micropolitical and microsocial practices, new solidarities, a new gentleness, together with new aesthetic and new analytic practices.' (Guattari 2000 [1989]: 51). At SAR 2022 in Weimar, I invited attendees to join me for a focused conversation through a sixty-minute workshop format.

2. Micro-Practices for a New Gentleness

2.1 Diagrammatic Instruments

Diagrammatic Instruments are meta-diagrams, consolidations of diagrammatic processes, objects, and drawings that evolve across sites, with multiple contributors and co-creators. They also borrow from each other, which is why I will briefly address the genesis of each. The *Fractal 3-line Matrix* developed over three years from relating and visually assembling information collected at conferences I attended at the outset of my involvement with cultural management and policy studies in 2007. The first *Diagrammatic Instrument*, the *Fractal 3-line Matrix* was fully formed by 2011,

and later also served to facilitate conversations. *The Braid* emerged over eight years from within predominantly North American formats of academic studio critique, initially diagramming conversations with artists during studio visits at a Banff Centre residency in Canada in 2008, and evolving into conversations I initiated, asking artists 'How do you work?' during a period spent at the University of Music and Performing Arts in Vienna in 2012, and continuing thereafter. In 2016, *The Braid* matured in workshop and later prototyping settings in my studio. *The Braid* is now regularly in use to facilitate conversations about practices (see Mers 2021a). In 2018, *Performative Topologies* was initiated with the premise of creating a game, through a summer-long workshop in my studio in Chicago, extended to a seminar at the Bauhaus-Universität Weimar, then publicly prototyped at events in Chicago, and first presented in spring 2019 in Berlin as part of a 'Performative Diagrammatics Laboratory' exhibition. *Performative Topologies* draws on embodied processes of cognitive switching that are already present in the *Fractal 3-line Matrix* (see Mers 2001 b), while its digital feedback loop deploys an interior view of *The Braid*. *Micro-Practices for a New Gentleness* similarly draw on aspects of its predecessors.

In September 2019, I used the setting of a faculty projects exhibition at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) to partially re-create the 'Performative Diagrammatics Laboratory', and within it convene a co-creation workshop towards making a new instrument. In 2012, I had adapted a studio critique format for the cultural management and policy programme at SAIC (see Mers 2013), and I continue to participate in studio critiques across the school. While *The Braid* facilitates important paradigmatic conversations about practicing in context, I hoped to isolate specific behaviors that critique mobilizes by developing a new instrument. I asked 'Which tangible objects may we develop that can become part of an instrument that can be used in facilitating pedagogic critique sessions?' In response, a group formed (1) that was well aware of studio critique as a central pedagogic component of academic art education in North America.

2.2 Practice-Centred Critique and Institutional Imagination

While conducted differently across institutions, studio critique customarily proceeds by giving group feedback to one student who presents work, as a culminating event at the completion of an assignment or the end of a semester. In what I deem an aesthetic approach to critique, spectator perspectives are offered by attempting to read the work along lines of material, scale, socio-cultural context, and market viability, along with inquiry about artistic intent. Despite publications and convenings that have developed important insights about power in the performance of critique (see Fraser and Rothman 2017; Martin-Thomsen et al., 2021), continued discussion may propel a paradigm shift in arts education. While the aesthetic approach to critique focuses on art's exhibitionary aspects, assigning the role of viewers to all but the designated artist, I am particularly interested in foregrounding a practice-centred approach to critique that takes its cues from the sociality of the setting, as a convening of practitioners. This approach shares with the discussion about power that it also deems pedagogic critique performative, but follows Karen Barad's agential realist approach in preferring a material-discursive definition of performativity as 'iterative

intra-activity' in a laboratory setting, rather than Judith Butler's performativity as 'iterative citationality' (Barad 2003: 823) that may be more useful for an aesthetically inflected model of critique. I agree with Butler, though, in her assessment that 'for critique to operate as part of a praxis [...] is for it to apprehend the ways in which categories are themselves instituted, how the field of knowledge is ordered'. Facilitation is needed because of 'the occlusive constitution of the field of categories themselves' (Butler 2002: 213), but in addition to understanding power in how a field is tacitly ordered, practice-centred facilitating approaches seek ways to generate the field of categories differently (for example see Crenshaw), by claiming the capacity to articulate and through that, a new agency to re-articulate. I think about this capacity to articulate as a prerequisite for institutional imagination.

2.3 Co-Creating Micro-Practices for a New Gentleness

Below, I draw on lab notes to show core moments of a co-creation process for *Micro-Practices for a New Gentleness*. In varying configurations, contributors met weekly, first in the public laboratory setting that the exhibition at SAIC provided from September to October 2019, and then through the end of the year at my studio. In both settings, we had at our disposal elements of already existing Diagrammatic Instruments, including rolling whiteboards containing pre-printed braid diagrams and paracord rope trefoils. We also brought simple materials such as paper, paper clay, wire, magnets, and string. There were different types of documentation equipment, including a 360-degree camera. The excerpts below will show that our project advanced by moving in space and handling things, by reading and interpreting texts, by creating and viewing forms of documentation, and by enacting and categorizing habitually engrained studio critique practices. With the physical positioning of our bodies — sitting, standing, walking, performing — our perceptions, our language, and our readiness to engage shifted. We were aware that the technologies we used rearranged how we were able to imagine. Often, it seemed that what was in the room and who was able to participate on a given day was exactly what was needed to progress. We were all aware that I served as a facilitator throughout, prompting and accepting activities, and choosing which offerings to amplify. That gave me added responsibilities for holding space. Examples follow:

September 14 – October 19, at the gallery:

- Seated around a whiteboard on stools and the floor, with one participant's service dog stretched out alongside the circle, we proceeded to collate what it is that we each bring to a critique. A critique setting may be bounded in time and space, but participants bring their lived reality to it. Looking at the string braid we asked: Can the instrument we are seeking be grounded by a string that holds loose labels, like a charm bracelet? Charms could be physical objects that evoke a mode of action within a critique setting.
- We considered Edvard and May-Britt Moser's work on grid cells, connecting conceptual and spatial mapping, referenced by Barbara Tversky when claiming that motion in space is the foundation for thought. (Tversky 2019). Earlier that day I had learned that we would be able to participate at the Index Art Book Fair in Mexico City and began

referring to our new instrument as a multiple/publishable.

- Projecting the text onto a wall, we discussed *This is Play* (Nachmanovitch 2009) finding it to operate on three levels. A game frame opens up a play level, which in turn permits an ability to enact peace. We noted how our conversation changed when we moved from 'projection/presentation' configuration to 'chair-seated conversation' to 'generously spaced, floor-seated conversation while handling objects'. The thinking we had access to in the third mode propelled us towards coalition, as an improvisational modality of performing for and with each other, drawing on individual repertory. We determined that this is something the instrument we seek wishes to promote.
 - We mapped game, play and peace frames from the previous week's reading onto a *Braid*-whiteboard, integrating actions we had started to develop. As we modeled it, the game frame contains rules that constrain behavior, determining space use and allocating time. As these meta-concerns are rigidly addressed, an area of play opens up. The play frame is what we want to enable for our instrument to promote flexibility. The peace frame promotes non-normative communal thinking and rule creation. To continue exploring play, we moved back to manipulating materials, paper clay, wire, and tape, sitting close to each other on the ground. Not satisfied with tinkering on a small scale, we remembered that being spread out around the full-size braid promoted play the previous week. The larger scale afforded a different body-mind engagement.
 - With the large paracord trefoil again spread out on the ground, we deployed the *Performative Topologies Diagrammatic Instrument* sequence. *Performative Topologies* asks participants to develop personal movements, by regarding a remembered object through multiple, cognitive and performative modes, followed by iterating movements. Recording with a centrally placed 360 cameras we noticed upon playback using the popular 'tiny planet' effect that we all appeared like moving beads on the trefoil paracord.
 - On the last day of the exhibition, we again played one round of *Performative Topologies*, this time focusing on how we might sharpen each participant's description of a memory through an associated movement. Moving undermined the need to illustrate a description metaphorically. Instead, we freshly enacted what it evoked.
- November 2 – December 31, at my studio:
- We want to reconceptualize pedagogic critique, thinking about Guattari's metamodelization. Metamodelization borrows and patches temporary models for self-management from found constructs, thus possibly sidestepping social and political powers that produce normative content.
 - We performed a critique session to observe ourselves in action. We clearly registered that we act from within existing reference systems. Also, one of us brought a bracelet to which long nylon threads were attached.
 - Inspired by the bracelet and recalling the 'tiny planet' video, I shaped figurines with paper clay and arranged them in a circle, others joined. We performed a second critique and broke down our actions,

for example ‘taking charge of the frame’, ‘understanding own modes of engagement’, ‘offering to contextualize for general audiences’, ‘playing a detective game’.

- Consolidating the previous week’s categories, we named three rubrics to collect actions under: ‘values, rules and techniques’. A small number of value categories expanded into multiple rules, which in turn spawned a large number of techniques. We named the new instrument *Micro-Practices for a New Gentleness*.
 - We visited the Joan Flasch Artists’ Book Collection at SAIC, in order to handle examples while thinking about how the emerging *Diagrammatic Instrument* is a ‘publishable’, and how our ‘publishable’ might be supported with included printed material. We coined the term ‘publishable’ in parallel to the well-known sculptural ‘multiple’.
 - We tightened rubric content for inclusion in a prototype.
 - We participated in SAIC’s semester end critique week, a school-wide event for graduate students, and listened attentively for evidence of rubric use. It became clear that focusing on the object offered at a critique was paramount for a generous engagement.
 - We paired down rubric actions to eighteen and built a matrix. We then funneled the action text through the *Performative Topologies Instrument* to build a full body gesture for each. Three of us posed for each item, taking turns performing and photographing. From the photographs, one of us arranged a digital wireframe in eighteen poses for 3D printing. We wrote an introduction, stating ‘we develop facilitation instruments because we believe that it is important to access propositional and embodied knowledge. These ways of knowing are not separate from each other.’ One of us prepared a first draft of the facilitation score.
- January 18, 2020 – January 25, 2020
- A prototype of *Micro-Practices for a New Gentleness* was presented at the Vilém Flusser Archive in Berlin, as part of the Transmediale Vorspiel series. One large and one small version of the instrument were laid out on a cluster of tables. After inviting participants to select figures, followed by introducing the matrix and its context, I led them through the score draft. The group had a predetermined time to engage with each other while keeping rubric items in mind. Where the score sequence was too open ended, participants broke the cohesion of the emerging conversation.
 - *Micro-Practices for a New Gentleness* was facilitated in Mexico City, as part of the programming for the Index Art Book Fair, held at Kurimanzutto. One co-creator was able to join me. Adjusted following the Berlin workshop, the score sequence worked flawlessly. A focused, generous, and intentionally embodied conversation arose.

Successful online adaptations have taken place since 2021. The first post-pandemic in-person engagement was at SAR 2022 in Weimar.

2.4. Using *Micro-Practices for a New Gentleness*

Micro-Practices for a New Gentleness serves to facilitate a focused conversation. The selected topic and the details of the conversation remain confidential, unless requested otherwise in advance. As participants enter the workshop space, a paracord trefoil is already spread on the ground. Attached to it are eighteen printed disks, one for each of the statements that make up a matrix of premises, rules, and techniques participants will steward throughout the conversation they will engage in. One trefoil lobe holds premises, one rules, and another techniques. A small, 3D printed and numbered figure is associated with each statement. Initially, those figures may be laid on a table, or already placed on the disks. Participants are not asked to introduce themselves, keeping the coming engagement free of distracting frames, for example affiliations and titles. Instead, and as the step preceding the ten-part score that will animate the matrix, the facilitator initiates the workshop process by sharing the matrix and briefly explaining the process.

As the first step of the score, the facilitator then asks participants to select a figure, initially by responding to its pose. Depending on the number of participants, they may select multiple figures, or share into one. By making the selection, participants become the stewards of a statement. Referencing their figure’s number, they will then be called upon to perform tasks. Figure seven will be asked to set the topic of the conversation, in consultation with figure eight. It is important this will be a statement they are invested in, and not a question, to make the desired sustained focus possible. Figures four, five, and six will be invited to adjust the space as needed. In Weimar, that resulted in lowering window shades. The facilitator then sets a time for the conversation, usually thirty minutes. Next, figures ten to eighteen are asked to steward their statements by enacting them if they feel that the ensuing conversation may benefit from it. As an invitation to be playful, the facilitator then asks figure one to ceremonially start the conversation. The clock starts when figure nine makes the first remark. Upon ending the conversation, the facilitator asks figure eighteen if they have noted anything fresh, and number sixteen if they noted anything beneficial. This tends to lead into a broader, reflexive exchange and assessment of the process. In Weimar, much of the reflection centred on methodological concerns about embodied and propositional knowledge, mirroring several of the experiences that had arisen while making *Micro-Practices for a New Gentleness*.

Guattari is interested in facilitating ‘access to the real’ through metamodelization, circumventing habitual signification (Watson 2009: 17). The *Micro-Practices for a New Gentleness* conversations hinge on the group maintaining a focus on the selected topic through multiple, self-selected modalities. If that is possible, and it mostly is, the experience is one of warmth, presence, and sincere exploration, while the limited time and assigned actions keep stakes low. Such an embodied, generous, and gentle experience is what a good, practice-based studio critique can yield for its contributors. Facilitation mediates risks associated with being sensitized to structure, communally experiencing epistemic diversity as one’s own, occluded premises emerge into view. Easing into trust, facilitating can make taking such risks not just palatable, but fruitful, a step towards expanding institutional imagination, and ultimately, action.

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II

Micro-practices for a New Gentleness		
A Diagrammatic Instrument by Performative Diagrammatics Lab		
Premises	Rules	Techniques
1. This is an event Gesture: Snow Angel	2. Commit to participating Gesture: Loose, crossed knees	3. Resolving to be alert and active Gesture: Forward bend
4. The setting is meaningful Gesture: Arms forward	5. Use space and time deliberately Gesture: Lower arms palm down	6. Positioning things and people Gesture: Planting motion
7. At the center is a proposition Gesture: Mountain	8. Take the proposition at face value Gesture: Broad stance	9. Examining the proposition Gesture: Arm up arm down
10. All bring own ways of knowing and doing Gesture: Hip leads	11. Remember that inputs reflect ways of knowing and doing Gesture: Hands on hips	12. Contributing mindfully and listening generously Gesture: Turn back
13. Relationships are at play Gesture: Line dancing	14. Navigate relationships Gesture: Shoulder leads	15. Giving, taking and holding space Gesture: Legs wide
16. Done well, this benefits all Gesture: Tumble	17. Permit emergence Gesture: Looking up	18. Taking note of anything fresh Gesture: Hand on center
Adelheid Mers with Ben Zucker, Christine Shallenberg, Daniel Quiroz, Doreen Chan, Lenny Moore, Noël Jones, Yujie Shangguan, and others.		

III

- I Adelheid Mers, *Micro-Practices for a New Gentleness*, 2 July 2022, workshop (workshop setting and participants), Bauhaus-Universität Weimar
- II Adelheid Mers, *Micro-Practices for a New Gentleness*, 12 October 2019, co-creating session (viewing a 360 degree recording using the popular 'tiny planet' effect, co-creators of the workshop's *Diagrammatic Instrument* appear like beads on a trefoil paracord), Galleries of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago
- III Adelheid Mers, *Micro-Practices for a New Gentleness*, December 2019 (the matrix listing each figure's action and the name of the associated positions was devised as part of the workshop materials)