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# Enhancing co-development in virtual environment

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# Exploring virtual facilitation of co-development

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Exploring  
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facilitation

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this study is to investigate facilitator's tools and actions in promoting interaction in virtual co-development.

**Design/methodology/approach** – In virtual environments, facilitation plays a crucial role. However, research does not provide many examples of tools and practices of virtual facilitation of co-development. To collect data, two virtual co-development processes were conducted. The data consisted of discussions during virtual workshops and was analyzed using both theory- and data-driven content analysis.

**Findings** – The discussions during the virtual co-development processes related on the topic and script of co-development and the use of digital technology. In co-development, both the facilitators and the participants take responsibility on the topic and the progression of the session. The facilitator needs to balance between offering the participants tools, supporting interaction and leaving empty space for the participants' initiatives to enhance their agency.

**Originality/value** – The study underlines the importance of the script and tools in virtual facilitation as well as flexibility in the execution of co-development processes.

**Keywords** Digital platform, Virtual, Facilitation, Co-development, Co-creation, Agency

**Paper type** Research paper

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# Co-development enables broader resources for responding to shared problems

- Organizations seek competitive advantage through virtual co-development efforts with partner organizations or customers (Ivaldi et al., 2022; Poblete et al., 2023).
- Co-development is an interactional activity: it proceeds through dialogue, through which participants involved build links between their activities, share ideas, and integrate their knowledge of objectives and intentions (Edwards, 2017; Kurki et al., 2024).
- At the interactional level, this emerges through initiative and responsive turns (Linell, 1998).
  - The initiative turns bring new elements and ideas to the discussion.
  - Through their initiatives participants also carry on the discussion by inviting others to respond.
  - Responses create coherence on the discussion by linking up with previous turns and presented ideas.

# Facilitation plays crucial role in virtual co-development

- The role of facilitator is
  - to prepare and orchestrate the virtual co-development process (script and tools) – merely asking questions is not enough (e.g. Evans et al., 2019; Schaefer et al., 2020; Virkkunen and Newnham, 2013; Heikkilä & Seppänen, 2014; Juvonen and Toiviainen, 2024).
  - support participants agency by provoking discussion and initiatives among the participants (Virkkunen & Newnham, 2013)
- In virtual environment facilitator need to overcome
  - Hindered interaction (e.g. Högberg and Willermark, 2023), feeling of trust, construction of shared knowledge and creating innovative ideas (Schaefer et al., 2019; Thompson, 2018).
  - Narrowed interactional cues, e.g., facial expressions and gestures (Thompson, 2018).
  - Restricted the use of the fillers to indicate listening -> a risk for continuity of interaction (Thompson, 2018).

# The Change Dialogue (CD)

**Workshop 1 Script**  
Analyzing developmental phase of activity developed (current and near future).  
Identifying the developmental needs and potentials for collaboration.  
**Facilitation tools**  
The Development Chart (Ahonen et al., 2020; Nykänen et al., 2022).

**Workshop 2 Script**  
Generating developmental ideas to enhance collaboration.  
Planning of development experiments and their implementation.  
**Facilitation tools**  
The Development Chart (Ahonen et al., 2020; Nykänen et al., 2022).  
The developmental experiment plan –form.

**Workshop 3 Script**  
Evaluating the developmental experiments and learning from their implementation.  
Evaluating the CD process.  
**Facilitation tools**  
From Experiments to Practice -model (Saari et al. 2018).

The data and methods:

- Two virtual Change Dialogue processes (8+11 participants)
- The general discussions were recorded as a data
- Theory- driven content analysis (Silverman, 2010).

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## Research questions

- RQ1 What are the objects of discussion during the virtual workshops?
- RQ2 What kind of chains of initiative interaction is provoked by facilitators actions and tools?



# The results

# What are the objects of discussion during the virtual workshops?

Speaking turns n=649,  
the category other (n=92) was left out of analysis

Part of data	Object of talk			Total (%)
	The CD script (%)	The use of technology (%)	Work and its development (%)	
Case 1, 1st workshop	47.7	12.9	39.4	100
Case 1, 2nd workshop	44.9	15.9	39.1	100
Case 2, 2nd workshop	38.2	36.4	25.4	100

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# What kind of chains of initiative interaction is provoked by facilitators actions and tools?

- 16 topical episodes related to “work and its development” with one or more initiatives
- Three types of chains of initiatives:
  - Type 1: From script-based tools and tasks back to the script (10 episodes)
  - Type 2: Facilitator’s open questions and support (4 episodes)
  - Type 3: Using empty space (2 episodes)

## Type 1: From script-based tools and tasks back to the script

### Excerpt 1

Turn	Speaker	Type of	Excerpt
9	Participant A (Org. 1)	Initiative: participant reflects on how the customary way of work conflicts with that in 'near future'	<i>It [Development Chart] made me realize that work is undergoing a transformation. . . we have new ways of working and new tools . . . if you're old school, used to doing your work . . . visiting customers and preparing well, inevitably you'll collide with this new world . . . I can't place myself on that [Chart] yet, but maybe the optimal position would be somewhere in the Middle . . .</i>
10	Participant B (Org.1)	Initiative: participant expresses their concerns about 'near future' and questions the interpretation made using the developmental chart	<i>. . . I haven't figured out yet, from this [Development Chart], what this new model is . . . the business service has somewhat forcibly shifted more toward the digital . . . some might think that local services aren't needed. Even support for new companies, concrete experiments are going on in which you don't meet the customer at all. I don't know where our work is really heading. . . I'm afraid that we don't really know what that new model is at the moment</i>
11	Participant C (Org.1)	Initiative: participant questions the interpretation of the "near future"	<i>This is still service work, so it's the customers' needs that determine how they're served. The operating model will take shape accordingly. If the service and the customer don't meet, then the service becomes meaningless</i>
12	Facilitator A	Script-based comment and question	<i>Good reflections . . . Does anything else come to mind about the current model or the new one? . . .</i>
13	Facilitator B	Script-based comment	<i>I really agree. It's good that you're thinking about it . . . that we have some things we can already start experimenting with . . . [trying out the next phase in the script]</i>

## Type 3: Using empty space

### Excerpt 2(1)

Turn	Speaker	Type of turn	Excerpt
1	Facilitator A	Script-based comment; comment on use of digital platform	<i>... like you described, there are many actors involved in the same issue, so. If you're wondering what I'm doing here, I'm taking notes of what you observed and what you paid special attention to. [keyboarding]</i>
2	Participant B (Org. 1)	Initiative: participant asks a question about the practices of the peer organization	<i>I'd like to ask Organization 2 whether you have anything regarding investing? What do you do to attract entrepreneurs to your area or things like that? How does it show in your work?</i>
3	Participant D (Org. 2)	Response: participant describes their practices	<i>The municipalities are responsible for new business acquisitions ... if we start attracting new businesses, then how can we be fair ... for example, Municipality A had this business agent experiment, in which the business agent's job involved investment services and new business acquisitions</i>
4	Participant E (Org.1)	Response: participant describes their practices	<i>Yeah, and investment services need some real estate business on the side, and we don't have that. Real estate ownership belongs to the municipalities</i>
5	Participant D (Org. 2)	Response: participant agrees	<i>Same thing</i>
6	Participant E (Org.1)	Initiative: participant highlights the problem related to their activity	<i>But another thing is that in our region, there are very few business premises. Investment services, of course, need available premises. How can funding work when municipalities don't want to take big risks?</i>
7	Participant D (Org. 2)	Response: participant agrees	<i>To invest</i>
8	Participant E (Org. 1)	Response: participant agrees	<i>Exactly</i>

## Excerpt 2(2)

Turn	Speaker	Type of turn	Excerpt
9	Facilitator A	Script-based question	<i>Alright, what else?</i>
10	Participant F (Org. 2)	Initiative: participant suggests benchmarking to find a potential solution	<i>When it comes to investing, we should go and see Town B to see how they've done it</i>
11	Participant G (Org. 1)	Response: participant agrees and describes the target of benchmarking	<i>We should go on a benchmarking trip there, because they have 100,000 m<sup>2</sup> of municipal space and 100,000 m<sup>2</sup> of privately owned space. And two new industrial areas are being built right now, it's quite a place</i>
12	Participant D (Org. 2)	Initiative: participant elaborates on what should be benchmarked	<i>Yeah, and it's also important to consider how the infrastructure works there</i>
13	Participant G (Org. 1)	[classified as other]	[unclear speech]
14	Participant D (Org. 2)	Response: participant expresses admiration	<i>What they do, it's awe-inspiring...</i>
15	Participant G (Org. 1)	Response: participant agrees	<i>Yes</i>
16	Facilitator A	Initiative: facilitator presents an outlining question	<i>So, are you going to plan a field trip to Town B?</i>

# Conclusions

- In virtual co-development the facilitator's role is essential in sustaining participants interaction, initiatives and elaboration on the content developed.
- High-quality facilitation requires **balancing between a planned script and empty space**. This requires:
  - Sensitivity to ongoing interaction, including noticing the minor use of fillers and weak linguistic cues, which indicate that participants are processing the topic discussed.
  - Encouraging ongoing interaction by open questions and content related comments.
  - Creating space for participants' open dialogue that deviate from the script – to expand on the topic and take facilitative actions.
- Facilitators should acquire multifaceted skills and implement them in the flow of virtual workshop discussion.

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# Thank you

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