

Julia Winston:

Take a look around, you'll notice them everywhere, facilitators, people who guide other people, create connection, and make tough things easier. This is Facilitator Forum, where we meet a magical mix of people who offer us insights and inspiration through the stories of their work in the world. I'm your host, Julia Winston. Welcome.

Julia Winston:

Hey, everyone. I hope you're ready for a plot twist. Today's episode is all about facilitating breakthroughs online. In other words, creating transformational moments for people in virtual settings, as opposed to in person experience. Honestly, I entered this conversation pretty skeptical about the power of online facilitation. And spoiler alert, I totally had a breakthrough moment myself. I even feel a little vulnerable about releasing this episode, because I was just feeling all my feelings when I had the breakthrough.

Julia Winston:

You'll see what I mean. Let me tell you about our guest. Gwyn Wansbrough is an international facilitator based in Barcelona who specializes in creating learning experiences that lead to breakthroughs. Gwyn grew up in Canada, just outside Toronto, as the daughter of educators. She first discovered facilitation while working for a nonprofit that helped young people with a passion for music develop their talent and skills in a supportive environment. At one point, she felt like the sessions could be more engaging.

Gwyn Wansbrough:

And then we brought in these people who called themselves facilitators just to do a little team building and community bonding and stuff and it totally changed the whole environment and the mood and the dynamic in the group. These facilitators had come in and they did all kinds of things to connect with these young people who weren't easily going to trust other people.

Julia Winston:

That's where her facilitation journey began. Gwyn recently stepped down as executive director of global facilitation training organization PYE, Partners for Youth Empowerment, scaling programs to over 15,000 educators and team leaders in 15 countries. She's collaborated with organizations and schools around the world, including the Ashoka Foundation, the World Innovation Summit for Education, private foundations, departments of education, universities.

Julia Winston:

She publishes a weekly newsletter on creativity, facilitation, and learning called The Quest, which is really awesome, and she launched an online cohort based course in October called Breakthrough Facilitation for professionals who lead virtual groups. More on that at the end of the up episode. For now, let's dive in. Gwyn, what is a breakthrough moment and what does it mean to have or facilitate a breakthrough?

Gwyn Wansbrough:

A breakthrough can be described in a number of different ways. It can be a new insight. It can be a kind of a profound realization. It can be that kind of aha moment where consciously or subconsciously you're struggling with something, could be a decision, could be a way of solving a problem at work, some kind

of issue that you're trying to work through or resolve in a personal relationship, but you haven't quite connected pieces that need to come together.

Gwyn Wansbrough:

That's how I see breakthroughs. Breakthroughs can be scientific breakthroughs, the COVID vaccine, for example, but they can also so be personal breakthroughs. A lot of the work that I do and I focus on is facilitating groups. I lead trainings in facilitation. But one of the things that I'm curious about, and this is why I focus on breakthrough, is how we can work with the group model of facilitation to help spark those breakthroughs. A facilitator can't give a participant, give them breakthroughs, but you can create the conditions where breakthroughs can happen.

Gwyn Wansbrough:

This is very much connected to what is called the arc of transformation that kind of underlies transformative learning. In my mind, I see it as a first step of creating psychological safety and connection, uncovering limiting beliefs that we may have about ourselves or about the world, to then be able to open new possibilities and new ways of thinking and take action on them.

Gwyn Wansbrough:

The breakthrough is once you have had that moment of clarity, that aha moment where things kind of come together, you're able to put things together that you weren't able to before, or come up with a solution, once you have that, there's no turning back. Your brain, the neurological new pathways are formed and you are not the same person who thinks the same way as you were before. That is a little bit of how I think about breakthrough.

Julia Winston:

Thank you for laying that out. It's so helpful the way that you laid out the arc of transformation. I can envision it. What are some breakthroughs you've had in your life through this work of... You were in an environment that was created by facilitators and the experience you had led to breakthroughs for you, whether those were professional or personal. Give us an example, maybe of an online breakthrough that you had, because this is what we're going to be digging into a little bit.

Julia Winston:

How does one have a breakthrough online? What are some breakthroughs you've had?

Gwyn Wansbrough:

Let me start by saying all the training work that I had been doing before COVID primarily through Partners for Youth Empowerment and working with facilitators, all of that had been in person. We were flying people around to do trainings over the world, because it was a global organization. There's no substitute for an in person experience. I actually stepped down as ED from PYE just before COVID hit, and it was coincidental. I hadn't planned for that, but that's the way that the timing lined up. I was just heading into a new phase of transition.

Gwyn Wansbrough:

I knew that I wanted to continue to facilitate, but I was thinking, oh gosh, now we're in lockdown. We're in a pandemic. I'm not quite sure how this is going to happen. In my own mind, I had always connected

facilitation being in person. One breakthrough that I had was actually also with PYE. I had stepped down already as the executive director, but PYE organized this amazing series called Creative Catalyst.

Gwyn Wansbrough:

As everyone started to experiment online, PYE was experimenting as well with their creative facilitation model. I signed up for one that was on movement, and I knew the facilitators, Sylvia Giovannoni and [inaudible 00:07:33] from South Africa and Sylvia's from Brazil. Wonderful movement facilitators. I thought, how are they going to do a movement class facilitation session online?

Gwyn Wansbrough:

I remember just about 15 minutes into the session, I'm like moving around in front of my Zoom screen, moving around my room to this beautiful Brazilian music being guided by Sylvia, in that case, and thinking, "Oh my gosh, I am having an experience right now that is very similar to what I experience when I'm in person doing these kinds of experiential activities."

Gwyn Wansbrough:

And at that moment I thought, oh my gosh, there is a way of doing deep and meaningful and transformative work and facilitating that work online. That led me on a very extensive quest to learn more about how we can create these meaningful experiences online.

Julia Winston:

I want to ask about community and connection. Because the moment that you described feeling when you were dancing, that sort of breakthrough moment that you had where you realized, "Wow! I can have a transformative, meaningful moment online," that was a moment that you had with yourself. You spoke before about how community was so important to you, and it was such a big part of growing up for you.

Julia Winston:

I'm sure so much of the work that you've done at PYE is about bringing people together. How does that part factor into this experience of having a breakthrough experience online?

Gwyn Wansbrough:

The thing that I have realized with the online experiences, which makes it very different from the in person experience, is that you really need to design and facilitate the engagement, the connection, and everything that goes on in the session. In an in person scenario, there are these kind of spontaneous things. You're in the same room, so you are already connected to people. But when you're on a Zoom screen, you're not. You need to more actively and proactively design and facilitate that connection and the community.

Gwyn Wansbrough:

When you do, then you are creating the conditions then for that transformative kind of experience. You might be in a breakout group with somebody. You might not ever be in person with them, or you might not never hear about them after your session, but I've had very profound conversations with people online that... And even when I'm facilitating online, sometimes it's like the screen actually disappears. I feel like I am in some way not physically in the same room, but I am in a shared space.

Julia Winston:

Do you get the sense that in a way people might feel even safer connecting with other people online because they are actually in their own space?

Gwyn Wansbrough:

Yes, that's a very interesting insight. I think for some people it could feel safer.

Julia Winston:

Like could it be that someone who gets to wear their fuzzy slippers and be sitting in their favorite chair feel more comfortable sharing about what's going on with themselves because they have the comforts of their everyday life around them? Perhaps they may not feel as comfortable if they're outside of their literal comfort zone in person.

Gwyn Wansbrough:

Yeah. One of the things that I have learned about facilitating virtually is to really not make any assumptions about where people are coming in from, because I used to make the mistake in the facilitation. You're running a facilitation session online. People dial in and you almost like... I used to kind of forget like, what might be going on in their lives before they got to the session? I think it is true. Some people might feel more safe, more comfortable. Other people might be so tired of being online that it's just a struggle. They're exhausted.

Julia Winston:

Zoom fatigue. Yeah, Zoom fatigue is a real thing.

Gwyn Wansbrough:

It's a real thing, even the founder of Zoom said that he was getting Zoom fatigue during the pandemic. He's getting Zoom fatigue. We're all getting Zoom fatigue. But I do also feel like facilitators can bring to the online space these online experiences. You cannot just assume that people will feel connected and they'll feel engaged. You've got to design and you've got to facilitate it.

Julia Winston:

You've alluded to creating the conditions for people to experience breakthroughs. What are some of those conditions? If you could share with us a little bit about how you facilitated breakthroughs for others online, what are some of the tips and methodologies that you've used to create those conditions?

Gwyn Wansbrough:

But I think if we go back to that arc, this arc of transformation is the foundation of creating these conditions for breakthroughs. It's that creating psychological safety and connection, and then creating ways where people can uncover their limiting beliefs so that they can open new possibilities and act on those new possibilities. Part of what sparks a breakthrough is when we stop thinking about the issue we're trying to resolve.

Gwyn Wansbrough:

I might start, for example, with a question like, what is something that has surprised you lately, or what is one thing that you notice in the space that you're in that you haven't noticed before? Just try to kind of start to get people's kind of minds a little bit open to things that they might not be seeing and kind of out of autopilot and out of...

Julia Winston:

And are you doing this on like chat, like using the Zoom chat, or is this more of like breakout conversations? What do those moments look like?

Gwyn Wansbrough:

I would do that usually upfront at the beginning. The idea is that you want to get people in a space where they start to be receptive to kind of do thoughts and ideas. That's one strategy. And then another one is finding ways to help people be really present in the space and in the session. And that can be very challenging, especially online, because people might be checking their email and they might be...

Julia Winston:

On Slack.

Gwyn Wansbrough:

On Slack.

Julia Winston:

Texting.

Gwyn Wansbrough:

Texting.

Julia Winston:

So many distractions. It's hard for people to focus.

Gwyn Wansbrough:

Absolutely. It's very challenging. In that case, I would be focusing on creating agreements upfront. One of the agreement is to be present. Because if you're distracted, if you're kind of really focused on something else and not on the here and now, it's going to be very difficult to get into that space of like having some kind of new insight. You're too distracted. You're thinking about something else. Another thing that I would do in a session where you want to create the conditions for breakthrough is to give people some quiet time for internal reflection.

Gwyn Wansbrough:

This could be, for example, a free write, where you just put a timer on and you give people a prompt.

Julia Winston:

Yeah. It also strikes me that it's a different modality. For some people maybe who are more extroverted or verbal processors, talking about insights might help them have breakthrough moments. Whereas for

other people, maybe writing about it could lead to an insight. Maybe it doesn't even matter what kind of person you are. Just having these different modalities can spark something different in your brain.

Gwyn Wansbrough:

Absolutely. It also kind of gives your mind the time just to wander. That's why often breakthroughs come to us when we're doing things like washing the dishes. Our mind is wandering in a lot of different directions as we're watching the bubbles kind of pop in the dishes. I tend to use writing because that's an effective quiet time activity. There's lots of things to do. But the idea is to let the mind wander a little bit. Another strategy is to engage the body. When you warm up your body, you increase the receptivity and capacity for these kinds of breakthrough moments.

Gwyn Wansbrough:

So many of us are mostly in the analytical thinking frame. It opens up access and information that you don't always have when you're just in thinking mode. I think the other way of creating the conditions for breakthrough is to give people an experience, so running an activity, and then debriefing and reflecting really well after it.

Julia Winston:

You just gave us such a rich menu of delicious dishes that we can use to facilitate breakthroughs online. Thank you for laying all of those out there. I'm curious, is there an example you could give us or a story you could tell us about a breakthrough you've witnessed that someone else had in an online environment that you were facilitating?

Gwyn Wansbrough:

Yeah. There's one session that comes to mind, and it was with a group of teacher trainees. They were in teachers college, and they were having a really hard time with this switch to online. All of a sudden, all their classes were online. I talked to their professor who was a very good friend of mine, who's a wonderful, very committed educator, but he couldn't figure out how to kind of reengage this group. He called me and said, "Gwyn, do you think there's something that we can do?"

Gwyn Wansbrough:

Like do a kind of facilitated session just to kind of get them back and to connect them again with their motivation?" Let's try. We did a session and they were very resistant, I would say, to the idea of kind of doing something experiential online, but they were willing to go with it. We started this session, and we got into a storytelling activity. We were kind of exploring, what is our why? Why were they there to study teaching? We went off into breakout groups, and I went into a breakout group with one of the students.

Gwyn Wansbrough:

He started talking to me about his story, and he was studying to be a PE coach. He started talking and it was just in the span of about four minutes that we had to share our stories with each other. He shared with me that he had ADHD when he was a child and learning for him was very, very difficult. He had a very difficult time sitting in a chair and focusing and paying attention. He didn't do very well at school.

Gwyn Wansbrough:

He said it was a PE teacher who turned all of that around for him and helped him to see that it wasn't that he wasn't able to learn, but that it was that he was more physical. It was the way that learning was set up wasn't working for him. He said, "Because I had that teacher, it made me want to go into teaching." I was really blown away by this story. Everybody came back into the main group and shared their experiences of really reflecting on why they were being teachers.

Gwyn Wansbrough:

It was for that particular student a real also breakthrough moment. I don't think he had connected in a way and shared with the group why he was there to study teaching, to be a teacher. And one by one, each one of them started to share their stories. It kind of took their own group connection to a different level. I think for each one of them, it clarified and it connected them to their motivation and their purpose for being there. I share that story because they continued with the online learning.

Gwyn Wansbrough:

We did a few more sessions, and they said that those sessions really helped completely turn things around for them. As a group, they felt more connected. They felt more motivated. And they realized that there was a lot that they could do online as a group to connect and to do worthwhile meaningful work together. That they didn't have to be in person. They could do it online. That kind of helped them finish the term. I actually ended up seeing them in person at the very end, because we could get together again.

Gwyn Wansbrough:

It was so amazing to connect with them in person as well. I don't underestimate the power of being in person, but I do think that we underestimate how much powerful work can be done online.

Julia Winston:

Whew! Wow! I'm surprised that I feel kind of moved and emotional right now, because this is so surprising. I've spent the last two years... Like I changed my whole life to go from being an in person facilitator to becoming an online facilitator. What you just described is... I've seen a lot of that, and I just don't think that maybe I've given myself the credit for facilitating moments that may have in fact been transformative for people in this online environment. Thank you.

Julia Winston:

I mean, what you just shared is like it's such a familiar story. It's something that I've experienced a lot, and I do feel that it's powerful when it happens. Hearing someone else tell their story of what I've been experiencing in isolation, in my own office every day through a screen is quite validating. Thank you so much for that, Gwyn.

Gwyn Wansbrough:

Now I'm getting goosebumps.

Julia Winston:

I really wasn't expecting to get emotional of talking about online breakthroughs.

Gwyn Wansbrough:

Well, that's it. That's it. I think that you've just put your finger on another thing about facilitating online. As facilitators, we are in a room on our own with a screen of people. When we're in person, we are with that group. It's a very different experience. Like you said, there is a lot that you are facilitating that you may not even have absorbed.

Julia Winston:

Yeah, it all feels kind of flat because it's just been happening on the same way on Zoom. It's like it all kind of just blurs together, but there is change happening out there as a result of the facilitation work that we're doing in online environments. And to your point and to the point behind the story that you told, there are millions of people out there right now who are all pivoting their entire industries to be online or to be hybrid.

Julia Winston:

You're really highlighting work that's very important when it comes to blazing new trails that facilitators and teachers and guides all over the world can follow to feel more confident about creating transformative experiences online. Knowing that that doesn't mean we have to abandon our in person experiences. This is actually a yes and. It's an expansive opportunity for us to embrace facilitating in a lot of different kinds of environments, and we're going to reach more people that way.

Gwyn Wansbrough:

I couldn't have said it any you better than you just said it right now. I think there's a wonderful opportunity, there's an important opportunity. Facilitation is having a moment. I feel like right now, this online world is opening up as well. My call to facilitators, you are needed right now and people who can facilitate and who can guide these kinds of group experiences online are doing very, very important work. I didn't plan on being only into virtual facilitation.

Gwyn Wansbrough:

I thought it was just a temporary thing, a stop gap measure, before we could get back to in person. I'm now 100% committed to doing virtual facilitation, in part because that's where I feel like there's a need. Really it's opening a way of doing things online that I didn't even believe was possible two years ago. It's an exciting space to be in, and hopefully, more people will just join the ranks of facilitating these online experiences.

Julia Winston:

Well, I'm reassured just knowing that you're out there with such genuine passion for this. It reminds me a little bit of the transformation arc, that middle piece of the arc, which is about transforming limiting beliefs to possibilities and then taking action on them. You're living that right now. And in fact, you actually have a course coming up that you're offering to teach this to people. Maybe you could just tell us about that for a minute before we start to close.

Gwyn Wansbrough:

Sure. Maybe unsurprisingly, it's called Breakthrough Facilitation, and it's a four week live online course for professionals who lead online groups. You could be a course creator. You could be a teacher, a professor, who's trying to find ways to do things online in a different way. You could be a facilitator who has done a lot of work in person and is kind of exploring this frontier of virtual facilitation. It's a live

course, so there's live interactive sessions. It's experiential learning online, so we focus a lot on learning by doing.

Gwyn Wansbrough:

And in fact, you learn about creating the conditions for breakthrough by having these breakthroughs yourself through the course. It is going to be running from March 15th through April 7th. If you want some more information about the course, you can check out the landing page, breakthroughfacilitation.com. We run the cohort once. This will be the second cohort. It's a global group of people who share the same goal of wanting to do things better and differently online and learn this kind of art of virtual facilitation.

Julia Winston:

Wonderful. Well, I'll be sure to put all the information in our show notes so that people can access the links to register. Gwyn, thank you so much not only for joining us on the show and for laying out so thoughtfully all the ways that breakthrough facilitation is possible, but also thank you for facilitating a breakthrough moment for me that was totally unexpected.

Julia Winston:

You just reminded me that for the last two years of my life, these have been very worthy moments in front of my computer and there's a ripple effect that's happened that I'll never fully understand, but that I have felt it and I know it's there. Thank you for that reminder.

Gwyn Wansbrough:

That's unexpected for me too. Honestly, I'm getting more goosebumps as you say that. I have so much respect and admiration for what you're doing.

Julia Winston:

Thank you. Thank you, Gwyn. Well, that happened. When Gwyn shared that story about the PE teacher's breakthrough, it was like a light bulb went off in my heart. At first, I was like, "I've totally facilitated moments like that on Zoom, more times than I can even remember. I could be telling this story." And then I realized, "Oh, that's because I've been facilitating breakthrough moments. That's because my work has been having an impact."

Julia Winston:

It's just that when the Zoom meeting closes and it's just me sitting in my computer chair, I just continue on about my day and forget it ever happened. It fades into the background along with all the other Zoom meetings, but it happened. It's like if a tree fell and no one is there to hear it, it definitely still made it sound. If a moment happened and then I closed my computer, the moment and whatever ripple effects that may have resulted, they still happened. It got me thinking about how facilitators can start getting desensitized to transformative moments.

Julia Winston:

It becomes almost commonplace for us to witness moving moments. How do we continue to see the impact of our work with fresh eyes? I think storytelling is the answer. By swapping stories with other facilitators, we can continue to see the impact of our work as reflected through the eyes and hearts of

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our peers, and we can continue to enrich our collection of stories by embracing all forms of facilitation, including virtual facilitation.

Julia Winston:

If you're like me and you've just been kind of going through the motions on Zoom, doing your best, but kind of waiting for in person to rise again as the primary form of gatherings, perhaps we'd be well served to learn to love facilitating in online environments as a way of expanding our range. To learn more about Gwyn's course on facilitating breakthroughs online, enrollment is open. Check out [breakthrough-facilitation.com](#) and head to [facilitatorforum.com](#) for the full show notes from today's episode.

Julia Winston:

I want to thank everyone who helped bring this podcast to life. Adam Rosendahl for the original artwork. Caleb Spaulding and Massimo Lusardi of Gasoline Tequila for the original music. And a big thanks to Josh Gilbert, a new addition to the team who helped edit today's episode. Most of all, I want to thank you for listening, for joining me in these conversations. Let's keep learning and growing together. See you next month.