Speed Dating

Engagement with researchers: Best practices of facilitation observation guide

This guide is based on excerpts from ACI-REF Best Practices of Facilitation, Chapters 3 and 4, "Engagement with Researchers" and "Implementing a Researcher's ACI Plan". The document is available at http://aci-ref.github.io/facilitation_best_practices/.

Observation guide instructions:

In the VR Speed Dating sessions you will observe one or more intake interviews, or initial *engagements*. An engagement meeting and its key aspects are explained in this document. Review it in its entirety before the session, as some of the sections will overlap. There are questions after each section to help guide your observations.

What is an engagement?

One of the main duties of a Facilitator is meeting with researchers in order to better understand their ACI needs and to help them select appropriate ACI resources and approaches. These **engagements** are important for accelerating the adoption of ACI resources in support of research endeavors. As an engagement requires direct interaction with a researcher, a face-to-face meeting is recommended for the initial meeting. During this first engagement a Facilitator may determine that multiple steps will be needed to achieve the researchers' end goals and will begin creating an Advanced Cyberinfrastructure plan (**ACI plan**) to capture research requirements and outline the major steps for ACI facilitation. If a formal ACI plan is necessary, subsequent engagements will play a crucial role in its development and success.

Activities defined as engagement may include:

- Development of ACI Plans describing the overall strategies by which a researcher will proceed
- Implementing the use of one or more ACI resources for a project
- Attending initial and on-going meetings to discuss a researcher's projects, goals, and roadmap
- Collaborating with a researcher on a portion of their project related to ACI, to enable their use of a resource near-term
- Transferring knowledge that leads to a researcher's effective utilization of resources
- Developing long-term plans as part of a larger ACI plan
- Consulting with a researcher on aspects of a project for which the Facilitator has domain expertise

Not all engagements will result in a formal ACI Plan. In cases where the research needs are straightforward and the researcher has a sufficient background in the use of ACI resources, the plan may be as simple as providing basic information on accessing the resources and on usage policies. In other cases, the researcher may have limited or even

no experience with the use of ACI resources and may be looking for guidance on how to begin, or determining what can and cannot be done. In either case, having an initial engagement with a new user of ACI resources is a good idea, as it serves as an introduction of the Facilitator and the role of facilitation to the researcher.

Observation guide:

As you listen to the conversation capture the research needs and note some possible steps for helping the researchers meet their goals. Think about the kind of an ACI plan you might you develop. Look through the list of engagement activities and find the one that best characterizes the type of facilitation this researcher will most likely require.

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Preparing for the Meeting

The initial meeting is an opportunity for the Facilitator to make a good impression on behalf of the resource(s) providers and to build trust in the researcher-Facilitator relationship. To ensure a productive engagement, a Facilitator should take several steps for preparation in advance. This will ensure that both the Facilitator and the researcher get the most out of the meeting and that the researcher's time is respected.

Research

It is crucial that a Facilitator takes the time to learn about the need for ACI resources in the researcher's field of study prior to the actual meeting. This may be accomplished by a simple review of any existing ACI plans and previous issues/support tickets if available, along with a review of the lab website, background on the current technologies in their field, and what local resources are already provided for such research. Doing so will establish Facilitator credibility in speaking about relevant ACI advances for their field and will allow the Facilitator to more quickly understand their research and ACI needs.

Observation guide:

The Facilitators in VR Speed Dating sessions have not had time to prepare for a meeting with these specific researchers, however, notice how the meeting gets started and think about how you might introduce yourself to a new researcher or research team.

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Questions

An initial engagement is the perfect time to gather knowledge about the science and research results that the researcher is currently pursuing for which they require ACI resources. For inquiring about research and resource needs, it is extremely helpful to have a list of prepared questions. The list below contains some basic initial engagement questions as well as questions specifically geared toward compute center resources.

1. What are your current research projects?
   a. What are the timelines of the projects?
2. What hardware resources are you currently using for computation?
   a. Do these meet your computational needs?
   b. Are there things you can't do with your current resource that you would like to? (E.g., can you evaluate all the data you want to at the scale you want?)
   c. Are you interested in using other resources? (E.g., our local cluster or national resources.)
3. What software programs, packages, etc. are you using for your research?
   a. Are there existing issues/limitations with the current software?
   b. Is there software you would like to use? Is there a reason you are not currently using it?
4. What resource are you using for storage?
   a. How much storage are you using?
   b. How much storage will you need?
   c. Is this the correct class of storage for your work?
5. Are there any roadblocks to the use of computation resources in your current research?
   a. Network issues?
   b. Knowledge/expertise?
   c. Hardware?
6. Where do you see your research going in the future?

The questions are aimed at prompting the researcher to discuss their current and long-term research, their research computing goals, what is blocking their current work, and what they would do if they had the necessary resources. Prepared questions can be given to a researcher prior to an initial engagement meeting to aid them in thinking critically about their cyberinfrastructure needs.

Observation guide:

Check the questions asked in the list above. Which questions led to answers that provided key insights into the team's computing needs? Were any unusual or unexpected questions asked? If the session had been longer, what other questions would you have asked had you been the Facilitator?

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Resources

It is helpful to have prepared in advance a list of ACI tools and resources available for the researcher's use. Researchers may not know or understand all the options that are immediately and locally available, and mentioning these can prompt additional discussion about their research and directions that they didn't think about prior to the meeting. In addition to local resources, the list should include external ACI resources that exist outside of the group to which the Facilitator belongs. These might include regional and/or national resources that scale beyond that which most individual institutions can achieve.

Observation guide:

What kind of local or external resources did the Facilitator suggest and for what purpose? Did mentioning different options and resources prompt additional discussion?

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During the Meeting

One cannot underestimate the importance of the first face-to-face contact — the tone and success of this meeting sets the trajectory for remaining interactions you will have with this team or individual. Remember that the purpose of the engagement meeting is to gather information; to that end, there are nine key practices to keep in mind.

Be interested and positive. You want the researcher to leave the meeting feeling positive about the ACI Plan so they will be able to enact the plan for the greatest research impact.

Take notes. Good documentation allows this meeting to be referenced in the future and will set the team up for success.

Actively listen. Everyone has a tendency to promote a predetermined message when discussing something they are passionate about and, in doing so, we sometimes forget to listen.

Identify roadblocks. If/when roadblocks are related to some of the policies and procedures of the institution, make a note without being negative or apologetic.

Describe the resources. Explain the relative scale of relevant ACI resources and what that scale enables. Often researchers are so focused on past solutions and their current lab capabilities that they miss the positive impacts of scaling up.

Make a plan. Whether a formal plan is required depends on the complexity of the researcher's needs. If needed, the ACI plan could be created during the meeting or in some cases taken back to the ACI team for additional development.

Engage others. Remember that the ACI team may not be able to address the researcher's needs. Bringing in or a referral to another resource or collaborator might be the appropriate solution.

Explain technical jargon. It is impossible to avoid technical jargon when discussing ACI. Try to be sensitive when using terms that are not familiar to almost anyone else, and be proactive about explaining these terms as you use them. Jargon changes over time and can mean different things within different disciplines.

Research first, ACI second. It is easy to get carried away when describing all your incredible ACI resources. Keep this urge in check while you focus on determining the research objectives and goals.

Observation guide:

Look at the list and check the key practices exhibited by the Facilitator, and the context in which they were practiced. Note the responses of the researcher. Are there practices that the Facilitator handled particularly well, or that were especially necessary?

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Concluding the Meeting

By the end of the meeting the Facilitator should have good comprehension of the researcher's work and goals, and have devised some form of an ACI plan, whether formal or informal. Prior to concluding the meeting, it is important to review the actionable items, to be taken by each party, and timeline of the ACI plan that the meeting has produced.

Observation guide:

How did the facilitator conclude the meeting? Was the information gathered sufficient to proceed? What would you have asked about if you were the facilitator and had additional time?

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