

'Dialogue' Methods and Approaches

Dialogue Methods

There are many different tools and methods that can be used for dialogue in meetings, workshops and forums. Methods are often mixed within a single workshop or forum. A forum may, for example, involve an expert panel followed by small group discussions. The methods listed here are some important examples, which provide tools for dealing with different kinds of situations. They tend to enable dialogue, deliberation and inclusiveness in discussions and decision-making. Note that some of these methods are copyrighted, some under Creative Commons, but there may be conditions associated with the use of the method or resources associated with it. You should seek to acknowledge the sources (see the websites).

Ice-breakers

There's a whole range of methods to introduce people to one another and get them warmed up. Have a look on the internet for some examples. You need to pick one for the setting.

We used an activity where we introduced ourselves to one another and talked about our grandmothers. This was chosen because we were to be working together all week, to start the process of getting to know and trust one another straight away. It was fun, got us moving, and the grandmothers got us thinking about ourselves and each other in terms of our family history and family culture.

Check-in, Check-out

These are a really important and valuable part of dialogue practice. They encourage a reflective attitude and build skills of reflection and reflexivity (How am I feeling? How is it affecting my contribution?). They help the group and the facilitator to know how things are going and whether anyone is struggling (with the process or because of external factors). Be very encouraging of different perspectives to avoid groupthink.

Self-test quizzes

These can let people know where they're at in terms of their knowledge and skills (in our case, emotional intelligence):

https://www.sdcity.edu/Portals/0/CMS_Editors/MESA/PDFs/EmotionalIntelligence.pdf

This can also be useful in acknowledging that we are different and those differences are useful for dialogue. In general, the results should be kept anonymous if there is any aspect of judgement or ranking from the quiz. However, there are some tools that just identify different types (like Myers-Briggs, or the DOPE test

(<http://richardstep.com/self-tests-quizzes/dope-bird-personality-test-printable/>)

which can be used to explore difference in an affirming way.

Quizzes can be an easy and engaging activity that can be done even if people are tired or anxious or not yet warmed up.

Relationship-building activities

Exercises where people find out about each in more depth, in a format where they learn to appreciate each other and appreciate their differences (usually very small groups), are very useful early on to build relationship and trust. If the activity can introduce some vulnerability, this will build more trust, but the group needs to be ready for it. Try to arrange cycles of sharing within the small group, so trust builds up progressively during the activity and people can make connections and parallels with each others' stories. Also, it's a good idea to do a whole group activity first, so that this exercise doesn't create cliques that make the group competitive.

We used life journeys, broken into 'where you come from' and 'where you're going'. Another good one is turning points, where you think of a number of turning points in your life and discuss these. Turning points are often moments of vulnerability but also of growth and say a lot about a person, including their strengths.

Stories

Stories are great for dialogue because they contain information and perspectives, but also emotion and personal connection, so they move us much more and are memorable. Everyone is allowed their story, so they remove questions of whether a person has authority to say something (we are all authors of our stories). They also discourage judgement (you can't be wrong about your story). They connect with real life and real experiences. They have an incredibly long history in dialogue and conversation.

Beware of stories because they can be used powerfully for persuasion. They are by nature anecdotal, so may not be generalizable, but may trump other forms of information and data.

Small group conversations

Breaking the group up is very useful and important, especially if it's bigger than about 10. Small group discussion allows quieter members more opportunity to speak (usually) and is better for relationship building in a large group. Conversation is often more flowing and engaged than in large group conversation; more can be covered and raised. It's a good idea if you are facilitating to check in on how the conversations are going from time to time.

The disadvantage of breaking the group up is that different issues and points are raised and discussed, so the group is no longer 'on the same page', so finding ways to report back is very important. These can be 'call outs' – asking people if they want to share what was said in their group – or summaries that the group produces at the end of their conversation. The latter tend to be more inclusive and representative of the group and provide quieter people with an opportunity to present to the whole group.

Selecting groups can be a bit fraught, and presses some social buttons for people. Asking people to select for difference can overcome some of this, as can random methods for sorting into groups. (note that this is an area I'd like to strengthen myself as I'm sure there are better ways to select sub-groups; perhaps you can find some!)

Procedural Guidelines or Ground Rules

There shouldn't be too many of these and they are much more powerful if developed by the group. If you are going to set rules for your event, make them simple and fairly self-evident, and either seek agreement from the group (with opportunity to discuss) or make sure they are rules most people will agree with. However, in that case you might think about whether you really need them or could trust people to behave well towards one another. Trusting the group might give a better result than setting rules.

We used (potentially!) an iterative process to set some procedural guidelines and then review them as the process went along. This is useful for ongoing dialogues and can help people to reflect on and monitor their practice.

Spectrum Activity

Getting people to line up on a spectrum is very useful for emphasising difference in a visual way. However, it's important to design questions and propositions so that people move and mix. Physical movement can be very powerful for dialogue ('movement makes meaning'), and energising, and is a way to let people know they can shift their positions, and that they can feel the same about some things and different about others. It helps to make this feel safer, which is very useful for dialogue.

Look out for people being isolated (go and stand with them). Getting people to talk about why they are where they are can be useful, and can get others shifting which is always interesting, but be careful about getting people to tell. Make it very clear they don't have to justify their difference.

World Café

(<http://www.theworldcafe.com>)

This method involves a café like setting, where participants sit in small groups, preferably at round tables. Organisers may provide tablecloths, flowers, drinks and other touches to create a café atmosphere. Participants, who may be invited or recruited, sit where they like initially (often they will sit with people they know). They are asked to discuss a particular question and have a set amount of time for the discussion. Each table has a table 'host' assigned or volunteered. This person may take notes to capture the discussion or a separate person volunteers to be scribe. A table facilitator may also be assigned to each table, particularly if the topic is controversial or if participants have different capacities to participate. After the set amount of time, all participants except the table hosts stand up and move to another table. They are encouraged to mix up and join people they haven't spoken to yet. The table host briefly summarises the conversation that went before, and the new groups discuss the question for the same period of time, before mixing up again. The method relies on the concept of "listening into the middle" – the group tends to converge on deeper understanding and shared meaning. The mixing prevents rigid social dynamics from setting in and allows common themes to emerge.

The method can also be used with different questions for each round (this is a variation on the model). This won't achieve as much depth on the question, but can be more interesting for people and allow exploration of different aspects of the issue. Beware that

world cafes can be subject to dominant people persuading each table of their way of thinking. Check in on groups to see if this is happening and encourage others to speak.

Open Space

Open Space, or Open Space Technology, is a relatively unstructured method that draws on participants' initiative and creativity and is most useful for groups who are already engaged and knowledgeable about a topic. It can work with 20 up to 2000 people and can be used with a mix of methods in a workshop or forum. An open space session is organised around a central theme or question. Participants work on the theme individually or in groups. Those participants who are prepared to lead a discussion then put forward proposals for solutions or issues or angles on the problem, usually written down on posters/butchers paper on the wall. The rest of the participants select which proposal they would like to workshop and form a group around that discussion leader. The several discussions are held in the same large space and participants have the freedom to switch discussion, or to float between them, or to leave discussions for personal reflection.

(<http://www.openspaceworld.org/>)

Station Rounds

This involves 'stations' placed around the room (on flipcharts, on posters or at tables) which have information or issues/questions of options. The group is split into small groups, who circulate around the stations, spending a set amount of time at each. In this way, the whole group covers all the topics, but retains the benefit of working in small groups (deeper, more inclusive conversation). At each station, the groups may be learning, giving feedback, brainstorming, asking or answering questions, or deciding on options.

In a common use of station rounds, the first complete round involves groups brainstorming and providing options or suggestions for each issue. In a second round, the groups may give feedback on the other groups' suggestions, or may dot vote on them.

Games

Games of various kinds can be very useful in dialogue – to engage people, to build relationships, to provide 'content' and a chance to interact with it, and to make the process more fun. They are especially useful for times of low energy for the group (after lunch, end of the day). Using objects (e.g. balls, cards, maps), as well as giving people a change from speaking, listening and writing, also engage our bodies as well as our minds, which can enhance our learning.

If you're lucky, you can find existing games (eg the Social Media Planner card game) that fit with the lesson. With some imagination, you can turn a lesson into a game (e.g. the planning cycle game – I turned the questions into 'mix and match' cards rather than just presenting them as a part of the cycle, and developed the 'what could go wrong cards' to stimulate more engagement with the cycle). Simple games like Rhian's tennis ball game that use symbolism and analogy (what did the balls and throwing represent?) can stimulate some very deep thinking and tend to stay with people.

ORID/Focused conversation

This is a step-by-step facilitated conversation to take participants systematically deeper into a question and through reflection to work through the issue as a group. It involves four phases of questioning:

Objective – “What are the facts? What did you actually see, hear, read?”

Reflective – “How did you feel about that, what was your reaction?”

Interpretive – “What did this mean for you, what insight did you get?”

Decisional – “What should we do about it?”

Talking stick

A talking stick is used in many indigenous cultures and provides a symbolic ‘right to speak’ to the group. The talking stick adds gravity to speaking in a group, which means, hopefully, that people will reflect more about what they are going to say and the responsibility associated with being part of the conversation. It may also encourage people to stick to the point, not talk too much, and build the conversation rather than just making their own points. The talking stick can be passed on when another person requests it, through the choice of the current speaker, or by passing it around the circle. It physically slows the conversation down, which can lead to more reflection and periods of silence. It’s good for serious conversations, when people need to be thoughtful and to be heard, and in situations where people are not showing enough respect for one another in a group. A talking stick can impede the flow of a conversation, so it’s not so good for fast-paced conversations, like brainstorming.

Role Plays & hypotheticals

Role plays are a good way of exploring other people’s perspectives and our assumptions about them. They are creative and require people to act. They are therefore fun and potentially energising but can also be intimidating. They worked well in our context for observing an interaction (in the climate change controversy role play), so that we weren’t observing and judging real interactions. Be aware that role plays usually involve stereotyping and assumptions and recognising this needs to be part of the exercise in a dialogue.

Hypotheticals can be a great way of connecting theory or practice with real world situations. It allows people to practice and explore learnings. In our case we used hypotheticals to make the planning cycle more real and explore its use. If you can use ‘real’ hypotheticals, especially real problems or tasks that come from the group, that is even better. You need to be aware of equity issues, as workshopping a person’s problem is extremely useful, and people who miss out are likely to be disappointed.

One-off Dialogue or Deliberation Approaches

21st Century Dialogue

This is a forum method that makes use of online tools including tailored software to enhance the forum process. These tools make it possible to analyse and synthesise responses from a large group in real time during the forum. The group, which may involve hundreds of participants working in small groups, discuss an issue then enter their responses into a computer at their table. These responses are then 'themed' and further discussed, voted on, etc.

This method involves a large group (100 – 1000), who are seated in groups of 6-7. The groups are asked to discuss particular questions and to enter responses, including individual, group and minority responses, into the computer. A 'theme team' then sorts responses into themes, which are broadcast to the group via central screens. Participants can then prioritise themes, individually or in groups. These rankings are then presented in visuals (histograms) on the screen.

Methods and software (CivicEvolution) have been developed to extend the method to online discussion before or after the forum.

Who participates? The method can involve an invited group, for example citizens who respond to advertisements or delegates at a conference, or can involve recruited mini-publics. The method can accommodate hundreds up to thousands of participants, depending on the availability of an equipped venue. A well trained and competent theme team is critical to success, and table facilitators can also add value.

When to use

- When an issue is 'hot' and immediate responses are valuable
- When the views of a large group are sought

When not to use

- When the issue is complex or technical and involves complex trade-offs
- When the issue is already well rehearsed and participants have relatively stable positions
- When resources are inadequate to support the method

Origin: This method was developed by Prof Janette Hartz-Karp, an Australian engagement expert based at Murdoch University in WA. It was adapted from 21st Century Town Meetings , developed by AmericaSpeaks.

Appreciative Inquiry (AI)

Appreciative Inquiry is an approach for creating a vision and planning to achieve it. It works through understanding and appreciating past and current best practices, as a basis for imagining the future.

Description: AI involves a group of people from an organisation or community building a vision for the future together based on a focus on success - what works and has worked well. It also taps into what people enjoy about an area, their aspirations for the future, and their positive feelings about their communities. By seeing what works and exploring why, it is possible to imagine and construct further success, ensuring that a vision of the future is created with a firm basis in reality.

Implementation varies, but AI may involve a core group, who conduct much of the process and then report back to a larger group, or an 'AI summit' involving as many in the organization or community as possible. AI works best when it is run as a long-term process of change.

AI often involves the '4D cycle':

- Discovery (appreciating and valuing the best of 'what is')
- Dream (envisioning what 'might be')
- Design (dialoguing 'what should be')
- Destiny (envisioning 'what will be')

Who participates? AI may involve a small core group to develop and test appreciative questions. A larger summit will seek to be inclusive of the community, with the aim of bringing together the 'whole system'.

When to use

- When you want to energise a depressed community or organisation
- When you want to bring the 'whole system' into a change process, including those with little motivation
- When you want to build a realistic vision and gain commitment to it

When not to use

- When you need to involve all key stakeholders or people with different interests
- When there is no interest in sharing responsibility and decision-making
- When there are problems that need to be addressed and should not be overlooked

Origin: Developed by David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastha at Case Western University in the US.

Stakeholder workshops/forums

Stakeholder workshops seek to bring as many relevant stakeholders as possible together to discuss an issue of mutual interest. Stakeholder workshops can take many different forms and use many of the workshop or dialogue techniques used in public participation processes. They need not preclude citizens, but citizens need to be framed as stakeholders and to be prepared so they have the capacity to participate.

Attention needs to be given to creating a space in which stakeholders can speak freely and reflectively about issues. Stakeholders carry responsibility to speak for their organisations and are sensitive to making statements or speculations that may be attributed to their organisations. Sometimes invoking the Chatham House rule (comments made during the forum can be passed on but cannot be attributed to particular individuals) can be useful. Stakeholders have particularly communication strategies that can detract from useful deliberative discussion, such as 'grandstanding' or keeping silent and 'having a quiet word' with decision makers afterwards. These strategies can be overcome by the careful use of methods such as small group work and good facilitation.

Diversiforums

These are workshops that seek to bring a broad range of stakeholders together, including indirect stakeholders and sometimes lay citizens, to move a discussion beyond 'the usual suspects'. These forums seek to frame the topic in such a way that new insights and perspectives can shift adversarial debates and fixed arguments to new ways of thinking. They generally use a mix of methods, such as world café and open space.

Future Search conferences

A Future Search conference is a way for a community or organisation to create a shared vision for its future. It is generally used for complex issues. It involves a group of stakeholders, ideally 64 (8 groups of 8), who are directly affected by an issue, have power to influence it, or have relevant knowledge and information. The process builds a shared vision for the future but also motivates stakeholders to act on this vision. It requires that participants are strongly affected or feel strongly about the issue initially.

They take part in a highly structured process lasting two and a half days. Phases include recalling the past, examining the present, creating ideal future scenarios, identifying common visions or projects, preparing action plans. A feature of the process is that disagreements are 'set aside' and the focus remains on agreement and common ground.

Principles:

- get the whole system in the room
- explore the whole elephant
- emphasise common ground and future focus; problems and conflicts are info, not action items
- encourage self-management and responsibility

Citizens' Jury

Citizens' juries are modelled on the criminal jury system and involve a small panel of citizens, randomly selected and demographically diverse, who carefully examine an issue of public significance and deliver a "verdict" and recommendations. Citizens' juries are usually used for complex, controversial topics, where opinion is sharply divided and policy makers seek insight from a thoughtful, informed public opinion to assist in making progress.

What is involved? The jury deliberates on information including a full range of perspectives and opinions, sometimes in the form of options on what should be done about the issue. This information is presented by witnesses who make presentations and answer questions. Juries need not reach a consensus but they develop recommendations as a group, which they generally deliver in public. The process can last between 2 and 5 days. The jury recommendations generally inform the decision-making process rather than having formal authority. Citizens' juries can stimulate and elevate further public debate.

Who participates? Citizens' juries generally have about 12 to 24 randomly selected citizens with demographic diversity reflective of the population. They are given financial support to attend. The process also involves decision makers who assist in developing the 'charge' that is put before the jury and receive the report. There are also expert witnesses, and often a multistakeholder steering group.

When to use

- When you have a 'live' controversial issue about which decision makers are genuinely undecided.
- Where you have several well-defined options to choose between.
- When decision makers are interested in what informed members of the public might think is the best way forward.

When not to use

- When decision makers are already largely decided on the issue;
- When the issue is not of significant interest to the public or not contentious;
- When you are seeking to inform, engage or empower the wider community (unless you are successful in publicising the process widely).

Origin: The citizen jury model is based on the US Citizens' Jury developed by the Jefferson Center, and the German Pannungszelle (planning cell) developed by the University of Wuppertal.

Consensus Conference

A consensus conference involves a panel of ordinary citizens who develop a perspective and recommendations about a topic through a conference process involving expert witnesses. It is usually based on complex and technical topics, often new scientific and technological developments. Recommendations arise which are intended to inform decisions.

What is involved? A citizen panel is set up with representative demographic diversity and a lack of prior experience with the issue. The model involves a preparatory process prior to the conference where panel members are provided with information about the topic, given time to read and research, attend information sessions and may be trained in group process. The panel then explores the issue through a two or three day conference, involving presentations and question and answer sessions from expert witnesses, deliberation amongst the panel, and preparation of a report. A distinctive feature is that the panel, following the preparatory process, makes decisions about the framing of the conference, which experts are called upon, and which questions they are asked. Parts of the conference and delivery of the final report are usually open to the public and media.

Who participates? A citizens' panel, usually of between 10-20 people, is selected for demographic diversity reflecting the wider population. They participate in the capacity of citizens and should not have experience with the topic. Consensus conferences are normally organised by independent organisations, who usually set up a steering group or advisory board.

When to use

- Issues are complex and controversial both in the political and public spheres;
- Experts, polarised positions and/or lobby groups have dominated debates and there is a lack of consensus about 'the facts';
- The issue has captured the public imagination and media attention widely (e.g. at a national level).

When not to use

- Decision makers are largely decided on the issue;
- As a sponsoring organisation with an interest or existing position on the topic;
- There is low awareness of the issue;
- Key stakeholders need to be involved in moving forward.
- If resources are inadequate (it's expensive!)

Origin: The Consensus Conference model was developed by the Danish Board of Technology.

Deliberative Polling

A deliberative poll measures the difference that information and deliberation can make to people's views on a topic. Deliberative polling processes are highly structured and results are statistically robust due to the large scale and tested methodology.

What is involved? A large group of citizens, between 200 and 600, is selected. The group is polled using a pre-formulated set of questions several months before the deliberative process. The group is given basic information about the topic, then meets in a forum over several days in which information is provided, diverse experts are available for questioning and the citizens deliberate in small group discussions. The group is polled with the same questions and the change in views is measured by comparing with the baseline poll. Results are publicised to reflect what public opinion might look like if people had enough information and time and good processes to consider the issue. This may inform decision-making.

Who participates? A large number (80 to 600) of citizens is selected based on random selection and demographic and social filtering to represent the wider population. This may include efforts to include minority. Experts and key informants are involved in providing information and perspectives to the group. An advisory group is often set up to oversee.

Strengths and weaknesses:

The large samples are more statistically representative than most engagement processes and can involve a larger range of citizens. The structured polling provides strong empirical evidence of the influence that deliberation has on citizens' views. The formulation of polling questions is critical to its success and tends to frame the discussion. Participants don't have as much input into how the deliberation runs.

When to use

- Deliberative Polling is especially suited to issues involving complex trade-offs and balancing of benefits or risks
- Requires involvement of media to have broader public awareness raising effects

When not to use

- If the issue is uncontroversial or well understood
- If consensus or appreciation of others' views is particularly sought

Origin: Developed by James Fishkin, US Centre for Deliberative Democracy, to quantify deliberative results and contrast with standard opinion poll results.

Scenario methods

Scenarios are a way to present alternative futures based on different assumptions and trends when there is uncertainty about the future. Scenarios allow people to better understand options and possibilities. Engagement can involve participants developing scenarios, or deliberating about scenarios that are presented to them. The former is more empowering and engaging, but also more uncertain and difficult.

What is involved? Developing scenarios is usually done by experts, but may provide engagement between experts or stakeholders from different areas or with different interests who need to develop a shared understanding of a common problem. The development of scenarios requires understanding of driving forces and trends acting on the system and the uncertainty associated with them. It often requires mathematical (or computational) modelling. Pre-formulated scenarios can be a useful focal point for broader community engagement, including involving citizen groups. They can be used to inform decisions about options. They have been used as stimulus for discussions on climate change adaptation, for example.

Who participates? Experts and/or stakeholders in scenario development; mixed groups or citizen groups for scenario methods. These could be invited or randomly recruited. Scenarios can be used in association with other methods such as deliberative workshops, displays or deliberative polling.

When to use

- For issues with considerable uncertainty, where future planning needs to consider this uncertainty
- For issues that can not be experienced or easily understood in the present
- To guide decisions that are likely to result in significant future change

When not to use

- For issues that cannot be easily modelled or where there is insufficient information to predict possible futures
- For issues where basic parameters are contested

Kitchen Table Conversations

Kitchen Table Conversations (KTC) are informal meetings that take place within communities. In a sense, KTCs mimic 'everyday talk' or informal discussion that might happen in the community anyway. The difference is that usually, many KTCs will be held during the same period, about the same issue and the results will contribute to a consultation or inform a decision-making process.

What is involved? Small groups of people (about 8 – 10) meet for a few hours, either around people's kitchen tables, or at a café or community venue. They come together to talk about specific issues, or to talk more generally about what concerns them in their community. Generally, one person hosts the conversation, which usually involves inviting people, providing a venue, and facilitating the discussion. There will usually be a scribe appointed from the group.

A series of KTCs may be organised by an individual, an organisation or a committee. If a particular issue is the focus, they will often provide an information resource or kit, which not only provides information about the issue and the context, but also describes how to set up and run the KTC. They also collect, collate and analyse the results of the KTCs and report on these results to the relevant decision maker.

Who participates? Individual KTCs involve groups of 8 - 10, generally friends or neighbours. Generally, the host invites people they know. Having said this, KTCs can provide a good opportunity for neighbours or community members who don't know each other well to connect through discussion of an important issue (rather than just chatting about the weather!). A KTC process may involve dozens of KTCs, and therefore amount to hundreds of people.

Strengths and weaknesses:

The model makes use of volunteers, existing social groups in informal settings and is therefore relatively quick, cheap and easy to run. It is also empowering for communities because they run the dialogue themselves, and can help to build community and engagement. Because the groups are random and are led by untrained hosts, the quality of discussions within KTCs can be quite variable. It is difficult for KTCs to avoid problems such as unequal status of participants, disrespectful behaviour and poor listening.

When to use

- When the issue affects many in the community and a broad range of views is sought
- When it's desirable to stimulate conversations within the community to help solve the problem (eg about climate change of refugees)

When not to use

- When the issue is not of general interest or requires explanation
- When the issue is very controversial or divisive

Origin: The model was developed in Australia by Mary Crooks at Victorian Women's Trust and by the Belconnen SEE Change group

<http://www.see-change.org.au/voicesofthepeople/>

Ongoing Dialogue methods

These continue over time (not based on a single event).

Study Circles

Study Circles is a method that extends small group discussion over time by creating small groups who work on an issue through regular meetings. They then report back to a plenary conference.

What is involved? The group of participants is divided into small diverse groups who each work together with a facilitator to explore an issue or problem over an extended period of time (several months). The forming of diverse groups is important to stimulate conversations across difference. The groups are provided with detailed information packs and work together to develop solutions. The circles then join together in a large conference to present and discuss their solutions.

Who participates? The method can be applied to an invited or recruited sub-set of a community or organisation. Data collected on participants helps to sort them into diverse groups. Each study circle has 8 – 12 people and there can be 10 to 50 circles working at the same time.

When to use

- For complex issues when time is needed to understand and resolve the issue
- To build relationships and bridging social capital within a community

When not to use

- When the input is unlikely to be used by decision makers or the community (as much time has been devoted by participants)
- When participants are not interested or engaged with the issue

Citizens' Advisory Panel/ Resident feedback register

A citizens' panel or resident feedback register is a large, demographically representative group of citizens' used to assess public preferences and opinions on a range of issues over time. They are used by decision makers, especially in local government, to gain feedback on local issues and services. They can be used by a partnership of agencies. Citizens' panels can be used to provide a voice to 'the silent majority' rather than the small group of engaged, vocal citizens in the community (the squeaky wheels).

What is involved? Citizens' panels involve a representative sample of a local population, generally randomly selected. Panel members participate in regular surveys, either online, via posted questionnaires or by telephone, and may also be involved in more in-depth processes such as focus groups. Getting the frequency of surveying right (4-8 times a year) and ensuring surveys cover issues relevant to members are important in maintaining participation. Citizens' panels need a well-maintained database, recruitment processes, surveys mechanisms, and tools for the analysis of responses. Results are often disseminated back to panel members and the wider community through a newsletter.

Who participates? Citizens' Panels can range in size from a few hundred to several thousand people. They need to be recruited carefully to achieve the demographic diversity of the population and to ensure random selection. With larger panels, demographic data may be used to select sub-sections of the panel for particular surveys (e.g. parents, particular age groups). The panel needs to be systematically refreshed to maintain its representativeness and participation.

When to use

- To monitor public opinion on key issues over time and balance vocal opinion leaders;
- To maintain an ongoing relationship with a community across a range of issues;
- As a source of participants for more in-depth processes, like focus groups and forums;
- When you need to check in with public opinion about new developments or campaigns, e.g. before and after information campaigns.

When not to use

- In isolation from other forms of engagement, particularly more in-depth processes, particularly if you are seeking to engage citizens broadly
- When seeking input about complex issues, especially when there is low awareness in the community.
- When you have insufficient resources or few issues to get input on.

Origin: Citizens' Panels have evolved from Opinion Polls and Market Research.

Online Discussion

Online engagement has become increasingly popular, especially for national government, along with the Gov 2.0 push. The online environment provides opportunities to extend the reach of engagement, and potentially make it more representative. Online discussion has a different quality to face-to-face interaction, however, and dialogue between different perspectives can be quite difficult online, as can deep deliberative discussion. There are some types of discussion that can be easier online, however. The tools structuring the discussion, and the facilitation (and moderation) accompanying it are critical to the quality of online discussion. It is worth noting that some parts of the community are harder to reach online, but some are easier. Note that particular groups, or random selections, can be invited to online discussions.

When to use

- When the use can be well supported with information, facilitation and moderation, involvement of decision makers, analysis and feedback of results
- When the issue is of interest to the wider community and people are already engaged in the issue

When not to use

- When you are short of money and time
- When there are significant and persistent cultural, conceptual or ideological differences between participants
- When there is low awareness of the issue in the general community

Bang-the-Table

Bang-the-Table is an Australian company who provide web-based platforms for engagement and budget consultations. They have a strong web presence and following and publicise their range of current engagements through their website. They also specialise in providing moderation, including to Facebook engagements.

<http://bangthetable.com/>


Delib

Delib is an international company that provides supported web-based solutions to support online engagement including consultations (about specific issues), budget consultations using a budget simulator and a dialogue app which allows sharing, discussion and rating of ideas. Its products are designed to be tailored by clients to their particular engagement settings.

<http://delib.com.au/>

Loomio

Loomio is an online collaborative decision-making tool developed in Wellington, New Zealand by a cooperative social enterprise.. The software is open source, flexible and being constantly developed by the Loomio community. The pricing structure makes it very accessible. The software enables a selected group to interact online. It allows for discussion (left side of screen) and decision-making (right side of screen). Decision-making involves proposals put forward (with some information to support them) and voting by group members. Voting is not as simple as yes or no, but includes agree, abstain, disagree and block. Block allows a single person to block the decision, even if everyone else agrees.



The screenshot shows the Loomio web interface. At the top, there's a navigation bar with the Loomio logo, 'Groups', 'Notifications', 'Give us feedback', and a user profile for 'Richard D. Bartlett'. Below this, the page title is 'Home > Enspiral'. The main content area is titled 'Make all enspiral accounts public'. It includes a description: 'What do people think about removing the notion of private enspiral accounts? Personally I think this would be a good step forward in helping increase transparency in the group and make it easier for people to look out for each other.' The proposal was started 3 months ago by Joshua Vial. The interface is split into two columns. The left column, 'Discussion', shows a comment box and several comments from users like Joshua Vial, Rohan Wakefield, Allan man, and Sam Rye. The right column, 'Current decision', shows the proposal text: 'We make all enspiral accounts viewable to other people in the organisation', with a closing date of 3 days and a proposal date of 4 days ago. Below this is a pie chart showing the voting results: 17 Yes, 1 Abstain, 14 No, and 0 Block. A legend on the right lists these counts. At the bottom, it states '41% of members stated their position (24/58)'.

<https://www.loomio.org/>

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