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Applications of Public Deliberation: Themes Emerging from Twelve Personal Experiences Emanating from National Issues Forums Training

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Abstract

In order to learn about post-training efforts in public deliberation in Oklahoma, a study was conducted with individuals who had completed a two-day course to become conveners, moderators, and recorders of deliberative forums. In Phase Two of the study (the qualitative portion), twelve individuals participated in in-depth personal interviews to describe a personal experience of significance related to public deliberation. The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed and analyzed. Five themes emerged from the data analysis: variety of settings; examination of benefits and consequences; use of guidelines and forum rules; common ground for the public good; and deliberative leadership. Study findings reinforced the use of some methodologies used in the two-day course and led to recommendations for post-course training and mentoring.

Keywords

National Issues Forums, NIF, Community Leaders

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Introduction

The idea of public politics has seen a renaissance across the United States in recent times. Boyte (2004, p.5) describes citizenship as public work, specifically the “sustained effort by a mix of people who solve public problems or create goods, material or cultural, of general benefit.” Educators and others working with families, communities and professional associations have noted multiple efforts and strategies for civic engagement (Anderson, 2004). Higher education has placed some of its focus on engaging the state and land-grant university system with communities to enhance the contribution to society that can be made by educators and community members working together (Peters, et al, 2005). Though the public has expressed and demonstrated some disaffection and disparagement, a study by Yankelovich and Furth (2006, p. 11) found that “the public’s mistrust is more like a crust than an impenetrable wall” that can be addressed with appropriate measures.

Research foundations and institutions have revitalized the idea of government by the people through grassroots efforts. Such efforts sometimes take the form of citizens making choices together on public issues. Choice work can be difficult because people favor different approaches and the options for action may conflict. The Kettering Foundation in Dayton, Ohio, created the National Issues Forums (NIF) in 1981 to engage people in public decision making through deliberative forums. The NIF network functions throughout the U.S., with a presence in over 40 states. In a state, NIF organizers often operate from a higher education institution or non-profit organization.

Since its inception, the NIF has made great strides in public deliberation. The NIF and its network have developed several discussion guides to support public deliberative forums on a variety of complex public issues with the potential for controversy and contention. Each discussion guide provides a current description of a particular public issue and presents three or four possible approaches for addressing that issue. The discussion guide is used in a deliberative forum to create an environment where people can make choices together regarding a public issue, followed by sharing the forum outcomes with decision makers and others. Trained in Public Policy Institutes (PPI) throughout the U.S., forum moderators and recorders facilitate forum participants in examining each approach in the discussion guide and in considering the consequences and tradeoffs. Forum participants do not always leave the forums agreeing on what action should be

taken to solve the problem, but generally find *common ground for action* and come to understand other points of view. Common ground is that piece that people can agree on which is somewhere between total agreement and total disagreement. It emerges as people work through differences and come to understand each others' perspectives and values.

Oklahoma's connection with the NIF network is through the Oklahoma Partnership for Public Deliberation (OPPD), founded in 2000. Prior to the formation of the OPPD, a study was conducted to determine the capacity of organizations in Oklahoma to support public deliberation (Williams and Daugherty, 2003). The study concluded that there was strong interest in fostering concepts of public deliberation in Oklahoma. The resulting organization is an informal partnership composed of representatives from statewide and regional organizations, agencies, higher education institutions and groups that share a conceptual link in fostering civic involvement in public decision making through deliberative forums. The OPPD has conducted Public Policy Institutes (now called Oklahoma Moderators and Records Academy) across the state. The PPI teaches adults and older youths to convene, moderate, record and report deliberative forums in their communities and organizations using the National Issues Forums model and materials.

After conducting Public Policy Institutes for four years, the OPPD wanted to examine the impact of these workshops. Phase 1 of the study, conducted in partnership with persons involved in public deliberation in Missouri, used telephone surveys with past PPI participants (Williams & Daugherty, 2006). The study revealed that participants used the concepts of public deliberation in a variety of settings, including: university classes, high school social studies programs, community meetings and neighborhood forums. The majority of interviewed participants said that common ground was found during the public dialogue. In addition, sixteen participants reported that they had an interesting anecdotal story about their experience with public deliberation that they were willing to share with the investigators in a personal interview.

Purpose of the Current Study and Methodology

Phase 2 of the study focused on anecdotal stories. Specifically, the purpose of this phase was to discover what the sixteen participants learned about public deliberation using the National Issues Forums model and materials. The study used in-depth personal interviews. Using questioning strategies suggested by Rubin and Rubin (1995), the investigators developed a thirteen-item instrument in collaboration with the Bureau for Social Research at Oklahoma State University (Table 1). The interviews were conducted by a research associate who was skilled in personal interviewing and knowledgeable about deliberative forums.

The research associate conducted the interviews in a location in Oklahoma convenient to the interviewee. Interviews averaged approximately one hour in length. All interviews were digitally audio-recorded.

Table 1. 13-Item In-depth Interview Instrument

<u>Interview Questions</u>	
1.	Briefly describe your experience with using the concepts of public deliberation in your community, work, social group, religious group or other setting.
2.	Who was involved, including individuals and organizations/groups/
3.	Why did you employ public deliberation in this situation?
4.	How were the principles and concepts of public deliberation used in this situation?
5.	Specifically, how did public deliberation improve the quality of the public decision involved in this situation? Were people better off? Was an organization better off? Was a community better off?
6.	When you used public deliberation, what went well and why?
7.	As you used public deliberation, what problems or challenges arose?
8.	If you had an opportunity to repeat this endeavor, what would you do differently?
9.	How do you see public deliberation being used in your organization, community or family in the future?
10.	Please describe any future plans to use public deliberation.
11.	How has public deliberation strengthened your role as a leader in your community or your field?
12.	Please describe how you think public deliberation could be used as a leadership development tool.
13.	You've given us an example to using public deliberation in a certain setting. Please describe how you think public deliberation could be transferred to other issues or settings.

A total of thirteen individuals from the original group of sixteen agreed to complete an in-depth interview. Three persons were unable to be interviewed due to relocation out of state or unavailability during the four-week duration of the interview portion of the study. Those interviewed included six men and seven women, ranging from 20 to 65 years of age. Two individuals were undergraduate students, two worked for the Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service, six were involved with the Oklahoma Early Settlement Volunteer Mediation program, two were employed by the two land-grant universities in Oklahoma, and one worked for the State of Oklahoma Department of Education.

Data analysis was conducted after all interviews were completed. To protect confidentiality, the Bureau for Social Research prepared the transcriptions. Twelve of the original thirteen interviews were utilized; data from one interview were lost due to technical error. Following transcription, the research associate and a statistical analyst from the Bureau for Social Research analyzed the transcripts and identified various themes across the interviews.

Additionally, the research associate developed brief case statements from the in-depth interviews (Merriam, 1998; Bray, et al, 2000). She condensed the data from the in-depth interviews to a one- or two-page statement that captured the individual's public deliberation experience described in the first nine questions of the in-depth interview. In situations where some interviewees shared two or more

anecdotal stories, the research associate chose the most noteworthy stories that reflected a broad range of deliberative experiences, both formal and informal. The case statements were written in third-person form, using pseudonyms to conceal the subjects' identities. In general, the case statements included the following:

- why public deliberation was employed in the particular circumstance;
- the number of people that participated in the deliberative experience;
- the setting of the dialogue;
- the concepts of public deliberation that were used; and
- common ground and/or outcome of the experience.

Each case statement described the subject's personal account of the public deliberation experience and his or her feelings, thoughts, challenges, and accomplishments. Statements suggested how public deliberation had and can be used in everyday situations.

Findings

Five themes emerged from the data analysis. The following common themes were identified: (1) used deliberation in a variety of settings; (2) evaluated benefits and consequences; (3) used guidelines and forum rules to facilitate discussions; (4) identified common ground for the public good; and (5) developed deliberative leaders.

Using Deliberation in Various Settings

Deliberation took several shapes in this study. Interviewees stated that they used concepts of public deliberation in all walks of life. Some stated that deliberation had become part of their negotiating and communication skills when dealing with co-workers, neighbors, and family members. Formal and informal forums, or deliberative experiences, were reported.

Five interviewees stated that their most significant experience occurred during forums using NIF guide books. The interviews revealed that the majority of trained moderators used the concepts of deliberation in other settings, including:

- University classes
- College civic engagement programs
- High school social studies programs
- Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service county-based community leadership programs
- Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service Community Listening Sessions
- Community and neighborhood meetings and forums
- County/municipal government meetings and forums

One man's most significant public deliberative experience was in conversations he initiated between the community's Alcoholics Anonymous group, which needed a new meeting facility, and a local church, which had plenty of meeting room. Although he said no official forum was conducted, several meetings between the groups fostered conversation and a new respect for "the other side."

In most cases, formal dialogues or meetings were conducted using deliberative concepts, such as establishing guidelines and examining benefits and consequences. Moderators adapted the NIF format and techniques to fit numerous deliberative situations in daily life. Seventy-five percent of participants identified their most significant deliberation experience was work-related. One individual described a situation where deliberation was used to facilitate discussion among co-workers.

Local, state and national issues were all addressed; however, ten of the individuals described deliberative experiences related to pertinent community issues, including the following: land zoning, job loss and environmental concerns. They commented that, through deliberative dialogue, participants often changed their perspective about issues, realizing that problems were broader than they appeared, as indicated by the following comment:

"Participants realized that this issue [racial tensions] was not only a local issue—it was a national issue."

The subject's realization may seem obvious, but people in ordinary life tend to personalize or localize issues. It takes this kind of process to make them aware of a broader perspective.

Examining Benefits and Consequences

Analysis of the in-depth interview transcripts illustrated that a majority of study participants used the concept of examining benefits and consequences of choices during deliberative discourse. Most individuals reported that they asked open-ended questions to facilitate discussion that led to the thought process of cause and effect.

For example, an attorney described his experience as a participant in a deliberative forum using the deliberative forum discussion guide "And Justice for All". While moderating the deliberative forum, he was able to hear a variety of opinions and thoughts about the judicial system from citizens, not just other attorneys. He described the frustrations of one Hispanic participant who explained that language barriers prevented some defendants from getting fair trials in English-speaking courtrooms. Other forum participants felt that making

English the nation's official language would solve the problem. Although forum participants did not come to common ground in the forum, the interviewee pointed to the success of the forum in that participants examined the costs and benefits of the choices they were making and were able to express their opinions.

The interviewees often stated that examining the consequences of choices helped participants understand the "other side" of the issue and facilitated public decision making, as illustrated by the following:

"Deliberation allows participants to take a problem piece by piece rather than tackling one large problem."

"The training at the PPI has imbedded in my thinking that we must always consider multiple perspectives of the issue, and we must also consider the 'empty chair' perspective—the perspectives of those who are not represented in the forum or dialogue."

"The beauty of a forum allows you to find out what issues are of concern and what the options are for solving those issues."

Using Guidelines and Forum Rules to Facilitate Discussions

Every study participant who considered their most significant deliberative experience a success used formal or informal guidelines to facilitate the dialogue and deliberation. Most of them used the National Issues Forums guidelines which feature the following: encouraging everyone to participate, listening to each other, staying focused on the issue, not allowing individuals to dominate the conversation, considering all choices on the issue, and creating an atmosphere for discussion. Even those interviewees who did not conduct an official NIF forum used the concepts of the NIF guidelines. Moderators felt guidelines were necessary to create an atmosphere of respect and security, as follows:

"You have to give people an opportunity to discuss and a secure place to talk about the issue."

"Ground rules created an atmosphere of respect."

One community leader described a volatile and contentious issue (county zoning) in a county about 125 miles from his community. His colleague in that county was not trained in public deliberation, and recruited him to come to the county as an outsider to conduct a deliberative forum on land use decisions. He used the discussion guide "Land Use Conflict: When City and Country Clash". Because he had been warned that people were upset about the issue and the impending forum, he prepared individual copies of the forum guidelines in addition to individual copies of the issue framework. He reported that his

application of the moderator skills learned at the PPI, including the use of the guidelines, helped to defuse the tension at the forum almost immediately. He also noted that a newspaper reporter from a nearby large city left the forum when she realized that there was not going to be an argument or debate. During the two-hour forum, the group found common ground from which to begin the work of developing a public policy for the common good.

Other moderators commented on the importance of deliberation guidelines.

“They may have come to a reasonable conclusion without having this initial forum, but my feeling is that it would have taken them a long time to get there, and there would have been a lot of hurt feelings and controversy that ensued.”

“[Forum guidelines] gave everyone a chance to say what they thought, to submit ideas, and also listen to others.”

Identifying Common Ground for the Public Good

The measure of success for most dialogues is the actual outcome—the action that is taken after the deliberation experience has occurred. However, “action” was not the only measure of success for the study participants. All 12 subjects stated that common ground was found during their most significant deliberative experience, making the experience worthwhile for participants. They stated that participants felt that the deliberative experiences were valuable because they were able to “step into their neighbor’s shoes” and at least agree to disagree.

“You could almost see, individual by individual, the change come over them [participants] when they’d hear the other person’s side of the issue and gave it some thought.”

“They didn’t necessarily agree on everything, but they understood where each other stood and why.”

The idea of “public good” was a common theme among the in-depth interviews. Study participants said forum participants would often change their way of speaking about an issue, creating a sense of unity.

“People, who were typically business, for-profit thinkers, were now developing a community- or social-based interest in their work.”

“At the end of the discussion, there was the question, ‘Where can we go from here?’ not, ‘Where do we HAVE TO go from here?’”

“By the end of the forum, participants were using the word ‘we’ not ‘I.’”

Developing common ground was not the only outcome of the deliberative experiences. Seven of the twelve individuals described vast action plans that developed from the process, creating positive community change. Actions included:

- Future forums/dialogues
- The development of county ordinances
- The establishment of rules and guidelines for a college apartment complex
- The refurbishment of tennis courts
- Implementation of new management strategies

Developing Deliberative Leaders

Interviewees also suggested that, since using public deliberation, they themselves were becoming more involved in community affairs. Subjects stated that the concepts of public deliberation helped them in their leadership roles. Among their comments, the four most common themes were the following:

- Becoming better listeners
- Improving comfort levels and confidence in being a moderator of deliberative forums on contentious issues
- Becoming less sensitive during contentious discussions, less likely to take comments personally
- Increasing open-mindedness

All 12 individuals said that the deliberative experience had initiated a change in their normal behavior or led to future plans to use deliberation, including:

- Facilitating more forums
- Becoming a certified mediator
- Framing local issues
- Getting involved in the community
- Promoting public deliberation forums

One individual noted that county government officials who attended a forum gained the most from a dialogue on declining community prosperity. Another person stated that he believed he was better prepared to address issues and learned he must study issues before forming an opinion. He also noted that his organization was recently recognized for the service it provided in public deliberation, as follows:

“Participants couldn’t believe that a meeting could run this smoothly—and that everyone still had an opportunity to voice their opinion. Anytime you can

learn how to conduct a meeting, and it is effective, I think you've learned something very valuable."

Study participants recognized the value of public deliberation training in the development of existing and future leaders as they worked with various publics. While several had been through leadership training programs in their towns, professions, and/or universities, only two persons (the university students) received public deliberation training as a part of a leadership program. Interviewees' comments about how public deliberation can help future and existing leaders reflected the following themes:

- Helps with decision making / finding common ground
- Fosters objectivity / open-mindedness
- Develops better communication
- Promotes thinking about the public good
- Reinforces the value of inclusion and diversity
- Gives people a voice / empowerment

One person responded that she has already incorporated deliberative forums into the curriculum of the countywide leadership program that she coordinates. Another subject noted the following:

"[Public deliberation] helps leaders understand one another and makes them more considerate, better listeners, and able to see the other side."

"I felt that through the training I had received from the PPI, I could handle the volatile situation and have a good discussion."

"A leader is not so much representing himself but representing the views of those people he serves."

"People respect the process of deliberation. They trust it."

Discussion and Conclusions

The study helped to validate the necessity of formal public discourse instruction in advancing civic politics. All of the study participants used deliberative skills and concepts from Public Policy Institutes to discuss issues and resolve problems in their communities. They felt compelled and prepared to initiate and facilitate deliberative dialogues about local, state, and national issues with the public.

Study participants were able to identify situations when public deliberation could be used and created environments that fostered public discourse. They

stated that common ground was often identified during the deliberative forum and that participants were willing to participate in and desired to continue the practice of deliberation.

The study helped to illustrate that adults and older youths, with little or no assistance from government entities or experts, were able to work with fellow community members to resolve public problems through deliberation. Safe environments provided by discussion guidelines and ground rules fostered rich dialogues and security for participants to speak openly. Citizens created networks and became more involved in their communities.

Most importantly, the study's trained moderators and recorders reported the importance of deliberative communication skills in their personal development as leaders. The participants of Oklahoma PPI trainings had an impact on the local, grassroots effort of changing the perspective of public politics. Consistent with Mathews' (2002) perspectives describing effective communities, public deliberation was recognized as an essential leadership development tool to foster citizen self-rule and community engagement.

Although public discourse occurs daily in civic life, the systematic approach of employing debate tactics in conflict resolution does not encourage the inclusion of all ideas and opinions. Instruction and training in public deliberation emphasizes the model of public politics that includes the examination of all individuals' welfare, as well as that of society's, before the decision-making process is completed.

Based on the study results, the Oklahoma Partnership for Public Deliberation renewed its commitment to foster deliberation habits in Oklahoma. It intensified endeavors to offer moderator and recorder training, as well as efforts in framing local and state issues and developing community/civic networks.

Limitations

The purpose of the research project was to determine the impact of public deliberation in Oklahoma, specifically the impact of the moderator and recorder development through Oklahoma Public Policy Institutes (PPIs). Although the in-depth interview questions asked participants to describe their most significant deliberative experience and the usefulness of the PPIs, the questions did not isolate specific PPI skills and concepts. Several participants had previous experience in facilitating meetings, received other training in mediation and/or meeting facilitation, or facilitated mediations.

Not all study participants described typical two-hour deliberative forums that used discussion guides such as those used in the National Issues Forums network. Some described other types of experiences or settings where they used public deliberation concepts, thus making it difficult to compare and contrast the impact

of the PPI training. Not every study participant moderated the forums or deliberative experiences described in the case statements; in some cases, the interviewee was the convener, recorder or observer.

Implications for Research and Practice

Analysis of the data collected during the study provided insights into the importance of developing moderators and recorders who take concepts and practices of public deliberation into their communities, as follows:

- Additional research could address and define “public deliberation” and other relative terms to identify more accurately the concepts learned at the PPIs.
- Future evaluations could examine the reasons why some persons who complete the PPI training do not become involved in public deliberation.
- Study findings support the need for similar evaluations in other areas of the country.
- This study focused on the PPI skills related to moderator and recorder development. Future research could examine forum participants’ reaction to the initial deliberative experience.
- Convener, moderator and recorder preparation can be greatly improved by reflecting upon and acting on participant responses to this study.
- Although the level of PPI participant involvement in forums was encouraging, there was room for improvement. To this end, the Oklahoma Partnership for Public Deliberation could create a mentoring program to improve the rate of active participation of trained moderators and recorders in deliberative work at the local level.

The investigation strongly supported the use of public deliberation as a way of increasing citizen involvement in community decision making, developing networks to support public work and stimulating citizen self-rule.

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