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Just-in-Time Exploratory Public Discussion

Adolf G. Gundersen

Interactivity Foundation, gundersen@interactivityfoundation.org

Dennis Boyer

Interactivity Foundation, boyer@interactivityfoundation.org

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Abstract

This essay describes a case study that successfully dealt two of the biggest challenges facing exploratory public discussion. By design, this category of discussion is typically separated from actual decisions and collaborative action and therefore lacks an element of urgency. The exploratory public discussions that prompted this report, which coincided with climate change conferences held in Cancún, Mexico, and Durban, South Africa, in 2010-2011, largely overcame this problem by preserving the exploratory nature of public discussion while trading on citizens' interest in unfolding real-world events. We call the result "just-in-time" exploratory discussion, shorthand for the notion that public discussion can remain exploratory despite drawing on the motivational power of temporal urgency. By getting the timing of exploratory discussion right, we suggest, citizens will be ready, even eager, to participate. Proper timing also tends to reinforce the value of exploratory discussion. In short, a just-in-time approach is useful at both the front and back end of exploratory discussion. It helps get citizens interested and keeps them interested in using what they've discussed.

Keywords

exploratory discussion, recruitment, felt significance, immediacy

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Thanks to the citizens who invented "just-in-time" exploratory discussion. We're glad to have been part of it.

INTRODUCTION

As longtime practitioners who work for an organization that has amassed more than a 1,000 hours of field experience, we think we have hit upon a way to successfully overcome two of the biggest challenges facing exploratory public discussion.¹ By design, this category of discussion is characterized by what in scholarly language has been termed “low decision control.”² In a widely referenced practitioners’ typology of 22 forms of dialogue and deliberation, exploratory discussion is most distinct from discussions aimed at “collaborative action.”³ Hence, it is to be expected that exploratory discussion will typically lack the urgency of deliberation designed to arrive at an actual decision.⁴ And, indeed, in our experience, this defining feature of exploratory discussion leads many citizens to view it as overly abstract on one hand and disconnected from their lives on the other. The result often leads to indifference—both to joining in and, once having joined in, valuing the results.

This essay describes a successful approach to finessing these twin problems of indifference by preserving the exploratory nature of public discussion while trading on citizens’ interest in unfolding real-world events. We call it “just-in-time” exploratory discussion, shorthand for the notion that *public discussion can remain exploratory despite drawing on the motivational power of temporal urgency*. By getting the timing of exploratory discussion right, we suggest, citizens will be ready, even eager, to participate. Proper timing also tends to reinforce the value of exploratory discussion. In short, a just-in-time approach is useful at both the front and back end of exploratory discussion. It helps get citizens interested and keeps them interested in using what they have discussed.

The approach we describe is a conceptual construct, the raw materials of which formed three instances of just-in-time exploratory discussion. The first

¹ The views expressed here are the authors’ alone.

² Christopher F. Karpowitz and Jane Mansbridge, “Disagreement and Consensus: The Importance of Dynamic Updating in Public Deliberation,” in *The Deliberative Democracy Handbook*, ed. John Gastil and Peter Levine (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005), 244.

³ Sandy Heierbacher, “Engagement Streams Framework,” (paper published by the National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation, Boiling Springs, Pennsylvania, 2005). <http://www.cnrep.org/documents/tools/ddStreams1-08.pdf>.

⁴ For a book-length description (and defense) of what is meant here by “exploratory public discussion,” see Adolf Gundersen, “Public Discussion as the Exploration and Development of Contrasting Conceptual Possibilities,” (paper published by the Interactivity Foundation, Parkersburg, West Virginia, November 2006). <http://www.interactivityfoundation.org/resources-downloads/papers/>. For those interested in how we see exploratory discussion fitting into the larger landscape of democratic discourse, see 11–15, which contrast exploratory public discussion as understood here with 11 other forms of dialogue and deliberation, and 79–84, which summarize how public discussion relates to democratic policy making more generally.

coincided with climate change conferences held in Cancún, Mexico, and Durban, South Africa, in 2010-2011; the second with President Barack Obama's key policy address on Afghanistan in 2010; and the third with the national energy debates, which were an important precursor to the fall 2010 congressional elections. Here, we will focus on the first of these. In all three instances, however, the experience we describe was the same: Just-in-time discussion, or a discussion that is timed to coincide with important real-world events, significantly reduced the difficulty of attracting participants and made it easier for them to see the relevance of the discussions.

EXPLORATORY DISCUSSION'S TWO BIGGEST HURDLES: MOTIVATION GOING IN AND FELT USEFULNESS COMING OUT

It is true that political discourse in general requires leisure, as Aristotle pointed out long ago. But it also requires interest or motivation. Exploratory political discussion tends to up the ante on both scores, because it is inherently focused on preliminary inquiry rather than immediate solutions or decisions.⁵ Getting citizens together to talk about an urgent question or a pressing choice can be hard enough; getting them together to talk over a broader set of issues and alternative possibilities tends to be much more difficult. Similarly, while the intrinsic social and civic value of such discussions is usually clear from the start, the way in which exploratory discussion can illuminate citizens' future choices tends to be anything but. So exploratory discussion—unlike, say, a town hall meeting to decide whether to allow a zoning permit for a new defense plant—tends to face motivational obstacles going in and a no small degree of practical skepticism coming out.

This is not speculation on our part. Between the two of us, we have conducted some three dozen exploratory public discussion series, each lasting from four to 12 hours. All told, our organization, the Interactivity Foundation (IF) has conducted more than 200 of them. Although we are pleased with our success so far, our own documentation, both quantitative and qualitative, leaves little doubt that the two most significant and frequent barriers to improving our performance are: (1) more effectively motivating citizens to participate; and (2) making it possible for citizens to more easily connect the discussions to future

⁵ These problems affect other forms of discourse, such as deliberation aimed at problem solving. "Immediacy" can help solve these, too. See Elena Fagatto and Archon Fung, "Sustaining Public Engagement: Embedded Deliberation in Local Communities," (report published by Everyday Democracy, East Hartford, Connecticut, 2009). <http://www.everyday-democracy.org/en/Resource.136.aspx>. Our point here is simply that this link is harder to establish for exploratory discussion.

choices.⁶ These are not just occasional or even routine issues for us; they have affected perhaps 90 percent or more of our exploratory public discussions. The data is thus in on the barriers we have faced, but we have also seen some indicators that just-in-time discussion can overcome them. In the next section we describe how.

JUST-IN-TIME EXPLORATORY PUBLIC DISCUSSION ILLUSTRATED

In this section, we describe a real-world case to illustrate what we mean by just-in-time exploratory discussion. We pinpoint what we believe is the key temporal feature leading to the success of the climate-change discussions and then go on to describe that success in terms of motivation and follow-through.

Despite involving fewer than 30 persons, the various climate discussion series we are reporting on here were attended by a very diverse set of persons. This was true in a demographic sense. (Even in the small group of college students that attended the Massachusetts discussion there was notable socio-economic, geographic, gender, religious, and intellectual diversity). And it was certainly true in terms of attitudes or perspectives, as well. Participants expressed dozens of different concerns about climate. A few said they were not worried about it at all. There were also numerous and diverging views of what might be causing climate change and what to do about it. Some of these were unconventional, a few quixotic, one or two wholly unexpected. In all cases these differences went beyond those in the prepared discussion materials.

At the same time, it is important to note that IF discussions do not attempt to ensure exploration by reproducing the diverse or representative attitudes that citizens bring to a discussion—though that can certainly help. Instead, IF's materials (featuring contrasting alternatives), discussion process, and facilitators work together to encourage participants to explore alternatives—a task which, for the most part, we have found that they readily embrace.

Like the other exploratory discussions we have conducted and seen our colleagues conduct, the climate discussions focused on exploring a broad area of concern—in this case global climate change—and the various policy possibilities that might address it. They utilized discussion materials that were themselves the product of exploratory discussion among three groups of demographically and attitudinally varied citizens. The first of these groups was made up mostly of climate and environmental activists, the second of engineers and technicians skeptical about climate change, and the third of persons without a special connection to climate policy or clear policy leanings. However, all three groups were charged with producing discussion materials that explicitly set forth a range

⁶ This evidence comes in the form of more than 700 survey responses and 200 written reports, all of which we expect the Interactivity Foundation to publish in some form in due course.

of climate concerns and a range of contrasting policy responses to them. In the end, the climate discussion report they produced contained a list of 18 concerns—phrased as questions—and six conceptual policy possibilities that are contrasting in their empirical analysis of the area of concern, its ethical significance, and how best to orient policy in response. They range from “Build the Ark” to “Be Prepared to Adapt.”

The climate discussion sessions themselves followed the same process that IF has used in more than 200 other exploratory discussions. First, participants agreed to discussion guidelines, which prioritize collaboration and creativity over advocacy and “getting the right answer.” After this critical step, participants were invited to share their own concerns and/or questions about climate change and then explore the concerns/questions in the first section of the discussion materials. Two frequently used prompts rounded out this portion of the discussion and set the stage for the next, namely: “What is *missing* from the current climate discussion?” and “What are the various *actors* or *groups* or *institutions* that might bring about change in how we impact climate?”

The IF discussion process then calls upon participants to explore the contrasting conceptual policy possibilities presented in the discussion materials. Facilitators encourage participants to consider each possibility thoughtfully, even if they might at first glance disagree with it. Sometimes participants are called to role play; other times it can be helpful to have someone who opposes a particular possibility come up with reasons it might be attractive to another person or group. Importantly, the discussion of possibilities always includes careful consideration of the consequences of each. On the whole, facilitators find that encouraging genuinely exploratory discussion is a relatively straightforward matter once participants understand the purpose of the discussions and begin to appreciate the contrasts in IF’s discussion materials—all the more so if they are willing to improvise and actively help participants develop ideas that are not represented in the prepared materials.

What set this discussion apart from our 200 similar discussions is that the climate change talk was specifically timed to coincide with important public events bearing on the general policy area—in this case the international climate summits in Cancún (2010) and Durban (2011).⁷ The actual public discussions occurred in early 2011, with Cancún still clear in the rearview mirror and Durban just around the bend. Discussion of global warming was perhaps not on everyone’s mind, but most citizens were mindful that it was the subject of important international negotiations.

⁷ For a concise overview of the history and politics of international climate control, see Paul J. Saunders and Vaughan Turekian, “A Climate Policy for the Real World,” *Policy Review* (February & March 2011): 15–28.

The conduct of the three public discussion series that were held in the months between Cancún and Durban (one each in Illinois, Wisconsin, and Massachusetts) broke the mold for us in one very obvious and important way: They required almost no “marketing” efforts. That these discussions required little organizational effort stands in strong contrast to our typical discussions, for which recruiting often takes more time than is spent during the actual discussions. In every case, the discussions were nearly “self-organizing.” Participants did not seek out discussions, but signed on with little or no knowledge of the sponsoring organization that was going to facilitate the discussion or the nature of the process to be used. In addition, we know of at least two instances (one in Alaska and one in Minnesota) in which independent discussions took place based on the materials we used in our meetings. Finally, those materials were widely shared, with 1,000-plus copies downloaded from the web. We conclude that the timeliness of the topic was more of a draw than its felt immediacy—a direct product of the recent events in Cancún and those about to unfold in Durban.⁸

In terms of results, the degree to which participants appreciated the practical value of the discussions—their ability to inform future choices—was also markedly different in these discussions when compared with the general run of discussions with which we have been involved. Our participants generally find our exploratory discussions challenging, stimulating, and socially valuable. But connecting the exploratory nature of the discussions with the realm of future choices—actions they might take or avoid—is often a challenge, even with the help of an able facilitator. None of these instances, however, was marked by the sense that something had been left hanging or that a loop had remained unclosed.

ANALYSIS: HOW JUST-IN-TIME DISCUSSION MOTIVATES PARTICIPANTS AND HELPS THEM APPLY WHAT THEY DISCUSS

Just-in-time discussion makes the link between exploration and both present concern and future choice. It accomplishes this by highlighting the value of exploring possible approaches to policy by relating “the possible” to “the real”—or a couple versions of it.

In a very direct and palpable way, the just-in-time approach helps address, if it does not entirely “solve,” the practical problems of motivation and participant follow-through. Through the simple but powerful means of providing a “case study” of more general possibilities to be explored, just-in-time discussion makes

⁸ The upcoming 2012 Rio Earth Summit has underscored the immediacy of our work in this arena. The draft materials that were the focus of the discussions described here are now under formal development, while invitations to put them to active use have come from Mazatlan, Mexico, and Rio itself.

it easier to see what might be at stake—both now and in the future. Seeing what is at stake now helps get people to the discussion. Seeing what is at stake in the future helps them apply what they have learned in the discussion.

With a real-time, real-world policy event happening or about to happen, discussion participants can readily appreciate the relevance of exploring various policy possibilities beyond, or in addition to, those being discussed in the media, on the Internet, or elsewhere. Participants are also able to appreciate the larger significance of their explorations: what their collective work is doing for them, where it is taking them—not just conceptually or abstractly or in general, but in terms of actual decisions they might make as citizens. The real-world event helps get them there; it also helps form a conceptual point of departure for acting on the other possibilities revealed in the discussion. Real-world events make it easier to envision how participants might act on the other possibilities, such as signing a petition, or taking a candidate's position into account, or perhaps by taking more direct action. To illustrate, a discussion of "Possibilities for Climate Policy" is first stimulated by what might be going on in Copenhagen. Then, as events in Copenhagen are contextualized by the alternatives discussed by participants, those events suggest ways to reconnect the generalities and abstractions of possible avenues for policy development back to world of citizen choice. Real-world events serve as both a point of departure for theoretical or abstract discussion, as well as the place where the results of the discussion are applied.⁹

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

It would be claiming far too much to say that timing was a key design feature of our initial public discussions on climate. But we did recognize a good thing when we saw it—good enough, in fact, that we now find ourselves recommending that others try the approach. (In the future, we would also recommend that practitioners pay closer attention to getting participant feedback on what they hope to get out of the discussion and what they in fact do.) As for the approach itself, we would suggest that other discursive practitioners look for ways to connect their work to real-world events, especially an unfolding political *process*—even if they are working in the exploratory realm. And because real-world events are infinite in their variety and multidimensionality, it is only a slight exaggeration to say that there will always be an event or process that can be framed in such a way as to be useful in the ways described here.

⁹ To the extent that citizens follow through and apply the results of their discussions, the entire process can be seen as a version of Aristotelian practical wisdom. See Martha Craven Nussbaum, "Saving Aristotle's Appearances," in *Language and Logos*, ed. Malcolm Schofield (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

Another significant practical implication of our experience is that it provides an alternative to the “go slow” model of exploratory discussion. Many concerns and topics simply do not allow time for preparatory discussions or serious background work. When citizens need to make decisions promptly, just-in-time discussion may prove not only valuable but also the only practicable approach to exploration.

More broadly still, we would suggest that discursive practitioners remain flexible as they approach both their own work and that of others. The successful use of just-in-time exploratory discussion suggests that practitioners ought to be ready to experiment and to think outside conventional categories. One way to do this is to borrow a “defining” characteristic from a different model or form of discourse (as we did by linking the discussions to an actual decision, usually thought of as fundamental to decisional deliberation). Another is partnering to combine different forms of discourse, dialogue, and deliberation. We suspect that there are many other such “deviations” that might prove useful.¹⁰

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

The usefulness of borrowings leads to the notion of hybrids among discursive forms. One lesson that we draw from our experience with just-in-time exploratory discussion is that many of the categories that were developed during deliberative theory’s infancy may be in need of fine-tuning and reorganizing. Discursive practitioners are an extremely varied lot and getting more heterogeneous all the time. It might be useful to have an updated taxonomy both to help keep track of the variety and to suggest what niches remain to be filled.

If someone does take up that task, we would hope he or she would keep John Dewey, an iconic figure in the deliberative tradition, in mind. Dewey was once reputed to have remarked, “All dichotomies are false—including this one.” It might be possible to incorporate that notion into a discursive “field guide” if such a reference work were to make it easy to cross-reference *multiple* and *differing* sets of characteristics (purpose, organizer, group size and type, process, etc.).¹¹ If it did, comparisons of discursive types could be made using the

¹⁰ This is perhaps not a wholly new insight or argument. See, for example, Adolf Gundersen, “Contrasting Possibilities and the Interactivity Foundation Discussion Process,” (paper published by Interactivity Foundation, Parkersburg, West Virginia, 2004, accessed November 2009) <http://www.interactivityfoundation.org>, or the same author’s work *The Socratic Citizen* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2000), 94–96. But we do consider it significant, especially in a world in which deliberative approaches compete for attention and allegiance.

¹¹ To the best of our knowledge, the originator of this idea is ecologist David Archbald, who authored or co-authored three such field guides in the late-1960s, all of which allowed the user to sort species or types by different combinations of characteristics. See, for example, his *Quick-Key Guide to Trees: Trees of Northeastern and Central North America* (New York: Doubleday, 1967).

dimensions that mattered most to practitioners and/or citizen participants.

A more general theoretical implication of our admittedly limited experience with just-in-time exploratory discussion is the need to be open to creativity and invention happening at the grassroots levels. We did not invent this category of discussion; we merely found it and labeled it. We are not suggesting that theory cannot make an independent contribution to democratic practice. But our experience has reinforced our conviction that we should be on the lookout for contributions that democratic practice can make to democratic theory.

CONCLUSION

We hope that this report on just-in-time exploratory discussion has convinced at least a few practitioners to experiment further with an approach that has already proved itself on several occasions and appears very likely to do so again in the future. Our practical advice is simply to look for events that can help get the conversation going and help participants make sense of it once it is done.

We also hope our report will help spur theorists to continue refining our understanding of the varieties of discourse that are possible and how they might be combined either in a single event or serially.

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