

Building Capacity for Dialogue Facilitation in Public Engagement Around Research

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This paper shares our experiences and reflections on a training programme which seeks to build capacity, across the public research sector in Scotland, for developing and facilitating dialogic approaches to public engagement. We came to an interest in dialogue and deliberation by different routes, but got the opportunity to collaborate on this thanks to institutional funding for culture change around public engagement in the sector. The analytical framework from which we developed the training focuses especially on the micro-politics of communication patterns in deliberative and dialogic engagement processes. The training programme thus sought both to raise awareness of the principles and practices of dialogue, and to build skills in the demanding craft of facilitation. Our training approach has two key features: it integrates theory and practice; and it endeavours to make the general themes of dialogue and deliberation relevant to the specific context of public engagement activities in universities and research institutes. Feedback from participants over four years indicates that this approach is working: awareness and skills are growing in quite concrete ways. In addition, there are encouraging signs of shifts and reflection over the 'expert culture' in this community of practice.

Key words: dialogue training, public engagement with research, micro-dynamics of communication, dialogue practice, facilitation skills

Where the Course, and We, Came From¹

Our training course arose in the context of efforts to make public engagement a central mission in the UK public research system, and a growing sense that 'dialogue' has to be part of this. The emphasis on public engagement has come from concerns to strengthen public accountability around government-funded research, to maximise its relevance and uptake. In the case of scientific research,

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there have also been concerns about low levels of scientific literacy, often linked to a loss of public trust in scientists (Bates et al. 2010). The earlier (from the 1980s) emphasis on fostering public understanding of science was strongly criticised by social scientists for its ‘deficit model’ of *one-way* communication (Bauer et al. 2007; Wynne 2006; Burchell et al. 2009; Irwin 2006; Stilgoe and Wilsdon 2009). The public engagement agenda took a more constructive path, by encouraging researchers to engage publics in *two-way* communication – hence the interest in dialogue in science. But ‘dialogue’ also has relevance in other policy-related fields where the language of knowledge exchange and stakeholder engagement is more commonplace.

Public engagement has become inscribed in UK policy, research narratives and funding streams since the mid-1990s (Pieczka and Escobar 2013), materialised through the proliferation of ‘hybrid forums’ (Callon et al. 2009; Escobar 2013). In 2008, six ‘Beacons for Public Engagement’ were established by the major UK funders of higher education and research.² *Their* shared aim was to change the culture within the sector so that researchers take more seriously the task of engaging with wider publics³ about their work. The Edinburgh Beltane Beacon for Public Engagement (Edinburgh Beltane) was formed by a partnership between five Scottish academic institutions and nine non-university partners.⁴ It was built on an ethos of collaboration and engagement. Being close to the Scottish Parliament, a major theme was to encourage citizen and stakeholder engagement in, and understanding of, research areas relevant to public policy. In addition, Edinburgh Beltane saw dialogue as a key part of the culture change it sought to achieve, and thus pioneered training in the university sector around the concept and practice of dialogue in the context of research and public engagement.

The story of this training programme is also a story about the confluence of three academics, with very different journeys to an interest in fostering dialogic ways of practising public engagement, who were brought together through Edinburgh Beltane. Since this is a practitioner paper, we share these journeys here.

2 The Research Councils (RCUK), the Wellcome Trust and the Higher Education Institutions Funding Councils for England, Scotland and Wales (HEFCE, SHEFC and HEFCW).

3 We adopt the plural ‘publics’ in recognition that ‘the public’ is hugely diverse; and we include within ‘publics’ groups with an interest or stake in particular research.

4 Including, for instance, University of Edinburgh, Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh Napier University, Queen Margaret University, University of the Highlands and Islands, National Museums Scotland, Royal Society of Edinburgh and Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh.

Heather Rea trained in mechanical engineering and worked in manufacturing, where she researched knowledge management in engineering design systems. She was drawn to public engagement through opportunities to work with the Edinburgh International Science Festival and local schools, to inspire children to appreciate the impact engineering has in their lives and to consider it as a potential career option. When she became deputy director in the Edinburgh Beltane Partnership, 'dialogue' was seen as the new direction for public engagement, but few were familiar with its principles and processes. So she set out to learn.

Wendy Faulkner trained in biology in the 1970s. She was active in the radical science movement of the time, which envisioned a democratic 'science for the people'. Consequently, her academic career took her into social studies of science, technology and innovation. Her interest in dialogue originated in a collaborative project which sought to conduct and research public engagement around the controversial field of stem cell research.⁵ This brought together diverse stakeholder groups and wider publics to learn about, and reflect on, some very complex and sensitive issues. In the course of this work, the team gravitated to a common sense understanding of dialogue, seeking to nurture mutual listening and understanding, but they were unfamiliar with the large body of literature and practice on the topic. Faulkner remedied this after leaving academia, and now works freelance designing, facilitating and delivering training on dialogic conversations.

Oliver Escobar trained as a political scientist in Galicia and participated in the Spanish universities' assembly movement of the early 2000s (Escobar 2011, 7). Shaped by the divides underpinning Spain's Civil War, dictatorship and democratic transition, he was fascinated by the transformative potential of dialogue and deliberation. Early research on policy-making heightened an interest in the challenge of turning participatory ideals into practices. He then moved into communication and interpretive policy analysis, in which policy worlds are understood as being made up of conversations, agents and networks entangled in ongoing meaning-making processes. In Scotland, he worked at Queen Margaret University's Centre for Dialogue and Edinburgh University's Public Policy Network. His recently finished doctorate is an ethnographic study of participation practitioners in local governance.

In 2009, Edinburgh Beltane funded Escobar to run a course on 'Dialogue and Public Engagement' bringing together researchers and practitioners from academia

5 This project was conducted between 2004 and 2007, and funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council. Dr Sarah Parry, Professor Sarah Cunningham-Burley, Professor Austin Smith, Dr Fiona Harris, Ana Coutinho, Dr Stephen Bates and Dr Nicola Marks all contributed. (See Parry et al. 2012)

and other sectors (including Rea and Faulkner). In five half-days over 5 months, he shared his understanding of the literature, drawing on examples of how dialogue and deliberation are being used worldwide to build trust, deal with conflict, make policy or generate innovative solutions to a wide range of issues. The participants brought to the course their diverse experiences, nurturing a practice-oriented thinking space. Rea felt researchers would appreciate this approach and how the course evidenced the value of dialogic and deliberative approaches. However, the course was strongly theoretical; researchers would need more tools and techniques to translate the theory into practice. For this, we all attended the International Association for Public Participation (www.iap2.org) course run by Vikki Hilton; Faulkner also benefited from that on Stakeholder Dialogue run by Diana Pound of Dialogue Matters (www.dialoguematters.co.uk).

From these converging journeys, we came to collaborate in developing a training approach which we felt would work for academic researchers doing public engagement. We were well aware of the tendency of academics to ‘talk at’ people. And we recognised that for many, especially scientists, the main (if not only) point of public engagement is to *inform* people about their work – often because they feel misunderstood, and often with scant awareness that they might learn something valuable from other groups. We also brought a critical awareness of power imbalances in lay-expert encounters. For these reasons, we knew we had to work hard to convey the deeper message about dialogue and to develop practical skills for nurturing mutual listening and understanding. The outcome was a two day training programme, piloted in June 2010, which combined Escobar’s framework, written up as a booklet (Escobar 2011), with our practical training from the world of public participation, written up as a handbook by Faulkner (2011). Before describing the course and its impact, we outline the thinking that informed it.

Our Framework for Dialogic Public Engagement

Participatory and Deliberative Democracy

The last three decades have ushered a global revival of participatory ideals developed since the 1960s (Pateman 1970; Barber 2003), now revamped through the ideals and practices of deliberative democracy that have flourished since the 1990s (Dryzek 2010; Elstub 2010). Participatory democracy is an umbrella term with a long tradition that foregrounds civic participation, active citizenship, power inequalities and social struggles. Deliberative democracy as a framework shares similar concerns, but emphasises the discursive dimension of the public sphere, that is, the way certain types of communication and interaction shape institutions, civic spaces and, more broadly, social worlds.

These overlapping concerns are reflected in myriad practices of citizen participation

at community level, and of collaborative governance at institutional level (e.g. Barnes et al. 2007; Leighninger 2006; Briggs 2008). These practices are posited as an antidote to a range of malaises – not least, the elitist and technocratic nature of many policy-making processes, which exclude alternative voices and ways of knowing (e.g. local, experiential, emotional); and the loss of public legitimacy of electoral democracies based on party politics, shallow mediated debate and hollow consultation exercises. As noted earlier, the case for greater public engagement around public sector research was in part a response to concerns about accountability and trust. But it is also a response to the critique of ‘expert fixes’ in decision making (Fischer 2003; 2009), and a recognition that heterogeneous mixes of expertise and insights are needed to grapple with the world’s pressing challenges (Williams et al. 1998).⁶

Whilst opportunities for public participation have increased, often required by law (Escobar 2014), the quantity of those opportunities has not been matched by an equal emphasis on their quality. Paradoxically, as public institutions seek increasingly to involve or at least consult citizens, many have grown weary of such processes. Three broad critiques can be identified. First, participatory processes can be tokenistic, manipulative or narrowly framed (e.g. Cooke and Kothari 2001). Citizens are invited to ‘have their say’ on topics where decisions have often already been made and public bodies only seek nominal approval, rubber-stamping, by selected publics (Cornwall and Coelho 2007; Cornwall 2008). In such cases, engagement processes have little or no impact on decision making. Second, they are not very inclusive. This critique highlights how publics are constructed, summoned and performed (Barnes et al. 2003; Barnett 2008; Newman and Clarke 2009; Mahony et al. 2010) – or the craft of public-making by which official public engagers decide who is organised in and out of participating (Escobar 2014, Chapter 5). Third, there is serious scepticism about the quality of many public engagement processes. For instance, poor quality of planning and facilitation can result in negative experiences for participants, which in turn can hinder future engagement (Escobar 2011; Mutz 2006; Forester 2009; Spano 2001).

Our work as public engagers and trainers addresses these three interrelated dimensions, but focuses especially on the micro-politics of face-to-face interaction. It is sometimes assumed that once you manage to gather a range of participants (e.g. citizens, officials, stakeholders, researchers), meaningful conversations will simply happen. As those involved in organising public forums know all too well, this is not always the case (e.g. Kadlec and Friedman 2007, 12-13). Such encounters can

6 For this reason, Fischer (2003; 2009) proposed ‘the transformation of the detached expert-adviser into a facilitator of public deliberation’ (Wagenaar 2011, 305), raising challenges we return to later.

go awry due to bad facilitation, confrontational dynamics, rehearsed monologues, shallow exchanges, and the invisible barriers erected by specialised jargon and expertise (Escobar 2011, 12-13; 2013). The paradox is striking: the very animal that became human through the power of speech and interaction often struggles to find ways of talking across a growing number of contemporary divides.

This is one reason for the growing interest in deliberative democracy. It is no longer enough – or worse, it can be counterproductive – to open up spaces for collective inquiry or problem solving whilst overlooking the communication dynamics that unfold within such spaces. This realisation begs a shift in emphasis from the earlier demands for a more pluralistic distribution of ‘places at the table’, to a demand for more meaningful patterns of interaction once a range of voices are ‘around the table’. It obliges us to pay attention to the interpersonal dynamics of participatory encounters, so that what happens at the micro level does not replicate the very inequalities that characterise policy and decision making at the macro level (see Young 2000, chapter 2). The point is to avoid the inequalities of power that prevented diverse voices from *having a place at the table* getting surreptitiously transformed into equally exclusionary practices now enacted through micro-political *dynamics around the table*. It is precisely this focus on the quality of interpersonal communication which has brought dialogue and deliberation to the centre of participatory practices.

The Dialogic Turn in Deliberation

In common usage, ‘dialogue’ often refers to both dialogic and deliberative approaches (Escobar 2010). By contrast, the framework for our training draws an analytical distinction between dialogue and deliberation and, at the same time, makes the case for combining them within public engagement practice, to ensure that any deliberation is built on foundations of dialogic communication.⁷ Perhaps because studies of dialogue and deliberation have evolved in parallel in different disciplines – deliberation within political science and dialogue within communication studies – the potential for cross-fertilization remains under-explored (but see Forester 2009). Our framework structures dialogue and deliberation into an episodic process with spaces for a range of ‘communication patterns’ (Pearce 2007). It is a heuristic tool for thinking about communication-related choices we make when we design and facilitate public engagement processes.

Put simply, dialogue seeks to increase understanding and relationships whereas deliberation seeks to reach some sort of conclusion or decision (Escobar 2009; 2011). The word ‘decision’ comes from the Latin *decidere*, which literally means ‘to

7 For the fuller account of this ‘D+D framework’, see Escobar (2009; 2011).

murder the alternative' (Isaacs 1999, 45). When participants engage in deliberation, their goal is to weight alternatives and make choices. Dialogue, on the other hand, is oriented towards discovery rather than decision-making (Yankelovich 1999). Not being pressed to 'murder the alternative' is what makes it possible to explore multiple choices and perspectives without making judgements about them, through reciprocal exploration, active listening, honesty and disclosure. Accordingly, the flow of communication differs substantially. Dialogue stimulates a *divergent flow of communication* where the conversation can take many directions and conclude with a polyphonic representation of diverse voices, issues and perspectives. In contrast, deliberation stimulates a *convergent flow of communication* where the conversation is oriented towards some kind of resolution on the basis of public reasoning. This give and take of reasons in order to persuade others is what makes it possible to critically challenge assumptions and views, and thus make informed collective decisions (Gutmann and Thompson 2004).

Unfortunately, dialogic patterns of communication can be elusive in deliberative processes. When debate and advocacy dynamics become the dominant forms of interaction, the co-inquiry dynamics which characterise dialogue get blocked. The aspiration that participants may change preferences through learning and reasoned deliberation, which is central to deliberative practice (Fishkin and Laslett 2003), can be lost if space is given to advocacy at the expense of inquiry and participants focus chiefly on persuading each other. Advocacy seeks resolution whereas inquiry seeks exploration, but arguably both are necessary in deliberation. If inquiry and advocacy dynamics are not balanced, learning is prevented, polarisation increases, oversimplification kicks in, shallow exchanges proliferate, and the whole engagement process can become meaningless or, worse, divisive and counterproductive (Escobar 2011).

Different flows (convergent/divergent) and patterns (advocacy/inquiry) of communication create different engagement dynamics. They can all play a role in fostering meaningful communication in public forums, when combined in ways that are fit for purpose. Our 'D+D' framework – which one could call dialogic deliberation – is premised on the basic notion that dialogue can open up space for more meaningful deliberation. The idea is to infuse deliberative processes with spaces for a range of communication patterns. Dialogic communication patterns can be especially helpful early on, for instance, in a preparatory phase where participants share personal stories and map the landscape of perspectives and feelings, or go through a process of envisioning a better future. The goal here is to allow participants to learn about diverse understandings and experiences of the issue in a setting where automatic (pre)judgement is suspended. Fischer (2009, 290), similarly suggests an 'expressive stage' in which participants can convey their

feelings and explore their social identities in a safe space. Reference to expressiveness highlights another distinction of relevance here: namely that dialogue seeks to foreground personal stories, beliefs and the like, whereas deliberation seeks to foreground public reasoning.

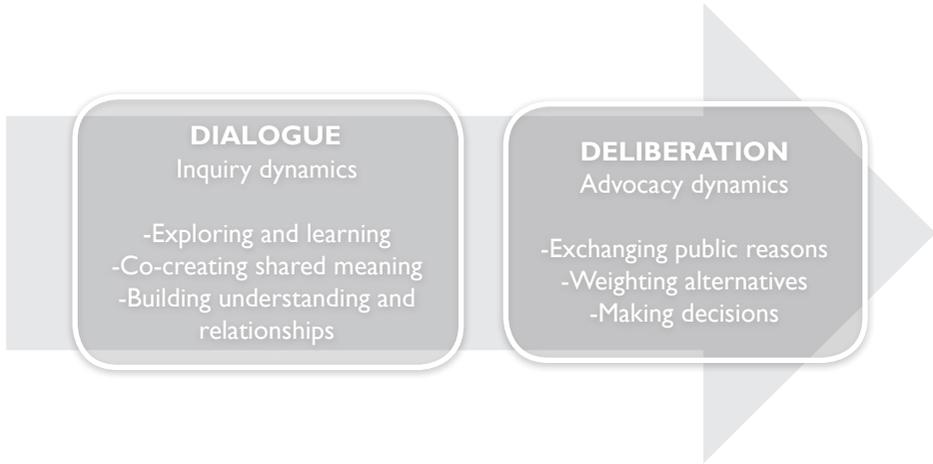


Figure 1. The D+D process

Figure 1 portrays the kind of staged process we have in mind, which also takes into account previous scholarly reflection on the ‘sequencing’ of deliberative processes (see Goodin 2005; Curato 2012; Curato et al. 2013). In this D+D framework, dialogue constitutes more than a programmatic complement to deliberation. If deliberation is the art of scrutinising alternatives in order to make decisions, prior dialogue enhances that process through the open exploration of languages, worldviews, visions, values and experiences that underpin the alternatives. As dialogue formats strive to enable safe spaces for dissent and difference, they can foster the creation of shared meaning on the basis of disparate forms of knowing and experiencing. Crucially, the mutual trust, understanding and respect built through a prior dialogue stage can provide a basis for the difficult task of deliberatively weighing alternatives and, thus, potentially achieve a ‘better’ outcome. It is likely to generate deeper understandings of different perspectives, needs and interests, and a broader range of perspectives. Participants buy in to the process because they’ve heard and been heard, which in turn can also stimulate unexpected collective creativity (Isaacs 2001).

Finally, our D+D framework takes seriously the often overlooked role of emotions in citizen participation (see Fischer 2009; Morrell 2010). There is evidence that citizens seem keener to engage in initiatives that involve like-minded individuals than with people who think differently and challenge their views. The prospect

of confrontational encounters can deter some from wanting to participate (Mutz 2006). This represents a significant barrier to the aim of fostering inclusive spaces where citizens learn from their differences and work through conflicts. It also diminishes opportunities to value pluralism and diversity, to meet those ‘others’ that are easy to dismiss or despise when they remain faceless stereotypes. If one of the factors that keep citizens from engaging is the perception that the process may be threatening, then caring about communication patterns becomes fundamental for public engagement practitioners. Mutz’s research is based on deliberative processes where debate and polarised argument prevail. It therefore underlines the need for practitioners to craft safe spaces for dialogue, where participants can welcome dissent and difference as part of a learning experience. This brings us to the challenges of facilitation.

Facilitation

To recap, our core concern in developing this training was to improve the quality of what happens at the micro level of public engagement processes, by caring about the appropriate choices of communication dynamics and patterns, and about keeping encounters safe and respectful for participants especially when perspectives and views differ greatly. We see the ability to nurture real dialogue as a crucial skill for engagement practice, including deliberative processes. Of course, the non-judgemental exploring and meeting of minds does not generally happen automatically. Concerted effort and example are required if participants are to put aside, even briefly, the cultural norms of adversarial debate and advocacy-based decision making.

Typically, dialogic processes use facilitators and collectively agreed ground rules or guidelines to do this. Care is also needed in the design of appropriate processes: how to frame the encounter and encourage mindsets that will enable a meeting of minds rather than a contest of opposites, that will help participants to:

- talk across social and disciplinary divides;
- involve a variety of ‘knowledges’ and ‘ways of knowing’;
- listen to and engage with voices that challenge us;
- create shared languages beyond our multiple specialist jargons;
- understand different values and worldviews;
- find common ground that is sensitive to difference;
- learn to explore and deal with conflict without confrontation;
- channel the energy that stems from conflict into creative solutions;
- harness our collective capacity for joint puzzling and problem solving.

Answering these challenges is the exciting task that practitioners and scholars of public dialogue and deliberation around the world are taking up.

The role of dialogue facilitators is to keep the group collaboration (whatever it may be) on task and inclusive. The latter requires modelling and encouraging an ethic of non-judgemental respect, building a safe and trusting space in which every voice is heard and every contribution valued. This typically demands that facilitators of dialogue do not contribute substantively to the discussion; they must be impartial about the topic, but they are not neutral about the process. Ideally, groups develop productive patterns of communication on their own, and indeed the ultimate goal of a facilitator is to help this happen and so to disappear. But when this is not possible, facilitators can help to detect and alter unwanted dynamics.

Facilitation is political work: you are creating an artificial situation, orchestrating materials and artefacts, and seeking to enable dynamics that would not happen otherwise (Escobar 2014, 130-176). In the case of very ambitious processes, you may be trying to reorganise a social world. Facilitation, therefore, requires reflective practice (Schon 1983; Forester 1999). You must be aware of the powerful position that you momentarily occupy. This may sound obvious, but we have seen processes ruined by reckless facilitators who either became dominant speakers, or unashamedly silenced or disrespected some participants' views (e.g. Escobar 2011, 56). At every step when you design and facilitate a public engagement process you are making political choices: from the location and timing to who is organised in and out, to what knowledges are included or what patterns of communication are fostered.

We find it useful to think of participatory processes as 'theatres of collaboration' (Williams 2012), where the facilitator's job comprises both backstage and frontstage work (Escobar 2014). In the backstage, facilitators design processes, negotiate agendas, align purposes, recruit participants and orchestrate the material choreographies that will structure interaction. In the frontstage, once the 'performance' starts, facilitators seek to materialise the 'script' created backstage (Escobar 2014, chapter 6), and to shape the micro-politics of the encounter by trying to distribute opportunities for intervention, keep the flow of communication going, observe communication patterns, and enable participants to change them when unproductive dynamics block the flow. Once the frontstage phase is over, there is more backstage work, engaging in the 'politics of filtering and distilling' inscriptions from the process (Escobar 2011, 55) or trying to make the results count – what Kadlec and Friedman (2007, 19) call the engagement practitioner's 'activist phase'.

In our framing, the underlying goal of a facilitator is to help participants move

the conversation along by avoiding obstructions in the flow of communication, and by serving simultaneously the needs of each participant and the group. Both the flow of communication and the needs of participants vary from dialogue to deliberation. In moments of dialogue, we seek understanding of meanings, sentiments and perspectives. Accordingly, we need 'skilfully attentive and probing facilitators to help us clarify meaning rather than have hot-button words lead us astray' (Forester 2009, 184) In contrast, to foster deliberation 'we encourage parties to sharpen their arguments, and we need skilful work not so much of facilitating but of moderating an adversarial series of claims and refutations, counterclaims and counterrefutations.' (Forester 2009, 184) Note that even when choices have to be made, the imperative to keep the space safe and exchanges respectful remains.

Surprisingly little detailed attention is paid to the role of facilitators in the literature on participatory and deliberative democracy (but see Forester 1999; 2009; Cooper and Smith 2012; Escobar 2013; 2014; Moore 2012). True, facilitators have a vast range of tools and techniques at their disposal (see Faulkner 2011; Escobar 2011, 46-57), but these are rarely analysed in terms of underlying communication patterns and dynamics, and how to use these tools and techniques in ways that will maximise dialogue. Moreover, whilst the principles of facilitating D + D can be read up, the practice of facilitating remains a craft that can only be refined and developed through reflective learning by doing. There is still much to be done to build capacity around what is arguably the most important skill never included in official education programmes.

The Training Programme

Our overarching aim in developing this training programme was to improve the quality – in the current institutional framing, the impact – of researcher's public engagement efforts by building capacity in two areas: *raising awareness* of the potential for dialogue to enhance those efforts, and *building skills* in the challenging tasks of facilitating dialogic public engagement. Our strategy for doing this was to mobilise our expertise about the micro-dynamics of communication in engagement encounters and make this relevant to university and institute researchers seeking to engage stakeholders and wider publics around their work. So the programme integrates what we understand of the principles of dialogic practice with what we know of the particularities of the public research sector and of researchers as a community of practice. Substantively, our focus was on agents and dynamics rather than structures (Forester 1999; 2009; Williams 2012). And we took inspiration from Dewey's pragmatism and ideas such as the 'community of inquiry' (Shields 2003; Kadlec 2007; Escobar 2013), drawing on and adapting learning from a range of disciplines to articulate possibilities that might be useful in our context.

An important consideration here is that there was (and still is in some circles) a job to be done in increasing researchers' basic capability in public engagement. For instance, thinking about who your publics are and learning to 'think from the other' – in terms of why these publics might want to engage with your research and what communication approaches might work for them – as a vital first step in designing a process. Starting from where our trainees were meant that our training needed to build awareness and skills in dialogue *as part of* a structured programme to build up capability in the kinds of public engagement activities that are pertinent for public sector researchers.

Public engagement in this sector takes many forms. There have been some highly publicised experiments with deliberative mini-publics on issues related to science and technology (e.g. Pidgeon and Rogers-Hayden 2007; Blok 2007; Dryzek and Tucker 2008), and some large public consultations such as the UK *GM Nation?* debate (e.g. Horlick-Jones et al. 2006). But such activities are the exception to the norm (Pieczka and Escobar 2013; Burchell et al. 2009). Depending on the discipline and particular research, the vast bulk of researchers' public engagement seeks to:

1. *inform and inspire* wider publics about the research (classic science communication);
2. *converse* about ethical or other issues arising from the research;
3. *involve* particular groups in research (as subjects, user groups or stakeholders);
4. *collaborate* to 'co-produce' the research, technologies or policies.

As yet, there are few deliberative engagement processes in the mainstream activities of the sector. Accordingly, the focus of our training is on dialogue and on how it might enhance the range of public engagement activities – including, but not only, deliberation. We maintain that all of these engagement activities are more likely to meet their objectives, and meet them more deeply, where dialogic steps are part of the process. We nonetheless address deliberation in the programme, and in doing so we make our larger political commitments clear to participants: we favour participatory politics and deliberative policy making over elitist politics and technocratic policy making.

With respect to the community of practice, we are mindful that widening and deepening public engagement in and around research can challenge those with specialist knowledge. The cognitive authority that comes with expert status (Irwin 2006; Wynne 2006), the presumption that technical knowledge should trump other kinds of knowledge, and the professional habit of talking *at* people can all be

barriers to dialogue. The training therefore foregrounds ‘multiple realities’ in the heterogeneous mix of different publics and types of expertise; and it encourages participants to reflect on their own entrenched behaviours and mindsets and how these might be experienced by others.

The programme is entitled ‘Dialogue in Public Engagement’. Its stated aims are:

- To introduce the principles of dialogue and explore how dialogic approaches might enhance different public engagement agendas and activities;
- To provide practical experience in some techniques used to nurture dialogue, and in thinking about what techniques to choose for which purposes and groups;
- To build skills in facilitating dialogue and in designing dialogic public engagement activities;
- To encourage participants to reflect constructively on their own public engagement practices, and be responsive to their experiences and concerns on this topic.

A key feature of our training approach is that it combines theory and practice. The programme is delivered by deploying most of the skills, tools and techniques we talk about, as an integral part of the orientation provided, starting with a sliding scale and metaplan to benchmark the course. Participants therefore gain hands-on practical experience throughout. We often work on ‘exemplars’ (Flyvbjerg, 2001) to illustrate and consolidate this learning, drawing extensively not only on our experiences but also on the wealth of the course participants’ own knowledge and stories. Thus, short talks and practical exercises are interwoven with less structured periods for reflection. Participants receive the booklets developed by Faulkner (2011) and Escobar (2011), providing a resource to refer to later for practical advice and deeper learning on all aspects of the course.

The course structure was designed to be progressive. It is delivered to between eight and twenty participants over two days in four half-day parts.

Part 1 addresses *Why dialogue in public engagement?* It opens with a carousel discussion of three questions: What do you want from engaging with publics? Who are your publics? Why should your publics engage with your work (what’s in it for them)? The point of this exercise is threefold. First, by revealing the diversity of motivations behind researchers’ public engagement efforts, the exercise signals a spectrum of possible public engagement activities, which we use to point out

the need to make and honour a realistic ‘promise to your publics’⁸. Second, the exercise highlights the diversity of possible publics and encourages participants to start ‘thinking from the other’ – i.e. where their particular public(s) will be coming from. Third, the exercise highlights the need to address these strategic questions from the outset in designing any public engagement activity. We then introduce the principles of dialogue, highlighting the defining aims of building understanding and relationships, and inviting participants to consider appropriate ‘ground rules’ for our own dialogic interaction in the course. Following a buzz, a listing or mapping exercise is used to get participants thinking about how dialogue might enhance the different types of public engagement identified in the carousel discussion.

Part 2 addresses *Facilitation skills: how to nurture dialogue*. We start by thinking about what constitutes effective communication and what the barriers to this may be (using nominal feedback from small group discussions). Following some basic orientation, participants then get the opportunity to experience facilitating small group conversations addressing the practical challenges of ‘how to ensure all voices are heard’ and ‘how to maintain and encourage a non-judgemental ethos’. This is followed by group reflection on each person’s facilitating. Subsequent commentary from ourselves highlights active listening and the framing of questions as key skills in the facilitation of dialogue. In the second half of the session we use a case study to highlight potential benefits and challenges of doing dialogue with mixed groups, especially where these come from very different educational backgrounds and standpoints.

Part 3 addresses *Choosing techniques: which to use for what purposes*. We open with a table of techniques from Faulkner’s handbook (2011) to review how participants experienced the techniques used thus far (e.g. carousel, metaplan, listing, nominal feedback). In plenary, we explore the pros and cons of different large and small group formats, and of sessions with very mixed groups or with like people together. We then introduce the principles of deliberation, and give people the chance to experience future visioning coupled with a metaplan clustering, and a thinking hats (De Bono 2010) approach to discussion on a controversial topic. Our future visioning question gets participants to think about where they would like their own public engagement efforts to go. The topic for the latter is chosen by the group, with members getting a second opportunity to practise facilitating – more challenging than the first because they choose a topic on which there are conflicting or emotionally-charged views within the group (some examples have been nuclear power, the Arab spring, genetically modified crops, Scottish independence and public sector funding cuts).

8 An expression borrowed from the IAP2 course in public participation.

Part 4 addresses *Process planning: how to design a dialogic public engagement activity*. Before the end of session 3 participants are briefed on strategic and practical considerations in designing and planning a dialogic public engagement process. In this closing session, they are charged with practising these skills on a potential or actual case, either a public engagement effort from our or their experience or one they are about to undertake. The brief contains the objectives of the organisers and a list of the publics they hope to engage. In teams of three or four, they have forty-five minutes in which (1) to decide what challenges they see in the brief, especially whether any of the publics would be hard to reach or need particular care to nurture the kind of respectful and inclusive atmosphere necessary for dialogue; and (2) to develop a detailed timeline for the activity. This must indicate a progression of sessions defined by appropriate questions or activities, plus the groupings and techniques to be used for each session. These timelines are presented for discussion by the whole group, each team having half hour slots for this.

There have been fourteen iterations of the course in the last four years, involving over 200 participants including scientists, engineers, artists, historians, policy workers, social scientists, science communicators, public engagement practitioners, doctoral researchers, knowledge brokers, health and social care practitioners, and community activists. Most of them were based in academic or research institutions, working on a range of topics and policy contexts. Our courses have been developed for academics, researchers and staff in the Beltane partnership. Other networks and institutions are beginning to take an interest in our training.

We have experimented with targeting different groups. In general, we have more success recruiting postgraduate and junior researchers than senior researchers. The latter either ‘don’t get it’, think they don’t need it or don’t feel they can afford the time. Notable exceptions were a handful of (mostly women) senior academics who have come with members of their research team. When targeting research students, we generally recruit across fields. Although some science students haven’t liked mixing with social scientists, we feel this diversity results in a deeper appreciation of the range of public engagement activities as well as a wider set of perspectives and approaches. When targeting research staff, we opted for single or related subject areas, in the hope that training senior and junior researchers who work together would increase the ‘multiplier effect’ of the course in terms of capacity building, with two or more people having proportionately more impact than one in spreading the word. We achieved a particularly successful ‘hybrid’ model when we held day one separately with engineers and with social scientists, and then brought them together for day two.

The basic structure of the two-day course has remained unchanged, following some early learning and adjustments. More recently, several one-day versions of

the course have been developed – for knowledge exchange and public engagement professionals (focusing on impact), for a dedicated research institute or subject area (focusing on their needs) and for experienced engagers (focusing on the micro-dynamics of facilitation). In each grouping, participants shared and reflected on stories of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ conversations (e.g. mixed group, lay-expert) from their own experience. As well as continuing to offer the two-day programme to postgraduate researchers, and targeting specific research groups, we hope to offer more one-day versions to follow up and deepen our work in that most challenging area – the craft of facilitation.

Reflections, Learning and Evaluation

Before addressing our own reflections on the training programme, we outline participant feedback. This is collected through individual responses to a feedback form plus a period of reflection and group discussion in plenary at the end of each day. For the first two years, a detailed feedback form was circulated and completed on each day (before the final plenary); subsequently, a simpler form has been circulated electronically to be completed after the course.

Participant Feedback

Our participants have come with a range of interests and differing levels of experience. Amongst the research staff, those already doing public engagement have quite specific skills they want to pick up or improve on. Others, including most of the research students, have little or no public engagement experience and simply want to increase their general awareness and skills in this area. Few come with an understanding of what is meant by ‘dialogue’ or ‘deliberation’, so public engagement is the hook by which we introduce these practices and the facilitation training. The engagement and knowledge exchange practitioners generally come with a more explicit interest in dialogue and deliberation and improving their facilitation skills.

In spite of this diversity, participant feedback has been consistently positive. Only a handful of participants responded negatively to the question ‘Did the course meet your expectations?’ and many participants on each course indicated that they gained more than they had imagined. Our before and after sliding scales confirm that both self-reported awareness of dialogue and skill in dialogic approaches to public engagement have increased as a result of the training. The training approach and delivery is invariably commended – the pacing and variety that comes from interweaving practical exercises with orientation and reflection. When asked for three words to describe how they experienced the course, the words ‘informative, enjoyable, interesting, thought-provoking, useful, inspiring, engaging, practical’ recur.

The learning points noted by participants concern four topics in varying proportions: public engagement, dialogue, facilitation skills and specific techniques. On public engagement, several gained a wider view of what public engagement might involve – activities and agendas that are different from their own. One knowledge exchange practitioner wrote,

I realised that I could organise dialogue events around the political ethical topics around research. I had felt restricted to ‘informing’ events as I didn’t feel the public could influence research design, but now I realise that a valid outcome could just be researchers having a greater understanding of public perceptions.

Commonly, participants report that our opening carousel questions on ‘Who are your publics and what’s in it for them?’ really made them think differently about their practice, and the closing exercise of process planning makes them realise just how much thought and preparation is required to design a successful public engagement event or activity.

A small minority of participants remain confused on the subject of dialogue. But at the other end of the spectrum, many tell us spontaneously and with mounting excitement how dialogue is something which can enhance communication in all aspects of their work, even in their private relationships. And many articulate the challenges of doing dialogue as learning points:

That it’s important to *listen*!! You need to listen to others and not have a prejudged attitude towards others.

I think it [the course] pulled into focus that effective dialogue is complex and challenging; that there isn’t necessarily a way to ‘get it right’. In other words, it’s a qualitative method with similar issues, complexities and, importantly, value. Reflection is needed after events.

The main learning point for me was the importance of the emotional content of dialogue, and the understanding that I need to be aware of both the emotional content and the factual content in group discussions and to be able to act on both as a facilitator.

Facilitating small groups discussion is not something that is learnt in a day, but several things give us confidence that in most cases we do succeed in increasing participants’ awareness of the value and demands of facilitation, and their willingness to keep practising. Although the practice session is brief and somewhat artificial (a friendly group), the feedback and review held afterwards is very valuable; many say they would like more time just for this. Participants often mention very specific things they’ve learnt in this connection – for example, that saying something

positive as a facilitator in response to a contribution is still judgemental and may act to close down a dissenting or alternative contribution from someone else, or how 're-framing' can turn a negative intervention from one participant into a positive challenge for the whole group.

The opportunity to practise designing and planning a public engagement process – another crucial facilitation skill – is also very instructive. Participants frequently comment that they didn't realise how many things have to be taken into account. The very quality of both the plans presented and the attention to detail in the discussion of these demonstrate that the course has expanded participants toolbox of techniques, and helped them think critically about which are appropriate for what purposes and groupings. Memorable favourites amongst those used on the course include the carousel discussion, future visioning, metaplan and thinking hats.

The knowledge exchange and public engagement practitioners naturally draw some different things from our courses. Several of them came to realise that they already knew or were doing aspects of dialogue, which was empowering for them. A typical comment, in response to a question about what was most valuable for them personally:

An awareness of the 'dialogic approaches' I already work with. Before this session, I was unsure what techniques would be considered dialogic, but I am leaving with confidence that we are using tools and techniques in this way.

And there was much evidence of a direct impact on practice, for example:

I enjoyed sharing experiences with other people working in knowledge exchange/public engagement realising that similar issues affect us all, and that there are common approaches we can use.

I've really enjoyed the course and will be sharing the content with my colleagues.

It's given me more confidence in putting dialogic approaches into practice, and also communicating to others the purpose and value of dialogue

[I] gained from all the sessions to build on previous experiences. [I] can see the overlap between work with colleagues and also the wider community – therefore [I] will use skills/knowledge in both areas.

There is a clear multiplier effect on this 'train the trainers' version of the course, as there has been when we delivered the training to a single institute (agriculture) and subject group (fine art). The opportunities for ongoing reflective learning and for

‘spreading the word’ open up when people are able to work together in this area.

Our Reflections and Evaluation

We had a two prong approach to capacity building: we sought to raise awareness about the potential for dialogue to enhance public engagement, and to build skills needed to facilitate dialogic processes. So how well has the training programme met these aims, and what learning can we share as a result?

With respect to raising awareness about dialogue, participants’ reactions constantly remind us that for most people ‘dialogue’ is simply not on the radar:⁹ They ‘don’t know what they don’t know’ – until they encounter it and experience that revelatory moment of sensing how valuable dialogue could be in all of their relations. So our training programme does succeed in opening eyes to the general potential of dialogue, very powerfully for some. The fact that a minority of participants leave with a rather woolly grasp of the principles and practice of dialogue arguably reflects, in part, just what a shift it requires from the norms of most everyday communication. For instance, some research students come to us in the belief that learning to communicate or engage publics better means learning to make better presentations – a telling indication of just how entrenched the ‘talking at’ habit is in academia!

Participation in the training programme has produced several encouraging shifts and moments of reflection around the kind of entrenched behaviour and mindsets that make it difficult for researchers to engage in dialogue. Where we address ‘lay-expert’ divides, for example, it is apparent that many participants had not considered how people without the same level of education might experience the authority they wield as experts. Where we talk about multiple realities, some (usually scientists) rejoin that surely ‘facts’ should prevail – and we are able to share cases where diverse knowledges have been needed to resolve a difficult problem. And when we collectively reflect on their facilitation practice, it becomes clear that the requirement for facilitators to be impartial about the topic can be particularly challenging for researchers. The conversations we’ve had around this have often shown a nuanced understanding: Does it help if the facilitator knows something about the topic? Should they, as specialists, actually not facilitate but find someone more removed from the topic to focus on process?

We are convinced that our strategy of linking the training on dialogue to the context of public engagement practice and agendas in the sector is correct. As noted above, addressing particular challenges for this community creates space for reflection, just

9 In recognition of this, we have removed ‘dialogue’ from the header for the course publicity: we now call it ‘Making Conversations Count’.

as mobilising concrete examples of researcher engagement provides a meaningful focus for what might otherwise remain too abstract. Much of what virtually all participants learnt about public engagement concerns practices which lay the foundations for more dialogic approaches. We are thinking here, for example, of the need to see even the simple ‘informing’ types of public engagement as necessitating a two-way conversation; the insistence that engagers think about their publics and where they’re coming from before designing a public engagement process; or the notion that good communication is as much about listening as talking and the practice of using ground rules to help keep a conversation respectful.

We are similarly convinced that our training approach of combining theory and practice is adequate. The craft of facilitation is only learnt through practice, and the evidence from participant feedback signals that the opportunities provided by the course to practise and reflect on facilitating dialogue have resulted in some quite deep learning and reflection. Informal discussion indicates that many were actively thinking where they could use what they’d learned in future public engagement efforts. At the very least, participants now have a far richer understanding of ‘communication’, and have been sensitised to some of the subtle ways that they may open up and close down dialogue. They have experienced and thought about the work required to nurture an inclusive and egalitarian ethos in any group work. As a result, they are more likely to ‘self-regulate’ in such settings and to recognise when skilled facilitation is needed. We often encourage participants to spread the word amongst their colleagues about how crucial skilled facilitation is to getting positive outcomes from public engagement – and to be willing to pay for this input if necessary.

Of course, there’s always more to learn in facilitation, as many come to recognise. We’ve seen some encouraging signs of ongoing capacity building. First is the multiplier effect of shared learning and reflective practice that has resulted from our courses with practitioners and with the individual institute and subject group. Second, the training programme has generated a growing network of budding facilitators across research and policy domains, who we contact when further opportunities arise to practise and develop facilitation skills. Former participants have volunteered as facilitators in a range of initiatives: the People’s Gathering, a citizens’ assembly that kicked off the Electoral Reform Society’s Democracy Max process (Electoral Reform Society 2013); So Say Scotland’s ‘Thinking Together’ citizens’ assembly, inspired by Iceland’s constitution-building process (SoSayScotland.org n.d.); plus ongoing events organised by the Genomics Forum (n.d.), Gengage (n.d.) and the Citizen Participation Network (n.d.). These are nurturing a sense of community of practice amongst participants, through face-to-face networking.

The job continues. After pioneering training around dialogue in public engagement

for researchers, since 2012 we are also delivering an extended version of the programme as a core module on the University of Edinburgh's new MSc in Science Communication and Public Engagement. We are delighted to be the first in the UK to have the opportunity to add dialogue and deliberation to the mainstream formation of a new generation of public engagement practitioners! The relative ease of attracting early career participants to our two day course¹⁰ is also a hopeful sign of a new generational mind-set. Needless to say, the continuing difficulty of recruiting more senior participants reflects in part that the hoped-for culture change around dialogue and deliberation in public engagement still has some way to go in the UK.

Coda

Taking stock of our training programme: We have shown how our efforts to get participants thinking about and facilitating dialogue and deliberation *is* raising awareness and building skills in quite concrete ways. Many now have an expanding toolbox with which they can broaden the scope of their public engagement efforts, and a stronger sense of the ethics and practices required to deepen what happens in them – to truly build understanding and relationships, so that respectful collaboration and problem solving can happen. We hope that, as they translate and adapt these ideas in their contexts, others will be inspired to join in and innovation will emerge.

Nudging academia to actively foster dialogue and deliberation with other publics is not an easy task. There are obvious differences between researchers talking 'down' to the world, and trying to create spaces for collaborative inquiry. Many public engagers work in institutions that do not see citizens, stakeholders, communities or publics as partners in a collaborative relationship. Facilitating civic participation is rarely on the agenda, and many researchers work comfortably within technocratic cultures that privilege elite-led policy-making and research. Nonetheless, there are growing numbers of researchers and practitioners who strive to create the sort of spaces for dialogic inquiry that would very much benefit other contexts in our democracies. Culture shifts don't happen overnight, but building and nurturing a community of practice with the needed capabilities has to be a central plank in that project.

10 This recruitment is greatly helped by the fact that training in both academic and life skills is now an institutionalised expectation for junior researchers.

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