

The Edmonton Citizen Panel

An engaged communication project in process

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The Edmonton Citizen Panel is a pilot project applying and exploring communication theories in public-deliberation. It is co-sponsored by the University of Alberta and the City of Edmonton in Canada, in which citizens used the principles of deliberative dialogue to develop and deliver recommendations to elected representatives concerning budget spending priorities (<http://www.edmonton.ca/citizenpanel>).

The Citizen Panel brought together women and men of diverse ages, incomes, backgrounds, and experience to learn about and discuss the city's program priorities as funded through the annual budget. The goal of the Citizen Panel was to gain informed citizen opinions for City Council to consider seriously as input into the 2010-2011 budget process. A planning team was formed with leads from the City of Edmonton's Budget Office and from the University of Alberta. The City's Office of Public Involvement coordinated and supported the organization and management of the Citizen Panel.



During the six full Saturdays that it met, panelists developed informed opinions about the city's spending priorities. They learned about the city's budgeting process and the strategies underpinning that process. They also learned about the City Vision and the 10-year strategic goals. They received information through presentations by senior administrators.

Deliberative dialogue is characterized by:

An intentional connection to a change in public policy

A systematic selection of participants to achieve a reliable representation of society

The formal distribution of speaking opportunities

An emphasis on mutual respect among participants and between the citizenry and elected representatives

Partnerships to allow for broadcast proceedings and the dissemination of information about outcomes.

(Health Council of Canada, 2006)

Deliberation is one of the four required components of a democratic society. The other three are political equality, participation, and non-tyranny. The strength of each of these components varies within a given society and over time. The extent to which citizens participate actively in strengthening each component also varies. *Deliberation* may be defined as a process in which a wide range of competing arguments are given careful and systematic consideration in small-group, face-to-face discussions.

Deliberative dialogue is a mode of communication in which participants systematically consider the strengths and weaknesses of an issue in a climate of mutual respect. A key characteristic of deliberative dialogue is hearing from and responding to others with whom one disagrees and may not meet in other situations (Gastil & Levine, 2006). *Deliberative dialogue* can be used in public-deliberation events, for the purpose of directly involving citizens in making decisions on behalf of society after due consideration of alternative courses of action and using rational methods of analysis.

Deliberative dialogue has theoretical and historical roots in the ancient Greek *agora* and *ecclesia*. It seeks an alternative to the instrumental rationality characteristic of modern political systems. Instrumental rationality represents the capacity of the state to “devise, select, and effect good means to clarified ends” (Dryzek, 1990, p.14). *Deliberative democracy* may involve modification, supplementation, or repudiation of instrumental rationality. It may be distinguished from the simple feedback mechanisms of media programming. Phone-in radio shows, television talk shows, and web polls seeking a response from a mass audience tend to emphasize etiquette, and their structure is designed to avoid substantive conflict (Habermas, 1989).

Deliberative dialogue can allow for the broad purposes of learning in the sense in which Mezirow (2000) describes *transformative learning*. North American public universities remain relatively open, neutral, and informed institutions that can provide an appropriate social space to initiate structured conversations about issues of broad public interest. The university’s role in the Edmonton Citizen Panel was to manage the deliberative-dialogue process, while the City of Edmonton’s role was to oversee the substantive content of the discussion, which was the annual budget. When the Citizen Panel was approved, City Council agreed that the recommendations would be seriously considered.

The Panel presented four recommendations and two broad directions to City Council about three months after completing its deliberations. The

recommendations were relatively broad, such as measuring livability and quality of life in the city in terms of arts and culture, affordable housing, economic diversification, and quality of community life. Some of the recommendations could result in dramatic changes in public policy. For example, the Panel recommended that disincentives, as well as incentives, should be created by both the private and public sectors and considered as a means of increasing the city's density. An orientation to action was emphasized from the beginning, and panelists were aware of the nature of the task they had been given, which was to act. During the fall of 2009, City Council will be asked to use the Panel's recommendations to shape the city's budget for 2010-2011.



The popular movie *High Fidelity* (2000) provides a useful depiction of the movement from storytelling to action that is at the core of deliberative dialogue and the potential for transformative learning. Rob (played by John Cusack) finds himself unable to establish a long-term intimate relationship. Instead, along with his record-store employees who include Barry (Jack Black), he spends much time and energy maintaining his knowledge and experience of popular music trivia. The “transformation” for both Rob and Barry occurs when each finds a way to move to the stage of action in their lives. For Rob, this means becoming a part-time disc-jockey so that his knowledge of music can be shared with others. Barry begins to use his considerable talent as a singer, unknown to that point, as a member of a rock group. In order to move to this stage of action, both characters must listen and respond to what significant others say. The movie ends with the prospect that both Rob and Barry will now be able to establish the meaningful relationships they desire.

In addition to the application of transformational learning theory, current theoretical and practical issues in deliberative dialogue include (a) selection of participants for public deliberation; (b) design of public-deliberation processes; (c) reporting and interpreting outcomes; and (d) use of online media for public deliberation.

References

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