Facilitated Dialogue Programs: Engaging the Public in Tackling Tough Issues

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Wicked Problems

- Climate change
- Poverty
- Resource shortages
Wicked Problems

- Difficult to define
- Complex
- Solutions create more problems
- Seen as "normal"
- Appear intractable
Dialogue is...

“the exchange of ideas, opinions, beliefs, and feelings...listening with respect...and being able to express one’s own views with confidence.”

Interactive Trend in Society

Facebook helps you connect and share with the people in your life.
Qualitative Research at Three Sites

Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History

Lower East Side Tenement Museum
Research Questions

Outcomes

- Do dialogue programs draw new audiences?
- What are the outcomes of dialogue programs?
- Do these outcomes last?

Best practices

- What are best practices for organizers, facilitators, and participants?
Methods
Site Selection

Chose three sites

- Snowball sampled
- Called dialogue sites
- Applied criteria
Outcomes

- Questions to audiences at programs
- Demographic surveys
- Interviews with:
  - Facilitators (post-program)
  - Participants (post-program and 4-6 weeks later)

Best Practices

- Program observations
- Interviews with:
  - Organizers
  - Facilitators (pre- and post-program)
  - Participants (post-program)
Data analysis

- Took detailed notes on programs
- Tabulated demographic info
- Transcribed interviews; coded and sorted transcripts
- Member-checked
Results
## Programs & Interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Programs</th>
<th>Organizers</th>
<th>Facilitators</th>
<th>Participants</th>
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<tbody>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
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<td>4</td>
<td>16</td>
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<tr>
<td>NAU</td>
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<td>14</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>31</td>
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Who chose dialogue?

- At sites with activity choices, 25% of participants chose dialogue programs intentionally.
- At NAU, which offered only dialogue, 36% of participants at a program were returnees.
- Demographics of interviewees:
  - Nearly evenly split between males and females.
  - 90% White.
  - 67% ages 45 and older.
  - 60% with advanced college degrees.
The Experience of Dialogue
Smithsonian HOT Topics Program
Tenement Museum Tour & Discussion
NAU Hot Topics Café
Outcomes of Dialogue Programs

• Valued program (all 3 sites)
• Learned about topic (all 3 sites)
• Gained new perspectives (NAU, TM)
• Built community (NAU, TM)
• Practiced civic skills (NAU, TM)
• Predicted new behavior (NAU, Sm)
• Had concerns about dialogue (NAU, TM)
Longer-term Outcomes

- Remembered and learned from program (all 3 sites)
- Continued to value program (all 3 sites)
- Engaged in new behavior (all 3 sites)
- Had concerns about dialogue (NAU, TM)
- No attitude or behavior change (NAU, TM)
- New attitudes about dialogue topic (NAU, TM)
Study Limitations

- Small number of sites
- Homogeneous groups
- Short interviews
- Responses potentially skewed
- Low return rate on follow-up email
Best Practices & Dialogue Models
Best Practices for Dialogue Programs

- Participants Engage Fully
- Organizer Lays the Groundwork
- Facilitator Sets the Tone

Dialogue
Organizers Lay the Groundwork

- Choose topics
- Train facilitators
- Communicate intent
- Invite diverse audience
- Provide welcoming atmosphere
Facilitators Set the Tone

- Encourage participation
- Establish safety
- Communicate format
- Guide flow
- Invite diverse views
Participants Engage Fully

- Attend
- Listen well
- Speak openly from own perspective
- Model dialogue for others
Programmatic Recommendations

- Incorporate dialogue into programs at parks, museums, and in communities
- Be aware that dialogue is not a good match for all topics, audiences or staff
- Focus on creating effective dialogue programs
Creating Effective Dialogue Programs

- Invite Diverse Views
- Create a Respectful Environment
- Guide Dialogue Flow
- Mentor Facilitators
- Communicate Intent Clearly
- Choose Relevant Topics

Dialogue
Examples...and dialogue