Designing to Facilitate Civic Conversations

Working paper

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Introduction
Decreased perception of the importance of a democratically elected government has created a moment of crisis for proponents of liberal democracy. (Foa, Mounk, 2016) The recent rise of factually impoverished, emotionally overabundant political discourse in recent elections in the United Kingdom and the United States has continued to infect the discourse of several major governments in Europe and the Americas. In spite of this concerning recent history, when examining discourse at the level of the individual, civic engagement events have shown that citizens can be trusted to discuss issues, share reasons and come to conclusions (Fishkin, Luskin 2005). Yet, the production of civic engagement events frequently neglects the influence of the system of stakeholders, and the power of material interventions in facilitating deliberative conversation.

Civic conversation is a key precursor to civic change, and successful civic change requires engagement across a complex network of actors. A civic conversation is a key place for knowledge transfer, a moment where citizens are able to come to an understanding of the needs of the greater community, and a moment where they can articulate the challenges faced by their communities and the needs that these challenges entail. Citizens have the opportunity to hear the needs of their neighbors, and perhaps place their own needs in the context of a portfolio of need across the entire community. The moment of the civic conversation is where government actors have the opportunity to collate critical information to guide policymaking, and to develop a better understanding of the needs of the communities they serve. This understanding serves as a framework or heuristic to guide the creation and application of policy.

There is an ongoing tension between the ideals of argumentation and commitment-making. Jeff Conklin (2006), following Horst Rittel (Rittel, Webber, 1973), has developed an understanding of the political conversation as mappable argument. Terry Winograd, Fernando Flores (1986) and Hugh Dubberly with Paul Pangaro (2009) have examined commitment-making between actors as a designed(able) system and social practice. Further,
the challenge to Jurgen Habermas’ (1995) consensus-based deliberative democracy by Chantal Mouffe’s (2000) agonist democracy – an argument taken up more recently in the design discourse by Carl DiSalvo (2012) – leaves discourse lost in the gulf between the positions of conflict and consensus. However, civic discourse need not be framed as arguments, commitment-making, consensus-building or contestation. Looking to newer models of political discourse, protocol-structured deliberative conversation (Cavalier, 2011) deliberative community polling (Fishkin, Luskin 2005) and storytelling (Young, 2000) point to this fertile ground. One might even consider that the civic conversation is a specific moment where participants’ worlds are open to one another, and that each person might be reshaped in conversation by viewing these new worlds (Spinosa, et al., 1997).

The challenge of a contemporary design practitioner designing civic discourse is to create a conversation that evokes the richness of the lived experience of the participants, while maintaining a reflective distance such that participants are able to share their present needs, their hopes for the future, and what they feel is the narrative that supports the positions that they hold. The civic participation event is the point where some of that richness can pass into the polity.

Citizens involvement in civic life, and their ability to articulate need (Max-Neef et al., 1991) in a way that can inform policy creation is influenced by their experiences with organizations that are more a part of their everyday life than the more abstract construction of ‘government’. The needs of citizens are aggregated, focused, filtered and fixed through citizens’ involvement in neighborhood associations, community groups, churches, community and economic development corporations, business associations, community based and corporate news organizations, and the views of political agents at all levels. Some may say that these mid-level actors represent a toxic influence on the political process, that they reorient the dialog towards their own ends. This may be true of some political groups, but most are working with what Spinosa, Flores and Dreyfus refer to as a rich awareness of their sustaining practices, or a clear view of how the organization’s mission and goals constitute a community interest. And, as I have found in my work, citizens who attend events on behalf of civic organization find it difficult to simply regurgitate talking points when events are framed as a conversation with neighbors. The activity of conversation, in and of itself, requires a richness that is not easily reducible to talking points.

So developed, through direct experience and conversations with organizations that are close to their everyday lives, the individual’s understanding of civic life and the articulation of their needs intersect with the capacities of public authorities, public agencies, and government entities that provision for those needs. At the scope of municipal government, marshalling these mid-level actors – the trusted organizations – facilitates access to citizens and helps to ensure those citizens are motivated to participate. This set of complementary processes that
influence the formation of attitudes, values, beliefs and policy are a dynamic system, and these event-based participations are a critical point of feedback within that system.

It is Design that flows from these conversations that must encompass the spectrum of need that is evoked in the conversation. The approaches of voting or negotiation are organized around a zero-sum game, create winners and losers, but design that is informed by a spectrum of need, and a spectrum of reasons why, can approach collaboration.

As a specific approach to these types of challenge, I have identified a particular type of conversation -- the high-stakes conversation -- that tracks to a degree with most citizen conversations that shape public policy. Without delving too deeply into this model in this shorter format, I will cover the model cursorily here, and reference its manifestations in the following cases.

![Fig 1. High-stakes conversation. Client and expert have a conversation to make a decision.](image)

**Model for High-stakes Conversation**

- The dialog centers around making a decision that is of consequence. (There is something of value to one or more of the participants at stake)
- There is no answer that is “right”.
- The dialog centers around making a decision that is imminent. (time pressure is a factor)
- Participants are characterized by imbalance
  - Participants typically have an imbalance of knowledge and/or agency relating to the conversation domain (expert vs client)
  - Participants have an imbalanced level of experience in having the conversation (routine vs singular)
  - Participants have an imbalanced level of investment in the outcome
- Once a decision is made, it is irrevocable, or very difficult or costly to revoke.
Several authors have identified these challenges as aspects of other situations. In the book *Nudge*, Thaler and Sunstein (2008) refer to the challenges specific to solving problems that are faced infrequently, one aspect of imbalance. Game theory, and satisficing (Simon, 1996) speak to decision-making with low knowledge of the outcomes. The problem of “no right answer” or making choices between several suboptimal options is addressed in game theory, other texts (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008; Funtowicz & Ravetz, 1993), irrevocability in others (Rittel & Weber, 1973; Fischoff, 2011). In short, this model addresses humans’ attempt to resolve situations of this type through conversation, speaking with one another in an attempt to find a way forward from a difficult position.

Fig 2. Civic conversation. Council convenes citizens to have a conversation. Council makes the decision, citizens experience the consequences.

The version of the high-stakes conversation that plays out in civic settings shares many aspects with the dyadic high-stakes conversation: but considering the speed at which municipal government operates, imminence is not always a factor. One key difference is that the question at stake in a civic conversation resides with the delegates who, presumably, are more expert than citizens. Also, in the dyadic high-stakes, the person who is engaged in the conversation who bears the weight of the decision is most affected by the consequences of that decision. However, in the civic conversation, delegates (who are responsible to govern) are insulated from the consequence of the decision to some degree.

Perversely, these high-stakes conversation situations are typically rare for the people who have the most to lose in the situation. And the experts, the city staff or elected officials who have these conversations more frequently, often view the events as a necessary evil.

The following cases explore the ways these events diverge from the dyadic model of the high-stakes conversation.
My VA Communities

My VA Communities is a collaboration between the United States Veterans Administration and a regional board of directors tasked to assess veteran’s needs in Southwestern Pennsylvania, develop a plan to increase coordination among the region’s charitable organizations providing services to veterans, and increase the sense of connectedness between veterans and their communities. Nearly 30 organizations were involved, with 16 contributing resources and viewpoints.

There are approximately 1300 not-for-profit organizations working on improving the lives of veterans in Southwestern Pennsylvania. While many of those organizations have positive effects through taking direct action to address veterans needs, there is no coordination between groups, no process to ensure that services are not over- or under-provisioned in certain areas, and critical gaps in the aid that organizations provide. (Carter, Kidder, 2015)

The goal of this particular engagement was to inform the strategic direction and profile of membership of a Community Engagement Board that is constituted from the Pittsburgh Veterans’ community and for the community to advise the VA on best practices for engagement in the region, and to create a formal structure dedicated to coordination between various veteran oriented not-for-profits in the region.

In this particular situation, we spent some time discussing approaches with the Heinz Endowments, the organization funding the conversation, to uncover goals, and to help frame the events that we would hold from the perspective of learning, or discovery rather than engagement. We worked collaboratively to solicit input from diverse stakeholders from different areas of the service sector, from those that provide basic needs to veterans in distress, like food, shelter, clothing, as well as organizations that provide mental health support, education and training assistance. Input was gathered through two goal-setting meetings, and by semi-structured phone interviews with nonprofit organization leaders.

The event series would encompass 3 conversations among veterans, and one conversation composed of people who were involved as agents in “helping” professions. The principal challenges of this approach to generating knowledge that show up across this work are

Fig 3. My VA Community conversation. The Community Engagement Board convenes veterans for a better understanding of how catalyze change within the non-profit community.

The event series would encompass 3 conversations among veterans, and one conversation composed of people who were involved as agents in “helping” professions. The principal challenges of this approach to generating knowledge that show up across this work are
freezing the richness of the veteran's conversations into a survey response, and packaging those survey responses as a report that is actionable. I helped to convene the veterans and hold the community meetings, and led the meetings helping the Community Engagement Board to structure and limit the scope of their inquiry. To aid this approach, rather than just simply asking veterans what they wanted — where the gaps were — we asked veterans to approach the problem from the perspective of the community, to think about what the region provides and try to articulate where it is deficient. We found that underemployment not unemployment was a key problem for the region, and discovered the existence of a skill that better employed veterans had gained literacy in: being able to translate military descriptions of responsibilities, skills and competencies into civilian parlance.

**Environmental Charter School**

The Environmental Charter School convened staff, faculty and administration in a deliberative engagement to redesign their compensation system. The Environmental Charter school engaged people at every level of their organization, as well as Human Resources and Social Justice scholars at two regional universities, and several local and national not-for-profit organizations.

Their current plan for compensation was self-directed, led by the teachers, and worked well when there were only a handful of teachers, and essentially no staff and few administrators. However, as the school grew, the plan for staff evaluation was never created, and the plan for faculty evaluation and promotion became increasingly difficult to sustain.

The center of the conversation was between the administration, faculty and staff. The school’s board of directors served in an advisory capacity to this process. Seemingly straightforward, the administration convened a conversation with the faculty and staff to gather input to use to design the system for retention, tenure and promotion. However, developing an understanding of the complexity of how pay works within this organization is something that was not possible to do in one setting.

From the faculty and staff meeting, we collected rich data on the perceptions of employees of how certain types of reward structures encourage or discourage living and working by a set of guiding principles. These guiding principles were principles that the faculty and staff had collaboratively created over the past several years. For instance, one of the principles is to encourage collaboration, so having a structure that competitively rewards “top performers” could be antithetical to the principles of collaboration. Considering fostering community as a guiding principle: promotion decisions should be based upon an evaluation of the teacher or staff member as a “whole person” within the school by diverse members of the community.
While this set of beliefs and attitudes developed by deliberating upon different approaches to compensation was valuable, it was not structured enough to base a compensation system.

The administration asked for a diverse group of employees to become part of retention, tenure and promotion working group, tasked to operationalize the set of ethical principles into a system. This group worked collaboratively over several months and authored a plan which was submitted back to the administration, the staff and faculty, and ultimately to the board of directors.

Again, with this situation I helped the administration clarify the approach that they wanted to take (they wanted something that would reward innovation, but we came back to the community’s ethics and values) helped to convene teachers and staff, helped to create artifacts and brought moderators to help them moderate their discussion, and reported the findings from that process. But the specific situation required more than just reporting out and taking action. The knowledge generated by the first event had to be worked through in a series of conversations after. Secondly diversity (Ashby, 1957) of the table groups and the working group on many axes (full time, part-, different roles, experience levels) were necessary to form the plan effectively.

**Affordable Housing Task Force**
The City of Pittsburgh’s Affordable Housing Task Force convened citizens to determine where areas of greatest need were within the city, and what solutions citizens wanted to see in their neighborhoods. Participants in the AHTF included city council members, and representatives from 22 area businesses and not-for-profit organizations.

In this particular situation, structurally, it turned out that we had two decision-making boards to consider. City Council convened the Affordable Housing Task Force, who was responsible to provide legislative and budgetary recommendations to the City Council who would ultimately structure the City’s approach to this.
The perverse thing is, in these situations where there is a lot at stake for individuals, and many perceived levels where the distribution of responsibility between the levels and the potential for influence at each level is not well understood, you have stakeholders attempting to exert influence at every level and at every step in the process. Some business groups and community groups chose to eschew the public comment process entirely, instead attempting to influence the city council members directly.

Protest groups with differing political goals came to the public meetings in an attempt to make their presence felt in different ways. Some handed out flyers, some signs, some requested that they be allowed to watch the process, and one group identified the survey as a vulnerable point for intervention and created stickers that residents could put on the survey instead of writing personal a narrative. Another group protested the choice of meeting locations, alleging (correctly) that there wasn’t a meeting in a particular neighborhood hit hard by the recent fluctuations in the real estate market. Another group insisted that any notes that were taken by city employees at the meetings be published on the city’s website.

The protocol asked attendees to evaluate the City’s proposed housing priorities and valued in relation to attendee’s own needs and the needs of their neighborhood. And in spite of all the above, this was generally successful in producing unambiguous priorities for the Affordable Housing Task Force. In relation to other priorities: housing rehabilitation and home ownership emerged as key factors from the discussion.

![Diagram](image)

**Fig 5.** Pittsburgh Affordable Housing Task Force (AHTF) conversations. City Council convenes the AHTF. AHTF convenes citizens to provide input on a set of recommendations for City Council. Other interest groups attempt to influence the process at all levels.

Key things that were learned from this were that protesters should not be regarded as an enemy, these protesters contribute to the variety of the conversation. Protesters, or voices that exist outside of the typical systems of public comment increase the resilience of the system of public comment, and broaden the spectrum of opinion that exists in the room and the documentation. In these meetings, discourse is very fragile, and depends upon the
engagement and good faith of the participants. Control cannot be maintained by the conveners, or by other means of authority, but people will adhere to a protocol that gives the sense that the process has integrity, and that the voices of the participants will be represented faithfully to decision-makers.

**Conclusion**

The rich network of interrelationships in a city, the variety of processes at work, diversity of people, and non-human actors, and the nested networks, or systems-within-systems nature of cities make them a fertile ground for frameworks for participation and governance that tolerate arational applications within those frames.

Deliberative democracy procedures can act as both a filtering and focusing element in high-stakes conversations by bounding the problem at hand, providing relevant information to participants, and creating structures through which that feedback can be processed, so it can be effectively consumed by governmental entities. This work can be enhanced by thoughtful intervention in the physical environment of the deliberation event, and by careful structuring of the knowledge that is “frozen” in the report that acts as the channel for information transfer. Considering the different systems that designers work within, and thinking about the tangential systems that a constituted conversation might activate, the civic conversation has the potential to inspire action and foster connections throughout the city network.

However, deliberative democracy as an engagement that is only sponsored, in a top-down method is perhaps not sufficient to catalyze social change on a grand scale. Opportunities for designing conversations need to step outside the mode of facilitating the statutory requirements of municipal government and architectural firms doing public works. Taking a systems-level view of the network that is organized around seemingly intractable issues, and activating that network so that tangible outcomes can be produced is really the next high-stakes project.

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