

Comment

ENGAGEMENT TOOLS FOR SCIENTIFIC GOVERNANCE

When stories make the context disappear

Interview by Davide Ludovisi

Barbara Streicher

ABSTRACT: Barbara Streicher is the executive manager of the Austrian Science Center Netzwerk, a network grouping over ninety Austrian institutions committed to science communication activities. Barbara used discussion games on many different occasions, all of which were outside a museum, and took place in places such as cafés, libraries, schools, but also shelters for homeless people and prisons. The communication exchange among participants always proved to be very open and respectful at the same time, even when the topics dealt with were especially sensitive and in social distress conditions. The game experiences were generally positive, whatever the places they were set in. The negative aspects are totally irrelevant and basically concern the time limitation and, in some cases, language difficulties. However, in her experience, there is still not an involvement of decision makers, and therefore it can be said that participation games are a way to help people form an opinion on controversial issues rather than an instrument with an impact on democratic governance.

1. *Have you ever used discussion games? Where, why and which ones?*

Yes, quite a lot. I mainly used Decide, in various circumstances. I had lots of experiences with that format.

2. *Can you tell us what the main pros and cons in using these tools are, in your experience?*

In my experience, there are lots of pros. People discuss for real, because this tool allows open communication. Most of the participants share their personal stories during the discussion, and sometimes it is touching. Usually the dialogue is very respectful, without problems, even when controversial topics are dealt with. It's a very good format for that. Another important reason in its favour is that it works with different groups: I used it with school children, in contexts of homeless people and in prison. So, according to my experience the game works, whatever the context. One of the main pros is that people are spurred to debate on the topics, with no need of knowing anything before it happens. As regards the cons... actually I have never noticed any. Sometimes the matter is the language; it's necessary to have a certain level of linguistic skills. People could participate anyway, but it would become a little difficult- Sometimes more time would be necessary for the discussion.

3. *Have you have experienced discussion game sessions in which researchers, policy-makers, stakeholders, citizens and/or special groups were sitting at the same table? Do you think games help building a shared ground for discussion or not? How did the different groups react?*

In a certain way they react very similarly, because they all took part in the game and got into the mood that the Decide game creates: everybody listened to one other and thought carefully about the answers. The involvement was similar in all groups. Sometimes we had a more playful atmosphere, sometimes it was more serious. People focused their discussion on different aspects of the content, and in the meantime I, as a moderator, was focused on the game, and sometimes I was more flexible

and interacted with the groups. Sometimes it is more important to put the focus on the conversation and sometimes it is more important to pay attention to the final decisions. There was one time in a homeless shelter, where the people really felt that it was an important experience. What I like most about Decide is the fact that it's flexible with the different groups, you don't have to force the participants to get involved.

4. *Have you ever noticed differences in the reactions of participants that can be clearly ascribed to factors such as age, social and economic groups, or nationality?*

Not really. As I said, the similarities are much more interesting to me, because I found that, for example, age is not a problem. Also the social status doesn't make a difference; in final results, initial differences between participants are not very relevant, because the engagement level is the same for everyone.

5. *What were some of the most interesting comments from the participants about their experience?*

The homeless people were really touched by the fact that I put the results on the website (<http://www.playdecide.eu/play/inspiringstories/787>). They are people that usually live in the streets, and they don't feel as part of the society that make decisions. So to me, this was the most important comment. To others it was the atmosphere during the game. People opened up and came forward with personal stories; for example, when Decide is used to talk about stem cells, the game could take completely different dynamics, and the people react strongly, it's the style of the discussion that changes.

6. *Are science centres and science museums good locations to host these events? The impression so far is that discussion games are used in a very irregular way, in comparison with science demonstrations or didactic laboratories. What are the obstacles that prevent a more continuous, structural use?*

We don't have a science centre in Austria, we did it in very different places: we don't invite people to a museum, but we usually go to the people that we want to involve. We've done it in coffee houses, in homeless shelters, in schools, quite often in public libraries, and it works very well. We try and go to places people feel familiar with.

7. *What do you think about the role of the mediator? What about the presence of scientists or researchers during the debates?*

I think that it's very useful when there's someone who moderates the game and the discussion, although it's possible to do it without, but usually it's better to have someone from the outside, to help to face the topic. I usually don't interfere much, but I just move around the tables to help to stay on track, basically. As concerns the experts, we hardly used them and we seldom found them necessary. There was one exception, in the case of the HIV/AIDS issue. In that case I found them very helpful, because it's a particular topic and people come with many questions on their own and I can't answer. The mediator doesn't necessarily have to be neutral. I think it's important that he or she stays out of the discussion, but if someone asked my opinion I'd give it, and sometimes it helps to put it with a little hint of humour. I would say that staying neutral does mean not interfering and not leading the discussion in any way, but it doesn't mean that you are not allowed to express your personal opinion. Of course, you have to clearly identify it as just an opinion.

8. *In your experience, is the impact of these games limited to the event itself and its participants, or are there relevant, tangible follow-ups: the emerging of a group of interest or a local network, an influence on policy-making, or other results? Can you explain why yes or why not?*

I can't say that there was an impact beyond the event, at least according to the circumstances I know. In one project about medical process, where we used the Decide game, I sent a summary of the results to the Ministry of Health, but I didn't get any reply. And I don't think that the website, where the results were published, is definitely relevant to decision-making processes. However, I'm quite

sure that those discussion games can be used for important decisions. Once I had a politician among the participants and I think that participating in the game can influence politics, at least in an indirect way. People or politicians are aware of this kind of discussions or this kind of topics.

9. *What other methods are you currently considering to implement, in order to enhance and improve the direct dialogue among citizens, policy-makers, stakeholders and scientists?*

I think that basically it is important to bring different people with a different background together. I still think that the style of the discussion game is very helpful, more than the traditional discussions. If you really want to have a discussion with participation by the people, you must have small groups, otherwise you'll have just a few people that speak, it would become a typical discussion with four or five experts that answer to the others, but not a real dialogue. This kind of meetings might be useful to obtain information, but not to build real participation.

Translated by Massimo Caregnato

Author

Barbara Streicher, Dr., was educated as a molecular geneticist, and has worked as a scientist in a university setting for several years, and since then has acquired long time experience in science communication, in the beginning through her work for the Austrian civil society organisation "dialog\leftrightarrowgentechnik". Currently, she is executive manager of the Austrian Science Center Netzwerk. She has set up and maintained the network now comprising over 90 partners, was involved in the development of interactive exhibits, in research projects and organised a number of science centre activities for the public (travelling exhibitions, school projects, etc.). She moderated many DECIDE events, especially with non-standard target groups. E-mail: streicher@science-center-net.at.

HOW TO CITE: B. Streicher, *When stories make the context disappear*, *Jcom* **09**(02) (2010) C03