

Introduction: Recent Research in Public Participation: A Focus on Learning

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A great deal of scholarship in the field of public participation and policy analysis has come increasingly to focus on the importance of deliberation and dialogue. Over a decade ago, Frank Fischer and John Forester (1993) labeled this the “argumentative turn” in policy analysis. A similar “deliberative turn” can be identified in the fields of public participation (OECD 2005, Roberts 2004), risk analysis (National Research Council 1996), political science (Ackerman and Fishkin 2004, Druckman and Nelson 2003), policy sciences (Fischer 2003), environmental decision-making (National Research Council 2000, Drew et al. 2003), and public health (Abelson et al. 2003). A widely cited National Research Council report highlighted the role of deliberation in complicated policy decisions about risks and hazard management (National Research Council 1996). This report was the topic of a *Human Ecology Review* special issue in 2001. Everywhere one looks these days there are signs that deliberation has been embraced with rarely a critical voice. Thus it is not surprising to notice a high-level conference on Deliberative Democracy³ sponsored at MIT this summer, yearly review articles in *American Political Science Review* summarizing the volumes of this annum’s research into deliberation, a new handbook on Deliberative Democracy (Levine and Gastil 2005), a plethora of academic studies evaluating deliberative policy making in practice, policy guidance within federal and state agencies (DOE 2003, EPA 2003, National Park Service 2003), and scores of instructions about how to “do deliberation” right (Forester 1999). In summary, deliberation is hot. You’re either doin’ it or you’re not.

But what is the purpose of dialogue? Why do so many think deliberation is such a fantastic policy tool? Often the reasons given are that dialogue can facilitate finding better solutions and reducing conflict (e.g., future litigation). The extent to which these are actually achieved is hotly debated. What seems less open to debate is that participants (including those who plan and implement processes, such as

federal and state agency staff) do better when they have substantive knowledge about the issues at hand and are able to effectively participate in a dialogue as speakers and listeners.

The articles that follow grapple with central questions related to public participation in environmental management and learning. A concern with learning comes across in many guises.

First, participants will rarely come to a process with full understandings of relevant issues and skills of dialogue (although some might think so!). Rather, these are learned and refined through participation. There is a question of how individuals learn as part of an effort to understand the substantive issues and to understand alternative options proposed by various participants. A related aspect of individual-based learning is how people present their own ideas to others — how they speak, how they find and use their “voice.” The articles by Walker, Senecah, and Daniels and by Petts speak to these issues.

Second, the organizers of a process often learn about what works and what doesn’t by actually carrying out an effort. There is the question of how organizations learn to do public participation better, by adapting during a process to changing conditions and needs and after a process is completed (decision made) so that a better job can be done next time. Evaluation both during and after a process can allow practitioners to better understand and structure efforts that promote understandings and respectful, open, and thoughtful dialogue. The articles by Chess and Johnson, by Walker, Senecah, and Daniels, by Petts, and by Hartley and Robertson speak to these issues.

Finally, those of us who study public participation and collaborative decision-making — and offer suggestions about practice — learn through study of what happens in specific cases. In other words, we learn by doing and critically reflecting on what we are doing. This is the focus of Halvorsen’s article.

As Halvorsen points out in her article, “we know a great deal about what people believe constitutes a high quality public participation process.” The intent of presenting these articles together is to highlight the ways that researchers and practitioners are helping to better our understandings of how to achieve what people want.

Enjoy.

Endnotes

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3. For more information about the conference see <http://launch.vermontlaw.edu/epp/>

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