

New spaces for debates, or new debates in existing spaces?

Some thoughts and background reading from Janet Salisbury

Craig Cormick's summary paper from the December 'War on Science' workshop in Canberra draws the following conclusion under 'Defining the problem':

'So we need new spaces for debates, or new debates in existing spaces'

While, much has been done over the past 10–15 years within the science communication space to promote dialogue, activities have generally been patchy, and discussions such as this one on the 'War on Science' still seem to be lacking in any agreed direction or consistent approach. Meanwhile, dialogue projects have been springing up around the world in relation to public conversations around other issues of citizen concern and conflict. Through my involvement in a Canberra project — Canberra Conversations (see below), I have explored and participated in this emerging movement over the past few years. The following links provide some insights that might inform the direction that ASC might want to take in promoting community dialogue around science issues.

Demographic Dialogue: A Handbook for Practitioners

http://www.undp.org/cpr/documents/we_do/democratic%20dialogue.pdf

This book is a joint project of the United Nations Development program and a number of other international agencies and is about developing dialogue to promote peace in the world. Like Wendy Russell, one of the panellists at the Canberra workshop, I do not find the language of a 'war' on science very helpful. However, if we want to use this metaphor, then it might be also be a good idea to look at some of the most progressive and thoughtful ideas about peacekeeping, in particular, and democratic dialogue in general.

Revisiting this book, I found that if we were to replace the references to war and the military in the Foreword (by Lakhdar Brahimi, Former Adviser to the United Nations Secretary-General), with references to the problems faced by science, the message is clear and, armed with the insights provided in this book and the other projects listed below, science communicators are well placed to be peacekeepers! He concludes:

The outcome of a real dialogue process will seldom be predictable. Even the most consistent application of the lessons learned should not be taken as a guarantee of success. This is the case with all political processes that involve a plurality of actors, and that take place in multifaceted and rapidly evolving contexts. Dialogue, indeed, is an eminently political process: on the one hand, it conforms to hard facts and has a purpose—to seek responses to very concrete social and political claims and grievances. But on the other hand it is also influenced by the more delicate and elusive chemistry of human relationships.

Understanding both the underlying political issues (the deep-seated grievances) and the human relationships that often blur and distort the picture (but that may also, when allowed to emerge, carry unsuspected positive energies) is crucial to creating the 'dialogic situation' that catalyses progress and allows the gap to be bridged.

Public Conversations Project

<http://www.publicconversations.org/who>

This project was founded in 1989 in Boston to improve polarised conversations about abortion. Since that time, PCP has developed a distinctive approach to public dialogue across many issues and developed a set of useful resources.

See, in particular, ‘Dialogue in Action/Public Policy’ (<http://www.publicconversations.org/dialogue/policy>), for the following case studies:

- Could Main environmentalists, timberland owners, public land managers, scientists and sportsmen’s groups agree about how to manage forests?
- ‘How did dialogue change the climate around abortion in Boston following fatal shootings?’

There is lots of good information on this site; in particular, I recommend their guidebook:

A Nuts and Bolts Guide from the Public Conversations Project

http://www.publicconversations.org/pcp/docs/resources/Jams_website.pdf

While on the topic of peacekeeping and ending the ‘war’ — I can’t help but be moved by this ‘1000-tables’ example of public dialogue from Israel:

<http://daviidehg.wordpress.com/2011/09/10/1000-tables/>

Dialogue at SFU

<http://www.sfu.ca/dialog/>

In Vancouver, the Morris J Wosk Centre for Dialogue at Simon Fraser University has created a beautiful and distinctive meeting space ‘in the round’ for international conferences and stimulating dialogues. This centre runs dialogue events, innovative courses, and professional development programs to create a community of dialogue in British Columbia.

Most recently, the centre has hosted *Canada’s World*, a collaborative project between 15 universities and over 40 organisations with the goal to engage Canadians and nontraditional voices in an ongoing conversation about what citizens want their nation’s role in the world to be. <http://www.canadasworld.ca/whatisw>

Sciencewise-Expert Resource Centre

<http://www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk/cms/>

Sciencewise-ERC — the UK Government’s national centre for public dialogue in policy making involving science and technology issues — has a lot of information about how the UK government has approached this issue.

I found this youtube video helpful:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=snU3L5ioZrs&noredirect=1>

Art of Hosting Conversations that Matter

<http://www.artofhosting.org/home/>

The Art of Hosting is a worldwide community of practitioners using integrated participative change processes, methods, maps, and planning tools to engage groups and teams in

meaningful conversation, deliberate collaboration, and group-supported action for the common good. It has been very active in international organisations such as the European Commission:

The art of hosting was co-initiated by a group of individuals who were curious to discover new ways in how people can meet to create wise actions. These were people from all over the world who sensed that there was a different way to work with diversity and who wanted to experience and experiment with this. Now there is a world-wide network of practitioners and trainings that take place in Europe, North and South America, Africa, Middle East, Australia, New Zealand and Asia. This way of innovating, relating and working is being used within organisations such as the European Commission, multi-stakeholder large scale projects, communities, schools, universities, government led initiatives and within families.
[Maria Scordialos, co-founder of The Art of Hosting]

Australian Centre for Dialogue Project, ANU

<http://www.anu.edu.au/dialogue/>

Inspired by the SFU Centre for Dialogue in Canada (see above), The Australian Centre for Dialogue, was initiated in 2002 with the aim for provide a major national and international venue in Canberra where groups and individuals could join in dialogue on issue of the day. This dream has not yet been realised but the project continues to host regular dialogue gatherings at the ANU for people interested in the practice of dialogue, and run important community dialogues such as the Dialogue for Community Harmony in Port Augusta in September 2010.

Canberra Conversations

<http://www.chorusofwomen.org/events.htm#Conversations>

Over the past 3 years, I have facilitated 9 citizen's conversations in Canberra in a series of called 'Canberra Conversations'. The 3-hour conversations have been co-hosted by a Canberra community forum, A Chorus of Women (of which I am a member), and the ANU Climate Change Institute (with Professor Will Steffen) and have been around issues of sustainability, including energy generation and use, transport, greenhouse gas emissions reduction, urban development and infill, Importantly, and unlike other public meetings about science issues, the conversations, involve artistic expression (in the form of music, poetry and story) to help people engage with the issues and find common ground in a shared humanity. It is not easy — some of the conversations have been better than others — but all have created a thoughtful and respectful opportunity for people to explore different perspectives on issues that would normally create adversarial debate in other political and public arenas. After our conversation on urban infill a member of a local resident's association (who are usually fighting infill projects), wrote in their feedback: 'I didn't expect to be inspired by a developer.'

Sciencewise-Expert Resource Centre

<http://www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk/cms/>

In terms of informing government policy making more specifically about science issues, Sciencewise-ERC — the UK government's national centre for public dialogue in policy making involving science and technology issues.

As an overview of what we might aspire to at a government level, I found this youtube clip useful: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=snU3L5ioZrs&noredirect=1>