

Work in Progress

A Brief Description of Interactivity Foundation's Sanctuary and Public Discussions

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Contents

	Page
Overview	1
IF Discussions Begin In Sanctuary	1
<i>Exploration of the Public Policy Area of Concern</i>	2
<i>Development of Conceptual Possibilities for Public Policy</i>	2
<i>Transition from Conceptual to Practical Exploration</i>	3
<i>Exploration of Possible Practical Consequences</i>	3
<i>Joint Panel Discussions</i>	3
<i>Editing the Citizen Discussion Report</i>	4
Lessons Learned about Sanctuary Discussions	4
<i>Importance of Careful Panelist Selection</i>	4
<i>Importance of Editing by Project Manager</i>	4
<i>Useful Conceptual Possibilities</i>	4
IF Public Discussions Begin Where Sanctuary Discussions End	5
Lessons Learned about Public Discussions	5
<i>Usefulness of the IF Public Discussions</i>	6
<i>Organizing Pubic Discussions and Recruiting Participants</i>	6
<i>Citizen Discussion Reports as a Starting Point for Public Discussion</i>	7
<i>Discussion Conduct and Process</i>	7
Ongoing Development of IF Sanctuary and Public Discussions	8
<i>IF Sanctuary Discussions</i>	8
<i>IF Public Discussions</i>	8
Rationale for IF Public Discussions	9
<i>Why Participate?</i>	9
<i>Why Might Citizens Find Discussion Useful?</i>	10
<i>Why Discuss Conceptual Possibilities?</i>	10

The Interactivity Foundation (IF) exists to promote citizens' thoughtful public policy choice through citizen discussion. In IF discussions, citizens explore a range of conceptual possibilities for public policy and their possible consequences. Two things set this form of public discussion off from more conventional forms of discussion such as debate, public hearings, and consensus-building: its emphasis on exploration and its focus on conceptual possibilities. These distinctive elements are what IF citizen discussions contribute to thoughtful citizen choice, and what they contribute to public discourse as a whole.

Overview

In IF public discussions small groups of citizens explore an area of public policy concern, a range of conceptual possibilities for addressing it, and some of the possible consequences that might result from them over the course of three or four sessions, each lasting about four hours. The goal of the discussions is not to produce any group action or decision, but rather to enhance participants' individual choices.

IF's small group public discussions do not start "from scratch" but rather by asking participants to consider a short discussion document. This "Citizen Discussion Report" is prepared prior to the public discussions in an extensive series of citizen discussions whose "sanctuary" setting guarantees anonymity in order to encourage free and wide-ranging discussion. IF's public discussions thus allow citizens to interact both with each other and with the thinking of a group of fellow citizens who have had an opportunity to consider the area of public policy concern in a far more prolonged and intensive way.

Both the preparatory sanctuary discussions and the public discussions themselves are carefully facilitated to ensure conceptual and exploratory discussion rather than debate or advocacy, and to ensure that all participants have an opportunity to get involved.

IF Discussions Begin In Sanctuary

The IF sanctuary discussions that are the source of the Citizen Discussion Report that will serve as the starting point for later public discussions are managed by an IF Fellow, who serves as both editor and facilitator. They begin with the selection of two separate panels of citizens. One of these is made up of professionals or experts—those with a specialist's knowledge or background in the area of concern. The other is made up of generalists, often with some lived experience in the area of concern. Because it is thought that public discussions are enriched by a consideration of a reasonable range of conceptual possibilities for public

policy diversity in perspective is an important qualification for selection to both panels. For the same reason, all sanctuary panelists are called upon to work together as “thinkers” rather than “knowers”—to cooperate in exploratory and developmental discussion rather than simply share opinions. Although selected for these qualities, panelists are further encouraged to approach discussion in this way by providing them with “sanctuary”—a guarantee that their contributions will be held confidential.

IF sanctuary discussions flow fluidly from an initial exploration of the public policy area of concern to the exploration and development of conceptual possibilities for addressing it, and from there to an exploration of the consequences of the conceptual possibilities that panelists choose as most likely to be useful for public discussion. The discussions culminate in a Citizen Discussion Report, edited by the IF project manager, that will serve as the starting point for future public discussions.

Exploration of the Public Policy Area of Concern

Most discussions of public policy involve a contest between advocates of a very small number of “proposals” intended to solve an immediate practical problem. IF sanctuary discussions, by contrast, begin with a small set of general or conceptual questions provided by an IF facilitator. By exploring these questions the panelists arrive at their own, far more extensive set of conceptual questions. This set of questions constitutes the panelists’—not society’s or a pundit’s or the facilitator’s—description of the area of concern.

Development of Conceptual Possibilities for Public Policy

During the next stage in the IF sanctuary discussion process, each panel explores answers to its own conceptual questions. Once combined, these answers are further developed into conceptual possibilities for public policy. These conceptual possibilities amount to the panels’ responses to the area of concern as described in the first stage of their discussion. They describe in conceptual or general terms different possible public policies and what a society in which they operated might be like. In order to stimulate later public discussion, the IF process calls upon panelists to develop a reasonable range of conceptual possibilities, and allows any single panelist to include a possibility, even if it is rejected by everyone else.

There are three interactive reasons that these conceptual possibilities later become the focus IF public discussion. The first is that citizens can discuss conceptual possibilities on equal terms with each other and even with authorities and experts. Second, conceptual possibilities deal with a number of aspects of public policy that are both fundamental and ignored in much of public discussion, such as the various motives and assumptions behind public policy, the interactivities that might exist

between different kinds of policy and between policy and society, and the relevance to public policy of possible future developments. The third reason for focusing on conceptual possibilities is that—because they describe neither “what is” nor “what must be” but rather “what might be”—they tend to encourage exploratory discussion while discouraging advocacy. For these reasons, while a discussion of conceptual possibilities cannot guarantee a thoughtful discussion, it does increase the likelihood that everyone will learn from everyone else—and that what is learned will be useful.

Transition from Conceptual to Practical Exploration

Until now the sanctuary panels' exploration has been conceptual—and expressed in their own conceptual language. It will next move into a practical phase, in which panelists explore the short and longer-term practical consequences of their conceptual possibilities. To make this possible, the conceptual and “internal” language of the panels must be translated into more concise and direct language. These shorter, plainer expressions of the gist of the conceptual possibilities are also useful later on as a ready reference point for participants in public discussion.

Exploration of Possible Practical Consequences

Panelists' final choice of conceptual possibilities is made only after they have explored in broad or conceptual terms what impact the possibility will have on individuals, groups, institutions, and society as a whole. But once panelists have selected conceptual possibilities, they explore their more practical consequences as well. As they do this, they are naturally guided by their own interests and limited by how far they (or anyone else) can see into the future. For these reasons, the practical consequences they explore are neither conclusive nor exhaustive but “possible.”

During this stage, panelists first explore various ways the conceptual possibility might work in actual practice: who would do what—and how. They then explore both the immediate and more long-term consequences of their answers. This latter step amounts to a kind of “test” or “reality check” on the conceptual possibilities, because it tends to reveal consequences that are unexpected, contradictory, and likely to be viewed negatively by at least some individuals or groups.

Joint Panel Discussions

Upon finishing their separate discussions, the two panels come together. After each group explains its work to the other, the joint panel works together to fuse their separate descriptions of the area of concern, conceptual possibilities, and practical consequences.

Editing the Citizen Discussion Report

Although reviewed by panelists, editing of the Citizen Discussion Report is not done by committee but is rather the responsibility of the IF project manager, whose goal is make the most of panelists' thinking as a springboard for citizen discussion.

Each IF Citizen Discussion Report briefly and as clearly and engagingly as possible identifies and describes the possible questions, possible answers, and possible consequences resulting from sanctuary discussions. The staff work is intended to both stimulate discussion and provide a jumping-off point for it. Rather than provide "answers," it describes the questions that the sanctuary panels explored, the conceptual possibilities they developed for answering them, and some of the illustrative consequences that might result from them.

Lessons Learned about Sanctuary Discussions

Scrutiny of the experience we have gathered from both sanctuary discussions and public discussions alike has yielded many lessons about our conduct of sanctuary discussions. The three described in this section are perhaps the most important.

Importance of Careful Panelist Selection

To begin with, we have learned that while the IF sanctuary discussion process of exploration and development is relatively robust, it is only as useful as its participants make it. We had suspected from the start this was true of the project manager, who must be an able facilitator and editor. We have since learned that the characteristics of sanctuary panelists—especially their openness to cooperative and exploratory discussion—are equally important. For this reason, IF Fellows have begun to cast their nets more widely in recruiting panelists and taken more care to ensure their suitability for IF sanctuary discussions.

Importance of Editing by Project Manager

IF Fellows have increasingly come to recognize the critical importance of the editorial work they do between discussion sessions to render the panels' previous discussions coherent and prepare them to move forward during their next meeting.

Useful Conceptual Possibilities

The third principal lesson that we have begun to apply to sanctuary discussions, this one derived from public discussions, is that certain kinds

of conceptual possibilities are more likely to lead to useful citizen discussion than others. Conceptual possibilities tend to be most useful as a stimulus and point of departure for public discussion when they:

- seriously engage citizens' moral, emotional, and/or intellectual interest
- are able to evoke a "different world"
- suggest rich and contrasting consequences
- clearly identify who the key actors will be and how they will interact, as well as who will make decisions and how decisions will be made
- are open to different interpretations as to means of implementation, future direction, or mode of unfolding; and/or
- are presented in language that is unbiased and of sufficient clarity to avoid disputes over the meaning of words.

IF Public Discussions Begin Where Sanctuary Discussions End

The citizens staff work generated in sanctuary and edited by the IF project manager then takes on a new life as the focus for public discussions.

Until now, IF has recruited for and conducted its own public discussions, typically with small groups of from five to eight participants, a size which has proved optimal for exploratory and interactive discussions. Recruiting has been done directly, through networking, with discussion sessions generally being held in a restaurant or at a participant's house. Each discussion actually consists of from three to four sessions, each typically including a meal and lasting for about four hours.

During IF public discussions citizen participants first briefly react to all of the individual conceptual possibilities contained in the Citizen Discussion Report in order to ensure that everyone is familiar with their range and involved in the discussion. Discussion then moves to a more interactive mode, in which participants explore each conceptual possibility in greater depth, then returning to re-consider all of the possibilities as a group. Once the discussion is over, participants record their reactions to each conceptual possibility and to the discussions.

Lessons Learned about Public Discussions

All of IF's citizen staff work reports have been the subject of at least three small group public discussion series; additional public discussions are planned with current and future IF reports. What follows is a selective sample of some of the more significant lessons we have learned in the process.

Usefulness of the IF Public Discussions

Appreciation for IF public discussions has been nearly unanimous among the scores of citizens who have already participated in them. Almost all participants have said that they value the discussions as a form of civic engagement and a way to deepen and broaden their appreciation of conceptual possibilities as well as the concerns to which they might respond. Participants have noted that the discussions bring other benefits as well, including: a chance to socialize and network; an opportunity to view their profession "from the outside; and a welcome counter to the pessimism that is prevalent in so many realms.

Considering the apathy so often attributed to citizens, what might explain citizens' enthusiasm for IF public discussions? One factor might be a "selection bias"—that is, IF facilitators may be drawing citizens from the minority who are already enthusiastic about the idea. There is another explanation, however.

Our experience is that citizens' concerns about politics and public discussion tend to be transformed in actual small group citizens discussions into enthusiasm for the exploratory and developmental nature of the discussion process and its results. Some participants who begin the discussions feeling powerless are reinvigorated through genuine engagement with other citizens in the democratic process, others through a consideration of possible alternatives to current policy realities. Some "expert" participants' who begin the discussions thinking that they already "know the answer" find themselves developing a deeper appreciation of both the questions at stake and their possible answers. Still other participants' need to "solve problems" or make immediate decisions gives way to a sense that in making their choices as citizens it can be useful to first explore the really big questions at stake in a particular area of public policy concern and conceptual possibilities for addressing them. And virtually all participants gain a greater understanding of and tolerance for how and why others think about the area of concern. We do not know with certainty which of these dynamics has had the greatest impact. What we do know is that they have left many—if not most—participants in IF public discussions eager for more.

Organizing Pubic Discussions and Recruiting Participants

In practice, recruiting by networking among known contacts has had good, but limited, results. We have had particular difficulty recruiting

citizens lacking a college education and, to a lesser extent, those with small children at home.

We have also learned that scheduling problems cannot be eliminated, only managed. Attendance tends to be maximized not by attempting to satisfy all participants' preferences all the time, but rather by recruiting to and sticking with a set schedule of sessions and slightly expanding the participant pool beyond the "ideal" number of six-seven to allow for absences.

Citizen Discussion Reports as a Starting Point for Public Discussion

Each successive public discussion series has added to our confidence that the conceptual possibilities that are at the core of IF Citizen Discussion Reports provide a useful focus for citizen discussion of public policy. Our experience also continues to validate the notion that public discussion participants find it much easier to react to conceptual possibilities than to create them from the ground up (as sanctuary panelists must do).

The usefulness of the Citizen Discussion Reports in general, and of the conceptual possibilities they describe in particular, is born out by the high quality of IF public discussions. Participants jump in quickly and, even with relatively little guidance from the facilitator, tend to move their discussion to a level that is typical only of the later stages of sanctuary discussions. (This may help explain why IF-trained facilitators have experienced success with their public discussions similar to that of more experienced IF project managers).

Most public discussion participants have found a shorter version of the staff work to be most useful. However, some participants continue to refer to the longer version they are provided, as well. As a result, our current practice is to distribute the longer version separately, while including a shorter discussion version as part of the collection of materials participants receive in a binder at the outset of discussions.

Discussion Conduct and Process

A number of important lessons have also been gleaned from IF's early experience about the conduct of public discussion.

First, it seems increasingly clear that it is useful to conduct at least four discussion sessions because participants' interactivity with the conceptual possibilities and each other typically begins to accelerate appreciably during the third discussion session.

Second, facilitators have learned that there are a number of ways to blunt some participants' concerns that the conceptual possibilities are too "vague" or "unrealistic", including reminding participants that:

- thoughtful choice means thinking through possibilities beyond the specifics of the given or status quo
- rather than leaving the democratic discussion of possibilities to others, they are jumping in and doing it
- proclaiming something "impossible" requires a knowledge of the future that few can presume to possess

- history is full of examples of important and unanticipated change
- possible means of actually implementing each of the conceptual possibilities have been explored in sanctuary and are described in the Citizen Discussion Report.

Third, experience has shown that it can be useful to begin public discussions with an exploration of the area of concern itself, both as described in the Citizen Discussion Report and as participants view it themselves. Beginning public discussions in this way can help:

- generate immediate interest and involvement in the discussion
- focus participants on the conceptual level
- improve participants' grasp of what is at stake in the various conceptual possibilities

Ongoing Development of IF Sanctuary and Public Discussions

Ongoing development of IF's sanctuary and citizens discussions will continue to rely on experience and reflection on it. As the tempo of IF public discussions increases, this development is likely to accelerate, not simply because we are gaining more experience, but because our experience with each form of discussion informs our approach to the other. The gathering pace of development is exciting, but it also means that IF's own exploration of conceptual possibilities will intensify. Still, some future developments are already coming into focus.

IF Sanctuary Discussions

The most important aspect of the IF sanctuary discussion process under current development is the editing of the citizen staff work report itself. Although the reports have clearly been useful in public discussion, we are working to further improve them by making them more accessible, interactive, and developmental.

IF Public Discussions

Better Citizen Discussion Reports will have a positive impact on IF public discussions. But in the short term IF will also be working on improving the way the discussions are conducted, as well. Under exploration are possibilities for making public discussions more closely approximate the interactive, exploratory, and developmental discussions that typify the longer and more intensive sanctuary discussions.

A second priority is to include a better mix of participants. Currently two distinct possibilities are under exploration. The first would involve networking in clubs, organizations, and groups whose members are themselves diverse or whose members might complement the more well-educated citizens who have most frequently participated in our public discussions. A second possibility for broadening participation in IF public discussions might be to reduce some of the barriers that keep citizens away, such as work and child-care duties.

In the medium term, IF contemplates significantly expanding its public discussions by training others to organize and conduct them. Already a number of IF-trained college faculty facilitators have shown the promise of this approach. IF is currently exploring who else might be recruited for this task, how they might be trained, and how often such trainings might occur.

Over the longer term, IF's explorations will broaden. We are making some headway; both sanctuary and citizens discussions seem to be stimulating thoughtful discussion. The next step will be to consider the question of more clearly connecting thoughtful discussion to citizens' choices. IF may or may not have a role in actually helping make such connections. But it is accustomed to exploring just such possibilities.

Rationale for IF Public Discussions

Why spend time in a busy world exploring conceptual possibilities for public policy in discussion with other citizens? For many citizens the question is a reasonable one. Some are convinced that their choices can do little—if anything—to affect the direction of public policy. Others may appreciate the importance of “citizen input” but think that they already know quite enough to make choices without the added bother of further discussion. Even those who see the relevance of citizen discussion to immediate practical decisions may find it difficult to grasp the usefulness of exploring conceptual possibilities for public policy.

Why Participate?

Why should democratic citizens participate in the choice of public policy? Why might it be our “duty”, as we are so often told? The answer to these questions is that in a democracy it is citizens who are ultimately the ones who—whether directly or indirectly, through representatives—make public policy choices. The democratic citizen is a chooser.

Choosing is sometimes difficult; it can require soul-searching and careful thought. Choosing can also be painful; it can mean giving up something important to gain something even more valuable. For these reasons it is understandable that we yearn to be relieved of the necessity of choice—

by others who seem certain of their own choices, by systems of rules, or by simply “doing what we’ve always done.”

But it is important to recognize that a decision to “opt out”, whether because we don’t see the point or because we are all too aware of the discomfort a choice might cause, is in itself a choice.

Why Might Citizens Find Discussion Useful?

There is no “escape” from choice—only choice that is more or less thoughtful. That citizen discussion can help transform democratic choice into thoughtful democratic choice has been appreciated since at least the time of the ancient Athenians. They understood that discussion can improve judgment in a way nothing else can. To be thoughtful, citizens need more than information or analysis or advice; they need to think. And there are at least some ways in which citizens think better together—as they do in interactive discussion—than alone.

Why Discuss Conceptual Possibilities?

Which brings us to IF’s distinctive emphasis on the exploration of conceptual possibilities for public policy. What special contributions might it make to thoughtful citizen choice?

Two have already been mentioned. First, most other current forms of public discussion involve either advocacy or immediate decisions. IF public discussions allow citizens to learn with and from other citizens without having to defend their views; indeed, they are free to “try out” ideas that they may not believe in at all. The second reinforces the first, while adding something of its own: because they are conceptual rather than practical, IF public discussions can cover a great deal of important ground that is simply ignored in most public policy discussion. The conceptual possibilities at the heart of IF Citizen Discussion Reports and public discussions make available for further exploration everything from the questions, motives and assumptions underlying policy choices to their broader consequences—unconstrained by disciplinary boundaries or conventional categories. These are things citizens care about—not the arcane details of statutes and regulations. And, because they involve the future direction of policy rather than the specifics of government, party, or expert proposals, they are also things citizens can grasp—and can grasp better as the result of discussion. Third, because IF public discussions begin with a *range* of conceptual possibilities, they both confront participants with the necessity of choice and equip them to face it in a more thoughtful way.