

Making Deliberative Dialogue Work Online

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with Nathan Connors
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Bang the Table is a digital community engagement company with a strong social mission. Our purpose is to involve citizens around the world in the conversations that affect their lives and advocate public participation as vital for any well-functioning democracy.



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Preface

Deliberative processes are essential for engaging your community. They facilitate social learning and dialogue, expose participants to new information, and enable higher quality engagement with important public policy - and with each other. Community-based deliberation is, therefore, an important element of social cohesion and resilience.

Over the past decade or two, deliberative processes have become increasingly normalised as 'leading practice' amongst community engagement practitioners globally. However, deliberation in the digital, or online space, is still very much in its infancy.

This eguide is an introductory explainer that unpacks the key challenges of moving processes that would traditionally be carried out in face-to-face environments onto online environments. As co-founder of Bang the Table, it is extremely important that community and stakeholder engagement practitioners are equipped to run effective and best-practice engagement activities.

Thank you for your interest in learning more about online digital deliberation. I sincerely hope you find this eguide useful in helping you run better online deliberative dialogue processes.

Dr Crispin Butteriss
Co-founder, Bang the Table



Overview

Running effective online deliberative dialogue activities is an essential skill-set and methodology for community engagement practitioners. This eguide has been created to provide an overview of how to conduct online deliberation. Here, we focus on nine key issues to consider when planning for an online deliberative dialogue. Understanding these key issues will help you gain confidence with moving your traditional face-to-face processes online. Our goal is to support you to identify risks, understand different types of dialogue, reinforce the importance of moderation and highlight the need to play an active role as a facilitator in an online deliberative dialogue space.

We have focussed on the following key issues:

1. Dialogue Principles
2. Process Design
3. Software Selection Criteria
4. Framing, Exploring and Contextualising
5. Participant Recruitment
6. Process Management
7. Content Moderation
8. Dialogue Facilitation
9. Understanding Behavioural Modes

Suitable for anyone with an interest in learning about online deliberation, this introductory eguide steps through how to plan and deliver an online deliberative activity.



Introduction

Before exploring the practicalities of implementing an online deliberative dialogue process, it's crucial to understand how deliberation and dialogue work together as a process that allows for enhanced decision-making. In order to do this, we have separated out the concepts to explore their individual characteristics. This is important as it will help to reinforce the compounding effects which are present in 'deliberative dialogue,' especially when looking at the practicalities and objectives of implementing such a process.

WHAT IS DELIBERATION?

Deliberation and deliberative processes have become accepted as best-practice methods of public participation. Indeed, more recently, these processes have brought into focus [questions around whether deliberation can renew democracy](#). This is partly due to their ability to support democratic decision-making at all levels by incorporating a range of different views and opinions into a focussed discussion. Essential to understanding the concept of deliberation is the recognition of the core objective to create a respectful environment that allows participants to consider the arguments of others. This core objective allows for participants to potentially transform their *values* and *preferences* to allow for a collective decision-making outcome. This is a key distinguishing feature of deliberation which makes it uniquely different from what we often understand as a debate. Deliberation is a social process involving many people. It happens when participants are able to think broadly and deeply about information and views being presented to them in a respectful environment.

By dictionary definition, deliberation is "long and careful consideration or discussion" that requires us to suspend our subjective opinions. Most definitions of deliberative theory - or deliberative democracy - focus on deliberation being solutions focussed. However, deliberation is a broad method (within lots of different processes) for problem solving that involves very careful consideration of all of the evidence, issues and various stakeholder positions, as well as many of the potential solutions.

Deliberation, therefore, requires participants to be exposed to information that is both broad and deep. The information must be provided to participants in formats that assist comprehension. This should be done via a facilitated



process as quickly, and as deeply, as reasonably possible. With this in mind, however, participants must also be provided with time. Time to read, listen, talk, digest, dwell and learn.

“Deliberation is typically embedded in a dialogue containing many other ingredients – elaborations, clarifications, illustrations, asides, jokes, insults.”
- Tim Van Gelder, 2018¹

Understanding deliberation as a process of suspending subjective opinions - instead of maintaining a focus on a range of information to allow for careful consideration of evidence - is an essential step in developing a ‘deliberative dialogue’ process with your community.

WHAT IS DIALOGUE?

Generally speaking, dialogue is a familiar concept - and something which we take part in during our everyday lives. It is understood via a relatively colloquial definition as a conversation between two or more people. While we all take part in a dialogue, we often don't pause to consider what a dialogue means as a conceptual or scientific process. Within the field of deliberative democracy, for example, dialogue takes on a much richer understanding than that experienced in our day-to-day lives. A dialogue, in this sense, embodies goodwill towards one's interlocutor. Again, as with deliberation, this sense of goodwill or respect, is an essential component of dialogue as it creates a discourse which provides for positive learning and interactions.

While dialogue has been defined by many authors, here we draw on theoretical physicist, [David Bohm's *On Dialogue*](#), a collection of his essays and lectures from the 1970s and 1980s that explored the creation and process of human communication, what obstructs us from listening to one another and how we can transcend barriers to reach mutual understanding. As Bohm outlines, “‘Dialogue’ comes from the Greek word dialogos. Dia meaning through and logos meaning ‘the word’ or in our case ‘the meaning of the word.’” Putting the word back together we see how this derivation suggests dialogue to be defined as a stream of meaning flowing among, through and between us. Communication that works to create something new, Bohm argues, occurs not only between people, but within people. Bohm's meaning of dialogue also suggests to us that dialogue makes possible a flow of meaning amongst a whole group, out of which may emerge some new understanding.

Bohm here sheds insight into a particular way for participants to give their attention to the dialogue content, and the subtle moment-to-moment

¹ Van Gelder, Tim, ‘The Wisdom of Crowds: Is there such a thing as collective knowledge and can new technologies capture it?’ *Australian Rationalist: Journal of the Rationalist Society of Australia*, March 2018, p.13.



unfolding process of thought itself. The objective of a dialogue, Bohm explains, is not to win an argument, or to exchange opinions. "In a dialogue," Bohm writes, "there is no attempt to gain points, or to make your particular view prevail. Rather, whenever any mistake is discovered on the part of anybody, everybody gains." Rather, then, it is to suspend opinion and assumption, to resist clinging to our existing opinions, and look at all of the opinions in order to see what meaning can be derived. By avoiding a tendency to manufacture a truth, a dialogue provides a space to simply share the appreciation of all the meanings of the group and from this, discover a shared appreciation which should emerge as an unannounced truth. When all people are participating in a dialogue they are said to be taking on the whole meaning of the group and also taking part in it. This is what Bohm describes as a true dialogue, one that provides for a collective way of opening up judgements and assumptions.

"When we come together to talk, or otherwise to act in common, can each one of us be aware of the subtle fear and pleasure sensations that "block" his ability to listen freely? Without this awareness, the injunction to listen to the whole of what is said will have little meaning. But if each one of us can give full attention to what is actually "blocking" communication while he is also attending properly to the content of what is communicated, then we may be able to create something new between us, something of very great significance for bringing to an end the at present insoluble problems of the individual and of society."

- David Bohm²

This idealistic description of a dialogue is crucial to understanding how we, as engagement practitioners, must attempt to construct and facilitate a space in which this environment can flourish. While we all accept there are constant forces pushing back against this ideal, including power imbalances, poverty, illiteracy, old antagonisms, stereotypes and other poor behaviour, establishing a considered online deliberative dialogue space is essential if we are to realise the benefits of deliberative dialogue processes.

2 Bohm, David, *On Dialogue*, Routledge, London and New York, 2004.



Principles for Online Deliberative Dialogue

Online deliberative processes mirror more traditional face-to-face processes in that they require sound foundations based on a clear set of operating principles. Below are a key set of principles which underpin the practice of online deliberative dialogue. Understanding these principles is the first step in identifying whether you are prepared for an online deliberative dialogue and that you have effectively thought about how the process will enable or enhance your consultation.

1. Participants have equitable access to online technologies and resources to ensure they have an equivalent experience of the process; for example, high-speed broadband access, and a contemporary PC or equivalent.
2. The digital technologies and formats provided enable participants with differing capacities - literacy, education, local language etc. - to participate equitably.
3. Online dialogue is about reading, listening, watching and learning. Participants are required to enter the dialogue with goodwill towards other participants; to suspend their assumptions and preconceptions; to attend to the common good; and, to be open to transformational change.
4. Online dialogue is also about writing, speaking, expressing, and being heard. Participation is open, fair and equitable through both the recruitment and facilitation processes. Status is suspended in favour of open discussion. Indeed, some form of within-group anonymity may be designed into the process. Expression of difference is encouraged.
5. The process must have a 'plausible promise', rather than necessarily a guarantee of implementation, as an outcome of participation. Consensus is not necessarily the objective, and indeed, not necessarily desirable.
6. Participants must be able to trust each other, which means that confidentiality must be respected and a respectful dialogue must be moderated and facilitated.
7. Participants are empowered to influence the process and given ample time to question and reflect on the material, presentations and discussions. Participation takes various forms as appropriate at different stages throughout the discovery and decision-making process.



Process Design

Most digital engagement exercises do not have a methodology. They have a launch date, and a close date. If you want to create a deliberative space, you cannot simply launch a website and hope.

There are a range of deliberative methods used in public engagement practice - deliberative polling, deliberative workshops, deliberative mapping, consensus conferences, citizens juries, charrettes, planning-by-design etc. With just a little bit of creative thinking, any one of these could be applied in an online context. A simple and adaptable online methodology to utilise, in which you can incorporate deliberative dialogue, is the design-thinking model.

The model follows the following pattern; (1) empathise, (2) define, (3) ideate, (4) prototype, and (5) test. Each of these different phases provides an opportunity to include deliberative dialogue activities. Below are the key components of each phase.

1. Empathising is the process of getting a deep 'lived' understanding of the problem from the perspective of those who are directly affected. In an online dialogue context, this may be dealt with through, for example, digital storytelling. Empathising via a forum discussion can also be achieved, however, this will require considered facilitation and moderation.
2. Defining is the process of agreeing, very specifically, on the problem you are collectively trying to solve, on the terms of reference and on any hard boundaries. In an online context, this may be a collaborative writing exercise.
3. Ideation is the process of imagineering as many lateral solutions to the problem as possible (with being limited by resources, politics, logic, budget etc.). This may be the online equivalent of a brainstorm, potentially using text, video, images and maps.
4. Prototyping is the process of fleshing out a number of preferred pathways or solutions through research, dialogue and deliberation. Couched in online deliberative dialogue, this is where online forums become the most obvious tool for providing participants with access to research materials, knowledgeable speakers, and each other's thoughts and feelings.
5. Finally, testing is the process of taking the preferred prototype to the market. In the context of an online deliberation, this could take the form of putting the prototype out to the broader community for discussion and feedback.



Software Selection Criteria

The issue of [process design is often muddled up with software selection criteria in academic literature](#) about online deliberative processes. This is a short list of functionality which we consider crucial when selecting the right software for establishing online deliberative processes.

- Your software must support various activities (other than deliberation) throughout the process, which means you need more than just online forums - for example, quick polls, surveys, ideation, idea ranking, collaborative authoring, digital storytelling, spatial ideation etc.
- Various deliberation tools should also be activated in parallel and sequentially to allow participants to raise questions, generate ideas and test their arguments etc. in as many forms as possible; including non-text forms, for example, 'likes' or 'votes'.
- Asynchronous discussion forums are far preferable to synchronous chat rooms. They permit more reflection time and encourage deeper deliberation, rationality, civility and inclusiveness.
- The platform user-experience should be straight-forward enough to be easily used by people who are inexperienced with internet technologies.
- Avoid anything, for example 'kudos' or 'labels', that privileges any one participant or contribution above others. Nevertheless, there may be an opportunity to provide incentives for 'quality' participation. It is, however, important to clearly identify facilitators and invited speakers or subject matter experts.
- There is some debate in the literature regarding anonymity. Anonymity between participants certainly reduces the barriers to entry for 'shy' participants and equalises relationships. However, anonymity may reduce the seriousness with which the participants treat the process and outcomes.
- The platform will need to have a 'private' and/or 'locked' mode to allow invited participants to engage freely.
- The platform will require an email newsletter and automated notification system in order to bring participants back to the dialogue on a regular basis.
- The platform will either require, or need to work very well with, qualitative and quantitative analysis and reporting systems.



Framing, Exploring and Contextualising

The way you choose to talk about your project, the information you provide participants to explore, and the way you contextualise the project are all critical to the way your dialogue participants will think about the issues. It also impacts participants' role in resolving those issues and the project process. Below are some key considerations for framing, and contextualising issues for an online deliberative dialogue.

- Framing the issues and the role of the participants in a positive light will set a tone and an expectation of success. Many community engagement processes acknowledge this explicitly, for example, Asset or Strengths Based Community Development. The Frame can help to set reasonable boundaries. It can also help to position the participant at the centre of the issue, rather than on its periphery.
- Contextual information resources should be provided in a variety of formats to ensure all participants have easy access; for example, HTML, video and PDF.
- These resources should also explore the issues in a variety of depths appropriate to needs of different participants; for example, plain language video summaries can sit alongside original text based source material.
- Subject matter experts need to be very carefully selected to ensure they are not too didactic. This will put participants off from asking questions. If possible, they should be invited to host live video Q&A sessions (that can be recorded for review later).
- The online dialogue should be monitored continuously for opportunities to provide participants with access to additional research and/or expert advice.
- Given that participants are expected to develop critical thinking skills as part of the process, you might want to invite specialists with alternative points of view to write critical analyses/reviews of resource material.
- You might also want to include multiple and conflicting information resources about the same subject, and then ask participants explicitly to explore and make sense of those conflicts.
- A simple measure, if there is a lot of resource information, is to ensure it is organised by topic, rather than upload date.



Participant Recruitment

The participant recruitment process is particularly fraught and absolutely crucial to the success, the authenticity, and the public acceptance of any online dialogue process. The main complexity (and debate) lies in how to treat the subject of 'representativeness'. There are a number of ways to recruit participants to an online dialogue, each with its own strengths and weaknesses.

- The most open form of online engagement uses **simple self-selection**. This model has the benefits of simplicity and transparency. It embraces the idea that anyone (and potentially everyone) with an interest in the subject has the right to be involved in the dialogue process. It also co-opts the idea from face-to-face dialogue processes that 'the people in the room' are the right people to solve the problem, because they are the people who are passionate about the issues. The method suffers from the risk that 'dominant voices' will control the dialogue to the detriment of 'minority voices' and communities.
- A second, common form of recruitment process that is used extensively for citizens juries is **stratified random sampling** of your affected community. Simply put, you look at the 'shape' of your community, as defined by a number of criteria (strata). For example, gender, age and ethnicity - and you recruit a sample of people to match that profile as closely as possible. This method has the benefit of bringing a range of voices to the table, and potentially a range of perspectives. It is open to criticism for excluding participants with a direct interest in the issues, from presenting as 'quasi-representative' based on ad hoc criteria, and from reinforcing the hegemony of the dominant social groups at the expense of minority voices.
- A third recruitment method is targeted or **purposive sampling**. This method attempts to acknowledge power imbalances in communities, particularly where the impact of policy changes impact different groups to a greater or lesser extent, by ensuring that minority and quiet voices are preferentially invited into the process. This is particularly important when members of those communities are likely to be adversely affected by any policy changes. The method ensures cognitive diversity within the group, which helps ensure participants hear diverse opinions, learn about opposing views, and hear counter arguments to their own opinions.



Process Management

As previously mentioned, most online forums and engagement exercises do not really have a 'process' as such. They are switched on, allowed to run their course, and then they are switched off. Sometimes they are moderated, less often, they are facilitated, and less often than we would all like to admit, the contents is analysed with a view to informing the policy development process.

Participants are rarely taken through a purposive process from relative ignorance, or unsubstantiated opinion, to thoughtful consideration of the issues, perspectives, possibilities and impacts of various courses of action. A deliberative dialogue requires a clear process with a beginning, a middle and an end.

Below are some crucial considerations for process management:

- Participants should be inducted into the process. This should include: (1) clearly explaining the process; (2) explaining the expectations of the participants in terms of their workload and participation; (3) explaining the process etiquette in terms of broad dialogue principles and specific moderation rules; and (4) explaining the separate roles of the moderators, facilitators, process managers, and technical support team. A simple and easy way to address this challenge could be to create a short video introduction for your engagement.
- The process manager is responsible for making sure that the process follows the published timeline. For example, they might publish and close discussion topics or surveys and polls to a predetermined schedule. They might also be empowered to make the call to extend certain parts of the process if they feel that the participants are in the middle of an important conversation.
- The process manager would also ensure that any materials and resources are published to the platform correctly.
- The process manager would be responsible for regular email communication with participants to; (1) remind participants about what is required of them at any particular point in the process; (2) to remind them that they have limited time to respond to part of the process as deadlines near; (3) to let participants know when the process has been altered and why; (4) to let participants know if new information/resources have been made available; (5) to let participants know about upcoming expert speakers; (6) to let participants know about the outcomes of any decision points in the process, for example, survey or poll findings.



Content Moderation

Content moderation is essential if you are seeking to provide a safe place for people to take part in your deliberative dialogue process. Moderation seeks to provide boundaries around the acceptable discourse for your activities and creates a reliable and trusted place for people to engage with one another.

Below are key considerations for content moderation:

- You must have a clear set of rules that bound acceptable behaviour for user generated contributions. These may vary from project to project, but include references to; (1) posting personal information; (2) naming organisational staff, particularly in a negative light; (3) defamatory content; (4) intolerance; (5) acceptable language; (6) bullying, hectoring and insulting; (7) external links; (8) advertising, and (9) comments on moderation policies and processes.
- You must also have a clear set of sanctions for breaching the moderation rules, for example; (1) content removal; (2) content editing; (3) temporary suspension of access privileges; and (4) permanent blocking of access privileges.
- You should consider including a set of guidelines for appropriate etiquette in the context of your particular project. These are, in the main, to promote positive behaviours, rather than to control poor behaviours, and may include broader instructions like 'be respectful', and specific education like, 'avoid CAPS LOCK'.
- Dialogue works best when it is allowed to flow, so you must find a way to use 'post-hoc' moderation. That is, moderation, after the comment (or content) has been allowed to go live on the site.
- Depending on the perceived risk of user-generated content egregiously breaching the site rules, you will need to tighten or loosen the protocols around the comment review period. Very low risk issues and groups may require almost no moderation, whereas highly emotional and politically contested issues may require real-time 24/7 human oversight.
- Your moderation should include both automated filtering and human systems. Automated filters are good at picking up black-listed words and spam, they are incapable of picking up other poor behaviours.
- Your moderation system should also include back-up processes, such as 'community flagging', because your moderators may not be familiar with all of the nuances of the issues under consideration, and may not, therefore, pick up all of the issues.



Dialogue Facilitation

Dialogue facilitation is perhaps the most crucial of considerations for online deliberative dialogue activities. Yet most online processes fail to recognise the critical role of the facilitator. Indeed, academic research indicates that untrained, or minimally trained, graduate students are drafted into the role of setting up and managing online engagement spaces and dialogue processes. This is concerning, especially considering the centrality given to a facilitator during any offline dialogue process. It's essential to understand that an online facilitator plays a multitude of roles.

When compared to the face-to-face environment, an online facilitator's job is made more difficult by the lack of visual cues from participants. However, in some ways, it's easier due to the asynchronous nature of the dialogue. This essentially means that an online facilitator has time to gather their thoughts (as a facilitator) and 'respond', rather than 'react' to a situation. There is also less chance they will miss a passing comment in the hubbub of a face-to-face event. And, they have the benefit of having the comment written verbatim in front of them, so there is less opportunity for misunderstandings.

Below are a list of potential ways in which an online dialogue facilitator should seek to be involved in a dialogue:

SOCIALISER

- Greeter of new participants (may include a person invitation to share their story)
- Welcomer of guest speakers
- Encouragement for thoughtful contributions
- Thanks to speakers and active participants

EXPLAINER

- Role of Moderator (to keep the space safe for all participants)
- Role of Facilitator (to support the dialogue process)
- Role of Technical Support (to ensure the software is working as designed)

SUBSTANTIVE

- Clarify contributions by participants
- Clarify the process
- Clarify project scope and objectives
- Clarify in/appropriate behaviours
- Correct misinformation or misunderstandings

SUBSTANTIATION

- Point out characteristics of an effective comment
- Ask participants to elaborate by providing more information, factual details or data
- Ask for examples of personal experience
- Provide substantive information about the project
- Directing participants to information resources

FOCUS

- Bringing participants back to the topic when/if they drift
- Pointing participants to other threads where their comment may be more appropriate

STIMULATOR

- Provoke more thoughtful contributions by posing questions to participants
- Identify and encourage participants who have remained silent to offer their stories and opinions, or to participate in other ways
- Contact participants directly if they are not responding to questions other participants might have about their comments
- Connect participants to each other if they have similar (or perhaps very different) stories or perspectives
- Provoke participants by suggesting outlandish solutions if you feel they are being to 'careful'

CONFLICT RESOLVER

- Suggest pathways through impasses between arguments for participants to consider

SUMMARISER

- Pull the threads of various comments together to suggest a 'summary' statement for participants to consider

CYBRARIAN

- Find new resources (and point to existing resources) to enable participants to explore issues in greater depth
- Contextualise and/or substantiate participant contributions by providing more information



Understanding Behavioural Modes

Understanding behavioural modes in an online deliberative dialogue is essential to ensuring you realise the most benefit from your consultation activity. Identifying behavioural modes is the art of identifying the type of conversation or dialogue which is taking place and responding to these modes in the most relevant way. Again, most attempts at online dialogue which we see are treated as a 'set and forget' activity, meaning the opportunity to identify and influence behavioural modes is often missed.

There are three behavioural modes to look out for in an online deliberative dialogue:

- **Monologue** is what happens when participants visit a forum once, leave their comment, and never return. The information may be useful for social research, but there is no community learning, no interaction, no attempt to build on, or indeed challenge the ideas of those who have gone before. Often this type of behaviour sees participants agreeing with the question at hand, or each other, and there is little in the way of contrary ideas or viewpoints. This can indicate that your discussion isn't properly framed or that you need to involve yourself more as a facilitator in order to steer the conversation.
- **Debate** happens when participants read and react to each other's posts. Yet, critically, they are competing to present the best argument. The goal is to win the debate. There is no attempt at reciprocity, learning or advancement towards any sort of consensus. Debate's indicate that you have ineffectively set up your dialogue activity, and you may need to consider your framing, process management and facilitator in order to get participants to suspend their cognitive dissonance in order to better engage in a dialogue.
- Finally, **dialogue** is what happens when participants start to read and respond to each other's comments. They ask questions; they build on the ideas. They may challenge arguments or assertions, but they do so in order to better understand the rationale or the underlying belief, or background story. There is mutual respect, and there is a focus on 'solutioneering'. This is the environment we all wish for but very rarely does it occur naturally.



Afterword

The practice of online public engagement, and particularly online deliberative dialogue, is still very much in its infancy. This eguide doesn't intend to be the last word on the subject. Indeed, a great many experienced public engagement practitioners around the world are currently turning their minds to the subject of 'how to take our traditional practices and reimagine them in an online context'.

If you are interested in learning more about online public engagement, take a look at our [webinar on online deliberation](#) and keep an eye out for [upcoming webinars](#) with current best practice advice for reorienting your organisation's public engagement practice. More broadly, you can find practice advice, [expert commentary](#), and [case studies](#), as well as a range of free longer form [ebooks and practice guides](#) and [podcasts](#) on our [website](#).

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