



### Chapter III. Information Renaissance model for online dialogue

Information Renaissance online dialogues are open to the public. Participants are requested to register, but anyone can read the discussions and the daily summaries, and review background resources. Participants join in at their convenience (unlike a chat room, for which all must be online at the same time); they can take time to reflect on background materials and others' postings, and reply at any time of the day or night. The dialogue Web site is maintained as an archive long after the online discussion has concluded, providing an authoritative information and reference source. The CAMP dialogue archive is available at <http://www.network-democracy.org/camp/>.

These dialogues can be seen as what the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has called "consultation,"<sup>26</sup> with the definition "a two-way relation in which citizens provide feedback to government. It is based on the prior definition by government of the issue on which citizens' views are being sought and requires the provision of information." However, our policy-related dialogues go further, in that the public and its government do not just give each other information, but engage in discussion on the issues. This is, we believe, a step toward OECD's category of "active participation" – a "relation based on partnership with government."

Careful preparation is the key to a successful online dialogue. This chapter outlines components (numbered below and in Chart 1) that have typically been used in Info Ren events, with special reference to the CAMP dialogue. CAMP participants' rankings of several of these components are shown in Figure 17 (p. 44). The scenario in Box 3, written by Tom Beierle as part of the evaluation of a previous dialogue,<sup>27</sup> gives a lively picture of one of these online dialogues by considering what it would be like to do something comparable face-to-face.

*Resources and tools (1).* For each dialogue, a searchable Web site is developed, with a recognizable character and user-friendly, 508-accessible<sup>28</sup> features. The site includes a "Briefing Book"<sup>29</sup> with extensive, searchable, thought-provoking online background material and a "How To" section covering both online dialogue and use of the site.<sup>30</sup> Participants are urged to become familiar with this material before the dialogue begins. The CAMP dialogue Briefing Book includes background information on California education; links to education glossaries; the full, searchable text of the draft Master Plan; Working Group reports with recommendations; public testimony; staff analyses; links to online references related to "cross cutting issues" like equity, accountability, assessment, school readiness, professional personnel, and technology; and links to state and organization Web sites related to education. (The draft Master Plan and Working Group reports were also available on the Joint Committee's Web site, but in PDF files;

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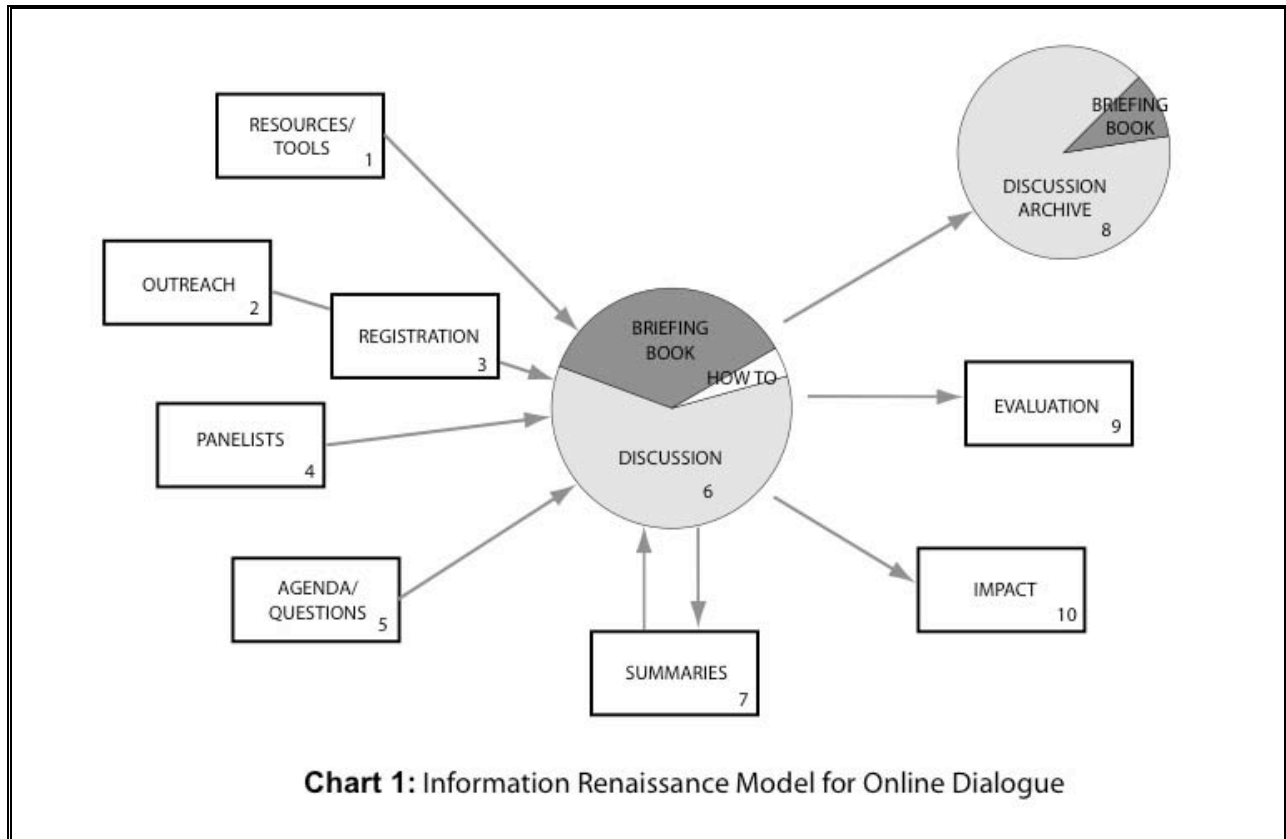
<sup>26</sup> "Engaging Citizens in Policy-making: Information, Consultation and Public Participation," OECD Public Policy Management Brief PUMA Policy Brief No. 10 (July, 2001, at <http://www.oecd.org/pdf/M00007000/M00007815.pdf>).

<sup>27</sup> Beierle, T.C. (2002). "Democracy On-Line: An Evaluation of the National Dialogue on Public Involvement in EPA Decisions." Resources for the Future, Washington DC, pp. 49-50 ([http://www.rff.org/reports/PDF\\_files/democracyonline.pdf](http://www.rff.org/reports/PDF_files/democracyonline.pdf)).

<sup>28</sup> Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act (<http://www.section508.gov>).

<sup>29</sup> <http://www.network-democracy.org/camp/bb/bb.shtml>

<sup>30</sup> <http://www.network-democracy.org/camp/ab/about.shtml>



Info Ren converted these to more easily searchable HTML files. This also made it possible, for example, to link each discussion question to the relevant part of the Plan.)

*Outreach (2).* Information Renaissance believes that a successful dialogue requires the identification and involvement of key stakeholder groups. The dialogue is announced through electronic mailing lists, Web sites of organizations, press releases and newsletters, and media coverage is sought. Key stakeholder groups help in this effort. Public libraries and other community organizations, particularly those that provide public access to the Internet, are encouraged to post information. Demographic information gathered at registration helps to indicate where extra recruiting efforts are needed, but doing more than notification to encourage participation from traditionally underserved communities requires a budget that allows extensive and focused outreach.

For the CAMP dialogue, recruitment encouraged citizens to participate in the online discussions. It also raised public awareness of the draft Master Plan, and is likely to have increased other forms of input as well. (Outreach and related issues will be discussed further in Chapters V and VI.)

*Registration (3).* Registration typically opens approximately one month before a dialogue begins. For the CAMP dialogue it began on May 1. Participants register and are asked if they would like to take an active part in the discussions (post messages) or be an observer, reading messages and background information. Basic identifying information, including name and e-mail address, is requested, as is an optional 50-word biography. Where possible, more extensive demographic information is collected to aid in evaluation. Although this is not advertised, non-registered participants may also post messages at the discretion of the moderator.

*Panelists (4).* Panels of policy makers and subject experts are recruited to be a part of the online dialogue. They are not asked to give “speeches” but to interact with other participants, answering questions and exchanging ideas. In some dialogues a Roundtable discussion among experts may be used to explore complex issues and help indicate areas of possible consensus. Each panelist is asked to provide a brief biography and a photograph for the Web site. Staff work with panelists (and in this case Joint Committee staff) beforehand to prepare for the process; during the dialogue, one or more panelists or staff may be asked to respond to a particular question or discussion.

During the CAMP dialogue, a panel drawn primarily from the Joint Legislative Committee and the Working Groups was part of each day’s discussion. For seven of these 10 days, there were two to four panelists, with five or more on the remaining days. Except for one day, at least one state legislator was a part of each panel; one day there were three. Joint Committee staff to the Working Groups were also asked to read and join in the discussion, and in particular to answer participants’ questions as needed. (Preferably other panelists, including representatives of the other political players listed for education in the section on *State organizational structure* (p. 19), would have been included.)

*Agenda and questions (5).* An agenda is established, structured around a series of issues, with specific questions used to focus the discussion. The agenda – and preferably the questions as well – are publicized as part of outreach to potential participants. For the CAMP dialogue, since the draft Master Plan was not yet available, the topic areas previously assigned to the Working Groups were used as a framework; specific questions were made available at the time of the discussion. Info Ren took responsibility for the final choice and wording of questions, but worked closely with Joint Committee staff. These and other issues related to structuring a discussion on a complex topic for lay participants are discussed in the section on the *Nature and complexity of issues* (p. 69).

*Discussion (6).* An online dialogue takes place over two or more weeks. The dialogue is asynchronous, so participants can take part at their convenience, with ample time to reflect on background materials and the postings of other participants. Online surveys can be used to help Committee staff and dialogue participants keep track of viewpoints as they evolve during the discussion.

Non-adversarial discussion is an Info Ren goal. In our experience a properly structured event is typically very civil (see *Civility*, p. 78); moderators and other staff are available to deal with the rare cases in which the discussion becomes too heated. The CAMP dialogue was quite lightly moderated. Moderators or other staff gave an introductory statement each day, presented discussion questions, gave tips (for example, on the use of message threads, or occasional reminders that brief statements are more apt to be read), and took questions. In a more heavily moderated discussion, facilitators and moderators can also help to keep the conversation focused while encouraging broad participation.

To take part in the dialogue, participants go to the discussion Web pages,<sup>31</sup> which list and link to the messages posted to the discussion and show names of posters. Names of panelists and staff and, for the CAMP dialogue, staff to Working Groups, are shown in red. If the author has submitted a biography at registration (an optional, 50 word maximum statement), it is available as a link from each of their messages. Participants may reply to a message or send a new one, and may rearrange and read messages by date, topic area, author, subject line or “thread.” A

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<sup>31</sup> Messages are arranged by date in the Discussion Archive (<http://www.network-democracy.org/camp/archive/date-X1.html>); click to view by subject, author or theme.

Start by imagining that more than a thousand people find a time to get together, on only about a month's notice. They all pay their own airfare, lodging, and meals.... Those planning to participate come from all over the country (and indeed the world).... Some people can't come because they don't know about it, can't afford it, or are uncomfortable participating in the proposed forum.... Before people arrive, they are sent a suitcase of materials to read.

Participants converge for what we might imagine as a one-day meeting (to approximate the total time most people spent on the Dialogue). The meeting room is large, with a conference table in the middle, ringed in concentric circles by folding chairs, then a bank of bleachers, and beyond that an expanse of space for milling around. The doors are open and people can come and go. First thing in the morning, participants sit wherever they please as they go through a round of introductions. Some remain silent and listen to the others. While the introductions are still going on, project organizers and the initial set of panelists and hosts take a seat at the central table and kick off the agenda.

As the discussion begins, people start to rearrange themselves. Those who talk the most join the hosts and panelists at the central table. Those with less to say gravitate toward the first ring of chairs. Those interested only in listening take seats in the bleachers. A large number of others – too numerous and mobile to be counted – wander in and out, catching bits and pieces of the conversations. As the day proceeds, some people continue to change places, and panelists and hosts take or relinquish seats at the central table as the agenda moves from one topic to another. Those sitting at the inner table talk the most, although not necessarily to each other. After the hosts and panelists initiate a discussion, others around the table chime in, but they also join in conversation with those behind them. Sometimes the hosts and panelists are simply ignored.

As the group moves through the agenda, discussion shifts to new topics, but many of the previous conversations continue apace. Multiple conversations on multiple topics start to emerge, with groups of speakers converging, splitting up, and converging elsewhere. Many of those listening focus their attention selectively. Some people just sit and talk to themselves, hoping someone will listen and respond. Many people find the rising din confusing and a bit overwhelming. To make matters more chaotic, most of the participants are also trying to satisfy their other daily responsibilities – taking work-related phone calls, leaving to attend outside meetings, and fulfilling other tasks. Some people get fed up and leave. Others take long breaks. Periodically, a recorder hands out a summary of the discussion thus far.

Despite the chaos, people remain respectful and polite. They answer questions when asked. They provide information when they think it will be helpful. For the most part, different viewpoints get a fair hearing (although there are rumblings of discontent). ... staff are everywhere, soaking it all in. A few of them run from conversation to conversation, answering questions, taking copious notes, and trying to make sense of it all. Microphones record all conversations.

And then it's over; tapes are transcribed, and a printed version is made widely available. As everyone goes home, the real work for [agency] personnel begins. Their principal challenge is to make sense of the transcripts and staff notes. Participants want to know that their time was not wasted and their participation will matter.

**Box 3.** Tom Beierle's dialogue scenario.

thread is a message plus any replies – thus a sort of conversation. During the CAMP dialogue, Info Ren staff frequently encouraged use of this feature.

*Summaries (7).* A summary of the discussion is produced each day, and sent to participants by e-mail. This helps newcomers join in and provides an overview for participants who don't have time to read all of the messages every day. As illustrated by their comments (see e.g. p. 44) and the rating in Figure 17 (p. 44), many participants highly appreciated the summaries.

*Archive (8).* The Web site is maintained as a searchable online archive after the conclusion of the interactive activity. This includes the entire site – the Briefing Book, messages contributed to the dialogue, discussion summaries and so forth, including this evaluation.

*Evaluation (9).* Until this procedure becomes routine, our preference is to evaluate each dialogue in terms of how well it meets the needs and expectations of public participants and the sponsoring organization.

*Impact (10).* Although difficult to quantify, the outcome of a dialogue can be seen in terms of various types of impact. One type asks if public involvement has made a difference, in terms of public input, legislation or other decision-making. Another relates to participants in the dialogue: whether the activity has changed their outlook, for example their interest in government or their understanding of other stakeholders.