



California Education Dialogue

Executive summary

From June 3-14, 2002, Information Renaissance produced an online public dialogue on the California Master Plan for Education (CAMP). Nearly 1,000 people took part in this event, which allowed them to learn about the draft Plan and talk directly with the education planners and legislators involved in its construction and implementation. The dialogue was part of a process initiated by the State Legislature through its Joint Committee to Develop a Master Plan.

Over this two-week period, the CAMP dialogue facilitated discussion of a complex policy document in a political environment. Evaluation findings of special interest include the high satisfaction rate of participants (76% positive; 91% would like additional online dialogues) and the low percentage (49% of non-education personnel) who knew about the Master Plan before hearing of the dialogue. Even more surprisingly, only 55% of non-administrative education personnel had known of the plan. Further, after the dialogue more than one-third of respondents reported an increased interest in government and politics. Among those who said they had previously been less active in politics, 50% said their interest had increased.

The first five chapters of the evaluation focus on the CAMP dialogue. Chapters I-II describe the background and context, plus a set of broad social goals that typically impel the desire for public involvement in policy decisions. Five questions were used to focus the evaluation on the value of online dialogue as a mechanism for civic engagement. These are introduced along with the evaluation methodology. Chapter III outlines the Information Renaissance model for online dialogue; in Chapters IV and V, the data gathered from registration and evaluation forms is presented and used to explore the five evaluation questions.

Chapter VI moves from the specific examination of the CAMP dialogue data to a broader discussion of public participation in a political context. Online activities can address many of the dilemmas associated with participation, but successful online events require careful organization and some basic infrastructure.

Chapter VII develops a set of conclusions, which lead to the following recommendations: first, online dialogue should be broadly used as a mechanism for civic engagement, since in many cases it offers significant advantages over conventional public meetings; second, online dialogue should be institutionalized, so that it becomes a routine part of legislative and regulatory processes; third, standards should be adopted for the exchange of information associated with dialogue; and, finally, both best practices and ethical standards are needed for participatory interchanges.

The CAMP dialogue

Our evaluation of the use of dialogue as a means for civic engagement is based upon data gathered during registration for the CAMP dialogue and from a post-dialogue evaluation questionnaire.

Goals

The intent of the evaluation is to explore the use of online dialogue on the California Master Plan as a mechanism for civic engagement, based on the five evaluation questions outlined below. To put the dialogue in context, we look first at broad participation as an ideal, expected to promote social goals such as incorporating public values, improving decision quality, educating the public, mitigating conflict and building trust in institutions. Detailed examination of

the extent to which the CAMP dialogue made contributions in these areas is beyond the scope of the evaluation, but it does appear to have had an effect. For example, it increased the flow of information between the public and policy makers, giving a chance to learn from each other; encouraged sharing of opinions and values among them; promoted new understanding of others' viewpoints; operated in a non-adversarial, respectful atmosphere; and increased interest in government and politics.

Participants

Those who registered for the online dialogue on the Master Plan for Education came from 47 of California's 58 counties. Cities and suburbs were home to about 77%, while 20% described their location as a small town or rural area. A strong majority (65%) work in the education sector.

Evaluation questions

How satisfied were participants with the process? Participants were quite enthusiastic. In responses to the questionnaire that followed the dialogue, 76% rated their experience as very or somewhat positive, and 91% said there should definitely or probably be online dialogues on other state policy topics. Open-ended responses confirm that the dialogue was a great success in this respect. Although some participants took a "wait and see" attitude, saying that their long-term attitude toward the process will depend on how the Master Plan is implemented, they would like more opportunities to interact with policy makers and find online dialogue a significant addition to the mechanisms that allow this.

Were new voices brought into policy discussions? The "new voices" most often sought in political processes are those who are underrepresented – less well-educated, younger, and ethnic groups. The dialogue did not involve many of these most-hoped-for new participants: 55% of registrants were over 50, and 74% had been or were currently in graduate school. As individuals, however, over one-third of the registrants said they had not known about the Master Plan before they learned of the dialogue, and 45% of those who did know about the Plan had not known they could submit comments. The classroom teachers who were brought into the dialogue on the Master Plan were an important addition of "new voices" to this particular policy discussion.

While technology can be a barrier to online dialogue, other constraints such as a lack of basic literacy (estimated at 23% of the population), a lack of information on issues, scarcity of time, and insufficient outreach and publicity are constraints that are at least as important. The technology also has major positive aspects: for the public, online dialogue can appreciably expand policymaking access and information availability. To increase civic engagement significantly among underrepresented groups, it will probably be necessary to invest more in recruitment efforts, use different approaches for outreach, institutionalize public involvement in legislative and regulatory processes, find ways to demonstrate the relevance of seemingly abstract discussions, and provide easy-to-absorb summaries of background materials.

For many potential participants – those who live outside a city, the disabled, students, parents with young children or other caregivers – online dialogue offers particularly significant advantages over more traditional mechanisms for public involvement in policy decisions, such as public hearings. The question of who wants to be or can be involved remains, but the answer is somewhat different online: those for whom Internet access is difficult or impossible, or technophobes, will be more disadvantaged; those who benefit from flexibility in time or place of participation will be relatively advantaged.

How did participants see the "public space" created by the dialogue for interaction? Much of the potential of an online dialogue is defined by how well it functions as a "public space" – a place

for communication and interaction among members of the public and between the public and policy makers. The evaluation asked about several factors that were expected to affect the perception of the dialogue. Here again, participants were largely quite satisfied: they said they had enough information to take part, and that others knew what they were talking about. They felt welcome in the dialogue and said people's attitudes and responses encouraged participation. They saw the dialogue as balanced among different points of view, respectful, constructive and useful for examining questions and ideas. Although the themes and questions of the dialogue were set before the discussion, there was a great deal of flexibility as to specific topics, and a majority of participants said that the dialogue had covered the education issues that concern them most. As demonstrated by the message archive, participants also supplied a large amount of information on conditions in local schools, policy effects they have observed, and what approaches do or do not work. On the other hand, the use of threads (grouping a message and its replies) and daily summaries only partly helped to meet the challenge presented by the volume of messages.

What did participants get from the process, including potential impact on policy? Opportunities for interaction with public officials and staff are typically limited. This may add value to the interaction in online dialogue, which feels rather direct and personal. This activity is new enough that many people simply find it interesting to take part, and constructive discussion on a topic of interest may in itself be perceived as rewarding. The discussion, as described above, was seen as a useful way to examine questions and ideas; a majority reported learning more about opinions they had not thought about before, and most said they had thought more about their own opinions. Most respondents did not expect a great deal of impact, but more than half expected at least "some." Open-ended responses show participants' hopes and frustrations with respect to their ability to affect policy, and the value they place on the opportunity to interact with decision makers.

What did policy makers get from the process, including the possibility of changes in public attitudes? Involving the public has several potential practical benefits for policy makers, including goodwill, increased trust, educating the public on issues and increasing interest. Many CAMP dialogue participants had previously not been too involved in government and politics. More than one-third of all evaluation respondents – and 50% of those who had been less active – reported that the dialogue had increased their interest. Again, however, what happens after the dialogue will be a major factor in the sustainability of these attitudes.

In interviews, Joint Committee staff were generally positive regarding online dialogue as a mechanism. Online dialogue was seen as far more interactive than other venues for public input on the Master Plan. The discussion is less formal and broader, more weighted toward getting the opinions of the lay public, and a place where people's comments are more direct than in hearings. Staff felt that for many participants this event was a first in terms of being able to address a legislator directly. However, some heard the messages in the dialogue as being "in a similar vein" to comments they had heard elsewhere, and felt that the loss of the face-to-face contact and "immediacy" of a Town Hall meeting as a trade-off. Each of the different venues is seen as giving a different perspective on public attitudes. There was disappointment that the dialogue did not involve a broader demographic spectrum, but the dialogue was seen as helping to change and add clarity to the Plan.

Issues for online dialogue

Beyond the specific issues of the California Master Plan, the CAMP dialogue reflected some practical issues associated with public participation and online events.

Dilemmas of public involvement

Do people want to be engaged? No matter how valuable public involvement in policy decisions may be, many of “the public” may not be interested. Online dialogue can bring together those who *are* interested, even though their numbers may be small in one geographic location, and can help to demonstrate relevance to others. It also allows “observers” to get a taste of an issue without making a major commitment, and to explore in more detail as interest deepens.

Who is or is not involved? Involving those who will be affected by a decision can improve the information available to decision makers in areas including problem definition, public values regarding alternatives, and the likely consequences of proposed policies. For those who are interested and have access, an online activity can encourage involvement in ways that will never be possible in one-time face-to-face events. However, online participation faces the same barriers as other forms of political involvement. To broaden representation, new approaches to outreach and to presentation of online background materials will be needed to inform the public and demonstrate the relevance of policy to people’s lives. When important stakeholders are missing, extra outreach should be attempted; innovative techniques may help to fill the gap.

Nature and complexity of issues. The complexity and interrelatedness of many policy issues increases the need for discussion and public understanding; it also increases the difficulty of involving the lay public in decision-making and makes it harder to build public confidence in government. Interactive online presentation techniques can allow users to explore an issue step by step, in as much or as little detail as they want, and show interconnections among issues. Skills of both organizers and sponsors should be developed to facilitate non-partisan communication, including development of themes and discussion questions, background materials, pros and cons and “why this is important” for diverse target groups and varied levels of reading ability.

Impact on policy and engagement. Impact can be seen in terms of the effect of public input on policy decisions, but effects on public engagement are also critical. These two types of impact intertwine: public interest in policymaking is increased by an expectation that input will make a difference; however, if this expectation is disappointed, attitudes may become more negative. Public involvement in policymaking has potential benefits for public officials; new skills will be required to work in a participatory way, build trust and learn to work together; online dialogue, in which people have time to think before they speak, offers a promising venue.

Trust. A lack of trust increases the difficulty of interactions between the public and government. Participation may be an avenue to improvement, but if expectations are disappointed, it may have the opposite effect. Online dialogue can help “public” and “government” to develop shared understandings, to begin to see each other as individuals, and work together toward solutions. Dialogue sponsors and organizers will, however, need to recognize the concerns of potential participants when designing an event, including explicit consideration of fairness and non-partisanship.

Organizational questions

Roles of sponsors, organizers and others. An online policy dialogue requires the collaboration of many groups inside and outside government. Sponsors and organizers need to discuss and agree on their roles and responsibilities; and who is sponsoring an event, who is organizing it and who is funding it should be clear to participants. The sponsor’s commitment to action, including participation in the discussion and plans to make use of public input, should also be explicit. The organizer’s responsibility to inform the sponsor about participatory processes and roles required for a dialogue can be an issue; and, as online events become more numerous and more commercial, there will be a need to adhere to standards of best practice.

Civility. An online dialogue can provide a space for public discourse that is both open and non-adversarial. Dialogue organizers can achieve the desired atmosphere by setting the tone in a number of informal ways and paying careful attention to structuring the design, presentation, moderation and facilitation of the event.

Mechanics. The mechanics of a dialogue require consideration of both the underlying technology and a number of less technical user issues. The technology should meet the varied needs of participants, sponsors, public officials, and academic researchers. Information Renaissance prefers an open standards, open source approach to building software. This both allows broad replication at the lowest possible cost and provides scalability and interoperability with similar systems of other organizations or units of government. For users, to assure that the public forum provided by the dialogue is accessible to all, the online facility should be designed with simplicity in mind – and with the necessary online aids for those who might be unfamiliar with the mechanics of the Web site or its content.

Cost versus engagement. Online public participation is an interesting new mechanism for civic engagement, but can only reach its potential if sufficient time and money can be invested. There are potential conflicts at every stage of design and production, as when the desire for an audience that is broad but also informed on the issues requires the development of explanations and tools suitable to a wide range of participants. The trade-offs between cost and engagement bear not only on the effectiveness of dialogues but also on the public presence of the sponsoring organization.

Institutionalization

Many of the issues outlined above could be addressed by building dialogue into legislative and regulatory processes. Making dialogue the norm and maintaining the infrastructure needed to organize online dialogues at national level could increase participation, improve the effectiveness of civic discussion, facilitate production of background materials, and build the skills of sponsors, organizers and participants. It could also spur the development of ethical standards and best practices, and could reduce or eliminate many of the recurring costs of production.

Recommendations

The experience of the CAMP dialogue leads us to four specific recommendations:

Use online dialogue as a means for civic engagement. Online dialogue should be used as broadly as public hearings to solicit public comments, educate the public about matters up for decision and encourage discussion of issues under consideration: these events offer flexibility for both the public and policy makers, allow large numbers of people to take part no matter where they live, and allow a broader geographic spread among the public who are involved. When properly structured, a welcoming public space can be created for interaction, communication and engagement, which can encourage constructive, non-adversarial discussion.

Institutionalize the role of online dialogue in legislative and regulatory processes. To increase civic engagement, broad adoption of this new mechanism should be encouraged by incorporating online dialogue in legislative and regulatory processes. By increasing and codifying knowledge and skills, providing ongoing public information, sharing background materials, exploring new means of presentation, establishing technical standards and shared software, and developing ethical standards and best practices, institutionalization of the role of online dialogue would increase the effectiveness of dialogue and decrease its per-production cost.

Adopt standards for the exchange of data associated with dialogues. This technical step will facilitate interoperability among the online dialogues sponsored by different units and levels of government. This will speed the adoption of online dialogues as a tool for public involvement and (1) facilitate parallel discussions that involve state and local governments or state and federal governments, (2) make it possible for researchers to study and compare different dialogues, (3) allow for sharing of resources including presentation tools and background materials, and (4) provide economies in the production of dialogues by facilitating the development of common software platforms for federal, state and local governments.

Develop ethical standards and best practices for participatory interchanges. As online civic dialogues become more numerous, ethical standards and best practices will be needed to assure that the process is transparent, non-partisan, fair, and worthy of the participants' trust. The development of ethical standards and best practices will encourage sponsors and organizers to recognize, think through and agree on their roles and responsibilities for each dialogue element, including the identification of stakeholders, balanced presentation of information and the use that will be made of public contributions to the discussion.