Making ResourceFULL™ Decisions: A Process Model for Civic Engagement

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Abstract

Many public issues are becoming more complex, interconnected, and cannot be resolved by one individual or entity. Research shows an informed decision is not enough. Addressing these issues requires authentic civic engagement (deliberative dialogue) with the public to reach resourceFULL[TM] decisions—a decision based on diverse sources of information and supported with resources (including human), competence, and commitment. The University of Minnesota Extension has developed a research-informed Model for Civic Engagement as a tool to describe a process for authentic civic engagement and support educational outreach. This article describes the Model and its applicability to educate on civic engagement.

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Introduction

Communities are faced with issues that are complex and interconnected that cannot be resolved individually despite their knowledge or influence. This manifests a world of shared power in which implementation of a decision often depends on collaboration and the voluntary action of others (Crosby & Bryson, 1992). Often, community leaders make "deficient" decisions, defined by noted political scientist Archon Fung as decisions that suffer from "lack of knowledge, competence, public purpose, resources, or respect necessary to command compliance and cooperation" (Fung, 2006:66).

In contrast to deficient decisions, University of Minnesota Extension coined the term "resourceFULL" decisions to describe the types of decisions that are based on authentic civic engagement, a process that generates collaborative learning (Daniels & Walker, 2001) and building of trust and relationships (Chazdon, Allen, Horntvedt, & Scheffert, 2013). Extension has a role in renewing civic engagement and enhancing community decision-making and governance (Beaulieu & Cordes, 2014). This article presents a tool for that role—the University of Minnesota Extension's research-informed Model for Civic Engagement.

The Model is the result of a multi-discipline literature review that was transformed into a process model for civic engagement. The Model provides a resource to educate on what authentic civic engagement

should look like to attain the outcomes of resourceFULL[TM] decisions and collective action. The process Model acts as a tool for Extension to develop curriculum for teaching the "doing" of civic engagement. Having a research-informed Model for Civic Engagement is important to Extensions' educational outreach efforts. "Targeting programmatic resources in ways that would help improve the level and quality of public discourse could leverage the impact of the many Extensions program we conduct in cooperation with our community partners" (Civittolo & Davis, 2011).

Model for Civic Engagement

Model for Civic Engagement, Figure 1, began with civic engagement defined as "Making resourceFULL[TM] decisions and taking collective action on public issues through processes that involve public discussion, reflection and collaboration." Discussion involving dialogue and deliberation, collaboration for co-learning and leadership, and reflection are recurring themes in the civic engagement literature (Fagotto & Fung, 2009; Chrislip & O'Malley, 2013; Gastil & Levine, eds, 2005; Lenihan, 2009; Nabatchi, Gastil, Weiksner, & Leighninger, 2012). The outcomes of these include issue learning, improved democratic attitudes and skills, improved relationships, managed conflict, individual and collective action, improved community problem solving, and increased civic capacity (Carcasson, 2009).

Figure 1.

Model for Civic Engagement

At the core of civic engagement, depicted in Model center, are fundamentals of authentic civic engagement: collaboration, discussion, and reflection. Collaboration applies to both learning and leadership activities. Discussion involves both dialogue to promote understanding and deliberation to reach a decision (Gastil & Levine, 2005). Reflection requires taking the time to pause, celebrate successes, and evaluate outcomes along the way (Lenihan, 2009).

The civic engagement process is represented by arrows. The process starts with a Public Issue and has

five arrows representing stages. The Model represents a holistic and integrated approach to civic engagement:

1. **Prepare**: Dialogue to understand the context in which the issue will be addressed and to assess community readiness. This phase ends with a decision to launch work on the public issue using civic engagement.

2. **Inquire**: Dialogue to better understand all aspects of the issue. The presenting issue is explored and clarified to determine possible underlying issues. Deliberate to frame the issue.

3. **Analyze**: Dialogue to explore various perspectives and viewpoints and deepen understanding of the issue. Deliberate to generate options for addressing the issue.

4. **Synthesize**: Dialogue to align the clarified issue with identified options. Deliberate to reach a resourceFULL^{TM} decision and translate the decision into a plan**.**

5. **Act Together**: Use created trust and relationships to take collective action to address the issue.

In the Prepare arrow the words Conveners and Community represent the two important partners throughout the civic engagement process. The conveners are individuals who come together to provide leadership around the issue and engage with the public. The conveners' task is two-fold. One task is to instill an atmosphere of collaboration for collective action and learning. Constructive process, appropriate people, and credible data have been identified as necessary for successful collaboration (Chrislip & Larson, 1994). The second convener task is designing effective civic engagement with attention to process design and process management/facilitation.

Community members may have the role of consultants and/or decision-makers, depending on the conveners' intended depth of engagement (Fung, 2006; Arnstein, 1969; Prokopy, L. S., & Floress, K. 2011). As a consultant, the community provides information, wisdom, and perspectives. With decision-making, those having the authority to make a decision are sharing this role with the community. Clarity and transparency about which role(s) the community is undertaking is critical to building trust and relationships. Fung cautions that whether engagement of the public is effective in minimizing deficient decision-making depends on primary attention to who participates along with attention to how conveners communicate (i.e., process design and techniques), and the connection between the public's input and the final decision or action (Fung, 2006:66).

The Model as a Teaching Tool

Because the Model is research informed, it has become an effective tool for describing civic engagement to stakeholders and state agencies. University of Minnesota Extension expanded its educational outreach to include civic engagement cohorts to build the civic engagement capacity of those working on public issues. Issue-based civic engagement cohorts on the issue of water quality are providing a forum for piloting the Model. Emphasis is on teaching process design and process management skills for authentic civic engagement. Curriculum modules have been developed for each of the five stages and the core of the Model. Specific civic engagement techniques are aligned to the

stages.

Conclusion

In a time of limited resources, a heightened call to accountability and the importance of sustainability, there is no place for deficient decision-making. It is important to tap into the assets of local knowledge, wisdom, and experiences through civic engagement for resourceFULL^{TM} decision-making to occur. This Model provides a research-informed approach for doing civic engagement and providing educational outreach to support embedding civic engagement in addressing public issues.

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