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Citizen engagement as a learning experience

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Abstract

True engagement is not merely providing information and gaining support from citizens but it is about reinforcing the sense of community and building up citizenship in a participatory process. The analysis of the wide variety of types and functions of forums as well as methods used for the involvement of the community reveals the strong learning aspect as a common platform to develop the competencies of both local government employees and citizens in order to cope successfully with the changing expectations and challenges at times of shrinking financial resources. The study is based on a comparative empirical research (interviews, document analysis) of adult training methodology used for facilitating interaction with the public from a European and an American perspective. It is aiming at providing practical tools for professionals in places, where democratic local engagement practice needs development, therefore the best practice of other countries could be benefited from.

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1. Introduction

Along with changing socioeconomic structures, societal values and behaviors, the style and degree of public participation in governance have seen major changes that affected the processes and techniques of public decision-making as well as the practices and tools of communication with the citizens. Citizen participation is not only at the center of attention of local government professionals but is also a growing field of academic research where the comparative approach has advantages if our ultimate goal is to explore international practices that could be adapted to local community needs. To this end the authors carried out extensive field researches in the past two years to explore innovative practices of citizen engagement in the United States, Norway, the Netherlands, Germany, Italy and Hungary.

While the data collection and the analysis of the European practices by Jenei targeted local government communication, researches by Dobos in the U.S. were primarily focusing on the specific aspects of training methods and practices applied in the American civil service. Benefiting from the multi-disciplinary and multi-national approach, present study is aiming at the examination and the analysis of the research findings from an adult education perspective. There are several methods and forums typically used by local governments to address various stakeholder groups and at the same time facilitate informal or non-formal learning to raise citizen awareness. Our findings draw the attention to the benefits an adult training approach can add to the improvement of citizen empowerment.

Consequently, besides professional expertise in government issues, public officials responsible for civic involvement in local community affairs need to be equipped with knowledge and skills how to address various adult target groups effectively. Therefore, the tools of participatory governance should be combined with a wide range of

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adult training methods and techniques that ensure the active participation and cooperation of the participants. It is especially crucial in countries where the interactive and learner-centered training approach is not taken for granted and not applied as a rule in the education or professional development of adults, moreover well-organized formal citizen education has no traditions either. By highlighting the opportunities hidden in the education perspectives, it is our intention to present some important aspects that should be considered when defining future directions of the improvement of meaningful citizen engagement.

2. Cross-country differences in civic engagement

In a well-functioning democratic society people trust their governmental institutions and public administration, actively participate in elections, in civic organizations, volunteer for giving back to their smaller or larger communities, because they believe that their personal contribution can make a difference. However, public opinion polls indicate that since the 1990s many Americans have gradually lost confidence in government institutions. Natural and social disasters, the economic crisis and the growing terrorist threat in the past decade have all brought about powerful public criticism of the performance of government institutions at all levels. (Tapscott, 1996; Salamon, 2002; Kamarc, 2002; Behn 2002; Walsh, 1999) OECD data reveal similar tendencies in most of our European target countries regarding the degree of *confidence in governmental institutions and public administration*. In 2010 in Hungary, only 40% of people say they trust their political institutions, which is one of the lowest rates in the OECD area, where the average is 56%. These rates in other countries are in turn the following: 49% in Italy; 53% in Germany; 58% in the USA; 68% in Norway; and 72% in the Netherlands. While in the United States the citizen confidence is somewhat higher than the OECD average, the Northern European states are considerably ahead of the others, and Hungary is significantly lagging behind.

There are also large cross-country differences reflecting similar trends in confidence in the *national governments*: the Netherlands is at the top with over 65%, followed by Norway around 55%, the USA slightly over 40%, Germany close to 40%, Italy hardly over 30% and Hungary closing the line with 25%, where the OECD average is around 40%. It is important to note that *national institutions* display higher trust in every surveyed country than the *national government*. Indicators suggest that civic engagement is closely linked with the subjective evaluation of the performance of the institutions and confidence in them. (OECD, 2011) In our target countries civil engagement shows diversity from moderate to average in most places and it is considerably higher only in Norway and the Netherlands, suggesting there is room for broader social inclusion and the adaptation of best practices in several fields.

3. From participation to engagement

While *citizen participation* is mostly about providing and gaining information, assistance and support from citizens, it does not necessarily mean *true engagement*, which is about reinforcing the sense of community and building up citizenship. *Citizen engagement*, the most preferred approach these days, is basically *interaction*, a reciprocal form of exchange instead of the traditional one-way ‘exchange’ of information between the government and citizens. Klein suggests that “the old-style public hearing mentality often represents a form of public engagement that is too little and too late.” (Klein, 2000)

Two types of citizen engagement activities can be distinguished: 1) *instrumental* and 2) *normative activities*. While the former aims at informing citizens or receiving responses from them to government decisions, the latter focuses on those activities that seek to strengthen communities, democracy and governance processes. If we wish to enhance the effectiveness of participatory processes, more efficient forms of engagement and partnership should be used, ones primarily belonging among the normative activities. (King, 2000)

Experts agree that local governments have to move beyond the traditional type of hearing to find ways that provide conditions for *listening* and the *engagement* of citizens in creative problem-solving. Local governments have to be the motivators of citizen engagement activities; they need to find new ways and techniques; they need to facilitate *dialogue* and *interaction* with and between various local players. The government-citizen relationship ranges on a continuum from information exchange to empowerment and delegating responsibility to the citizen. From informing to empowering there is a gradually expanding involvement offered to citizens, so that there is an

ability to *consult, include and collaborate*. The government can be a successful facilitator if residents are willing to cooperate. People are expected to be interested, *inquire, express opinions, make suggestions, and even take responsibility* and the government should motivate them with attractive and long-term initiatives and alternatives. (Svara & Denhardt, 2000) This approach is more likely to generate better understanding, result in public support for sensitive issues and dedication to community affairs.

4. Citizen engagement from a learning perspective

It is not by chance that the key words referring to a new engagement approach coincide with those we regard essential for the process and outcomes of the efficient training and learning of adults. “Community engagement is a participatory community process that reminds us that we can all learn from each other. It requires systematic probing, concentrated listening to the concerns of community members, and dialogue about possible solutions. It is an iterative process that brings together a diverse group of stakeholders to identify problems and generate strategies to meet them.” (Waffle et. al., 2010)

The desired competency development covers citizens’ knowledge and understanding of the operation of the political and administrative system and their civic rights to influence it. The skills refer to the ability to analyze, evaluate, express and defend opinions, take positions, participate in meetings and debates. The traits like tolerance, loyalty, openness to negotiate and make compromise, critical mindedness are civic dispositions necessary for a democratic society. (Rietbergen & McCracken, 2012)

Efficient learning occurs in a favorable learning environment, which reinforces the learner-centered and problem-oriented experiential learning in which wide range of interactive methods is applied regardless of the content and the competencies to be developed. Methods ensuring the active participation of the learners encourage both cooperation and individual learning, and they are relevant at all stages of the experiential learning cycle to facilitate and strengthen reflection and self-reflection that is the source of learning. As our ultimate goal is the ability of application of new knowledge and skills in real-life situations, the forms, organizational principles, methods and techniques used during the training activities should serve not merely knowledge transfer but practical skill development as well.

The learning process is mutual, as changed requirements bring new challenges to local officials: the challenge of facilitating public debate, creating opportunities for change and empowering citizens. They have to encourage diversity, help define new relationships with citizens, develop new processes of communication and interaction, experiment with new methods and solutions to issues, facilitate cooperation between community groups, and realize that the leadership role should be shared with citizens. The accomplishment of these tasks requires the competencies of a facilitative trainer like the ability to instill confidence and sense of security, reinforce attitudes and behaviors, stimulate self-criticism and reflection, focus attention on details, point out and demonstrate proven methods, reinforce positive performance through praise, just to mention some of the most important ones. (Graeßner, 2007) The education environment, the methods used, the attitudes of the team leader or facilitator to the group and to the individuals, all have impacts much beyond the scope of the traditional training situations.

Our researches revealed a wide variety of methods and forums used in parallel for community building, public information, deliberation and dialogue and decision-making.(see Table 1; source: Walsh, 1999, adapted by Dobos) Many of them have direct education objective like the study circles or leadership training programs for local officials, but all the others have strong learning impacts too. The selection of the most appropriate tools in a concrete situation is based firstly on the goals and objectives, and then on factors like the nature and the complexity of a problem, the stage of the process, the real needs, the available information and time constraints. (Dobos, 2010) There is no single best way to do things – some methods are better for short-term purposes, while others are more suitable for ongoing activities. Each one has its advantages and the better the one we choose, the more effective and efficient our engagement efforts will be (Svara & Denhardt, 2010).

Table 1. Methods and forums used for involvement

Type of forum	What is it about?	Type of forum	What is it about?
Collaborative decision making dialogue	decisions made that include everyone who has a stake in the issue	Neighborhood district council	setting priorities, communication between citizen groups
Study circle	a facilitated small group session to learn about a particular issue, and to raise awareness of others' perspectives	Community celebration	community-wide celebrations of different kinds
Community visioning	visioning sessions to envision the future of the community, to see the consequences of decision paths	Volunteer work	work in all aspects of public life
Community forum	facilitated and technology-assisted forums with the purpose of problem solving	Citizen panels and focus group	measuring preferences and soliciting opinions, engaging citizens in ongoing dialogue
Strategic planning workshops	involves the whole community in developing long-term goals and objectives; survey and all-day workshop, setting priorities	Community meetings with small group discussion	fostering exploration of shared concerns and hopes
Search conference	major stakeholders (15-35) meet at a two-day facilitated conference to search for ways to attain a desirable future	Educational programs for citizens	educating citizens in several fields to be more prepared for participation in decision-making; educating government employees
Public information outreach	newsletters, presentations by experts, hot lines, cable TV, local service centers for better accessibility, electronic information kiosk with touch screen, computer bulletin board	Internet and social media, interactive websites, online forums	digital neighborhoods linked by face-to-face communication as well as new technologies, people can send photos, can define their location using handheld devices, can submit proposals and vote online
citizen survey	regular polling	Facebook and social networking sites	
		Twitter, iPhone. GPS	
		Art, dance, theatre, and story-telling	relying on the creativity of the citizens to express thoughts and ideas that might otherwise be too difficult to communicate
youth involvement program	internship programs for high school students	Education programs for local government officials	professional development training, leadership training

If we note a parallel between methods used for the engagement of citizens and those applied for the purposes of adult education and training, the Mutual Learning Model by Schwarz could serve as evidence of the validity of shared underlying core values and assumptions when addressing participants as partners either in education or community action. They are, for example, *valid information, free and informed choice, differences seen as opportunities for learning, respecting the opinion of others, internal commitment, and compassion*. The strategies based on these core values include *focusing on interest not positions, combining advocacy and inquiry, using a decision-making rule that generates commitment*; and the result could be *increased trust, understanding and a reduction in non-productive conflict and defensiveness, increased effectiveness and a quality of life*. (Schwarz, 2005) Conditions for favorable learning environment should be provided in all kinds of forum and event to serve the needs of very heterogeneous and diverse local groups. Several methods for interaction with the public use facilitated small group discussions, which provide an opportunity for dialogue, where ground rules are set and everybody is given an opportunity to share ideas and experiences, and learn about the experiences of others. Facilitated interaction and involvement in small group meetings and workshops can effectively be used for the purposes of both meaningful citizen engagement and adult learning that in most cases coincide. Similarly to learner-centered approaches in education, citizen-centeredness is a key to successful citizen engagement.

3. Conclusion

The openness and transparency of communication and the partnership-oriented approach in the surveyed municipalities were highly appreciated by local professionals, faculty members and students involved in the dissemination of research findings. However, they expressed concerns regarding the chances for adaptation referring to the individualistic social culture and the reliance of the public on initiatives and actions coming from above on the one hand, and the authority-based approach of the government officials on the other. They agreed on the need for change in society in general and among all local players in particular. They need to re-identify their own roles, and adopt new methods to facilitate and spread win-win problem-solving, which is of key importance these days when they work under high economic pressure. (Jenei, 2012) Increased citizen activity, a strong civil sector, a better understanding of the complexity of local issues can result in more supportive attitudes to government performance. (Walsh, 1999) The high potential inherent in the life-long and life-wide perspectives of adult training is an invaluable input in a new model that local officials should offer to their community members. Despite the existing national and cultural differences, the ultimate intentions in the background of the new challenges show high similarities in different local communities, – on the continent and overseas alike –, which justifies the possibility of cross-border adaptation of best practices and opens up new perspectives for various local communities.

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