



A virtual and anonymous, deliberative and analytic participation process for planning and evaluation: The Concept Mapping Policy Delphi

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Abstract

Integrating knowledge and values across a range of stakeholders and experts is a common goal of, and challenge in, forecasting and planning processes across numerous decision-making domains. In this paper we present a virtual and anonymous, deliberative and analytical participatory group process which we applied in a planning study. The process was a combination of concept mapping and a policy Delphi. The Concept Mapping Policy Delphi offers an iterative process that is meant to foster critical, dissensus-based thinking by a group about an evaluation problem. In particular, it offers a platform on which to structure the group brainstorming of ideas, integrates knowledge and values, and creates a shared conceptual framework for addressing evaluation problems. We discuss the merits and limitations of this process and compare it with other public engagement mechanisms for decision-making. We argue that the use of a Concept Mapping Policy Delphi is relevant in forecasting and decision-making processes that aim to integrate information which is from various disparate points of view in order to clarify arguments and values, democratize and mediate public participation, and/or provide strategic advice about scenarios or planning options, while mitigating the problematic aspects of face-to-face group processes.

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1. Introduction

Integrating knowledge and values across a range of stakeholders and experts is increasingly becoming a common goal of, and challenge in, forecasting,

planning and evaluation processes across numerous decision-making domains. The drive for integration using analytical participative mechanisms in decision processes has arisen from concerns with democratic and procedural justice, maintaining trust in governing bodies, and enhancing social learning in the adjudication of alternatives to increasingly complex problems. Indeed, there is a growing awareness of the complexity

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(Roe, 1998), or ‘wickedness’ (Rittel & Webber, 1973), and/or ‘post normal’ (Funtowicz & Ravetz, 1993) nature of many of the problems facing decision-makers today. Rittel and Webber (1973) argue that these types of problems are exceptionally difficult to resolve because they are particularly vulnerable to framing conditions; affect numerous stakeholders; are plagued by large uncertainties; involve often incompatible criteria for judging the ‘goodness’ of decisions; involve the experiential valuation of decisions; and offer no enumerable or exhaustible describable set of possible solutions.

As De Marchi (2003) suggests, given the ‘risky’ nature of complex problems, value judgments arise at every stage of the decision-making process. Jasanoff (1990), Nowotny (2003) and Rayner (2003) argue that the implication is that the decision-making process should be informed by those who will be affected by the decision, rather than solely by decision-makers. For example, in the context of public policy-making, Davenport and Leitch (2005) suggest that the complexity of public policy problems has given rise to the need for a modern ‘agora’ for science-society debate.

Dozens of public engagement mechanisms have been developed over the last few decades. These can be distinguished according to the flow of information they facilitate. Rowe and Frewer (2005) described two categories of one-way information flow mechanisms: (1) public communication; and (2) public consultation. In the first category, information is conveyed from the decision-makers or their representatives to the public. In the second, information is gathered from the public by decision-makers or their representatives. Rowe and Frewer (2005) described one category of two-way information flow mechanisms: public participation. In this category, information is shared between decision-makers (or their representatives) and the public, and some means of knowledge and values integration (consensus or compromise) is used to facilitate learning and policy-development. Here, following Renn (2006), consensus means the product of deliberation that represents a win-win solution, or a course of action that serves all participants’ interests and values better than any other solution. By way of compromise, we refer to van den Hove’s (2006) characterization of a negotiated outcome of deliberation in which the agreed solution, or course

of action, represents the maximal level of constraints on particular claims that each participant is willing to accept.

In their useful typology of public engagement mechanisms, Rowe and Frewer (2005) propose six key distinguishing variables: (1) participant selection method (who sits at the table?); (2) facilitation of information elicitation (is a facilitator present?); (3) response mode (open-ended or closed questions?); (4) information output (is the information required by participants easily accessible?); (5) medium of information transfer (face-to-face or not?); and (6) facilitation of aggregation (structured or unstructured aggregation of participant information?). It is important to note that in the public participation category of public engagement mechanisms described by Rowe and Frewer (2005), only face-to-face approaches are included (e.g., citizen panel/jury, consensus conference, action planning workshop, task force, deliberative opinion poll, planning cell and town meeting). However, face-to-face approaches are often plagued by power dynamics that can affect the quality of the experience for participants, as well as the quality of the information gathered and integrated through the process. For example, as Rowe (1998) suggested, some individuals may dominate the conversation while less confident participants are silent (or muted), the group may become polarized around contentious perspectives, or the group may reach a conclusion prematurely. What are needed are techniques that mitigate these problematic characteristics of face-to-face group interactions, by using, for example, virtual and anonymous group deliberation frameworks such as the Delphi method.

In this paper we present a virtual and anonymous, deliberative and analytical participatory group process that we have developed in a futuristic planning study, designed to: (1) integrate the knowledge, values and experience of a group of people representing different areas of expertise; (2) advance social learning; and (3) map consensus and dissent; while (4) mitigating the risk that divergent views will be silenced by dominant voices during deliberation. The resulting process is a combination of concept mapping, developed by Kane and Trochim (2007), and a policy Delphi, as characterized by Turoff (2002). The purpose of this paper is not to engage in a thorough analysis of the substantive recommendations of the expert group.

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