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FIELD NOTE | INNOVATIVE APPROACHES TO RECONNECTING THROUGH COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

Part 1 – Open Space

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CONTEXT

In recent years, shifting to a virtual community engagement environment has moved from being a mere option to being a necessity. But how do we meaningfully engage in such environments? Many groups and organizations have been asking this exact question and, faced with the challenge, are creating opportunities to engage more thoughtfully. To address this change, the Cities Deepening Community team led a bi-weekly community of practice series in July and August 2021 that involved diving into ideas of deepening community using four different participatory processes that are adapted for online: **Open Space**, **Conversation Café**, **Deliberative Dialogue** and **Fishbowl**.

These methods are useful for those wanting to engage more effectively with stakeholders at community meetings, at partner meetings, in Communities of Practice and at other virtual sessions.

When hosting online sessions, the facilitator must consider whether the purpose is to go broad or to dive deep. A key consideration here is 'you get what you get out,' meaning the value you gain is based on how much you contribute. These methods are ways to be intentional about hosting conversations, providing more opportunities for input, participation and diversity of voices to foster deeper conversations and build trust.

Four Engagement Strategies

In an effort to explore authentic virtual engagement strategies, four different methods were tested out with participants:

1. Open Space
2. Conversation Café
3. Deliberative Dialogue
4. Fishbowl

This field note series describes the following for each engagement strategy:
- Principles
- Process and intended outcomes
- Insights
- Further resources to dive deeper

Open Space

Description

Open Space or Open Space Technology is an opportunity to invite participants to co-create and manage their own agenda and sessions focusing on a central theme. Open Space is a participatory facilitation process that involves inviting participants to actively join the sessions that interest them and contribute to the decisions around what topics are on the agenda. During our Community of Practice session, we held conversations asking, "What is the conversation you need to have now about your community?" We then built an agenda around the answers we received.

Intended Outcome

A truly participatory process, Open Space empowers learners to decide what they want to discuss more deeply. This sets the expectation that participants will provide topics and facilitate conversations that spark interest for the group. The practice has been used across multiple sectors including public health, government, charity and the public sector, as well as local community organizations across a large global Community of Practice.

Process

Open Space sessions can happen with or without the use of digital technology, but in this case, we'll describe the process for creating a digital Open Space event:

1. Introduce the theme and intention for leading open space in advance of the event
2. Invite participants to come forward with a question or interest they want to explore in a breakout room conversation. Breakout room sessions are typically set for 15–20 minutes, depending on the group size.
3. Assign a lead for each breakout room. These participants will facilitate the smaller conversations and allow others to self-select the rooms and topics they want to join. Make sure to display the agenda outlining the topics and leads.
4. Designate a notetaker for each conversation. This person will record the highlights on a digital whiteboard platform (e.g., via Jamboard, Mural, etc.).
5. After hosting several rounds, gather as a large group and have the breakout room leads or notetakers outline the highlights and themes from each conversation

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One essential aspect of **Open Space** sessions is that participants are able to follow the "law of mobility." The law of mobility essentially makes it acceptable for people who are not leading conversations or taking notes to join and leave conversations as they see fit. This encourages people to take accountability for their own learning.

Four Principles

Whether in person or online, Open Space has four key principles:

1. "Whoever comes are the right people": Those who join the conversation are the right people to be there, whoever they happen to be.
2. "Whatever happens is the only thing that could have happened": Be adaptable to whatever tangent or flow the conversation takes, inviting spontaneity and openness in your conversations.
3. "Whenever it starts is the right time": Be mindful of starting based on the needs of the group rather than adhering to set timeframes.
4. "When it's over, it's over": Invite participants and hosts to wrap up when the conversation has gone as far as needed. This allows participants to move into new conversations.

ADVICE FOR OTHERS

While Open Space is not a new form of engagement, providing this practice online is new to many. Holding group conversations online through Open Space involves providing clear instructions, setting expectations and providing a way to move the conversations into action. Below are some insights from running an Open Space session in July 2021.

Encourage being present

Holding interactive and engaging conversations online requires participants to be fully present. If they are able, encourage participants to turn their cameras on and remove distractions from their workspaces. Doing an exercise before beginning can be helpful for setting expectations and actively bringing the group together.

Simplify and visualize instructions

Walk participants through the process for Open Space in a straightforward and visual way so they can follow along. Creating a list of ground rules and outlining the principles of Open Space are important for the process.

You should also note that one of the challenges of using screensharing tools such as Jamboard or PowerPoint is that they prevent users from being able to see each other's video feeds. Also, juggling between web browsers and video conferencing apps can be difficult for participants and hosts alike.

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Give enough time for people to consider the conversations they want to lead

With participants showing up as the content experts, they should be given enough space to reflect on the questions posed. We found that giving participants reflection time and a concrete theme helped shape the topics they wanted to cover.

Providing several rounds of smaller conversations allows those who led conversations to shift their role to being a participant as needed.

Include tech support

Holding the space online requires a host's full attention, leaving little room for them to manage any tech challenges that may arrive. For this reason, having someone delegated and focused on providing tech support is important so the host can focus on outlining the process and helping to draft the agenda.

Some tech challenges can be mitigated in advance; platforms such as Zoom, for example, may require participants to update the latest version in order to self-select their breakout rooms. Reminding people to update their software in advance and having someone on standby to manually move people into rooms (for those who forget) is important.

Harvest your conversations

All the conversations and thoughts should be documented to support reflection and future conversations, as well as developing concrete actions. Having an app to add images and text is valuable for presenting the highlights and the key takeaways from each smaller conversation. It is also important to find time to "close the loop" by having notetakers report back to the wider group.

TOOLS

Here are some tools and resources to learn more about hosting Open Space sessions online:

- View the recording of our open space Community of Practice hosted in July 2021
- 10 Guidelines for Increasing Online Community Engagement
- The Art of Hosting and Harvesting Conversations that Matter
- Drawing Change's Guide on Hosting Open Space on Zoom
- Chris Corrigan's Resources on Open Space

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