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Community x-change: connecting citizens and scientists to policy makers

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Introduction

Our community x-change process aims to strengthen links between the public, scientists and decision makers, and to create opportunities for discussion and debate that will help to influence the directions of policy.

Our project draws on elements of various methodologies for public participation, not least the IPPR citizens' jury model (see Kashefi and Keene, article 5, this issue).¹ However, it seeks to incorporate learning from experiences of bottom-up processes of engagement, which provide space for participants to set and shape the agenda. A conventional IPPR-style citizens' jury would have a decision or question on which to make a ruling. However, as the name suggests, the community x-change is a process by which a group of citizens exchange experiences with appropriate stakeholders in order to co-produce knowledge. Therefore, the boundaries between experts and lay knowledge are disrupted in order to create a safe space where all knowledge is respected and recognised without any form of knowledge being given special attention on an elevated platform.

An unusual feature of the community x-change approach, compared to most science communication events

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in the UK, is that it provides opportunities for scientists to participate in an engagement process as regular participants, without being called upon to act as experts.

Origins

In the mid-1980s in the UK, it began to be acknowledged that communication is an integral part of being a scientist. Initial attempts to communicate tended towards a one-way transfer of information from the 'knowledgeable' scientist to the public. However, with both a perceived lack of public trust in science and controversy over issues such as genetically modified organisms (GMOs), foot and mouth disease and *bovine spongiform encephalopathy* (BSE), to name but a few topics, it has become clear that a one-way knowledge exchange is not enough. It is in this context that the community x-change aims to involve scientists not as experts but as

¹ Institute for Public Policy Research (www.ippr.org)

Participants discussing issues in the community x-change were sometimes aided by an interpreter (left).



Photos: Community x-change camera volunteers

citizens. For most scientists familiar with a reductionist approach to a particular question or problem, it is unusual to be involved in an approach which draws on a broad range of expertise, and which values lay perspectives on issues normally the preserve of the 'expert'.²

The project is the joint initiative of the BA (British Association for the Advancement of Science) and the Policy, Ethics and Life Sciences Research Centre (PEALS), based at Newcastle and Durham universities. The first x-change was convened in the summer months preceding the BA's annual Festival of Science, a six-day series of talks, discussions and debates highlighting recent scientific developments and intended for the public and popular media. A small group of participants from the community x-change shared their experiences of the x-change process at a session held at the Festival in Norwich on 6 September 2006, where a video of the x-change meetings was also shown.

The Norwich community x-change

In the summer of 2006, a group of people of mixed age, ethnicity and background, took part in the first community x-change, in the city of Norwich in East Anglia, UK. They met to discuss local issues of concern, and also to reflect upon and debate about their local environment and climate change, to share their thoughts and ideas on possible action,

and to frame questions for further exploration. They then raised these ideas and asked questions of the decision makers, whom they themselves had nominated to be invited to the final workshop. Highlights of the discussions, presented in a series of short videos of the x-changes, recorded by six young people who had previously participated in a community video project, are available on the project's website.³

Over four days in June and July, 39 people – mostly from Norwich, Lowestoft and Peterborough – met in Norwich. Two participatory practitioners had spent time building contacts with community groups throughout the region, to recruit participants from a wide range of communities. Sixteen participants had responded to an invitation sent to people

² Reductionism can either mean (a) an approach to understanding the nature of complex things by reducing them to the interactions of their parts, or to simpler or more fundamental things or (b) a philosophical position that a complex system is nothing but the sum of its parts, and that an account of it can be reduced to accounts of individual constituents.' Source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reductionism>

³ www.the-ba.net/communityxchange

on the electoral role, and eight scientists were recruited from the University of East Anglia and Norwich Research Park. It should be noted that the process was not trying to achieve a representative sample of the local population. Rather the aim was to over-represent groups who might not be able to push themselves to the fore in a public meeting or consultation. For example, participants included individuals from the Bangladeshi and Portuguese communities who do not speak English, and young men from a hostel.

Despite the large group, relationships quickly developed, especially as participants met others living in the same local area. Initial discussions focused on issues about the local environment, such as transport and crime. How could public transport networks be improved? What factors are driving young people towards criminal behaviour? As the group began to feel they had ownership of the discussions, and that no questions or comments were out of bounds, groups began to gel.

On the second day, a local environment campaigner, Maxine Narburgh from a charity called Suffolk Connect (now Bright Green), helped to facilitate sessions along with six of the charity's environmental volunteers. In particular, this helped the participants to relate the issues they had raised to climate change. For many of the participants, climate change appeared to be a global issue for governments to discuss and tackle. However, relating global warming to the amount we consume, whether we recycle, the modes of transport we choose – or have – to use, started to open up debate.

On the third day, the participants delved deeper into the issues they had begun to discuss over the first weekend. Alongside issues related to climate change, the group were keen to include social issues of community breakdown and the lack of public meeting places. Of significant concern were specific issues around meeting places for, quite often, isolated ethnic minority women. The participatory process enabled gender inequalities to be drawn out and drew attention to the importance of women's voices in climate change discourse. Part of the process involved the group looking at various scenarios, written by the project team, to present some of the tensions emerging from climate change. Participants talked about the issues in small groups, and two groups decided to dramatise their discussions. One drama addressed flooding in Norfolk, and the other issues of exclusion and isolation. In both cases, the dramas brought a real depth and richness to the process.

In the final workshop, participants had the opportunity to discuss issues raised during the x-change process with 'information providers'. One session in a previous workshop

had been devoted to drawing up a list of potential information providers. So the group was able to say who they deemed to be trusted sources of information and to generate questions for these specialists. Those who attended included two environment experts, one who works with a variety of stakeholders, including businesses, on a project to reduce carbon dioxide emissions. The other was an environmental activist. A police community support officer, a local councillor and the local MP also attended.

Feedback from reviewers

After Norwich, a team of reviewers, Jenny Chapman and Antonella Mancini, with expertise in community development and participatory approaches, were commissioned to undertake a mid-term review of the process. The intention was to draw out lessons learnt so far, to be incorporated into the next community x-change in Liverpool. These reviewers read all the reports and diaries, viewed the video and raw footage, interviewed 21 members of the project team and the participants, and held a focus group discussion in Norwich with five participants. Although the sample was small and unrepresentative, it was clear that the workshops were enjoyed by most participants and that most had found the experience interesting and engaging. Some participants, however, would have liked more clarity about the purpose behind the workshops. Most expected that something would come out of the process and, in particular, that the information generated would be presented to decision makers. One benefit of working with the review team was that it became clear that a more realistic assessment was needed of resources – human and financial – available to make change take place.

In discussion with the reviewers, the project team acknowledged that they were over optimistic in their expectations as to what they could achieve in a short period of time, in a process led by people from outside the region and with only temporary links to local communities. Another issue that the review team voiced was that there was too little attention paid to explaining to participants the overall purpose of what was being done.

The reviewers recommended an externally facilitated workshop to look at objectives for the next project phase, to agree clear, shared and realistic objectives and to develop a clear theory of change as to how those objectives might be achieved. The project team were only too aware of the inherent power imbalance within the project around decision-making on issues of climate change. However, in seeking to redistribute the power, particularly around local issues of

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concern, there was now a clear plan for how participants might affect change. Future workshops would need to allow participants to work with stakeholders to formulate and own a plan to create a better future.

The review team also advocated that the key stakeholders take collective responsibility to improve group dynamics within the project team. All team members should know what is happening and why. The reviewers judged that there had been insufficient feedback and joint reflection about the model and methodology employed at Norwich. We needed to prioritise learning, monitoring and evaluation in the next phase of work. The reviewers specifically recommended a clear write-up of methodology before the workshops and that the x-change process would benefit both from ongoing feedback from participants and from project team members. Where a number of project partners work together, clear terms of reference needed to be negotiated within the project team to enable a transparent and mutually agreed decision-making process.

Feedback from participants

Four of the scientist participants kept a diary of their experiences, from which the following quotations are drawn. Helen Czerski asks:

So what will come of all this? It was a fantastic way to explore the problems in society and to hear many different points of view. There was a genuine feeling that if this group had a discussion and made a decision, after hearing a cross-section of opinions and the reasons for them, then the group as a whole would be far more likely to respect that decision, even if they didn't like it. But how do you use a set of opinions expressed by such a group? It was very useful for all of us, but how could we apply what we discovered more generally? I think that the links made between people who live close enough together to see each other on the streets of Norwich or Colchester will be very valuable to them, but the whole of East Anglia is a bit too large for that sort of interaction. I hope that more of these happen and that it makes local communities more cross-linked as a result. The more people who are exposed to the opinions of others in society in an envi-

ronment like this, the better – or so I think. Thank you to the BA for giving me the opportunity to participate. And if you ever hear of one of these happening near you, don't hesitate to volunteer!

Peter McKeown writes:

I certainly came away from the x-change with a lot of food for thought, as well as a lot of optimism about people's enthusiasm for dealing with problems within local areas. Like most of us, I'll be interested in seeing what becomes of the outcome – what thoughts it provokes when shown at the [BA] Festival, and how it compares with the results of other similar exercises. I particularly hope it is followed up on by local government, and attracts interest from the local press, as opportunities to hear people frankly discussing their thoughts in an unpressured environment are all too rare.

Laura Bowater writes:

The wonderful thing about the x-change was that it brought together a great big melting pot of different people from many communities and walks of life who under normal circumstances would never ever interact with each other. It made me see that in today's society we are individuals who have some contact with our immediate community but that we have hardly any contact with different communities or members of society [...] The really amazing thing that I discovered was that almost everyone in these communities wanted to find ways to break through the barriers [...] and form wider links with other people from other backgrounds, other beliefs, and other age groups. We noticed that our immediate environment and where we live can make a huge difference to creating these links. It was felt that having green, pleasant spaces where people want to pass the time as well as town and community centres that are inclusive and welcoming are steps that would start to break down the isolation and the alienation that people feel in British society today.

Reflections

The community x-change has highlighted the importance of recognising community perspectives in developing solutions to one of the biggest challenges of modern times – climate change. The key message we took from the x-change was that feelings of disempowerment and isolation were at the forefront of people's minds, especially some of the women

and younger participants. A conclusion we have reached following our experiences in Norwich is that changing the culture that disempowers and isolates these people is inherently linked to the development of climate change solutions. Like nanotechnology (see Singh, article 4, this issue), climate change does not perhaps fit as neatly into the 'science' box as some suppose.

Perhaps the enormous threat of climate change provides an opportunity to reinvigorate democracy and collective action. These, no doubt, will be among the key ingredients required to adapt to a rapidly changing climate. The x-change highlighted the limitations of top-down behavioural change initiatives that target the individual and do very little in allowing communities, especially women and young people, to develop safe spaces for collective analysis of issues of primary concern in their locality – which, no doubt, will be both social and climate-related.

The other challenge that the community x-change highlights again and again is one of institutional culture change.

Over the last 25 years, the focus of the UK science communication community has gradually moved away from dealing with complex issues using simplistic methods of information provision. There is now a glut of initiatives in the sphere of what has become known as public engagement. Scientists will act as citizens in much the same way as any group of individuals in such processes. However, the sort of innovative and flexible thinking that allows knowledge to be co-produced, as we attempted here, is much less readily found. There is now increasing appreciation of knowledge gained from those other than professional experts, for example within the farming community about ecology, or within patient groups about treatment procedures and regimes. But this sort of knowledge, derived from these 'experts by experience' is rarely valued by policy makers. Few of them, in the UK at least, behave as if the expertise, values, hopes and fears for research and regulation can yield creative solutions to complex problems.

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For institutions, such as the BA and universities like Newcastle and Durham, the key challenge from this project is to embed participatory approaches within the organisational fabric and move beyond one-way communication of science. A great amount can be achieved through careful planning. Key questions must be asked at the outset about the thinking behind the approach chosen:

- What are realistic timescales for this project?
- What are the barriers to engagement?
- Who can we work with to ensure critical monitoring and evaluation before, during and after the process?
- Have we considered all the various sources of knowledge which could be utilised to produce a creative solution?

These questions could also have profound impacts on government, learned societies and universities.

As our community x-change process begins in Liverpool, so we have recognised a drawback in the funding model behind our project. It does not allow our project team to become integrated into the community in which it works. We have therefore employed a Community Engagement Worker from the area of Liverpool in which we will be working. The funding for this process ends in the near future and we want to maximise the possibility of future interactions between participants. So we are working closely with a number of community groups from the area within which we have drawn our participants. In parallel, we are seeking to share our learning and encourage others to implement it more widely within our organisations. The true legacy of this project in the long term could be significant changes in the way we 'do' science. This would be the most significant demonstration of long-term success of the community x-change.

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