

Connected Conversations

Tackling big issues by linking small conversations

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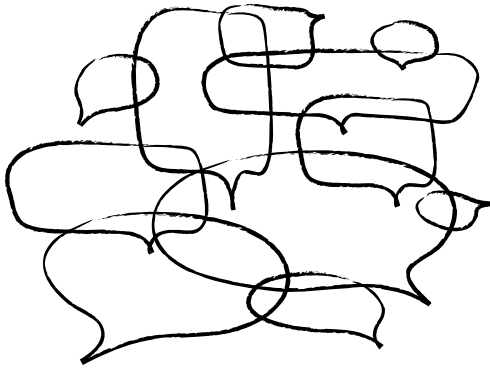


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nef (the new economics foundation) is a registered charity founded in 1986 by the leaders of The Other Economic Summit (TOES), which forced issues such as international debt onto the agenda of the G8 summit meetings. It has taken a lead in helping establish new coalitions and organisations such as the Jubilee 2000 debt campaign; the Ethical Trading Initiative; the UK Social Investment Forum; and new ways to measure social and economic well-being.



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'Such essays cannot await the permanence of the book. They do not belong in the learned journal. They resist packaging in periodicals.'

Ivan Illich

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About the authors

Perry Walker is an innovator of participatory methods that anyone can use. Over the last ten years he has led the development of Democs, a conversation game, which provides a unique opportunity for small groups to find out about complex policy issues like climate change or nanotechnology, to shape and share their opinions, and to provide feedback for policymakers. Democs has attracted tens of thousands of participants.

More recently, he has created Open Up!, an 'argument map'. This started on paper: an on-line version, on global drugs policy, is now under development. He is currently promoting Crowd Wise, a new approach to participative decision making, adapted by **nef** from a well-established approach called consensus voting. He has also designed and facilitated numerous participatory projects including: future search conferences (usually for 64 people over two days); Imagine, a workshop-based visioning process using appreciative story-telling; and the People's Café project, spreading discussion cafes to a range of people, including those with learning difficulties.

Perry has MAs in economics from Cambridge and from Birkbeck. He is on the board of Involve.

Stephen Whitehead is a researcher at **nef**. He is currently leading the foundation's work on criminal justice policy. He ran Who Sees What, a mass engagement project on healthcare, privacy and research which is one of the prototypes for the connected conversations model. Other interests include public participation in decision-making, volunteering and civic debate, education and skills and the implications of social networks for democracy, governance and activism.

Before joining **nef**, Stephen worked in education policy with an emphasis on further education and the qualifications and examinations system.

Introduction

On 21 April 2010, seven members of Age Concern met in the echoey hall of a community centre in Ilford to talk about who they trust with their most sensitive personal information. Armed with the key facts, they discussed what their health records meant to them, how they should be safeguarded and who should have access. After 90 minutes they were better informed, more opinionated and more engaged. When it came to their health they left more ready to be active citizens. As participation goes it was nice, although hardly earth-shattering.

That spring and summer, though, a lot of other people were having the same conversation. Students in lecture theatres, families in living rooms, patients in doctors' surgeries. In total 1,500 people used the same information to draw their own conclusions at more than 100 events across England. Another 1,500 learned more about the issues at stalls in libraries and museums, while 3,000 young people talked about the same issues in school science lessons. And more people used materials specially designed to help people with learning difficulties to get involved.

All told, more than 6,000 people talked about the topic of health and patient records that spring and summer. Those conversations were linked through a project called Who Sees What, an attempt to stimulate hundreds of conversations and link them together to create a rich picture of public views, with the potential to inform and shape public policy.

Meeting future challenges

The UK faces an interlinked set of economic, environmental and political challenges that have led **nef** (the new economics

foundation) to call for a ‘great transition’¹ – a fundamental shift to a more sustainable, socially just way of living. But transition cannot be achieved from the top down. It will require central and local government, businesses, communities and individuals to develop their own understandings of sustainability and social justice and to debate and negotiate with each other about the way forward.

At the moment, however, there is no easy way to get this kind of debate to happen. Our social fabric is fragmented, and opportunities for debate are few and far between. There is little space for groups to deliberate about complex, pressing issues and even less space for them to share their views with each other. The internet is at best a partial solution: there is no substitute for face to face discussion.

Processes such as Who Sees What offer a clue as to how problems like this can be overcome. We call this kind of approach ‘connected conversations’. Unlike many forms of public engagement, connected conversations are not about settling issues or reaching consensus. They simply let citizens engage in public discussion with friends, family or colleagues in their existing networks and then link these discussions together. Rather than seeking to generate a collective decision, they reflect that tackling the biggest issues means making many small decisions and then finding the links between them. They are, in effect, talking shops – and we are proud to describe them as such.

Many of the biggest issues are ‘wicked problems’²: thorny topics that bring about disagreement about the very nature of the problem and repeatedly defy solution. Policy interventions in wicked problems often bring about unintended consequences. For example, efforts to reduce the harm caused by illicit drugs by restricting their supply have led to drugs that are available being adulterated with more harmful chemicals, leading to greater health risks to users.³ Such problems cannot be fully solved but they can be managed. Successful management involves drawing on the information, insight, ideas and energy of as many of us as possible.

The connected conversation approach has evolved over more than a decade of work at **nef**, primarily in the field of science communication. Through projects such as Democs,⁴ Open Up⁵ and Science on the Street⁶ we have explored how and where deliberation can take place and what can link it together. We are grateful for the support of the Wellcome Trust, which has consistently been willing to support innovative and untested work in this area.

Our understanding of the connected conversations approach owes a debt to other work, including Involve's recent work on distributed dialogue.⁷ Such publications have identified the need for distributed engagement approaches. This paper is our own contribution to the growing body of literature in this area, drawing on our experience to suggest a practical model for societal debate. It sets out what we mean by connected conversations, and explores the role they can play in addressing some of the major challenges we will face over the next decade.

Our paper is divided into four chapters, each covering one of the four features that define the connected conversations model. These chapters are entitled 'Openness', 'Deliberation', 'Information' and 'Connections'.

'Deliberation' and 'Information' describe the way in which individual conversations take place, and explore the specific challenges encountered when running events at arm's length. 'Openness' and 'Connections' describe the structures that link the conversations together.

Connected conversations that embody these four features can help mobilise individuals, civil society groups and government to solve the challenges of the twenty-first century and to ensure that they are not only taking action, but doing so together.



1. Connected conversations

Climate change confronts modern nation-states with perhaps the most grave and complex challenge they have ever faced. Unless we can achieve a transition to a low-carbon global economy, we run the risk of losing the environmental conditions that have provided the backdrop for the development of human civilisation. While some eco-authoritarians argue that democracy is not capable of meeting the challenge, **nef** believes that it is only through a pluralist system that the political impetus and systemic capacity to create transition can be found.

Transition is a difficult task. While solutions to climate change are often discussed primarily at the very highest echelon of responsibility (international political agreements) and the very lowest (individual actions), achieving transition requires a comprehensive response across a range of levels.

Individuals will have to change their consumption habits, while local and regional government will need to take a more strategic approach to urban planning, management of the building stock and leading the restructuring of the local economy. The role of national governments will be to handle broader infrastructure issues, from energy to transport, and to ensure that the right incentives are in place for others to contribute. International organisations have the important job of setting the pace of change and ensuring that transition is both rapid and equitable. Across all these levels, civil society organisations can create a social context in which transition is seen as necessary, desirable and possible, while businesses of different sizes must ensure that their practices value sustainability over short-term profits.

In considering the role that deliberation can play in tackling climate change we need to move beyond two common views

of political decision-making. We reject the argument that civil servants or elected politicians are best placed to make policy decisions because of the ability they have to grasp the complexities involved.⁸ On the other hand, however, we do not believe in the argument that collectively applied ‘democratic intelligence’ will produce the best decisions.⁹ Instead it is our view that, for the most pressing issues, neither government officialdom nor the populace at large has the knowledge or power to identify and implement solutions on its own. Dialogue structures must be found that can pool the knowledge, power and legitimacy of all different kinds of institutions and individuals to create actions at many different levels.¹⁰

Without active participation at all levels of society, governments cannot tackle these issues. But active participation will not be possible as long as the centre maintains its role as the arbiter of how others must change their behaviour.

The issue of climate change is characteristic of a range of complex problems we face – from persistent, intergenerational social exclusion to ageing populations – that require multi-level collaboration. Neither direction from the top nor isolated pockets of activism can create the systemic shifts required to meet these challenges.

Our experiments with connected conversations offer a glimpse into how dialogue can mobilise different actors around a common cause. They help individual groups to create their own internal consensus which can become a platform for action, while also tying the conversations of different groups together to create an opportunity for co-ordination and the development of a shared understanding.

What are connected conversations?

Connected conversations are a series of discussions that take place in many different places and are joined together by a single project identity, a shared frame of reference and structures that enable information and insights to be shared. They are facilitated by a project organiser or organisers to encourage the organisation

of events, provide information and facilitate the sharing and amalgamation of results.

Rather than bringing all participants together in one place, connected conversations empower them to hold discussions within their existing social networks. These discussions serve as ‘laboratories of public interest’¹¹ – spaces where often relatively homogenous and sometimes marginalised groups can consider an issue and determine collectively how they should respond to it. As Cass Sunstein observes,¹² deliberation within groups that share a common interest can lead to an intensification of shared understanding, creating powerful opportunities for mobilisation.

At the same time, however, connected conversations also attempt to ensure that groups have access to information representing a range of positions and interests. The aim is to ensure that processes take advantage of the demonstrated ability of deliberation to make participants more “fact-regarding, future-regarding and other-regarding”.¹³

Connected conversations are defined by their interconnectedness. The individual conversations are joined together by another meta-conversation that links individual conversations to each other and to external actors. The meta-conversation serves to ensure that participants feel part of a wider process and are directly or indirectly connected to others beyond their existing group.

The events within connected conversations are usually organised individually by participants themselves. They are staged by volunteers operating at arm’s length from whoever is convening the overarching dialogue.

These volunteers are given materials and support but are otherwise charged with setting up their own events. This allows the process to reach many more participants than a more centralised approach. However, it relies on the desire of participants to be involved and their willingness to take on the role of organiser and facilitator. This makes it important to provide clear and informative resource material and a flexible, easy-to-stage event format. Simplicity and flexibility are required to ensure that

events require minimal planning and can be customised to the needs of a particular group.

This leads to the final plank of connected conversations – diversity. The range of participants, contexts and organisers will naturally lead to events that vary widely in tone, content and process. This is actively encouraged: conveners may produce different tools or even entirely different approaches in order to provide different groups with an experience that is relevant to them. Chapter two has the example of adapting Democs for adults with learning difficulties.

While the practice of connected conversations organised along these lines is in its infancy, early experiences have highlighted some key points that can support a successful process. We regard a successful process as one that engages with and ultimately connects a wide number of people at various levels in a relevant and informative way, and one that has a well-defined outcome.

Democs – a toolkit for connected conversations

Enabling individual conversations to take place without the intervention of a facilitator demands a series of tools that are suitable for operating without facilitation. These tools need to achieve the following:

- Define the topic for discussion
- Give the information required for an informed discussion of that topic in an accessible format
- Provide a framework that enables a respectful and useful discussion to take place without the presence of a facilitator
- Offer a format that makes sharing the outcomes of the event as simple as possible.

In carrying out our experiments with deliberative conversation we have achieved most success with a tool called Democs, which has a card game format. The tool is simple to use, making professional facilitation unnecessary. It offers information in an accessible

format, removing the need to consult experts, and is flexible enough to be adapted to many different situations.

Throughout this paper, we will use the example of Democs to describe how the architecture for a connected conversation can be created. However, we don't assume that this is the only way to run a connected conversation. Other approaches, perhaps including ideas that place greater emphasis on the use of technology or that follow more traditional deliberative forms, may be equally effective – if they can be adapted to offer the same advantages.



Democs

Democs (originally an acronym for DELiberative Meeting Of CitizenS) is a small group consultation tool that mimics the form of a card game. It is designed to offer a structured deliberative experience that is more flexible and less resource intensive than traditional forms of deliberative democracy, such as deliberative polling or citizens' juries. It uses information presented on a deck of information cards rather than requiring the presence of expert witnesses, and provides a detailed set of rules to make the role of facilitator very straightforward.

Democs was developed in the period 2001–2003 by Perry Walker, head of **nef's** Democracy and Participation programme. One aim was to create a tool for public debate that offered a high-quality deliberative experience to a large number of participants. A second aim, inspired by the German political philosopher Jurgen Habermas (see chapter two) was that participation should be open to anyone who wants to take part and should be available in a setting of participants' own choosing.

The Democs approach is built around a conversation kit. Each Democs kit is custom-designed for the topic in question. The kit contains a deck of cards that offer short pieces of information and argument about the topic. The kit also includes a set of instructions for using the cards, a decision-making plenary activity and a feedback form for recording the outcomes.

2. Openness

The connected conversation model is built around the principle of openness. Processes should be accessible to anyone who wishes to take part in them. This means not only lowering formal barriers to entry but also removing other obstacles such as skills requirements or inaccessible venues.

In aspiring to this kind of openness, we situate deliberative democracy within the tradition of direct democracy. We draw this principle not from science communication but from the realm of politics, specifically the work of Jurgen Habermas. Freedom to take part is one vital element of Habermas's 'ideal speech situation' – his term for the best possible environment for debate and decision-making.¹⁴ Habermas reached his conclusions by studying civil society in the UK and elsewhere in the eighteenth century, and in particular the coffee houses that were notable at that time for providing “a forum for exchanging views and nurturing public opinion across the social spectrum”.¹⁵

Embracing openness makes it possible to engage with significantly larger numbers of participants. Because participants are not selected or vetted and do not need approval to take part, open access enables public engagement to reach numbers of people far higher than traditional closed models. Connected conversations are thus well suited to projects that aim to have an impact on participants as well as generating information for a decision-making process. The inclusive and wide-ranging nature of the events also makes this approach appropriate for early-stage public engagement ('upstream engagement', as the jargon puts it), where it is important to draw in a range of perspectives and generate a diverse set of ideas.

Alternatives to openness

Openness stands in contrast to two other ways of recruiting participants for public engagement – random selection and stratified sampling. In the UK random selection is most closely associated with jury trials, although some writers have called for it to be more widely used in political representation.¹⁶ It derives its legitimacy through transparency: it is clear how participants were represented, that everyone has an even chance to participate and that selection cannot be steered by special interests. In larger assemblies, random selection may approach statistical representation of the population.

An example of public engagement using random selection is the Ontario Citizens' Assembly.¹⁷ This brought together a group of citizens to discuss electoral reform. Initially 100,000 citizens were sent letters inviting them to attend. Of the 7,000 who expressed an interest, 103 were selected, one person at random from each electoral district. The final sample included a broad range of occupations, ages and ethnicities.

This shows how random selection can be tweaked to ensure fully balanced representation against a particular dimension (in this case, geographic spread). But it also highlights one of the problems of random selection – the impact of refusal. The reduction from 100,000 to 7,000 will necessarily have changed the characteristics of the sample. Random selection is most suitable for high-profile formal political processes, where refusal rates are likely to be lower.

The stratified sample is a key tool of quantitative research in the social sciences. To create a stratified sample, researchers identify the characteristics of the population that are relevant to the outcome, such as age, ethnicity and gender. They then identify what proportion of the population falls into each subgroup (such as Afro-Caribbean women aged 18-30) and recruit a sample in which each subgroup is represented proportionately, according to its size in the population as a whole.

In public engagement, stratified sampling is most closely associated with James Fishkin's deliberative polling methodology.¹⁸

This recruits a sizeable stratified sample and has them deliberate in small groups. It then requires them to complete detailed quantitative polling individually to identify their policy preferences.

The role of the representative sample in deliberative polling is a complex one. Although it ensures that the sample resembles the population from which it is taken, it does not give outcomes that represent the opinions of the larger population. The purpose of the polling is to gauge “the opinions people would hold if they knew and thought more about the issues”.¹⁹ The evidence suggests that deliberation tends to change participants’ views²⁰ – particularly on issues where they do not hold strong views before the process.²¹

Self-organisation

Connected conversations tend to be built around self-organised events. This means that participants themselves initiate and manage individual events. Our experience is that events are most commonly and most successfully run by members of community or voluntary sector organisations, although some have also been run by individuals.

Self-organisation ensures that discussion is situated and strongly rooted within civil society. While many forms of public engagement have a model similar to a town-hall meeting where citizens temporarily immerse themselves in the political arena, connected conversations take political issues out of politics and put them in the spaces and language of everyday life.

Discussions tend to be organised by community and voluntary sector groups with an interest in the issue at hand. This is important because these groups offer not just a venue but also a vehicle for action.²² Discussions that take place within organisations such as community groups and support networks are closer to the authentic instruments of collective action in our communities than discussions in ad hoc groups such as citizens’ juries.

This demands a new way of doing public engagement. Formalised political processes such as citizens' juries or deliberative polling generally take their language and style from traditional state politics. They are not well suited to the community centre, the back room of the pub and other places where associational life takes place. They can be difficult to manage, and organising them can be an imposing challenge for someone not versed in this area.

The participative vision of connected conversations is best served if the conversations take place in civil society spaces that are, in large part, outside of the control of the project organiser. This means finding new forms of engagement that people feel comfortable with.

Our experience has shown that Democs lends itself well to self-organisation. One example of this is the 'spreading and embedding' project, which ran between 2004 and 2006. Funded by the Wellcome Trust, this ground-breaking initiative involved producing 'conversation kits' on a range of bio-ethics topics such as vaccinations and stem cell research.²³ These kits were used by groups as diverse as NGOs, discussion organisations, teacher training bodies and universities.

Overcoming self-selection bias

Connected conversations clearly have the potential to reach large numbers of people. But there is a risk that those involved may prove to be an unrepresentative sample of the groups and communities targeted. As Luskin and Fishkin observe, leaving participants to be self-selecting can favour those with the most resources.²⁴ Like tea at the Ritz, even a formally open process may be inaccessible to many people. A lack of time or confidence, or doubts about the efficacy of political participation, or a lack of money can prevent people from taking part in public engagement.

In thinking about the impact of self-selection bias, it's valuable to consider the meanings of different conceptions of representation. Jane Mansbridge, for example, argues that marginalised groups cannot rely on others to represent their interests, but must be directly present in a discussion if their voice is to be heard.²⁵

This ‘politics of presence’ has both a symbolic value (valuing diversity and conferring legitimacy) and a practical one (outcomes that correspond closely to the needs of diverse groups).²⁶ But achieving the representation of marginalised groups does not necessarily require a focus on achieving statistical representation of each subgroup. Rather it means addressing barriers to entry to ensure that a diverse range of voices is present in the conversation and that all those voices are heard. We will deal in chapter five with how to capture and share diverse voices in a conversation, but in this part we look at how to overcome barriers.

Using a process that is not a good fit with participants’ normal modes of expression can create barriers to full participation. For example the 2001 Romanow Commission, which aimed to engage Canadians in discussing healthcare policy, included a number of aboriginal people but did not succeed in reflecting aboriginal perspectives in its outcomes. Analysis suggested that aboriginal people remained very quiet in the sessions, as the discussions were designed in a way that encouraged people to talk about their personal experiences. This may mesh with people from an individualistic cultural background but it was not well suited to aboriginal cultures in which forms of group-based representation are culturally dominant.²⁷

In order to overcome the bias that is potentially introduced by self-selection, project organisers can actively encourage members of excluded groups to take part in their projects. This means considering which stakeholder groups are likely to be excluded and systematically acting to draw them into the process. Fortunately, by enabling a diversity of approaches and methodologies, self-organisation permits project organisers to actively target excluded groups. This can be achieved through processes, or through targeted outreach.

The self-organisation model enables event organisers to meet the needs of the groups they work with by adapting processes or drawing on local resources. Even the structural limitations of an approach – such as Democs’ reliance on written language – can be overcome. For example, at one event exploring the potential of Democs as a tool to support interactions between settled and

traveller communities, a traveller said that he had been able to take part despite being illiterate. Other members of the group had supported him by reading the material to him.

People who are organising individual events can sometimes identify barriers that may not be apparent to the overall project organiser. For example, in the Who Sees What project described in the introduction, a number of people who work with adults with learning difficulties said they found the process and materials to be too complex. The project organisers responded by commissioning an adapted version of the kit that used Easy-Read text and video, and by adapting the process to reduce the amount of information considered at any one time.

If they identify marginalised groups who are at risk of being under-represented, project organisers can reach out to them via the civil society organisations to which they belong. Organisations such as church or community groups can be mobilised to stage events if it can be demonstrated that participation is in line with their aims and values. In fact, drawing on the reach of existing community groups can reverse the commonly understood hierarchy of who is 'hard to reach'. Recent immigrants, second language speakers and other marginalised groups that rely heavily on mutual support are far more likely to be part of community groups than affluent, time-poor professionals. In relying heavily on community groups to mobilise their participants, however, it is vital to avoid allowing group leaders to speak for their members.



3. Deliberation

Deliberation is at the heart of the connected conversations model. The word ‘deliberation’ is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as “careful consideration” or “the discussion of reasons for and against”. But there are three areas in which our model of deliberation goes beyond the dictionary definition, and these areas need to be explained.

Firstly, deliberation as **nef** uses the word in this context encompasses an element of reasoning. As Erik Olin Wright and Archon Fung put it: “to deliberate means to debate alternatives on the basis of considerations that all take to be relevant; it is a matter of offering reasons for alternatives, rather than merely stating a preference for one or another”.²⁸

Secondly, deliberation is more than reasoning because it is directed to the aim of reaching a conclusion on a particular issue. In the words of Tim van Gelder, “If reasoning is like running, then deliberation is like running to catch a bus or to win a race”.²⁹

Thirdly, deliberation happens best in groups. In one experiment, for example, a group of American college students were set a logic problem to tackle either individually or in groups. The correct answer was selected by 75 per cent of the groups but only 9 per cent of the students working individually. A review of the process suggested that groups did better because of “rational social processes such as requests for clarification and justification, critical evaluation, presentation of alternatives, and reflection on disagreements”.³⁰

Connected conversations aim to create a quality of deliberation that achieves two things. Firstly, deliberation needs to offer

individuals the opportunity to share their experiences and values and to understand the experiences and values of others. This supports participants in developing empathy and has the potential to make them more ‘other-regarding’. Secondly, deliberation should help groups develop a shared understanding of issues that can offer a platform for communal action.

According to the American social psychologist Solomon Asch, dialogue can effectively achieve aims like these when it help participants develop a “shared psychological field” where “the facts of one person’s world become part of the others”.³¹ This rests on doing two things. It should enable participants to develop a shared sense that all parties are ‘talking about the same world’. It should also help participants to appreciate that all human beings have basic psychological similarities, and that all experience “laughing, loving, working, desiring, thinking, perceiving, etc”.³²

Deliberation without facilitators

Creating the conditions for effective deliberation is often seen as requiring the presence of a skilled facilitator. In a connected conversations approach, however – where events are largely self organised – this is clearly not an option. Instead, the approach must somehow ‘design out’ the need for facilitation skills, by creating frameworks that allow groups to create for themselves the conditions of deliberation.

The first part of this task is to create the appropriate environment for deliberation – one where participants feel both safe and engaged. The value of safety is highlighted by a report from the Wellcome Trust about public consultation on biomedical science issues. The report suggests that one reason for low participation rates is “a disinclination to expose themselves to a discussion of a complex issue among a crowd of strangers”.³³ Engagement is also vital. In the words of Mark Dyball, “at a basic level people attending should enjoy themselves; everything else follow[s] from that”.³⁴

The challenge of creating de-skilled facilitation tools is complex. It is also difficult to consider in the abstract. It’s worth looking

in detail at the Democs model, as evidence from a series of evaluations has consistently demonstrated that Democs succeeds in creating safe and enjoyable deliberation without the presence of a trained facilitator.³⁵

Democs has two key features that are designed to create a safe, engaging environment. Firstly, the card format offers participants a support mechanism. A participant who wants to make a comment, but is lacking in confidence, can reinforce a point by referring to the cards instead.

Secondly, participants can control how much of their own views they disclose. One participant commented: “Central to the method is that we review and talk over facts and issues openly and become familiar with those dimensions, without immediately having to say what our own personal viewpoint is. We were being truthful but didn’t have to reveal our ‘positions’ or even to say we had not decided those for ourselves yet. The importance of each aspect remains but considerable possible ‘heat’ from individual exchanges will have been avoided.”³⁶



4. Information

Although much work on deliberation focuses on the role of sharing views and ideas in the development of participants' viewpoints, providing access to factual information in an appropriate form is equally vital. Without access to accurate, balanced and clear information, coming to useful conclusions is impossible.

Take, for example, this testimony from a person who participated in a Democs-based deliberation on stem cell research:

“Before I started to play Democs all I knew about stem cell research was gleaned from snippets of news reports and pro-life propaganda. I was sure that I didn’t like the idea very much. However, playing Democs with people of varying viewpoints was a great eye-opener... I learned things that I didn’t know before... which was a very pleasant surprise for me. My stand on the issue... clearly moved from where it was at the start of the game, to something quite different... I can still remember the exact argument that changed my mind. I came to the debate with a belief that the fetuses involved were generated just for research, and I didn’t like that. During Democs, I learned that in the UK most research is done on aborted fetuses. I felt that as they already existed, it was best to make use of them.”³⁷

Providing this kind of accurate and useful information is a key challenge for connected conversations. In many established deliberative formats such as ‘World Cafe’,³⁸ experts are in attendance to provide an introductory talk and answer specific questions. In a connected conversation event, however, this is clearly not possible. A key challenge for anyone attempting to

organise a connected conversation, then, is finding ways to ensure that participants have access to the information they require.

Tools for sharing information

A number of approaches are available to meet the challenge of connected conversations. Video is a natural choice as it reproduces the engaging nature of spoken communication and the enthusiasm with which many experts can present their field. However, watching a recorded talk is a notably different experience from being in the presence of an expert. The inability to question makes a video a much more passive form of engagement.

Another simple alternative is written briefings. National Issues Forums, an American approach that has many similarities to the connected conversations model, gives participants 15–20 page briefings known as ‘issues books’. But requiring so much reading can be problematic. Many participants may not read the document in advance, and reading at the event itself can become a time-consuming distraction. Equally, the sheer volume of information in the briefing may mean that participants who have read the document in advance are unable to bring all of it to mind.

Participants for whom reading is not a regular part of their daily routine or who have specific barriers to literacy may find written briefings particularly problematic, and this can deter many already excluded people.

The problem of providing information is at the heart of the Democs model. The tool itself is based around the principle of presenting information in ‘bite size’ chunks. Our aim is to make information easy to absorb from the perspective of ‘cognitive load theory’, which says that “the cognitive load in complex tasks, where the learner has to maintain several information items in working memory, may become so high that it will prevent knowledge formation.”³⁹

Democs cards

Democs kits include information and issue cards. Information cards provide key facts about the topic. Here's a card from a kit on Nanotechnology:

Novel food packaging using nanotechnology

Nanosensors embedded in food packaging are being developed. They can give warning signs when the food has 'gone off', for instance by monitoring levels of oxygen or bacteria.

Issue cards are designed to complement the facts in information cards by reflecting ideas, attitudes, opinions and so on. Here are two issue cards from a kit on climate change:

Jeremy Clarkson:

"What's wrong with global warming? We might lose Holland but there are other places to go on holiday."

Too late?

"Surely it's too late to do anything?" Question at a meeting on climate change.

Answer: "If you think that way then it is."

The use of information cards in Democs also avoids the 'recall' problem that is encountered with briefing documents. Because participants retain their information cards and are encouraged to use them in the discussion, there is not the same requirement on participants to memorise key details. This is particularly valuable for participants who lack confidence when it comes to taking part in deliberation.

Like the materials themselves, the Democs process is designed to manage cognitive load. Rather than introducing all the information at once – a model that experience shows can be difficult even for topic experts – the group engages in a process of collaborative filtering.

Information is divided between participants in randomly selected 'hands' of information cards. Each participant filters their hand

down to the cards they think are most important and then reports to the group.

Once information has been filtered, the chosen cards are combined into clusters, and the clusters are named. Again this is achieved through collaboration. Once a cluster is named, participants no longer have to remember the individual cards that comprise the cluster.

Creating discussion materials

The process of creating discussion materials is, at its heart, one of framing a topic. All public engagement exercises involve framing a topic to some extent. The type of information given, the way in which it is presented, the things that participants are encouraged to talk about and the format for them recording their views all reflect an implicit understanding of what the issue at stake is and why it matters.

In connected conversations, where the materials are presented to participants in a finished form with little opportunity to interrogate them, the power of the frame is particularly strong.

Equally, with all public engagement, there is a risk that the framing of the topic primarily reflects the interests of the people who initiate the engagement. Funders and organisers have their own understandings of issues that are often not shared by their participants. Framing an issue in a way that does not resonate with the values and perspectives of the participants runs the risk of distorting the outcome of the engagement.

For connected conversations where the level of commitment required from participants is often higher, the risk is greater: if an issue is framed in a way that does not resonate with participants, they may not take part at all.

For this reason, we believe it is vital to involve participants early on in the process of designing and creating the materials for connected conversations. A good example of how this can work can be found in the experience of the *Who Sees What*

project, which developed a set of discussion materials to help community groups talk about health records.⁴⁰ The first version of the materials was drawn from interviews with experts and desk research. But when these were tested with participants it was found that they did not reflect what people thought was important for the topic. The cards were then redesigned to draw out the lessons learned from working with the sample of participants, in particular emphasising how proposed changes would actually affect people who use the health service.



5. Connections

Connected conversations aim to combine the power of small, locally rooted conversations with the experience of being part of a larger process. In practice achieving this means doing two things – creating connections between the different conversations and creating connections with and between actors external to the process, including policy-makers. In this chapter we draw on our experience to explore some ways in which this might be achieved.

Connecting conversations to each other

Conversations can be connected to each other in three ways that can be complementary. The first is indirectly, via the project organiser acting as a hub for discussion. The second is by an infrastructure which enables groups to connect directly to each other. The third is through plenary events that bring together some of the participants from the constituent conversations.

In their position as the ‘hub’ of connected conversations, project organisers can use a project website or a social media presence like a Facebook group or Twitter profile to share details of events that have taken place and their conclusions. This offers participants and observers a sense of the scale and diversity of the project.

The data that are presented can extend beyond the ‘official’ outcomes of events. In order to amalgamate the outcomes of conversations it is necessary to find a way of capturing their outcomes. In practice, given the number of conversations involved, the organiser will need to find a way to standardise the results, for example by providing a recording form. However, while standardising results is valuable for analysis, it necessarily loses much of the richness of the conversation that has taken place.

In this case there is value in finding other ways for conversations to be captured and shared. This can be as simple as inviting participants to write brief personal comments on the discussion or to record their views using video. These participant-created records can then be shared alongside the 'official' outcomes.

Having to go through the hub of the project organiser is likely to be something of a brake and even a deterrent for some participants. Direct links between conversation groups is particularly valuable if collective action that extends beyond the local is desired. This can be facilitated most easily by drawing on social media tools such as Ning,⁴¹ which enable the creation of custom-built online communities.

A final mode of connection is a plenary event that brings together participants from some of the individual conversations. While discussions within individual groups can be polarising, a concluding event can find common ground between individual positions and create a shared position. Since such events are organised by the project conveners, there is the opportunity to control or influence who comes, and to ensure the presence of the 'seldom heard'.

Connecting policy-makers to conversations

Although distributed dialogue is aimed at generating collective action by participants, it also seeks to offer participants the opportunity to influence government and business actions. In order to achieve this it is necessary to build connections between the process and the people in a position to influence action – the policy-makers.

In addition to their role as the final audience for the outcomes of the connected conversations process, policy-makers can play a number of roles along the way. They can act as a source, providing their expertise; as a participant, contributing to the discussion; or as a champion who promotes the project. In fact, there is considerable value in engaging policy-makers in these roles because increasing their involvement may make them take more of an interest in the project's outcomes.

Involving policy-makers directly as participants is a particular challenge, however. Given the dispersed nature of the process, policy-makers can usually participate in only a fraction of the events – and most likely only one.

Bringing together the outcomes of connected conversations

Although connected conversations are not oriented solely towards creating a picture of participants' opinion, such a picture can be useful in creating a bridge between the conversations and the policy process. However, given the uncertain and unrepresentative nature of the group of participants in a connected conversation, it is necessary to treat aggregated results cautiously.

One cannot say, for example, that the results of a deliberation are representative of the results of the population at large. This cannot be true even if the people who took part were very typical of the population at large, or if they represented a genuine cross-section. This is because taking part in the deliberation itself might well make them unrepresentative. The results of a connected conversations approach ultimately represent only the views of the people who took part.

For this reason, qualitative analysis can be more useful than quantitative analysis. Qualitative analysis creates a sense of the context in which a decision is being taken and helps to explain why people hold the views they do.

Despite these obstacles, it is possible with the right degree of transparency and caution to present outcomes from connected conversations processes in a valuable and robust way. In particular, three principles can guide the presentation of outcomes.

1. Be inclusive not summative. Qualitative data is likely to be contradictory. In an open-access analysis it is more valuable to present a plurality of conflicting views than to attempt to construct a unified viewpoint.
2. Keep track of demographics. It will be much easier to represent data robustly if it is clear whom it has come from.
3. Use subgroup analysis. If demographic characteristics are attached to your data, then you should use them. It can be very helpful to break down a sample into groups to ensure that the voices of marginalised participants are not stifled – even though they may be few in number. This is particularly important if quantitative analysis is being used.

Post-script

“Democracy begins in conversation,” remarked John Dewey, the American philosopher and educational reformer, on his ninetieth birthday. Conversation – especially that form of constructive conversation known as deliberation – provides an unparalleled means for all of us to absorb new information, to challenge the views of others and accept their challenge to us, to find out both what we think and what others think and (last but not least) to find out what we are prepared to do, by ourselves and with others.

The ‘wicked’ issues that we face, and the great transition that is required to deal with them, will need a response from all of us. Society as a whole and those who undertake to govern us need our understanding, our opinions, our energy, our action. And all of these things need to be joined up: we need connected conversations.



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The Great Transition: A tale of how it turned out right

The UK like many nations is in the midst of a triple crunch – a coming together of credit-fuelled financial crisis, accelerating climate change and highly volatile energy prices underpinned by the approaching peak in global oil production. These are no longer abstract, distant issues of financial and environmental policy. They are beginning to affect everyone. The Great Transition shows why we need to get behind solutions that can proactively deal with climate change, the economic crisis and are also socially progressive. These are choices we must take, because ahead, both progressive and poisonous political trains of thought may emerge. The Great Transition sets out why the transition to a new economy is not only necessary, it is both possible and desirable.



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This report presents a summary of the findings of a two-year-long mass public engagement exercise on the subject of electronic patient records in the NHS. We make recommendations about how to ensure that electronic records are used in way which protects privacy and confidentiality.



Crowd Wise Turning differences into effective decisions

This briefing paper provides an introduction to nef's new participative method for taking shared decisions, helping people to find common ground. Crowd Wise produces outcomes which the participants are more likely to support or be able to live with. It is a tested and flexible format that can be used for a wide range of issues and decisions. It can work as a single event, or over a period of time; it can work for 15 people or 1500; it can be used to set priorities, allocate budgets or respond to a consultation.

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