

Participatory Processes: Creating a "Marketplace of Ideas" with Open Space Technology

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ABSTRACT

Engaging an active citizenry in public policy decisions using participative processes is increasingly recognized as a critical step in reducing the democratic deficit, a fundamental issue facing democracies around the world. This article demonstrates the connections between the theoretical literature on governance, participatory processes, knowledge, and the principles that underpin Open Space Technology or OST. OST is an innovative, highly democratic consultative process that has gained international recognition as a leading edge large group consultation methodology. The process creates an environment in which codified/professional and experiential knowledge of participants can emerge to inform the meeting's agenda and coalesce to produce rich and creative outputs. It enables participants to create their own agenda within the parameters of the meeting's stated purpose, to work through obstacles that stand in the way of moving forward and create an action plan for implementation. This process has strong utility in the implementation of public policy within decentralized environments such as health and social care that include a multiplicity of actors and diversity of opinion. It has the additional capability of connecting participants in remote locations through OpenSpace-Online® software developed for Internet technology. Used when authentic consultation is sought, OST regularly results in additional benefits that include community building, transformational learning, and enhanced confidence in institutions.

Introduction

This paper shows the value of Open Space Technology (OST), a large group facilitation methodology, as a way of opening up communication among various segments of our increasingly complex society. It will focus specifically on the utility of this methodology first, as a method of citizen consultation that can help to address the democratic deficit; second as a way of ensuring a healthy feedback loop within policy systems; and third, as a method of addressing intractable problems in decentralized policy subsystems. These represent just a few of the applications through which this methodology can improve both governance and results.

OST is a method of tapping into the collective wisdom of communities of interest. It is being used internationally by both public and private organizations and increasingly by governments. The approach is underpinned by the fundamental value of respect for individuals and the belief that everybody has something to contribute that needs to be heard. In other words, none of us is as smart as all of us. It is a truly democratic process in that it demands that the power relations that can silence voices be neutralized in the dynamics of consultation thus, opening up space for creativity and innovation.

The paper begins by identifying two challenges faced by modern governments: the democratic deficit and the changing role of the nation state. It proceeds to discuss the debate about the value of public space and the characteristics of public discourse. The paper shows how the principles of deliberative discourse are embodied in OST. It then describes how OST works, provides examples of where it has been used and concludes with ideas on how the use of this methodology can assist governments to govern consciously.

The Democratic Deficit

Citizens of advanced industrialized democracies are becoming increasingly alienated from politics. Voter turnout is falling while at the same time participation in protest action is increasing. People are abandoning political parties as the vehicle to articulate their preferences. A growing proportion of the population feels that “people like me don’t” have any say about what government does”, that “those who are elected to Parliament soon lose touch with the people” and that “government doesn’t much care about what people like me think” (Nevitte, 2000).

There has been a narrowing of the “skill gap” between citizens and elected officials linked to a general increase in education levels (ibid., p. S86) and a loss of deference in citizen-elite relations. Citizens are feeling that they have something relevant to add to the policy discussion, yet there is no satisfactory mechanism for this. The vote as the pinnacle of democratic expression is proving unsatisfactory.

Claims by governments that by virtue of being “democratically elected” they have a mandate to rule as they see fit rings hollow when typically voter participation barely exceeds half the Canadian population in federal elections and much less in municipal and provincial elections. Kymlicka and Norman identify the dismissal of the “mandate” argument as reflective of a shift

from vote-centric to talk-centric democratic theory. Vote-centric theories see democracy as an area in which mixed, pre-existing preferences and interests compete through fair decision procedures or aggregation mechanisms (such as majority vote). But it is now widely recognized that such a conception cannot fulfil norms of democratic legitimacy, since the outcomes can only represent winners and not a common will (Kymlicka and Norman, 2000).

Increasingly citizens join or fund non-governmental organizations or social movements as a way of expressing their preferences. The art of government has become more challenging and government is grappling with increasingly complex, and sometimes intractable, issues.

Recreating Democracy In An Increasingly Complex Society

Public conversation or discourse is a basic pillar of democracy. While it is popularly argued that we have unprecedented opportunity to engage in free speech in this age of instant communication, the question has to be asked whether it is enough simply to have public commentary floating in the ether? How does this percolate upwards to government? London summarizes the work of Arendt and Habermas, makes the point that opportunity for public discourse must be institutionalized,

Hannah Arendt and Jurgen Habermas have devoted considerable attention to the importance of public discourse in latter-day democracies. They maintain that an institutional arena of public discourse and civic participation is essential to counterbalance the dual pressures of state and market. They conceive of the public sphere as both a process by which people can deliberate about their common affairs, and as an arena, or space, in which this can happen naturally” (London, 1995).

Public space can be created by citizens engaged in ordinary activity or by third sector organizations and other non-governmental actors. Public space can become a locus for the expression of preferences, the development of consensus, or even an opening up of opportunities for visionary leadership to emerge.

This dynamic can be supported and facilitated by state institutions and processes - or actively discouraged. It will depend upon a number of factors including the levels of trust in society, the citizen capacity-building instruments of the state and above all, the willingness of government actors to relinquish some power for agenda-setting to citizens. As Arendt and Habermas have concluded, there has to be an institutionalized vehicle for creating this public space. Without it, public discourse can be treated merely as white noise.

A “Marketplace of Ideas”

The question is how to create that public space and identify its proper role, given the realities of representative democracy, the size and diversity of populations in modern nations, the complexity of issues, the shift to multi-level governance and the modern preoccupation with accountability. How, then, is output or public discourse harnessed so that the wisdom and knowledge embedded in communities inform government? There is no clear consensus on this, but two solutions that are floated are “teledemocracy” and deliberative democracy.

“Tele” or “distance” democracy provides opportunity for the airing of opinions and manifests as talk radio, letters to the editor, demonstrations, letter writing, and the general phenomenon of television’s talking heads. With the exception of Internet bulletin boards and chat rooms, these are not deliberative or often not even dialogic. Moreover, they encourage and support an “argument culture” where issues become polarized and individuals set out to win an argument rather than understand different ways of thinking or to find common ground (Mezirow, 2000). Some argue this activity merely creates a “din” (London 1995) rather than “collaborative thinking and social competence” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 11).

Others think of public space as a marketplace of ideas that creates an opportunity for the best ideas to take hold. Implicit in this is the assumption that the ideas that prevail do so because they have substance, just as the best products prevail in a “marketplace” (Gordon, 1997). Free speech, or absence of suppression of speech, opens up public space, which permits ideas to germinate. However, in this marketplace ideas are simply floated. There is no formal link between those floating ideas and decision-makers. Decision-makers have no obligation to engage in discussion or address issues that arise in this public space, no matter how valid, unless public or private pressure builds. Thus ideas are not debated necessarily on their merit but on their popularity or the social position of those holding them. These conditions shape the type of issues that do find a place on the political agenda.

The seminal defender of free speech, John Stuart Mill, argues that deliberative discourse is a necessary step en route to arriving at political truths (Gordon, 1997; Mill, [1869] 1974). Mill believed that all ideas should be aired so that the “wrong” ones could be corrected through discursive processes. Discussion provides an opportunity to challenge preconceived ideas and prejudices that are based on habit rather than logic. Without discussion and the inclusion of a wide range of perspectives the articulation of ideas becomes a matter of people talking ‘at’ or ‘past’ rather than ‘to’ each other. Even worse, there can be a “pooling of ignorance” as ill-informed popular prejudice or populist opinion reinforces itself without benefit of more nuanced arguments, other perspectives or hard evidence.

There appears to be no popular discernment of the difference between teledemocracy and more deliberative forms. Popular methods of information gathering by politicians, such as public opinion polls, public hearings or focus groups may guide policy but these merely skim the surface of what people think, failing to delve down to excavate and benefit from what they know. Governing by polls is derided as opportunistic political behaviour. Government hearings on legislation can lead to the modification of legislation but submissions can as easily be ignored, uninvited or the opportunity to participate limited. These methods arguably contribute to the sense that government is unresponsive to citizens, that politicians simply do as they please once elected. Pockets of citizens may be engaged horizontally with one another but they are not engaged vertically with formal political institutions.

Governance

In addition to the citizen alienation argument, the emergence of both multi-level governance and policy networks as ways of creating and implementing public policy means policy-making involves a greater number of actors than in the past. Governance is increasingly process-oriented. The term “governance” has been incorporated into the lexicon to describe the reconfiguration of the respective roles of states, markets and civil society in influencing and governing countries. Jessop states that governance “offers a solution to problems of co-ordination in the face of growing complexity” (Jessop, 2003, p. 2). The role of the state has changed over the past three decades. It has “decentred” or permitted its power and authority for specific types of policy to be moved to different institutions. In governance terms, it is argued, what has unfolded is “decentring” [from the state] *up* to supranational institutions, *down* to subnational governments and *out* to markets and/or statutory or other designated authorities (Newman, 2000; Pierre and Peters, 2000). Stoker points out,

In the modern world of government, ‘what is’ is complex, messy, resistant to central direction and in many respects difficult for key policy-makers let alone members of the public to understand. Broadly the governance perspective challenges conventional assumptions which focus on government as if it were a ‘stand alone’ institution divorced from wider societal forces (Stoker, 1998, p. 19).

Kooian defines governance as “the pattern or structure that emerges in a socio-political system as an outcome of the interacting intervention efforts of all involved actors. This pattern cannot be reduced to one actor or group of actors in particular” (Kooian, 1993, p. 258). Kooian links his views to those of Marin and Mayntz who state, “political governance in modern societies can no longer be conceived in terms of external governmental control of society but emerges from a plurality of governing actors” (Marin and Mayntz 1991, back cover). This

definition also captures the struggle in advanced capitalist societies for more responsive, democratic and accountable institutions and reconceptualizes democracy outside the traditional boundaries imposed by responsible government. In other words, this describes the shift from vote-centric representative democracy to more direct forms of participation, including participation in civil society (Trottier, Contandriopoulos et al., 1999).

Policy networks are an important feature of contemporary government. Drawing from work by Rhodes (1997), and Kickert, Klijn and Koperjann (1997), van Burden, Klijn et al. define a policy networks as “a collection of stable relations among mutually dependent actors” (van Bueren, Klijn et al. 2003, p. 195). Organizations exist as independent entities each with their own internal logical, culture and purpose, yet each has a role to play in accomplishing particular public policy objectives. Some of these objectives move forward easily but van Burden et al. identify “wicked problems” as a type that is less easily resolved. According to the authors these tend to straddle the border between scientific knowledge and the social sciences. The authors conclude that there needs to be a mode of interaction prescribed within a policy network or regime to create a healthy and vital interface between the actors making and implementing policy. One can add to that equation the citizens whom it affects.

It is assumed that organizations that work well have an effective feedback loop that maintains organizational dynamism. Similarly, decentralized networks composed of actors in mutually dependent relationships require the same sort of free-flowing exchange of information that informs to their common venture at a number of levels. Communication is a necessary condition for effective outcomes if the system is to work as a healthy system instead of one engaged in a series of battles among its component parts. The health of the relationships among the actors within a policy subsystem can be shaped by government policy. Some government policies can result in actors going into survivor mode, which can weaken trust relationships and reduce the likelihood they will work creatively and collaboratively with others (O'Connor, forthcoming 2005).

In Canada, provincial health care systems serve as an example of a highly decentralized policy subsystem required to deliver complex and interdependent services. In Ontario this currently happens without benefit of a local decision-making body that crosses the spectrum of care¹. The feedback loop within this “system” is interrupted by the barriers that separate the component parts with its vertical accountability to government, no horizontal accountability to each other and little formal accountability to the community. Feedback does not flow freely to allow for incremental improvements to the system. Instead, problems fester (O'Connor, forthcoming 2005). Ensuring that communication happens within policy networks requires a broadly inclusive process that incorporates all stakeholders, demonstrates a commitment to honesty and transparency, and has the policy output as its central agenda item.

Participatory Processes

Increasingly scholars are looking to the notion of deliberative democracy as an answer to the challenge of participation. Patten states that,

The condition of deliberative democracy requires that free and public discussions allow a broad range of affected parties to engage in rational, open-minded debate leading to collective decision-making. This, it is argued, can best be accomplished

through the extensive use of consultative processes and the democratization of those aspects of public administration that can facilitate the input of societal interests into state policy making, even to the extent that these interests effectively have control over the policy-making process. In a society structured by social and economic inequality, however, deliberative democracy also requires a commitment to equalizing the deliberative capacities of respective interests and to respecting both expert opinion and the 'situated knowledge of more marginalized social interests. To be clear, 'deliberation' is understood as discussion intended to change the preferences of others. But these discussions must exemplify what Habermasians like John Dryzek characterize as 'communicative rationality' as opposed to simply 'instrumental rationality' - that is, they must be free of self-interested goal-oriented craftiness and characterized by a high degree of reciprocity, respect and understanding (Bohman, 1997 in Patten, 2001, p. xx).

Patten argues that this consultation should occur at all stages of the policy process - agenda setting, policy formation and implementation (Patten, 2001 p. 226). The processes should be open, formal and public and ought to "allow representatives of public interest groups and social movement organizations to challenge the state's once accepted role as the guardian and representative of the public interest" (pp. 230-31). This echoes Mill's ideas and is at odds with the current fashion of assessing the legitimacy of interest group opinions by the numbers they represent rather than by the logic of their position.

Representation in decision-making fora is important, as Mansbridge points out, so policy makers have a complete understanding of the implications of their decisions. This reduces unanticipated consequences. An improvement in the information available invariably makes better public policy as it allows decision-makers to move closer to that ideal, but unattainable, state of perfect information. In its deliberative function, a representative body should ideally include a representative who can speak for every group that might provide new information, perspectives or on-going insights relevant to the understanding that leads to a decision (Cohen, 1997; Mendelsohn, 2000; Patten, 2001). However, the challenges associated with participatory processes are many. There is the danger of unreflective populist opinion pooling ignorance in a superficial and unhelpful way that ignores technical, professional or experiential knowledge. Thus, it is important that processes be carefully designed to bring together groups in a way that facilitates mutual understanding among those situated with popular, expert and experiential knowledge.

Consensus building is an ongoing process that requires discourse among people with diverse points of view, including those that challenge prevailing norms in order for "best judgements" to be determined. Mezirow follows Mill (1974) when he states, "[a]greement based on the unchallenged norms of a culture will obviously be less informed and dependable than those based on a wider range of experience" (Mezirow, 2000, p. 12). Consensus requires people to transform their points of view or frames of reference, which is a process of learning (Schön and Rein, 1994; Mezirow, 2000). Effective discourse requires that individuals be willing and prepared to seek understanding and to come to some reasonable agreement and an environment that is free from coercion and power imbalances, that encourages respect for self and others and that welcomes diversity (Mezirow, 2000).

Our current political culture is an “argument culture” and public discourse has focused on winning arguments rather than building “social competency and collaborative thinking” (Mezirow, 2000, p.11). For example, in Canada after each unsatisfactory Leaders’ Debate - present in every election - the media looks for the “knock-out punch” in order to ascertain the “winner”. There is no space in these debates for reasoned argument. Creating an environment where there is safety to express diverse viewpoints and in which there is limited ability for any individual to exert power and influence to coerce is essential to support effective discourse in any arena. As, broadly speaking, public discourse has been constructed around this “argument culture” paradigm, a new social technology is required that is different in both form and function.

Open Space Technology

A number of large group interventions methodologies have evolved that can involve an entire system in the change process (Owen, 1999). Open Space Technology developed by Harrison Owen in the mid 1980s is emerging as a leading edge large group consultation methodology that can transform the way citizens engage in political processes, enrich decision making, produce inspired results and empower communities and the individuals within them.

OST is based on the concept of a community of collaboration and a small village-scale marketplace of ideas. It is a simple and easy way to organize meetings that last from one to three days with anywhere from ten to more than 1000 participants. Participants create their own agenda and self-manage a program of multiple concurrent working sessions. Owen (1999) was inspired to create OST when after spending months organizing a large conference, it was apparent that the most productive and lively discussions occurred during the coffee breaks. He proceeded to design a process that replicates the energy and productivity of the coffee break that harnesses the passions of individuals and creates the conditions that enable creativity, innovation and excellence to emerge.

OST embodies the positive aspects of the ideals of Athenian democracy or the traditional American town hall meeting - a gathering of citizens free to speak their minds and engage in meaningful debate. However it goes further by shifting from debate to dialogue. Two general principles inform the invitation to the meeting: first is the inclusion of all internal and external stakeholders; and second, a clear articulation of the purpose and parameters of the meeting. OST is designed to build bridges within any community of interest. Implicit in the process is an understanding that there are different sites of knowledge dispersed through communities. It is designed to pull that knowledge together to coalesce around a particular problem or issue. It is underpinned by the notion that authority cannot solve problems, or even maximize societal or organizational potential by merely imposing its will. Solutions to complex questions reside outside of what is known by any single individual or small group: they lie within the collective intelligence of the whole (Fetzer Institute, 2001). Moreover, OST does not merely hand back a set of solutions to decision-makers leaving them the sole responsibility to attempt to move them forward. OST builds community linkages and networks in a way that strengthens civil society and creates an impetus for those within communities of interest to move forward with their own solutions. In this regard, it is well suited to liberal democratic societies that implicitly value a vibrant and active civil society.

Choosing to utilize OST requires discernment and clear thinking by the meeting's sponsor. It is essential that the sponsor be open to authentically listening to ideas generated by participants. If the consultation is disingenuous or the sponsor has a narrow or well-defined vision of the outcome, OST should not be used. It is crucial to articulate a clear question, theme or purpose for the gathering that is meaningful to those involved, which provides the focus and the framework for the OST meeting. OST can be used for a range of purposes: from broad visioning exercises to technical implementation types of questions. It is ideally suited to the uncertainties and complex issues that current public policy or when there is an important issue to be addressed and a diversity of people and perspectives involved. These include highly polarized emotional or technically complex issues. It is a way of addressing intractable or wicked problems.

The sponsor's honesty in expressing the constraints, "non-negotiables" or assumptions under which the sponsor operates is also crucial. The sponsor must communicate the parameters of the work and the degree of freedom that participants have to use their creativity. These non-negotiables may include resource limitations; the realities of the locus of authority to make decisions or take action following the meeting; and laws, policies or procedures that are not open to change. A government sponsor, for example, must be honest in admitting there is no possibility of new funding or in articulating a constitutional constraint that delimits the action of various levels of government. Most importantly, the sponsor must identify how the information generated at the meeting will be used and how participants will know what action has resulted from their participation. This establishes accountability and a reporting mechanism to participants or the public.

From the onset, participants know this process is not "business as usual". The room is set up with chairs placed in a circle or series of concentric circles. The circle symbolizes the notion that leadership comes from each and every one of us and that every person's contribution is equally valued. The OST meeting opens with an introductory plenary at which the purpose, background, boundaries and form of the meeting are introduced. The "ground rules" for OST are expressed as four principles and one law:

- *Whoever comes are the right people.* This reinforces that the wisdom to achieve solutions is present in the room. It is not who is in the group or their position that matters, but rather their own passion for the subject that is important.
- *Whatever happens is the only thing that could have happened.* Participants are reminded to focus on the present, be open to outcomes, and not to worry about what "we should have done".
- *Whenever it starts is the right time.* This reminds people creativity and spirit are not controlled by the clock and will appear in their own time.
- *When it's over, it's over.* This encourages people to continue their discussion so long as there is energy for it. Some sessions will finish well within the anticipated time while others will run longer than the time allotted.

The *Law of Mobility*, or the *Law of Two Feet* states people can enter or leave a session when they choose. If a session is not meeting their needs for either contributing or learning,

participants are free to move to another. This is probably the most powerful of the rules. It encourages people to take responsibility for their own learning and energy and reduces the likelihood of an individual or interest from exerting “control”. The principles and the law are very liberating if not somewhat disconcerting for very rule-oriented individuals. They provide individuals with maximum freedom and maximum choice- elements that are unfamiliar to most in the context of meetings.

The absence of a pre-planned agenda and the freedom presented by the OST format results in a “creative tension” that captures the attention and imagination of participants and motivates them to take action. Participants are asked to express their passions and energies that relate to the meeting’s theme, to raise the ideas and opportunities they feel are important and want to discuss. This is the marketplace of ideas. Initiating a topic constitutes an agreement to begin the discussion and ensure notes are recorded. The process has no hierarchy; everyone has the same opportunity to participate and contribute. The topics are posted with a time and place for discussion and the initiator’s name: this becomes the meeting’s agenda. Agenda creation continues until all topics are exhausted. The marketplace is “opened” and everyone is invited to select the sessions they plan to attend.

From what appears to be organized confusion comes a clear set of objectives for each individual: the participants self-organize the rest of the meeting. As they are completed copies of session reports are posted for review. This provides an opportunity for participants to add their thoughts to the notes of the discussions of both sessions they attended and did not attend. In a multi-day meeting, a complete Report of the Proceedings can be generated in a matter of hours and distributed to participants. This Report represents a compendium of the wisdom of the group and subsequently serves as a reference for decision making and future planning.

The concurrent sessions of an OST meeting are a divergent activity, in which many potential solutions or ideas are generated. The process also allows for a single voice to be heard. If a person posts a discussion topic but no one attends the session, that individual can submit a report of her own ideas, which becomes part of the Report of the Proceedings. Once the concurrent sessions are completed, there is “convergence”, where all of the ideas generated in reports are reviewed by participants and then prioritized.

OST meetings range from a day or less to three days in length. A meeting of up to one day will allow issues to be raised and meaningful and productive discussion to take place. The quality of discussion is enhanced in a two or three-day process as people have an opportunity to reflect on the dialogue of the previous day and process the ideas in relation to their own views. This is part of the deliberative process. Once participants embrace the principles and the law and find their “voice” a rhythm and flow is developed to each event. The morning of the second or third day is often when a new and innovative topic, idea or solution gets posted. A three-day event provides maximum time for viewpoints to be discussed and consensus to build, creating the ideal conditions for “best judgements” to be ascertained. The third day is dedicated to action planning, allowing for further deliberation on the previous day’s discussions and adequate time to plan next steps or recommend actions. In corporate arenas, employees have developed whole new product lines including a marketing plan on the third day of an OST event (Owen, 1995).

The sponsor's role is to be present, to participate in the meeting just like everybody else and to be prepared to be surprised. The most common barrier to the success of an OST meeting is attempts to control the process. "Magic" often happens in the sessions, creating solutions that transcend what was thought possible. This is a key feature of collective intelligence. It is very often the least likely person who has an idea or seed of an idea that will generate an innovative solution. The unexpected may be triggered by a conflict that arises from two or more ideas in opposition or other unexpected events that challenge assumptions and cause critical reflection and moments of illumination (Fetzer Institute, 2001).

OST meetings can also be hosted in an online format. OpenSpace-Online® is a real-time conferencing software developed by Gabriela Ender and her colleagues at OpenSpace-Online GmbH of Berlin, Germany. It incorporates the essence and form of an OST meeting to the degree possible in a virtual environment. The online conference unfolds in successive phases similar to a face-to-face event. A meeting can be scheduled for two to eight hours, hosting up to 75 participants. Upon completion the notes of all discussions are available for immediate download. OpenSpace-Online® facilitates participation by geographically remote individuals or for those who find it difficult to travel to a central location. It can be used to complement face-to-face events or to build on the synergy of a face-to-face event by creating an opportunity for ongoing dialogue and discussion.

The Value of OST in Policy Consultations

OST creates public space that invites diverse viewpoints and provides the nutrient ground for reflective discourse. The dialogue and rich output of an OST meeting goes beyond "making a din" as the invitation by the sponsor, the form of the meeting and freedom to create generates an environment of safety, trust and community that are essential to effective discursive processes. The agenda generating exercise enables every idea to become part of the agenda. If an idea does not make it to the agenda, there is no "other" to blame as the responsibility for creating the agenda rests with the participants. Participants regularly comment afterwards that they have felt genuinely heard, often for the first time.

OST allows whole systems to be present in a room. Given that it is designed to accommodate large numbers of diverse stakeholders, extensive consultation can be achieved within a very short time frame. The pooling of the collective intelligence found within groups with diverse viewpoints increases the likelihood of best judgements being made. The output is rich in content, creativity and innovation. In addition, the format contributes to community building. Stakeholders with opposing views learn to work together in new ways. OST engenders respectful conversations and active listening, facilitating relationships and building community capacity. The opportunity for a diverse group of individuals to come together with a common purpose and shared commitments creates a "community of understanding". Greater understanding of each other through dialogue helps to transcend the "us and them" mentality to "we", making it possible to work together for a "common good" (Parks Daloz, 2000). This has led to the formation of groups that continue to work together on their common mission after the meeting.

OST is particularly beneficial when large-scale systematic change is required. The process induces buy-in to solutions or implementation strategies when these are developed in

collaboration with stakeholders. There are fewer unanticipated consequences because the range of perspectives has been considered. Resistance and implementation time are usually reduced. Moreover, OST is founded on passion and responsibility, which allows previously unidentified leaders and champions of change to emerge.

OST is an effective, easy to organize, practical, low-cost means of engaging stakeholders that proves very popular with participants. While it has been used most extensively by local communities, and for-profit and non-profit organizations some governments are recognizing its potential to engage citizen participation. OST has been used by national, regional and municipal governments in North America, Europe, Africa and Australia. The Mayor of Washington, D.C. invited citizens to create a new vision for the city using OST. The German Association of Towns and Municipalities is currently working in partnership with OpenSpace-Online GmbH to support cities and communities to open new public spaces. This encourages new ways of citizen participation in city and regional development and establishes new ways of conducting "E-Government", "E-Participation", and "E-Democracy" (www.openspace-online.com/oso_en/html/dstgb/dstgb_eng.html). Additional information can be found at the following links: www.integralvisions.com, www.openspacetechnology.com or www.openspaceworld.org. OST has been used extensively within government departments in Canada, but has yet to be fully embraced as a mechanism for broader policy consultation.

OST is a very powerful and effective methodology with the potential to foster democratic transformation of communities. It is action-oriented and allows timely and effective gathering of valuable information from a variety of stakeholders, encourages out-of-the-box thinking and consensus building and enhances decision making at all stages of the policy process. By-products of the consultation are collaborative thinking, social competence and capacity building in communities.

Conclusion

Connecting government and citizens requires that those in power take a more open, honest and inclusive approach to politics. To maximize the power and potential embedded in the collective wisdom of an educated society a process to unleash their collective wisdom needs to be deployed. Clearly this represents a baby step in that direction given the logistics of citizen participation in large, dispersed populations and the levels of apathy and cynicism endemic in politics today. Technology holds potential as a tool to increase the likelihood of successful citizen engagement. OST's e-component can open up virtual public space and enable those in remote regions to be included in consultative processes. Using deliberative processes like OST is one way in which governments can begin to govern consciously and deepen those connections.

Similarly within government, OST can support a freer flow of information among actors within policy networks. It has particular potential in situations where policy is characterized by complexity. Intractable or wicked problems are unmanageable without processes that open up space for consensus building and problem solving in a way that breaks down the barriers of competing visions. Incorporating OST as a regular mode of interaction within Ontario's health delivery system, for example, could engender a freer flow of information by neutralizing some of the problems associated with delivering services through a complex decentralized group of

organizations and individuals. By virtue of its methodology OST can offset the power relations that stymie the free-flow of information within networks and provides the opportunity for those of good faith to come together and generate solutions.

OST is a social technology that can assist in creating a more open and transparent society, It can bridge the gap between citizens and governments, engaging citizens in a way that allows their collective wisdom to be harnessed. The very process creates a marketplace of ideas: wherein ideas are freely presented and discussed, with the best ones emerging. OST embodies the principles of deliberative discourse as envisioned by John Stuart Mill or the communicative rationality of more recent scholars like Arendt and Habermas. It permits governments to create new vertical linkages with the citizenry in a way that is more broadly inclusive, democratic and accountable while increasing the density of horizontal links among citizens. The community building spin-off can strengthen civil society networks, and improve the co-ordination and complementarity of civil action, relieving some of the pressure on government to solve all problems.

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Endnote

ⁱ The provincial government is planning to change this with the roll out of Local Health Integrated Networks by April 2005.