

Comment

ENGAGEMENT TOOLS FOR SCIENTIFIC GOVERNANCE

Creating exhibitions from debates

Interview by Davide Ludovisi

Guglielmo Maglio

ABSTRACT: Guglielmo Maglio is Manager of Exhibitions at the science centre “Città della Scienza” of Naples. With “Città della Scienza” he took part in the creation of “Decide”, which he appreciates for its ability to create an informal atmosphere favouring discussion. As concerns the involvement of scientists and policy-makers in the debate, though desirable, it sometimes may influence negatively the spontaneity of the debate among non-experts. In the participants, the main differences can be ascribed to personal experience, rather than to other factors such as age, nationality or social groups. Though not the ideal places for the use of this kind of games, especially owing to time limits, science centres may exploit them to attract specific groups of interest and may obtain useful information on the attitudes of the public to subsequently develop exhibitions and events on the themes dealt with.

1. *Have you ever used discussion games? Where, why and which ones?*

Yes, we have used the Decide game (<http://www.playdecide.eu/>) several times, firstly because as a partner of the Decide project, we took part in the testing phase of the game, and secondly because it turned out to be a very powerful tool of discussion on science and ethical issues.

2. *Can you tell us what the main pros and cons in using these tools are, in your experience?*

Among the positive aspects, there is the fact that discussion games create a friendly environment, propose scientific topics in an informal way, and give all the participants/debaters the same rules and opportunities to talk. Negative points include the time limit of these games, i.e. the fact that the game usually ends when the participants still want to discuss. Another negative aspect is the fact that it is difficult to adapt the topic of the game to all local situations. Finally, it is very difficult to convince people that it is worthwhile to play.

3. *Have you have experienced discussion game sessions in which researchers, policy-makers, stakeholders, citizens and/or special groups were sitting at the same table? Do you think games help building a shared ground for discussion or not? How did the different groups react?*

Yes, we experienced that, but in my opinion stakeholders should not introduce themselves before the game gets “passionate”. If participants know that either a scientist or a politician is playing with them, they feel uncomfortable in expressing their opinion, or even worse, they ask questions to stakeholders, fearing that their opinion may be criticised.

If participants come from the same background, the discussion runs free, but still it is almost impossible to end with a shared vision.

4. *Have you ever noticed differences in the reactions of participants that can be clearly ascribed to factors such as age, social and economic groups, or nationality?*

Of course yes, but the main difference comes from personal experience.

5. *What were some of the most interesting comments from the participants about their experience?*

Talking about the neuroscience Decide game, the most interesting comments regarded the fact that the game helped the players to talk about their personal problems without fearing to be judged negatively.

6. *Are science centres and science museums good locations to host these events? The impression so far is that discussion games are used in a very irregular way, in comparison with science demonstrations or didactic laboratories. What are the obstacles that prevent a more continuous, structural use?*

Yes, science centres are not the best places where to discuss, at least for games involving general visitors. Visitors prefer to play with exhibits rather than sitting at a table to play a card game. But if we involve special groups, like teachers, politicians, scientists, then science centres become a neutral environment and this kind of players feel at ease when playing and debating.

7. *If you are aware of their use in museums and science centres, how may these institutions exploit (or not) the information collected during the events?*

This information is usually uploaded on the Decide website or for example, in our case, it was used to design an exhibition.

8. *What do you think about the role of the mediator? What about the presence of scientists or researchers during the debates?*

I believe the role of the mediator is fundamental. Explaining the game, collecting results, inviting to spread the use of the game is something that strictly relies on the quality of mediators.

9. *In your experience, is the impact of these games limited to the event itself and its participants, or are there relevant, tangible follow-ups: the emerging of a group of interest or a local network, an influence on policy-making, or other results? Can you explain why yes or why not?*

The impact of the game can be strong or weak, depending on the organizers. If behind there is a good managing team, the results can be used for a public political discussion, for a press campaign, or to organize a city event. In our case we used the results to build an exhibition.

10. *What other methods are you currently considering to implement, in order to enhance and improve the direct dialogue among citizens, policy-makers, stakeholders and scientists?*

I think that focus groups are still the best methods to implement dialogue between citizens and different stakeholders, especially if they are “driven” by expert facilitators. At Città della Scienza (<http://www.idis.cittadellascienza.it/>) we are using them every time we plan a new exhibition.

Translated by Massimo Caregnato

Author

Guglielmo Maglio has a Degree in Natural Sciences (Università di Napoli Federico II) and has carried out Anthropological and Zoological surveys in Italy and abroad. He has professional experience in the field of science education and communication, and since November 2007 he has been a lecturer in “Science Communication in Museums and Science Centres” at the Master in Science Communication organized by the University of Rome “Tor Vergata”. He has been in charge of Fondazione IDIS - Città

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