

Comment

ENGAGEMENT TOOLS FOR SCIENTIFIC GOVERNANCE

Changing standpoint on issues, by playing

Interview by Davide Ludovisi

Sally Duensing

ABSTRACT: Sally Duensing previously worked at the Exploratorium in San Francisco and is now based in London where she carries out research on science communication. In this interview, she tells about her experience as an evaluator of the Decide project, one of the most successful discussion games ever designed. Years after its creation, Decide is still used nearly all over the world. Its main strong point is that it allows to grasp the standpoint of the others and, at the same time, to express your own standpoint in a mutual exchange of experience; in addition, the interface and the game rules allow to overcome any cultural and age gaps. However, sometimes the public expects a debate with an expert rather than a dialogue among peers, whereas on other occasions the debate was inhibited especially by the presence of a scientist. In museums, discussion games often clash with the needs of members of the public, who generally have limited time. However they can still be useful to the museum activities when the results of the discussions are used to program other activities: it is a way to gather valuable information on the public's orientations which is often underrated.

1. *Have you ever used discussion games? Where, why and which ones? (if you already answered for the FUND project, please ignore)*

It all started a long time ago, when I got interested in science ethics and public debate about science and technology; and it was a result of living in Bristol in 2000, right when the Parliament came out with the study called “Science and Society” (<http://www.i-sis.org.uk/index.php>) in which they advocated a stronger public involvement in a number of controversial science issues that emerged back at that time. I guess that in 1999 the mad cow disease case had just broken out, and the government kept repeating “Don’t worry, don’t worry”, without giving any information. I got interested in what role a museum could take in that situation, because working in science museums belongs to my background. When I moved to London (circa 2005), I got involved in two things at the same time: first in the Decide project as an external evaluator, although the work was like a research project, so I was tracking the development of it. One of the criteria for that was asking if the game did generate dialogue among people, or people just expressed their opinion, not really paying attention to the others and not delving deeper into the topic. At the same time I was hired by the New Economic Foundation to work with their evaluators in charge of a project for the schools, called “Democs for the schools” (http://www.neweconomics.org/search/apachesolr_search/democs%20for%20schools), conceived for secondary schools students. That was interesting, a format slightly different from Decide, but with the same ingredients: issue cards, information cards, story cards... but it was partly designed for school use, although I think that the Decide texts basically work also for high school students. Anyway, it was interesting to see what worked and what did not.

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

It takes a lot of time. You can't rush Decide and claim to have a substantial or meaningful dialogue... it might be possible, but I haven't seen it done. It requires at least two hours, an hour it's not quite

enough. And that was the problem with the schools, they were trying to do it during the class period, and it just didn't fit. And also in the schools it was basically the teachers that told the students to do it, without giving many reasons, as if it was homework. There were sparkles of interest sometimes, but it was despite the teachers, not thanks to them. One negative experience I had was in particular with the topic concerning nanotechnology, it just failed. The only thing that it generated was "academic sleepiness". I don't know what happened exactly, it just didn't work. Maybe it was that particular topic, although I have seen in other evaluations that other groups that did nanos in other countries worked very well. Decide, however, is very well designed, it isn't like a radio talk-show: people don't just yell at one other without listening. It helps to see in a multiple perspective, and still maintaining your opinion. Also, you can understand why there are other opinions, that's really powerful. One of the indications that it works so well is that people keep using it around, although it is not officially promoted.

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

I noticed some very interesting differences, much debated in Trieste last September, during a workshop about these kinds of discussion tools and their role in promoting local networks. For example, it was interesting to see how the yellow card in Decide was used as a way to interrupt people who talk too much or walk all over the others. When we were developing the prototype, lots of different countries were involved, and a woman from Finland was saying that people from her country really liked the yellow card, but they never used it, and the guy from Naples commented: "Are you kidding? At our place people use that very much!". One of the strengths of discussion games like this is that participants see what they have in common and they learn from one other at the same time. For example, in Torino there was a Decide event, and it was in a shopping mall, so everybody came intentionally. One group comprised young people aged 16 or 17, and everybody else was much older; afterwards, in interviewing somebody about it, they were surprised that teenagers were so experienced and knowledgeable about the topic. Then I realized that this kind of tools could be a lovely thing for different age groups to learn beyond their stereotypes on one other. In that case the teens were an active part in the conversation, they weren't marginalized.

In Vienna it was used to talk about HIV/AIDS in shelters for the homeless, and everybody learned from one other, I don't think anybody felt isolated, although they hadn't had this kind of conversation before with the others. So, I think it is a great tool.

I think that one of the elements of the success of this kind of discussions is that the game lets you express yourself. You have your story cards about other people, and then you can empathize or not; these cards are the first type that participants use at the beginning, so it means they don't have to start with their own experience, but with the experience of others, and maybe it makes people more comfortable in engaging in a dialogue. Also, the story cards also have a media language. At the Dana Centre in London (<http://www.danacentre.org.uk/>), where we were doing the HIV/AIDS one, I was going around the table to see what was going on; there was one or two health workers, one person whose friend was dying to Aids, and probably three or four people who didn't express any particular experience with it. It was very interesting: everyone participated at the same level of conversation.

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

During the evaluation of Decide, I did telephone interviews three or four month after the end of the event. One of the comments I got from a number of people was that they were surprised about having their own opinions and perspectives about the topics dealt with, and being able to talk about them to others that even seemed interested. Before that experience they didn't realize they could contribute to topics like stem cells, or xenotransplantation, not as experts, but as an active part of the discussion.

There was a simple tool of evaluation I used. The name of the event was written on a sheet of paper, and then I asked the people to write any association that came into their mind before the game, and after the discussion I asked the people to add or change whatever they wanted. Basically you could do an interesting sort of quantitative studies on the interaction between words. There was a very common pattern for some topics, and for others, already dealt with by the media in different ways, like the

research on stem cells, people already knew something, and they expressed themselves in richer terms. But with a couple of them, especially with nanotechnology, generally people just got the science words, and it was only after specific questions about issues (for example they were asked who should have the right to control the research). There were a couple of comments I collected in which people said that they were more worried than before, and this is one of the consequences of the game, for better or worse: Decide is not just funny, but it makes people think about their supposed certainties. It should be stressed that the science centres that host these events do not often exploit the following phase, the follow-up. It could represent an occasion to think about other programs, or where to go next, what to do next. For example, as a start, with a tool simple as a concept map you can start to analyze some of the areas where people express their concerns or they want to delve into. One of the main reasons for the new project based on the success of Decide, the Fund project (<http://www.playdecide.eu>), is to promote the use of these dialogue tools, as a way to deal with issues, also to address any local issues a community might have. One of the things I will be most interested within Fund is not so much what happens at the events, but rather interviewing people afterwards, and seeing the results of the discussion: who was part of it, what the participants think, and how it matches with the initial intention.

5. *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?*

With science centres the main problem is time. If you're going just to have an afternoon at the Trento Natural History Museum, for example, you generally don't want to sit in a room for an hour and half, you want to go around and see the exhibits. So discussion games don't really work for the casual dropping visitor, but all museums have educative programs and other events, so people could change their minds, if, for example, there's a discussion about xenotransplantation, they could forget about the exhibits and participate in the event. In addition, the tool is not something for kids under twelve. But it's a great tool for museums: with regard to a specific controversial topic it could also introduce that topic too. A lot of museums are doing nanotechnology, climate change... I think that the Decide version devoted to climate change was developed by a museum, especially in conjunction with an exhibition about it.

What's been very interesting and unexpected to me is that since when the Decide project ended (in terms of European funding) it seems to have grown, rather than stopped: the grant was over and the project took off! So, though it was pretty hard to create an online adaptation (which we're doing with the Fund project), it was somehow adapted, and now with an open-source platform everyone can develop the game. Another interesting thing about Decide is the quantity of the different places where it has been used. It seems to work well in lots of different places (online there are already 11 topics translated in 20 languages).

I first saw it in pubs, the first time way before Decide, and I remember that I told myself that maybe museums could do that too. So it didn't start in museums, it started in pubs. I don't know how many people have ever experienced it, but when you do it in a pub as a context, people just drop by, because, again, they have a time constraint. In the Dana centre in London during the discussion activities three or more experts usually come and debate about a certain topic, then they take questions from the audience, and then the discussion starts (questions and comments). So when we did the first Decide activities there, I remember there were just a few people. They were surprised, because they expected a speaker to deliver a speech, not a discussion, and they weren't really happy about that, at first. They didn't come to listen to the common people, but listen to experts.

6. *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?*

As follow-up information, for either exhibitions, special programs, or even to form special interests groups, it depends on the role of the museum or institution. Just like it happens now with Fund, connecting with other cities, or organizations. One of the aims of the project is to have different

organizations (research institutions, NGOs, associations, local administrations, etc.) to team up to address specific issues. We see that it works, and maybe it may connect institutions across other places in Europe as well, which may be interested in the same type of issue. Actually, it is already happening with rare diseases, a case which is involving museums and institutions, already members of the network using Decide to empower patients and families affected by rare diseases, to be able to talk more about the issues they all have to face and the policy matters that affect it. That is a big challenge. The project is called Polka (<http://www.playdecide.eu/getinvolved/projects/12>), and in this case it has nothing to do with museums.

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

There are a lot of ways for a facilitator to facilitate the discussion or not. At the Dana centre, for example, they invite scientists, but just to participate, not to moderate, a role usually given to journalists. Scientists, however, are not introduced as persons whom you should be afraid of just because they have knowledge of the topic. They also do informal conversation. But I saw a scientist interrupting the discussion, not intentionally, but he did. Often they start with one or two experts, just for a couple of minutes, talking about the topic, from their point of view, without monopolizing the time available. Then, when the discussion is with groups, they wander from table to table, just listen in... that's a real interruption. Sometimes the group would say something, for example, about climate change, but suddenly the conversation stops when the scientist gets there. Usually the scientist doesn't stop for more than ten minutes at the table, but I still think that is quite a long time. So the presence of the scientist can inhibit spontaneous dialogue; I didn't see it happening when the scientist was just a member of the group. There's a lovely quote from a physicist, Jean-Marc Lévy-Leblond, published in an article on the Public Understanding of Science journal (http://pus.sagepub.com/cgi/pdf_extract/1/1/17): "If scientists are not universal experts, non-scientists are not universal non-experts". Basically it's about the expertise that we all have in different ways.

8. *In your experience, is the impact of these games limited to the event itself and its participants, or are there relevant, tangible follow-ups?*

How could this information be more integrated with the governmental policy and affairs? Even though it's not hard to realize how people would vote for certain politicians, I think it would also be interesting to organize the data collected with discussion games on a website, even divided country by country, like we did with Decide. Even though they may seem data related just to local issues, they actually regard Europe and even the world.

9. *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 don't think Decide is the only instrument, of course, and because of the time constraint it has a big disadvantage. I know there are some groups in the Fund project that are going to adapt Decide, in particular as concerns the story cards, that are going to include video clips or something. There have been three or four different tools I've seen for school groups. There was another project in Bristol called "Citizen and Science" (<http://www.at-Bristol.org.uk/cz>).

There are also some interesting adaptations of Decide, in some cases the graphics will be adapted for non-literate people, or people who have difficulties in reading, or to bridge language differences.

Translated by Massimo Caregnato

Author

Sally Duensing is currently an independent consultant working on exhibition projects and research in areas of science and society programmes as well as relationships between cultural contexts and the design of informal science learning environments. She was the project evaluator/researcher for the first

DECIDE project. In 2000 she held the Collier Chair, a one-year invited professorship in Public Understanding of Science at the University of Bristol, UK. Prior to this, for over 20 years she was at the Exploratorium in San Francisco where she developed connections between centres, museums and scientific communities and directed a variety of exhibition projects primarily in fields of perception and cognition including a large exhibition on biological, cognitive and cultural aspects of human memory. Duensing's first position at the Exploratorium was as an explainer for visiting school groups. She is in the steering committee of THE group, the Thematic Human Interface and Explainers group, an organization of Ecsite dedicated to promoting the professional growth of museums educators.

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