

engaging people

specialists in engaging people

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Democracy – the wicked problem of the 21st century?

BY RIRIPETI REEDY

Wicked problems by their very nature are immune to easy and linear solutions. Despite our efforts to collaborate, be inclusive, and work comfortably with ambiguity, together with recognition of the limitations of traditional problem solving methods, wicked problems persist. And to this I've added democracy as the latest of our wicked problems.

The downward trends in voter turnout across the Western world are well reported. This may be symptomatic of lives in the 'fast lane' where technology that was supposed to give us more 'time' has become the 'rust that never sleeps' of the 21st Century – forever beeping us, demanding our attention and instantaneous response to everything and anything, from our newest purchase to our last thought.

The result is that increasing levels of knowledge and awareness require voters to be active and committed, and give of their time and effort, both commodities in short supply. Voter time and effort is also increasingly required for a democracy that aims for representativeness and social inclusion, and ensures the legitimacy of its decisions and decision-makers.

Auckland – the largest Polynesian city in the world – with its young, growing demographic, is home to more than half of New Zealand's Maori population. It is the showcase of a demographic 'time bomb', which has the potential to blast us into an innovative, vibrant future of difference, diversity and wealth. At the same time, there is a downward trend in voter turnout among this same demographic. This may signal increasing disconnections amongst and between communities; fractures to the social capital of Auckland, and declining tolerance and openness.

The recent Royal Commission on Auckland Governance offered a way forward: a proposal for two councillors elected by voters on the Maori electoral roll and one councillor appointed by *mana whenua* (defined as local Maori with ancestral ties to the land). This, the Commissioner considered, was consistent with the spirit and intent of the Local Government Act 2002, which requires local authorities to establish processes for Maori to contribute to decision making.

Perhaps not surprisingly, Prime Minister Key, who saw the Commission's recommendation as "a democratic problem to have some super-councillors elected by majority vote and others appointed by minority institutions", remains unconvinced that special arrangements for Maori representation and participation are needed. Mayor John Banks put it more bluntly in describing the Commission's proposal as "a kind of apartheid".



RIRIPETI REEDY

So we have two positions at least, one for special representation to encourage participatory democracy and another that says special representation is in fact anti-democratic. Surely this dichotomy of opinion is an example of the most wicked of wicked problems! How can we define a democracy for NZ if we cannot even agree to the fundamentals of what this 'looks' like?

The wicked problem of democracy is more than the two or three positions touched on here: It does seek to change individual behavior; It is seen differently by everyone who approaches it; It will require more than you, me and one or two others to begin to tackle it; It will need collaboration, good will and a willingness to work where there is no clear way forward - all defining properties of a wicked problem. Along with the demographic imperative in Auckland, this wicked problem – democracy – should keep us all ticking over, for some time to come.

Calling all experienced community engagement practitioners....

See page 3 for details...

Engaging stakeholders to resolve wicked problems

BY VIVIEN TWYFORD

The term “wicked problem” was coined in 1973 by HWJ Rittel and MM Webber to describe complex social problems that have resisted attempts to solve them.

Examples provided in a 2007 paper from the Australian Public Services Commission (APSC)* include: obesity, climate change, atmospheric pollution, indigenous disadvantage and land degradation, as well as alcohol, tobacco and illicit drug control. Such problems seriously challenge the thinking of both policy makers and policy implementers.

The APSC paper, and Twyfords experience, is clear about the importance of engaging stakeholders and communities of interest in identifying the wicked problem and exploring ways to solve it. Effective engagement should develop a shared understanding of

the problem and shared commitment to a possible solution. Such engagement should include: sharing the agenda with stakeholders; allowing sufficient time for dialogue and deliberation; emphasising value-sharing rather than debate and; including activities based on inclusiveness, courtesy and respect.

However, such engagement requires significant resources. The challenge is to identify those problems where more extensive engagement will add value and where benefits will outweigh the costs. As engagement requires some level of ministerial authorisation, the political climate can affect perceptions of the value of engagement.



VIVIEN TWYFORD

In-House Workshop - Facing The Music

NEW
COURSE
FOR 2009

Do you dread fronting up to a large number of angry, confused and distressed people? Who doesn't? Sometimes we just have to face the music!

The “Facing The Music” workshop is designed for people who find themselves either facilitating or presenting to audiences that are enraged. This could be at public or shareholder meetings, large internal organisational events or anywhere really where there is plenty of passion and people.



MAX HARDY

As a group you will explore helpful and unhelpful mindsets and practice techniques which will enable you to successfully navigate through these emotionally-charged environments.

This interactive short course is delivered by Max Hardy. Max has fronted angry crowds for the past 20 years in a variety of situations (even in prisons!). A masterful story-teller, Max uses amusing anecdotes to share the experiences that have shaped his approach and informed his practice.

“The workshop was a great pleasure for me. Max covered a huge amount of territory with great examples and good humour. I gained an enormous amount from his experience. Thank you so much for the opportunity.”

For further information please contact Michelle Balchin on 02 4226 4040 or michelle@twyfords.com.au.

How do we recognise wicked problems?

The APSC paper identifies 8 characteristics summarised as follows:

- they are hard to define clearly; there may be many versions of the problem, each version having elements of truth but none of them being the whole truth or verifiable as right or wrong;
- they have many causes which are often interrelated and interdependent requiring a co-ordinated response and challenging trade-offs;
- often attempts to solve them produce unintended consequences; discouraging a particular undesirable behaviour only produces an equally undesirable alternative;
- they are frequently unstable, dynamic and evolving; attempts to solve them may be based on untested or unrealistic assumptions and potential solutions are rarely verifiably right or wrong but must be assessed as better or worse or as good enough;
- they are socially complex and solutions require coordinated actions from unrelated or unconnected organisations across sectors;
- they don't sit within the responsibility of one organisation;
- all potential solutions involve behaviour change;
- they often involve chronic policy failure.

How do we go about tackling them?

Solutions often depend on how power is dispersed among stakeholders and policy makers.

- A group can take on the job of finding a solution while others acquiesce in the transfer of authority to the group and agree to abide by their solution. This can be efficient but tends to restrict thinking to the group's own narrow experiential boundaries rather than seeking innovation.
- Competition can include a search for power, influence or market forces. It can create new ideas, innovation and more choice, but often results in conflict or a stalemate when stakeholder groups have equal power. *Continued next page*

Problems: Wicked or Wondrous?

BY VICKI VAARTJES

Is this a case of how we see the problem is the problem?

One of the things we talk about a great deal is the idea of wicked problems. An article we recently came across, which Vivien has reviewed in this Newsletter, provides a definition of a wicked problem as being "an issue highly resistant to resolution".

The key words here are "highly resistant", because they seem to imply that resolution requires effort and persistence. The resistance is something that must be overcome, pushed back, minimised in order to resolve the problem. It is easy to imagine that when faced with such a resistant issue, our orientation would be more resentful than enthusiastic! And despite our efforts to redefine the use of the term "wicked" as "not in the sense of evil", I still wonder how much our predominant negative use of the term influences how we orient ourselves to this kind of complex issue.

If we marry this up with our current experience, I think it is fair to say that we are facing layer upon layer of wicked problems: problems that are difficult to understand and define, let alone resolve. Action taken in one part of the world ends up with massive consequences in another – we are seeing exactly that with the "global financial crisis". Yet I still have to wonder what part is played by our orientation toward the problem.

"Life is largely an interpretive experience, and we live in our world of interpretations. This is not just the world of the present, or the world of the past, it is also the world of the future, which is the world of possibilities. A fundamental issue

we all face is: "How well do our interpretations serve us?"..... We don't see things how things are; we see them according to how we are" (Coaching to the human soul: Ontological coaching and deep change, Alan Seiler (2003) Newfield Australia: Melbourne)



VICKI VAARTJES

There is a fundamental assumption behind this idea: that the way we think impacts the way we see the world and experience "reality", and that we can improve the quality of our lives by changing the way we think and the way we "show up" in the world.

If this is the case, what might it take for us to "see" and think about complex problems as *wondrous* rather than *wicked*? As opportunities, rather than things to be overcome? How might this way of thinking impact how we step into resolving wondrous problems?

Might we jump at the possibility of bringing diverse people and ideas into the room rather than groan at the thought of it? Might we be enthusiastic about the possibility of vast amounts of data, complexity and conflict rather than seek to minimise or control through process? Might we value the opportunity to be challenged, and even at times feel a bit unknowing and even incompetent (dare I say!) knowing that this leads to growth, new understandings, and collectively, new possibilities?

What might such an experience be like?? And how might such an experience help us to navigate our way through the never-ending sea of complex problems?

Engaging stakeholders to resolve wicked problems

(continued from previous page)

- Collaboration is the preferred strategy which requires dispersed power and a win/win objective.

The collaborative approach is more likely to support the behaviour change that is inevitably required to address wicked problems. It is also important to note that effectively engaging stakeholders to tackle wicked problems requires a different set of skills from those traditionally associated with policy making. Connecting skills and the ability to build relationships across the public, private and community sectors will be increasingly sought after and valued.

* <http://www.apsc.gov.au/publications07/wickedproblems.htm>

Calling all experienced community engagement practitioners....

This year Twyford's is running an exclusive event, the Advanced Community Engagement Practitioner Masterclass on 2 and 3 September, 2009 in Sydney Australia. We are now taking bookings for this intensive 2-day residential workshop that is specifically designed to build capability for designing and managing complex community engagement projects, and it is filling fast!

Facilitators:



JOHN DENGATE



VICKI VAARTJES

Our 2008 Masterclass programs attracted diverse professionals and leaders from around Australia.

For further information please contact Michelle Balchin on 02 4226 4040 or michelle@twyford.com.au.

Wicked Action Research in Australia

BY SUSAN GOFF

Have you noticed?

Australia used to be in the vanguard of the action research field from the '70's through to the mid '90's – in education, social work, disabilities, indigenous development, community development and management. Then action researchers went underground. The rise of the dominant rhetoric of economic rationalism meant that the "soft stuff" of human inquiry practitioners and visionary commissioners could not use the language of "action research" for fear of being seen as ideologues and activists – which even got close to code for "terrorist" as we might well remember! It was indeed, a very wicked problem that we carried.

The origin of the word "wicked" can be traced back to Early English (1200's) and is of the same linguistic root as "wizard, witch" and even "Wiki"! It's about power that is mysterious (not known) and uncontrollable (not prone to being subdued).

At Twyfords, we are noticing a "wiki" of action research initiatives mysteriously taking off across the country – in broad daylight - with promises of long term commitment from the commissioners, and a scope of works that demands we do much more than deliver a humble pilot project. But are the AR capabilities available in the market place to meet the need? We suspect that there is a gap, not limited to delivery capability and now at a systemic scale of readiness to engage with AR. The edges around this gap wherever it emerges, need to be well cared for or we risk returning to old wine in new bottles – a state our natural, social, economic and governance systems can no longer endure.

While this resurgence promises a spell-binding quality of work, even more importantly, it promises witnessed systemic change. If contemporary (non-linear) action research approaches are used to meet a client's needs, as these large scale, complex and dynamic initiatives require, then actual change, embedded in the everyday world, has to take place for research output and outcomes to be recognized as credible.

Action Research is about change that is imbued with principles of collaborative inquiry and shared commitment to significantly improving situations by changing what we do in the everyday through researching it.

If we mistake this wicked opportunity by addressing these change initiatives with the same kind of action research that was mainstream in the mid-90's we will fail the question of systemic change. If contemporary approaches are used - this will put new demands on us all: to let go of the rhetoric of control, and engage with the emergent powers of learning, questioning and the experience of genuinely not knowing so we may come "to know" in ways that cannot be predicted. With such means, and in the company of new generations of talented practitioners, we can - in reference to Einstein's overused quote - reach beyond the thinking that caused the problems that our institutions are currently trying to solve: like the burgeoning ageing population, the drying of our river systems, the need for ethical leadership and the loss of credibility in our financial systems.

As contemporary thinkers are saying:

"A wider purpose of action research is to contribute through [this] practical knowledge to the increased wellbeing – economic, political, psychological, spiritual – of human persons and communities, and to a more equitable and sustainable relationship with the wider ecology of the planet of which we are an intrinsic part" (Reason, P. and Bradbury, H. 2001).

Imagine our institutions realizing wiki wellbeing on this scale. Action Research does.

Are we ready?



SUSAN GOFF



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