

ENGAGEMENT IN PRACTICE

Theory and Practice for
Successful Engagement

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Prologue

This book has been written to support and extend professional and community practice, to provoke reflection and encourage critical thinking.

During its preparation, the Government's championing of the concept of Big Society has put the ideas and processes of engagement centre stage. It is important to note that the ideas and practice of engagement have been fairly constantly, if not always consistently, developed over previous decades.

During this time, it has come to be commonly accepted that it is important for both public and charitable organisations to engage people in deciding how services are shaped and delivered.

That ideas about engagement have been implemented by governments of different political persuasions demonstrates not only that engagement matters, but also that there are different ways of achieving it and talking about it.

This book gets under the skin of what's involved in engaging various public groups in whatever a government or any other organisation is doing. It explores what happens when engagement doesn't engage, and suggests how it might be done better.

The book explores how ideas of engagement have developed over time. Practices of engagement continue to be refined and once developed, they can help sustain the vibrancy of national and local democracy, the improvement of public services, the empowerment of people in their communities and the evolution of important organisations, if they are undertaken thoughtfully.

Engagement: all the rage

Current government policy seeks to move away from centralised decision-making, towards a greater level of public involvement in creating, designing, delivering and using services at the local level. This pushes participation and engagement further up the political agenda.

Engagement involves citizens, those working in the voluntary and community sectors, in public service and at all levels of government. If the processes for involving them are not well orchestrated, the outcomes may be poor. And what can and should be powerful and deeply transformative ways of working, yielding insights and deep liaisons between various communities of interest, can instead generate disengagement, provoke 'engagement fatigue', and engender feelings of distrust in the very idea of engagement. This book explores ways in which engagement processes may be created to be inclusive, mindful and effective.

Engagement: a diverse and slippery concept

Engagement, the word and the concept, are widely bandied about; sometimes thoughtlessly. Engagement can be a slippery concept.

As explored in this book, engagement:

- involves various public groups, policy makers, local communities, communities of interest and a host of political, non-profit, private and governing institutions and organisations
- can be referred to in other terms, such as participation or empowerment in youth work, international and community development
- may take the form of both more and less interactive practices, from citizens' juries to expert presentations, dialogue and town hall meetings
- has a definite history, linked to particular political times, geographical communities and communities of interest
- appears in formal political life and government. It surfaces in individuals' lives, purposes for the engagement, in their behaviours, choices and actions, such as ethical investment, volunteering and re-cycling. It manifests in social and associational movements, like community development, tenants' associations and campaigns
- is about involvement in civic life, quality of communication and sharing decision-making through relationships of people to one another, to institutions and political structures
- can be either actual or virtual
- is conducted through activities and events, with differing levels of frequency and formality. It varies between one-off demonstrations to on-going commitments; from informally watching-out for a neighbour to joining a campaign or regularly undertaking e-mentoring

Engagement: an evolving idea

It is important to stress that engagement in public life, social practice and political policy is evolving. Its methods and channels develop as more people become involved, as technologies extend what is possible, and as those with power dare to distribute more widely opportunities and responsibilities for civic life.

Because of its evolutionary nature, some of the manifestations of engagement outlined in this book will be dated, even before it is published. A new app may well have been developed, downloaded and be delivering mobile engagement.¹ An idea being discussed in a government green paper may have become a Big Society building block.

Engagement: an informed and ethical approach

By understanding the background to engagement, by exploring issues inherent in its various conceptualisations, such as power, politics and values, and by being alert to the practicalities of carrying it out, we can become constructively engaged in this evolution.

This book urges readers to question what is happening, so that engagement can be practiced with an eye to: making informed ethical decisions; being appreciative of others; and being aware of the impacts of what is done in reinforcing or challenging the existing *status quo*.

Engagement in Practice unpicks a number of elements of engagement in order to facilitate better understanding of what it might be. It explores the complexity of engagement in organisational and relational terms. It considers various reasons for engagement and some of the benefits of, and

barriers to, engagement. It blends these broader insights and understandings with various practical elements in undertaking engagement.

Who this book is for

As the practice of engagement grows, there will always be people new to the area and in need of grounding in its ideas, as well as those who already have experience but who want to explore other concepts and ways of working. This book is directed at a wide readership. While being accessible to those new to the area, it offers all readers some theoretical and background information, some history, and reflections on potential developments. It explores some examples, and offers check-lists to support practice.

The book explores material relevant to the various debates that are currently crystallising around the Big Society, but which predate it, and will quite possibly outlive it.

Engagement in Practice is for:

Anyone commissioning or orchestrating engagement work. It is hoped that this book will encourage these readers to pause for thought, and help them reflect on what they are doing. It can provoke them into asking about the purpose of the work being undertaken. Is it really engagement? Is everyone involved who should be? Are the methods being employed really accessible?

Anyone who is trying to instigate engagement. This might be a specialist practitioner or consultant deliberately starting a piece of engagement work; or someone for whom engagement has recently been bolted onto their job description. For anyone who instigates and drives forward engagement processes, this book poses questions about participatory working, and offers some strategies and tools for undertaking engagement work. It is to everyone's advantage if, as a result, an engagement process and its outcomes can be transformative, not just a hoop to scramble through, little valued by the commissioning organisation for either the process or its outcomes, and which may have alienated participating publics.²

Anyone involved in engagement. Whether you are a professional, a facilitator, someone in a community organisation, or a citizen, this book can help you think about issues such as power and democracy, how events may be structured or participation designed, and how this might end up including some people, but excluding others. There are a number of references in the book to ways in which stakeholders can be unintentionally excluded, and practical sections on working with communities such as young people and older people who might otherwise be less visible. Some guidance is offered which will help you to encourage people to think about vehicles for work that are more inclusive.

Anyone evaluating engagement. Both the theory and the practical guidance in this book will assist those who want to take engagement processes apart, in ways that can enable evaluation of the implications of various options during the planning stages, and the subsequent evaluation of what action has been undertaken.

Anyone thinking about or researching engagement. Perhaps to develop better community practice, or perhaps to understand and explain more clearly just what engagement and its constituent elements really are. This book can help thinkers and researchers to explore in ideological and historical

dimensions, both the actual and virtual evolution of the roles engagement may play, and the forms it may take.

The objectives of this book are to:

1. Explore what engagement can mean, and the variety of contexts and forms it may take.
2. Explore what may help engagement to be undertaken effectively and ethically.
3. Explore how different types of engagement practice may suit different circumstances, purposes, intended outputs and stakeholder groups.
4. Explore how to design engagement work so there is synergy between the issue around which engagement is taking place, the process, stakeholders and intended outputs.
5. Focus on how to do research that includes stakeholders in an effective way, so as to prepare them for subsequent engagement tasks and reduce the risks of exclusion.
6. Explore some of the skills and attitudes needed for undertaking effective engagement.
7. Explore how to approach the evaluation of engagement work.

Helpful resources

An associated book, *Evaluation in Action* has been written, like this book, to support and extend professional and community practice, to provoke reflection and encourage critical thinking.

The two books can be read without reference to each other, but taken together, they stimulate thought and action as to how any individual, organisation or community can play a full part in the systems of citizen, consumer and client involvement that have been developing in recent decades, and which continue to develop.

Engagement in Practice and *Evaluation in Action* both have supporting resources, such as checklists, assessment exercises, additional tools for participatory evaluation and discussion papers. These can be found at <http://www.e2rc.net>. They are referenced in the main text or the notes at the end of each chapter.

This book

Engagement in Practice offers the reader a smorgasbord of approaches, issues and positions for thinking about, and doing, engagement. It encourages the development of alternative ways of working.

The book may be enough for you for now, but throughout there are pointers to other resources and lines of enquiry for developing practice.

The next section – the Introduction:

- outlines the intentions of this book
- explains what you can find in it, and points you to where
- outlines engagement practices, where they come from and how they are developing
- explores some features of engagement that run through both the theoretical and practical sections that follow

(The endnotes for the Prologue are on page 5.)

About the Author

Dr Gillian Squirrell describes her career as social sciences in action. With an academic background in social sciences and management she has worked for over 20 years in research evaluation, training, organisational development and as a social entrepreneur. She has worked in and been contracted to universities, research and development institutes, the public sector and non-profits.

She founded and was the CEO of a residential, learning and training project for offenders and substance misusers for 10 years.

She has undertaken many national evaluations of social policy and programme interventions, run national consultations and researched and trained extensively in areas of programme development, evaluation, engagement and the interplay of research, policy and practice development.

As an organisational consultant and manager she has been actively engaged in working with change in organisations and mediating the various challenges that changes to programme expectations and budgets can present. She works extensively with action research and action learning and systems theory.

She is currently researching and developing a new vocationally geared social enterprise programme for excluded adults. More information about the author can be found at www.gilliansquirrell.net.

There was high praise for Gillian Squirrell's earlier Russell House publications. The three bestselling training manuals – *Becoming an Effective Trainer* (1998) *Developing Life Skills* (1998) *Developing Social Skills* (1999) – were acclaimed in many published reviews, and remain both in print and in widespread use. *Becoming an Effective Trainer* was described as 'Particularly valuable . . . It is presented accessibly and balances theory and practice'. *Community Care*. 'An ongoing source of reference and help.' *Youthwork*. 'Promotes all the right messages.' www.trainingzone.co.uk.

Introduction

Context and definitions

This book has been written at a time when the Coalition Government is de-emphasising the role of government-provided services, trimming the constraints of centralised regulation, in order to free-up non-profit organisations, the public themselves and the independent sector to provide a range of services hitherto provided or funded by the government. Policies, manifestoes and statements grounded in the language of progressive conservatism, from Government and some think-tanks, underscore the importance of communities identifying what issues matter locally, and taking charge in addressing them.³ Localism, mutualism and grassroots leadership are prominent among their watchwords.⁴

While this book explores some contemporary public policy, it is important to remember that engagement is not tied to any particular political party. It has been centre stage in this and New Labour's governments (1997–2010). It transcends political barriers, national borders, and social and cultural boundaries around class, gender, faith, ethnicity, age, able-bodiedness, sexual orientation and lifestyle choices. Engagement is timeless, in that it is about the extent to which people relate to each other and to institutions in civil society. It has been described as: participation, empowerment, participatory decision-making, democratic dialogues, devolution of decision-making and, latterly, as co-production.

The historic reach and contemporary incidence of engagement add to difficulties of its definition. This too is a theme of this book. Engagement can be defined according to context, intention and mode. Issues of definition are explored at greater length in Chapters 1 and 2.

For the purposes of this Introduction engagement is understood as a way of working that operates along a continuum. At one end of the continuum there are deliberate and created opportunities for different bodies of interest to come together and share information. This may be uni-directional, for example, a presentation from one interest group to another. Further along the continuum towards its centre there may be more participative approaches to engagement with more consultation to solve issues and with communications being two-way, with various bodies coming to understand what is important to the other.

At the farthest end of the engagement continuum there could be a co-development by various groups of changes that will impact a local community or the co-development of research and planning projects. In this situation those who traditionally hold power will share their power with others. They may relinquish power. So those who have traditionally been without influence in the past can develop solutions or changes.

Engagement can be entered into in a variety of ways as determined by the task to be undertaken and the extent to which those with power wish to share their power. The approach to engagement will be informed by the nature of the solutions or products to be developed and the extent to which the less tangible outcomes, such as attitude changes, are sought.

Engagement has entered and ebbed in public life over the past fifty years. For example, the 1960s and 1970s in the UK and US saw a push on community development geared to tackle poverty and inequalities and to increase community activism. This ebbed with the rise of identity politics, the breaking down of the so-called 'nanny state' in the UK and US and the development of marketisation.⁵ This led through the 1980s and 90s to increasing numbers of invitations to private and third sector providers to deliver public services.⁶

The turnouts for UK elections at national level have decreased from historic highs in 1950 of 84% of the population to 59% in 2001 and 61% in 2005. At which point 17 million people stayed at home. Local government fared even worse with 35% of the population voting in the 2008 elections. Traditional political involvement through voting and engaging with MPs attracts older, educated and more affluent people; those who are perhaps more like the MPs themselves. The lowest turnout is found amongst younger and disadvantaged people. This voter profile could skew policy development, with policies being aimed at those more likely to vote. Those who opt for self-disenfranchisement becoming increasingly disenfranchised in policy development.⁷

In the White Paper, *Communities in Control*,⁸ the then Government argue that political structures based on Victorian models have not kept up with developments in technologies and access to information. Throughout the 2000s New Labour emphasised the value of participation, consultation and community involvement; legislation, funding, innovations and policy articulation became strong features of political and public life. The Internet was used extensively to make Government more transparent, and to promote the possibility for petitions and for consultations. There has been, and is, a largely unquestioned assumption that engagement is a social good, and that people want to be involved in shaping and possibly paying for the services they use. Engagement continues to be a key plank in political policy into the second decade of this century.

Alongside the more formal and political arenas for engagement are philanthropy, volunteering, donations, movements like Timebanking⁹ and a host of global, local and national campaigns, both on-line and off. This diversity of terms for engagement and its implications are explored in Chapters 1 and 2. Chapter 3 explores the development of virtual engagement and the role of the Internet in developing engagement in, for example, the political arena.

Pitfalls and opportunities

The fluidity in definitions of engagement and its practices, and in the contexts in which it takes place, is a strength allowing for innovation and for engagement to be shaped according to purpose. It does, however, present challenges when trying to develop evaluative strategies. There is a tension between, on the one hand, understanding the importance of achieving measurable outputs and outcomes and, on the other, not wanting to restrain the more open-ended potential of engagement work.

This fluidity and diversity makes it vulnerable to being used in ways that are not authentic. The label 'engagement' can be stuck onto a number of processes and products, whether or not they are engagement. It is a term that can be bolted on to a job description without any discussion of what it means. It can be rolled into communications, PR or marketing, whose purposes are very different from engagement. People can be expected to work in engagement with no real training for undertaking and developing its practices. The skills and guiding principles that add authenticity to engagement work are discussed in Part Two.

In their absence, the potential vagueness of engagement can mean that organisations have little capacity or knowledge on which to base their work with either the outputs and outcomes from engagement or with the communities that have been engaged. This can worsen relations with publics and their perceptions of organisations. It is possible for communities to feel engaged in a sham, or that they have been unheard or betrayed. This does little to support any feelings of public trust. Trust and its cultivation is an issue which is explored in Chapters 3, 5 and 7 of this book.

On the flip side, good engagement processes can transform stakeholders. Individuals may develop skills and insights. Communities may gain new social and associational networks and social capital. Organisations can develop capacity, new partners and new cultures for working. Key to unlocking these opportunities is designing engagement so that it has scope to enable learning. Learning, benefits and barriers to engagement are explored in subsequent chapters, particularly Chapter 5.

Themes

This book explores a number of themes that underpin engagement. These include:

Values

Engagement is, or at least should be, value driven. It brings together people and organisations with different viewpoints: what each of them care about must be shown to count.

There is often also a differential of resources and power between bodies involved in engagement. When considering values, it is important to have awareness of any such imbalances and their potential effects, alongside awareness of other assumptions that may be brought into engagement relationships. In the case of those with more power or resources, they may feel that they have more rights and authority, or more at stake. It is important to explore why this may not be so.

Engagement should not be approached as an activity that is about persuading others to a point of view, or as a rubber-stamping of something already decided. Engagement is not market research, marketing or organisational communications. The active development of Codes for Consultations¹⁰ from 2000 onwards have been attempts to reduce the number of inauthentic consultations.

At a minimum, engagement is the sharing of clear and factual information. In other forms it is the mutual exploration of issues and the development of solutions. Engagement should be based on authentic communication, and be backed with sufficient resources to create what has been agreed. It is not a service delivered to people, or done to them. Values such as authenticity, respect, equity and inclusion are at the heart of engagement work.

Power

This relates to thinking about which groups may be invited into engagement processes, and the ways in which they are thought about and treated. It is likely that one or two sets of stakeholders have more power than the others. Engagement should be inclusive. So, rather than simply inviting in those with power while excluding others, there should be effective research to determine which groups need to be involved. Chapter 6 explores stakeholder analysis.

Engagement is about change. This can be threatening. It can stand many things on their heads, and invite people to have a voice over areas of life, which hitherto they may not have had. In this way it

can change where power lies. Chapter 5, on ethics and engagement, explores how people may be encouraged to have a voice in engagement. Chapters 8 and 9 explore more inclusive ways to work, discussing ways to develop people's capacity and facilitate more equitable engagement processes.

Change

Engagement will involve various types of change. It is possible that engagement in its weakest form is one-way: involving talks and presentations, but even this type of engagement may stimulate individuals to find out more. More complex forms of engagement may see people from various groups exploring issues together, and generating ideas for development. In more collaborative forms of engagement, the experience of working with others and synthesising different views makes it impossible for individuals and organisations to stand still. All participants will be changed by the experience of hearing about things from others' perspectives, and perhaps engaging in activities with others, or working with solutions which would not otherwise have occurred to them.¹¹

The model of change with which this book works is that of emergent change. By which is meant change which comes about as a result of small changes or individuals doing something differently: change which is mutable, dynamic and evolving. For example, an idea or two from a meeting between people involved in engagement may impact some people strongly. They may take these ideas and thoughts back to others in their communities; ripples of changes may occur to various people's thinking, understandings, ways of behaving and attitudes. This model of change is based on the belief that large scale or top down initiatives are not required in order for change to happen. This is a very simplified explanation of what is known as complex adaptive systems theory (see Chapter 4).¹²

Transformational learning

Allied to change is learning. There is much discussion in this book about learning as a result of being engaged. Working with people who are different from oneself can exert a tremendous impact on ways of perceiving the world. Such experiences can lead to developing new skills and knowledge. There is an emphasis in this book on the appreciation of different forms of knowledge, from tacit and experiential knowledge to that which is book-based. There is an emphasis on the role of reflection in helping what is known, or what has been learnt or discovered, to emerge. This requires people to challenge their preconceptions and assumptions about themselves and others, and about the nature of knowledge. Learning and developing alternative standpoints is explored in Chapter 4. Different ways to engage, and so to learn, is a thread running through the book and is explored more thoroughly in Chapters 5 and 8.

Engagement may be an opportunity for people to come together to hear what others think, and to be asked about their own concerns, and to develop their own voices. This can be deeply enabling and empowering.

Engagement can also support organisational learning as well as learning at a systems level. A powerful example of this is the country-wide engagement *My Estonia*,¹³ a national dialogue in Estonia about problems the nation faced. This led to a voluntary and therefore low cost campaign to clean-up the country, with people in different geographic areas taking responsibility. The result was completed at a fraction of the cost and time that it would have taken for a government-led initiative.

Engagement can lead to a powerful sense of agency and investment in civic life, supporting the development of tolerance in communities; encouraging communication, shared visions and actions across them. Models for participatory approaches to learning are found in Chapter 5.

Communication

A key element to all engagement work is communication. It is important to have an appreciation of some communications theories, to think about ways in which language can be used to ill effect to distance people, or can be used to help collective sense-making and creation of common ground. Chapter 4 explores ways language is used to frame situations. Chapters 7 and 8 explore language in use.

Assumptions and framing

There is discussion of the ways in which people's held assumptions affect their perceptions and actions. These can be inaccurate assumptions, but nevertheless they will shape the ways in which other groups of people and issues are viewed and responded to. Trying to understand some of the blinkers and baggage that people bring to an issue, and to other people, is an important element of finding ways to work differently with people. This is explored in Chapter 4.

This book

This book fuses the conceptual, and the analytically descriptive, with engagement in practice. It has been written to support and extend practice, provoke reflection and encourage thinking about the potential value of engagement.

The first part explores some conceptual issues about engagement: its purpose, value, role and developments. The second outlines some of the ways in which engagement may be designed, instigated and undertaken.

Within the text, especially in Part Two, there are various suggestions and guides to encourage reflection about engagement.

Endnotes

1. With Web2 many forms and access to virtual engagement through mobile phones, androids and iPADS.
2. 'Publics' is a term used in engagement, much as 'audiences' is used in communications. 'Publics', as opposed to 'public' or 'the public' is a way to signify that there are a number of different types of people with various interests and multiple affiliations within any group of the public as a whole, and that within the public as a whole there are multiple groups of public. So, 'publics' acknowledges a diversity of people, rather than stating 'the public', as if this were a homogeneous group.
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 6. Walsh, K. 1995, *Public Services and Market Mechanisms*, London, McMillan
 7. 2007 *Audit of Political Engagement*.
 8. Communities and Local Government, 2008, *Communities in Control*, London, The Stationery Office
 9. Timebanking's foundation and early development is attributed to Edgar Cahn. It has developed in a number of countries. In the UK see <http://timebank.org.uk> and the USA www.timebanks.org. It is the trading of time, an hour of activity, for an hour of another's time and skills, or for access to a service. The overwhelming principle is that of the equity of all partners in the trade.
 10. <http://www.bis.gov.uk/policies/better-regulation/consultation-guidance>
 11. Squirrell, G. 2009, Developing Organisational Agency, *International Journal of Knowledge, Culture and Change Management*, 9: 7, 53–64
 12. For examples of complex adaptive systems theory in action and further explanation see Stacey, R. 1996, *Complexity and Creativity in Organisations*, San Francisco, Brett-Koeler; Stacey, R. (Ed.) 2005, *Experiencing Emergence in Organisations*, London, Routledge, <http://www.e2rc.net>
 13. My Estonia, see <http://www.minueesti.ee/?lng=en>