Public Engagers and the Political Craft of Participatory Policy Making

We are witnessing the mainstreaming of participatory policy making and, with it, the rise of the public engager (officials whose job is to perform public participation). Public authorities have become permeable to the rhetoric and (sometimes) the practice of collaborative governance and public engagement. Accordingly, public participation processes are no longer exclusive to domains “outside” the state but increasingly embedded in everyday public administration. Arguably, participatory democracy is undergoing processes of professionalization and institutionalization, most notably in Europe and the United States.

A corollary of the mainstreaming of participatory practices is the proliferation of guidelines for public engagers. “Designing Public Participation Processes” is John M. Bryson, Kathryn S. Quick, Carissa Schively Slotterback, and Barbara C. Crosby’s addition to this burgeoning literature. However, this is a contribution with a difference. First, it is evidence based, which provides public engagers with a valuable rhetorical resource to fight the “backstage” battles that are instrumental to “frontstage” participatory processes. Second, it is interdisciplinary, bringing together know-how from various fields. Finally, and most crucially, it is founded on an appreciation for the craft-like quality of participation design and the context-sensitive nature of engagement practice.

I find it essential that the authors advise not to take the guidelines as a rigid template, but rather as a heuristic map to a lively domain of action in which we must engage the contingencies of situated practice. Designing participation is not a mechanistic task, nor a purely managerial or technical endeavor. Rather, it is a craft that requires local knowledge, political know-how, and reflective practice in order to purposefully assemble processes in which people, ideas, spaces, and artifacts are brought together to rethink or remake certain policy worlds. Guidelines are, by nature, normative and prescriptive: they seek to raise standards of practice. Badly designed, purposeless, manipulative, or tokenistic participation is indeed problematic. However, the challenges of state-initiated public engagement are not always to do with a lack of know-how or guidelines, but with the resistances shown by certain departments and officials. Let me illustrate with an example from Scotland. The National Standards for Community Engagement were officially launched by the Scottish government in 2005 to guide participatory processes carried out by government agencies, councils, health boards, police, and other public bodies. Subsequently, the online tool called VOiCE (Visioning Outcomes in Community Engagement) was developed to assist public engagers in planning, developing, evaluating, and recording participation.

Despite the innovative nature of the tool, which was co-designed with participation practitioners, it has not always been welcome on the ground. I have worked with engagers and managers who actively resist using VOiCE. Why? Among other things, it is sometimes perceived as a disciplinary tool that forces a quality of process design that exceeds the scope of public engagement that they realistically expect to achieve in their governmental contexts. In the words of a public manager, “it is like using a car to crack a nut.”

The guidelines by Bryson and colleagues illustrate how demanding it can be to design participatory processes. To some, it will seem unwise to simply add this to the existing workload of public officials. That is probably why the work of participation is becoming specialized, professionalized, and institutionalized. Interestingly, we can learn a great deal by looking at the introduction of official engagers as a disruption to established routines in public administration. Working as a local engager, I have found that the fate of government-initiated participatory processes often depends on logics and dynamics that seem incomprehensible from the outside—for instance, the multidirectional pull
observing and working with others within networks of masters and apprentices. Accordingly, the most effective forms of training are often “shadowing” schemes, placements that pair novices with seasoned engagers. Unfortunately, much of the frustration felt by budding engagers comes from the lack of such opportunities and feeling thrown at the deep end of an unexpectedly political milieu. It seems that only practice teaches you to deal with practice.

Bryson and colleagues clearly acknowledge that their guidelines do not constitute a temporal sequence. The participation cycle, like the policy cycle, is often rationalized in scholarly accounts and governmental “best practice” standardizations. Such accounts serve to appease managers, assure decision makers, and orientate novice engagers. However, public participation processes, like any political process, are messy. Participation design takes place not only at the drawing board, but also throughout the process. Or, as Hendrik Wagenaar may put it, it unfolds as an ongoing conversation with the situation at hand. Seasoned public engagers know that their trade is as much about plotting how to get from “here to there” as about negotiating the “here and now.”

In my experience, public engagers who thrive at designing and performing participatory processes invest considerable time doing political and relational work in the “backstage”: negotiating, nudging, cajoling, pressing, persuading, reframing, aligning, trapping, enticing, enthusing, concealing, disclosing, unleashing, connecting … From this perspective, with their guidelines for “Designing Public Participation Processes,” Bryson and colleagues succeed in resisting the temptation of making a technical rendition of what is, in essence, a political endeavor.