

RIFS-Blogpost

Datum: 09.01.2024

Autor*innen: von Schneidemesser, Dirk; Stasiak, Dorota

Projekt: [Projektname(n)]

[Dachzeile]

Matching Facilitation Methods to Deliberative Purposes

Imagine three groups of people deliberating the same question. All three groups were recruited the same way, they are deliberating in similar rooms, and they have the same materials available. Does it actually matter how the facilitation of these deliberative processes is carried out? Dirk von Schneidemesser, Dorota Stasiak and Daniel Oppold explain why it matters, and how different facilitation styles affect deliberation.

Our starting point for [this explorative study](#) was that the purposes of deliberative formats vary greatly: while some seek to achieve consensus, others intend to promote mutual understanding in the name of social cohesion, while others seek to clarify or define problems, and others still may seek to generate collective solutions, make recommendations, or identify the diversity of positions. We lack clarity regarding what facilitation methods best serve which purposes. This is especially relevant when we consider the broad variety of facilitation methods, because different facilitation methods have different strengths and weaknesses.

Beyond deciding on who needs to participate, we need to clearly plan out what the participants will do once the deliberation begins. If we wish to convene a deliberation aiming at consensus, which facilitation approach do we choose and how do we need to arrange different facilitative steps into a coherent process design? How do we ensure that every participant's voice is heard? Is this necessary? If each participant has a chance to speak, is that enough? Or do we need to build in elements in the process that not only allow for contributions, but encourage contributions, or even require contributions? Or ensure contributions are actually understood by other participants?

It seems obvious on the surface of it to say: “of course we need to appropriately facilitate our deliberative format.” But there are thus far no standards for what “appropriate facilitation” entails. With the rolling [deliberative wave](#), more and more conveners demand facilitation

! Zum Aktualisieren der Textelemente, Zitation markieren und dann F9 drücken !

Zitation: von Schneidemesser, Dirk; Stasiak, Dorota (2024): Matching Facilitation Methods to Deliberative Purposes – RIFS-Blogpost, 09.01.2024.

URL: <https://www.rifs-potsdam.de/en/blog/2024/01/matching-facilitation-methods-deliberative-purposes>



services. In turn, more and more actors offer facilitation services. Some are high quality, others are not. And some are great, just not for the purpose at hand.

Facilitators might offer what they know, choosing what has worked well in past experiences, even if the nature and purpose of the deliberation at hand is completely different from past projects. Further, if I am a facilitator trained in two different methods, I may believe – and lead others to believe – that any deliberative purpose can be well addressed by one of these two methods. Perhaps, anyway, until I am trained in a third method...

In other words, facilitation remains something of a black box. Yet it is a crucial factor for the success of any deliberative endeavour. So we need to know more about how differences in facilitation affect deliberation and deliberators.

Facilitation remains something of a black box. Yet it is a crucial factor for the success of any deliberative endeavour.

[Facilitation matters](#) because it helps us reach the purposes and expectations we have for deliberative processes. If we have decided that deliberation is helpful for, say, formulating recommendations for a parliament, and we've identified the question for which recommendations should be generated, it will likely make a difference if we ask someone trained in psychology to facilitate the deliberation or if we ask someone trained in sociology to do so. It is plausible that the same group of deliberators would develop entirely different recommendations with a psychologist as opposed to a sociologist as their facilitator. The implications could also go so far as to lead participants to have wildly different impressions of the process, either criticising or supporting the legitimacy of the process afterwards, for example.

In darker scenarios, deliberation might even be subject to manipulation. Even if there may have been a representative group of participants (external inclusion), and everyone was given a chance to contribute (internal inclusion), we could still end up with a deliberation in which only some of the participants did actually contribute (failed internal inclusion).

Facilitators plan and structure deliberative processes so that the interaction is inclusive and best helps achieve the goals of the deliberation. In a [research article published last year](#), we imagined different facilitation methods applied to the same problem. We compared three facilitation designs and practices, and found that, indeed, facilitation matters. The first, Dynamic Facilitation, was better at ensuring inclusion than the other two, and teased out differing positions better as well. However, participants who deliberated with a second, mixed-method, facilitation approach indicated higher satisfaction with the process as well as more likelihood to continue engaging beyond the deliberative format. The third, self-organised group was only given instructions – but left to deliberate without a facilitator. Out of the three, they were least satisfied with the outcome but produced the largest quantity of output.

The self-organised group also showed the most interruptions. But participants in the mixed-method facilitated group interrupted each other almost as much, while interruptions were very rare in the group using dynamic facilitation. Perhaps not surprisingly then, the self-organised group indicated that they found it easiest to bring ideas into the deliberation, whilst the Dynamic Facilitation group scored lowest – though the differences here were minor. One explanation for this could be that the facilitators (in the two groups that had them) served as quality control. The facilitated groups produced fewer recommendations, as the facilitators worked with the participants to prioritise and integrate contributions. They asked participants what they meant or if they had been understood, which did not happen in an organised way in the self-organised group. Deliberators may feel that it's more difficult to contribute ideas if a facilitator demands they make contributions more precise.

When we asked the deliberators how large the variance in perspectives was within the group, the Dynamic Facilitation group reported a much higher variance in perspectives than the other two groups. Had they simply become aware of this variance because they listened to – instead of interrupting – each other? One interpretation is that while Dynamic Facilitation is better at identifying problems and priorities, the mixed-method approach is more apt to serve as a foundation for common action, and self-organised deliberation can certainly be constructive if facilitation is, for example, too costly.

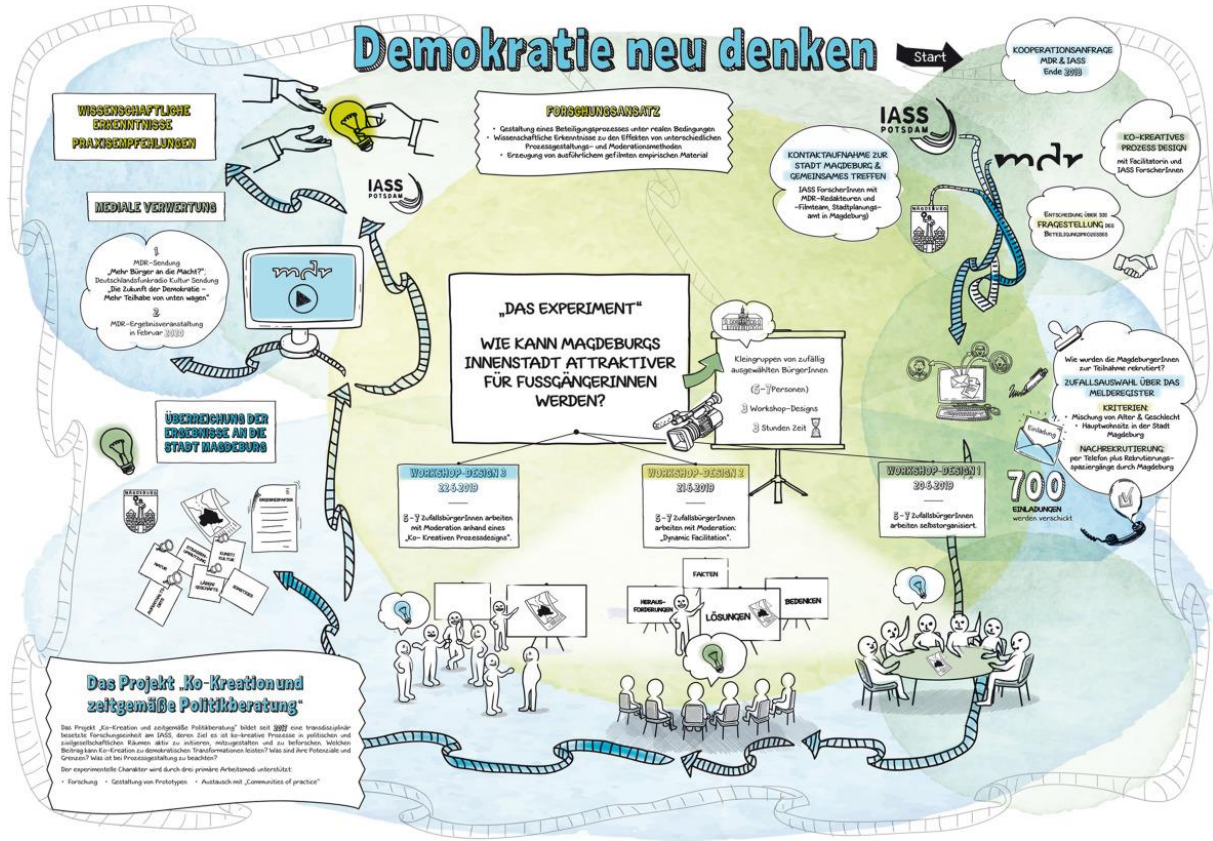
Conveners of deliberative processes need to be aware that matching facilitation methods to deliberative purposes is a critical step in the process. Fostering “facilitative literacy” is essential.

Is it more important to clearly identify different positions, foster civic engagement, or be satisfied with the outcome of the deliberation? Of course, it depends on the purpose. And this brings us back to the beginning: there are a broad variety of facilitation methods, and they all have different strengths (and weaknesses). We therefore must match facilitation methods with the goals of the deliberative format.

This is easier said than done. Conveners of deliberative processes, like public officials, need to be aware that matching facilitation methods to deliberative purposes is a critical step in the process. Fostering “facilitative literacy” is an essential precondition to take this step confidently and successfully match facilitation methods to the purposes of deliberative processes.

Want to know more? [Read the full article in the Journal of Deliberative Democracy.](#)

This blog post was first published in [Deliberative Democracy Digest.](#)



Graphical representation of the project results. (c) RIFS/Sabine Zentek

