

Parallels between on and offline youth participation

by Kirsty Leong, Luella Paine & Alex Hughes

This short article consists of a transcript from a presentation given at the My Space, Your Space, Our Space: Australia and NZ Adolescent Health Conference held in Melbourne in 2008. The presentation was given by policy officers from the Victorian Office for Youth.

Kirsty

Today we'll be using an interview format to ask our 'experts' to draw out the parallels between online and offline consultation with young people. We'll use the following case study to demonstrate.

This year, the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission (the commission) undertook a project that explored young people's right to participate in decision-making and public life. They approached the Victorian Office for Youth (OFY) to assist with their consultation with young people.

Luella, can you tell us about the approach that the OFY took?

Luella

While OFY could have assisted in a more traditional way via its network of youth organisations, we thought that an issue-based consultation like this would be perfect to take online, especially to reach a different kind of youth audience, so OFY assisted as a technology partner through *youthcentral*.

ICT – Information and Communication Technology – can offer many options to facilitate participation via the web such as forums/blogs, user-generated content initiatives and social networking/online communities. However, for this project, we recommended an online survey as it provides a more structured feedback and data collection mechanism.

So, *youthcentral* provided the technology and online expertise, hosted the survey on its website and

was part of the overall communication strategy. The survey was promoted using a mixture of online and offline strategies such as mail, email, websites, forum posts, word-of-mouth etc.

The commission also ran an offline version of the survey so this case study is a typical example of how online and offline consultation methods converge.

Kirsty

The subject matter, 'a person's right to participate', isn't exactly a light-hearted subject. How do we make issues like this appealing to young people?

Alex

Although it's true that we need to make our consultations creative and interesting, we should also acknowledge that many young people do want to contribute to the world around them and are interested in engaging with serious issues.

We often hear comments about how young people are only interested in their individual lives and not in political processes. This is a misconception. Research has shown that young people are interested in contributing to government decision-making. It is the ways in which we engage with them that need to shift to be relevant to young people's experience.

For example, the recent National Youth Affairs Research Scheme's report *Rewriting the rules for youth participation* (Bell, Colin & Vromen 2008) quotes

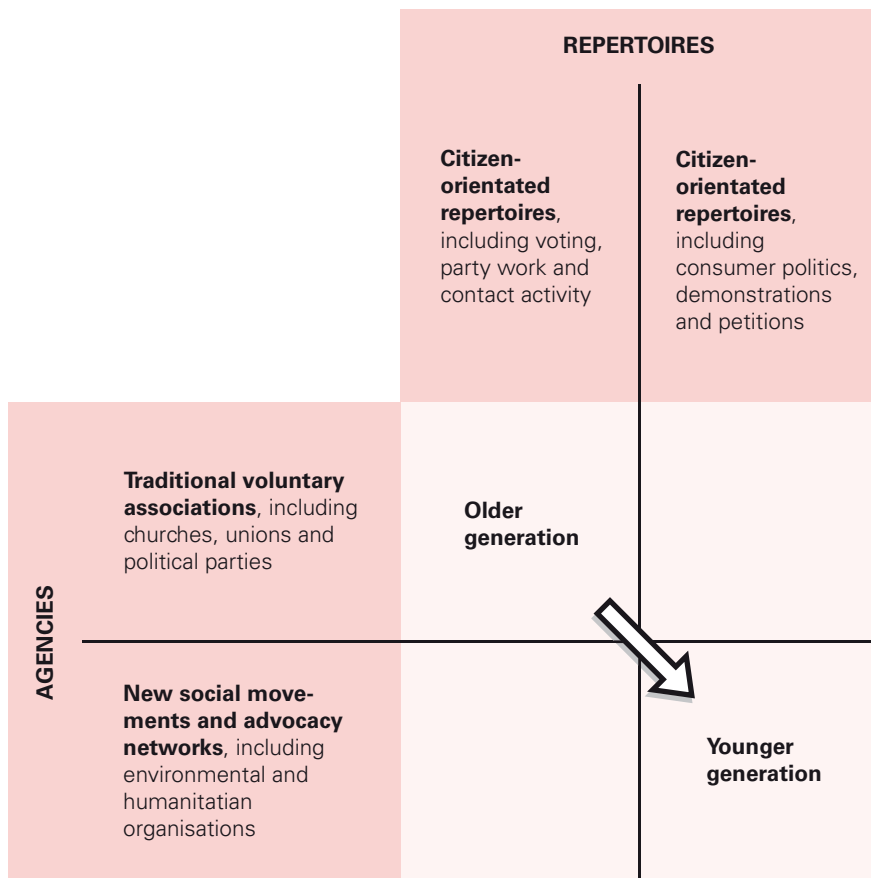


FIGURE 1 Typology of the evolution of Political Action (source: Norris, 2003, p.22)

many young people expressing interest in having their say in politics and government. Yet, at the same time, this report also reflects young people's frustrations at the limited avenues through which they are 'allowed' to participate in government decision-making, which mainly focus on traditional methods of consultation such as youth roundtables and councils.

This research highlights that we need to make our consultations relevant to young people – not only in relation to the content, but also the engagement style – and to draw on the range of communication mechanisms young people are using.

Other research has identified that the recent generation of young people are more likely to participate in issues-based consultations than in those that are "for consultation's sake" only. That is, they are more interested in ongoing consultations than in shorter term project-based consultations. This is illustrated in the above graph (Norris in Collin 2008).

We know that young people can't be seen as a homogenous entity; therefore, in planning consultations we need to assume that we will attract a range of young people for different reasons. For example, some may engage with a consultation because they are passionate about an issue, whereas others may engage because they are interested in the process and their right to have a say about a range of issues in community life.

So, instead of assuming that young people aren't interested in 'heavy' or political issues, we need to start recognising that it is often the way we promote the opportunity to participate that will determine young people's engagement.

Luella

And we need to be clear that just because something is online, we can't assume it will be instantly 'cool' and appealing to young people or that new technology is even a young person's domain. The technology is only a tool that provides us with different ways to consult and involve people, but it doesn't solve the challenge of making a consultation relevant and inclusive for a diverse range of young people.

We chose an online approach because it offered:

- potential to reach a greater number of young people all around Victoria;
- ways to hear from fresh voices;
- an online format that young people were familiar with;
- a way to validate and collect our data in a real-time setting;
- a way to quickly analyse our data so we could ensure we were reaching diverse young people;
- further or ongoing opportunities to participate beyond the survey; and
- anonymity and inclusiveness (to a degree).

But to consult online we still needed to ensure:

- a good strategy and processes e.g. clear consultation goals, outcomes, timelines;
- an appropriate consultation method for the issue/ audience/outcome (i.e. in this case a survey);
- the tool (e.g. the survey) is relevant and usable e.g. language, tone, structure, design (best way to do this is to involve young people in process);
- quality, reliable and trusted technology (tested, usable, secure, compatible, accessible); and
- a relevant communication strategy (it's never a case of 'if we build it they will come') e.g. trusted brand, communication channels, online and offline promotion plans.

Kirsty

You could say that the best way to find out what works is to ask young people themselves. I'm interested to know whether young people were involved in the planning and design of this consultation.

Luella

In this case, the commission contracted a young person working at Youthlaw to consult with young people to develop the survey questions. The commission then gave the questions to us to refine for an online survey. Then, the draft survey was provided to a panel of young people (the commission's Youth Ambassadors group) and their feedback and ideas, from both online and offline perspectives, were incorporated into the final survey content, design and processes. The young people's feedback included suggestions like introducing a prize incentive, refining some of the language in the content and a restructure of questions.

Alex

This is a good example of how online and offline consultations draw on the same principles of youth engagement. Other principles that were applied here in the online context include:

- ongoing consultation and feedback with young people;
- providing rewards and acknowledgments for their contributions;
- involving young people throughout the whole process, not just at the beginning or the end; and
- providing young people with the opportunity to participate a little bit or a lot, depending on their interests and skill levels.

Kirsty

What about some of the barriers that using technology introduces? For example, what about young people who don't have access to the internet, or young people with a disability, or young people who speak English as a second language?

Luella

Just like with traditional methods of consultation, of course there are barriers. The important thing is to be aware of them and then incorporate ways to minimise them and be inclusive. For example:

Technology barriers

I've already mentioned starting with reliable and trusted technology so that those who do have access

to technology aren't met with extra barriers from error messages, browser incompatibility, confusing language, poor design and usability.

You can also provide technology alternatives for those with limited access e.g. high and low resolution options or transcripts (if using multimedia), text alternatives (video or audio), and access to help via phone or email.

Additionally, you can take the technology to the user by incorporating a road show or one-on-one sessions into your overall strategy.

Internet technologies introduce issues of information privacy and data security that you must address if you are using online tools. Use technologies like SSL (Secure Socket Layer) code that secures personal or private information that's transferred via the web and user authentication for additional security. Provide information that explains to people how you will ensure their privacy and collect and handle their data. Having a credible and trusted website also helps. Finally, never collect private information unless you actually need to (e.g. there's no point in asking for people's contact details unless you need to follow them up as part of the consultation).

Language, cultural and disability barriers

These can be overcome by using multilingual formats and building in accessibility compliance (how far you go depends on time, budget, resources and goals).

Again, offering alternatives to ensure that all young people can participate is often the best approach e.g. multilingual help via email or telephone, providing offline options (print and mail) and providing a support person.

Kirsty

Alex, how do you think the traditional barriers to youth participation translate to the online environment? Are they exacerbated?

Alex

If you think of the internet as another 'space' that we inhabit, the reasons young people experience barriers to participation are similar to those in the offline environment – they just manifest differently. For example, in the 'real world' young people often experience barriers to participation due to:

- assumptions that consultations are for 'other', more capable young people;
- geographic location/isolation;
- having a language barrier or disability; and/or
- the perception (real or assumed) that the consulta-

AUTHORS

Kirsty Leong is a Senior Policy Officer for the Victorian Office for Youth, responsible for the Regional Youth Affairs Network.

Luella Paine is the Web Manager for the Victorian Government's website for young people, YouthCentral, run by the Office for Youth.

Alex Hughes is an Associate Lecturer in Youth Work in the School of Global Studies, Social Science and Planning at Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology in Melbourne.

tion is not relevant to them or will not have meaningful outcomes.

Unfortunately, these barriers translate to the online environment because the same young people who experience these offline barriers are also most likely to experience difficulties with technology. For example:

- Young people who are geographically isolated are more likely to experience problems with technology such as slow internet connections, less time on the internet and less access to hands-on technical support.
- Young people who speak English as a second language or who have a disability are more likely to encounter websites and online consultations that do not cater to their needs and therefore exclude them from participating.
- Young people who feel excluded or disadvantaged by political systems and institutions (e.g. young people in care, Indigenous young people, homeless young people) are more likely to believe that online and offline consultations are not relevant to them and will not result in positive change. They are also less likely to have easy access to technology. This perpetuates the idea that youth participation is only for a select, capable and well-resourced minority.

Therefore, in order to get input from a diverse range of young people, it is important to tailor consultations to ensure that young people who experience these barriers can participate. Some strategies that are used offline can be adapted to the online environment. These include:

- targeting consultations for specific groups to make sure they are accessible and relevant;
- taking the consultation to groups of young people instead of expecting them to come to you;
- involving elders and other members of the community in planning and implementation; and
- fostering partnerships with youth services and the community sector to promote the opportunity for consultation within organisations and local communities.

This final point is vital in order to engage a diverse range of young people, especially those who wouldn't traditionally participate in consultations. Whether it's online or offline, young people's participation is most valuable when they are informed and supported.

Kirsty

Now I want to talk a little about feedback. How do you manage expectations and incorporate feedback in the online context?

Alex

It's important to be clear about the young people's sphere of influence from the outset in order to manage expectations and let them know how the information they offer will be used, where and why. This allows young people to understand that even though they are being consulted and/or providing advice on an issue, their thoughts may not translate directly into action in a way they would like. Equally, it is helpful to let them know where the information is going so that if it does inform a specific policy or program, they are able to see a direct link between their participation and positive outcomes for the community.

Luella

As Alex said, part of managing feedback comes with setting realistic expectations in the first place and building this into the online experience. We can add prominent links to privacy information, rules for participation (if you are hosting a forum or blog) and technology alternatives (e.g. alternative language formats, a printable option, contact details for telephone support). We can also use technology to validate users' responses and, if necessary, prompt or remind them of our expectations as they are engaging online.

Many of the Web 2.0 tools build in feedback mechanisms so that online participants themselves provide feedback and reinforce expectations. You can also build in as much 360-degree feedback as possible into your consultation. For example, 'thank you' screens, survey summaries and reports, links to related forums, information or tools, competitions or mailing lists. This way, your one-off online survey (in itself a stand-alone consultation tool) can become part of a community-building exercise.

References

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