

Pushing the boundaries

A new approach to community conversations

A review for brap by Merida Associates



Pushing the Boundaries: a review of brap's use of process work

Why process work?

As far back as 2012, brap identified in their facilitator's handbook for Critical Integration¹ the need for a new kind of open conversation between people in local areas to explore the topics that matter to them, such as migration, community cohesion, parking issues or homelessness. brap recognised from the outset that these kinds of conversations require finely honed facilitation skills if all voices are to be heard; and found in process work a way to enhance their own abilities to create spaces for people to talk to each other meaningfully.

Process work has its roots in psychology, physics and sociology and is a method that recognises the complexity of human beings, acknowledging that we all assume different roles and voices depending on who we are 'being' – a mother, a teacher, a friend – and that we can hold a range of views depending on where we are and who we are talking to. Process work holds that people's opinions are not fixed and that they can be influenced or persuaded by the arguments of others or the introduction of new information. Giving people the opportunity to change their minds, based on listening to their neighbours, is a key element of Pushing the Boundaries.

Process work facilitators devote years developing their understanding, firstly of themselves and the complexity and contradictory nature of views and roles they hold; and then on how they can enable other people to overcome social and cultural barriers to speaking out and share their thoughts with people they do not know, even when their views are not perceived as mainstream.

To be effective, process work requires a range of views to be heard in the room and facilitators can participate in the conversations, not as themselves but as voices and viewpoints that may otherwise not be heard, taking what are called 'ghost roles'. brap has invested in training its staff over the past 5 years to become group process practitioners based on process work principles and has been testing out the methodology as part of its [Pushing the Boundaries](#) project.

¹ brap *Interculturalism: A handbook for Critical Integration* (2012) Baring Foundation p.46

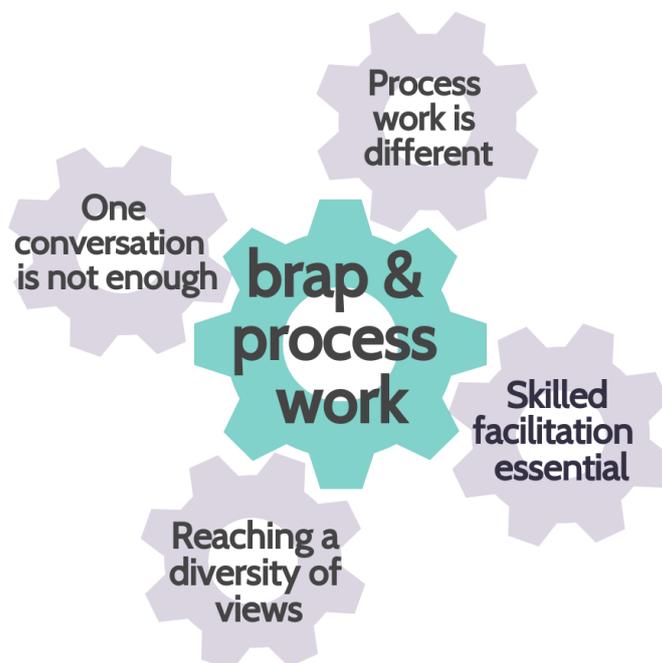
Purpose of the review

brap commissioned the review to supplement its own evaluation of Pushing the Boundaries; they wanted an external perspective on the implementation of the group process methodology, an independent sounding board to review how it works 'for real' and to analyse feedback from participants to support brap's internal reflective practice.

Review activity

- Engagement with the brap group process delivery team
- Attendance at process work sessions (Impact Hub, The Bond and Bosnia House)
- Review of filmed footage of community conversations facilitated by the brap team
- Review of community conversation transcripts and post-session follow up interviews conducted by the brap team
- Review of end of session feedback data collected by brap (12 sessions)
- A focus group with community practitioners who had attended process work sessions
- Follow up interviews with a sample of community conversation participants

Key themes from the review



Process work is a different way of having a conversation

Participants in community conversations who were familiar with traditional consultation formats found that group process was a different experience. People described it as less confining than other consultations they had attended. Some found the format challenging at first as it felt unstructured and they were not sure how to behave; however, people could choose to speak or remain silent, in process work both positions are valid forms of participation and people reported picking up the flow and becoming involved. Even people who didn't speak reflected that they had found the content thought provoking and stimulating. A minority didn't 'warm' to the format of standing and moving around; likening it to being at school, but its unclear whether this prevented them engaging.

The warm up activities helped people to feel more comfortable and this appears to be an essential part of starting a conversation.

Most people liked being able to set the agenda for the conversation at the start of the session, although some felt clapping to choose the main topic didn't always work well.

People felt listened to and able to participate in the conversations which were described as creating safe or comfortable spaces to express views and feelings.

Without necessarily expressing it as such, people did talk about the democratisation of space and conversation content. They appreciated the fact that discussions could be robust and challenging without leading to confrontation between participants: *"Sometimes there would be a heated discussion – but that's all to the good really"*. One person called the process a *"non-confrontational confrontation."*

There was evidence that people used the physicality of process work to take up positions and then change that position during the conversations. People enjoyed the concept of standing and moving around, they found it refreshing and novel in the context of consultations they had previously attended. The questioning approach of 'do you feel closer to this view or that one' worked well for people and avoided entrenching or hardening stances in response to challenge. People appreciated being able to hear different viewpoints and to be able to change their own stance and thinking as a result.

Some people reported that they had intended to observe rather than speak but that the conversation drew them in and they found themselves joining in

There is evidence to demonstrate that in Erdington the conversations challenged perceptions of homelessness, helping people to extend their understanding of homelessness and humanise homeless people

There is some limited evidence that certain people who were passionate or knowledgeable about the chosen conversation topic struggled to deepen their understanding or hear views that were new to them, perhaps being invested in their role as 'expert', whereas others reported hearing views that surprised them.

Some participants felt uncomfortable expressing 'hidden views and feelings', even when they were reflecting positions other than their own. It was suggested that people from communities were more able to say things as they saw them, and that group process gave them the opportunity to do so rather than the conversation being dominated by 'professionals' who automatically take a 'PC' point of view.

Process work requires confident and skilled facilitation

People had confidence in the group process because it was led by brap; many were motivated to attend events because they were being facilitated by brap.

Process work accepts that people often hold multiple and contradictory views and beliefs and it doesn't try to simplify this complexity – it works with it and actively encourages people to consider different viewpoints and their responses to them. Confident and skilled facilitation is essential to enable this to happen. Participants commented favourably on the skills displayed by the brap team in facilitating the sessions and reflected on the differences between the facilitation of process work and more traditional approaches to facilitation (see Appendix 1).

They noted that the team worked well together, managed 'difficult' participants well and created several ways for people to contribute. One described the facilitators' ability to "lubricate tricky conversations" ... "turning potential tensions into an exploration of the issues..." The use of ghost roles, particularly in earlier sessions, caused some confusion and for some people it took time to understand that the facilitators were presenting views not present in the room.

There is certainly a sense that hearing often unheard voices that run counter to the language generally in use in community spaces made some professionals feel uncomfortable.

"people can say things that might be a bit racist and it's OK to say that, to be honest and discuss how we feel..."

".... brap have intellectual depth, know the city, (are a) good team, diverse, they give you the confidence in the process, you will go along with them..."

The facilitator's challenge is to create a space where people feel comfortable to explore issues and different views and opinions in a way that people can disagree with each other but without feeling the need to *"defend themselves too hard"*. In process work facilitators must be fully engaged throughout, conscious of what is and isn't being said and noting where people are struggling to speak, or feeling uncomfortable with the viewpoints being expressed. The facilitator's job is to deepen conversations and maintain the balance between allowing the conversation to develop by stepping back and intervening when the conversation gets stuck or begins to loop. They must maintain a neutral space where people can be encouraged and challenged and the degree of 'push' to dig deeper should be carefully nuanced so that people are not 'closed down' or intimidated by the power that still lies with the facilitators, even when they are assuming the roles of unheard views in the room.

brap team members have a range of experience and skills in using process work as a tool for creating community conversations. Skills and confidence have grown across the whole team during the period of the review and the use of reflective practice is certainly helping brap to hone its organisational style and approach to using process work.

There has been a noticeable growth in confidence about when and how to challenge and 'push' to deepen a conversation, and increased sureness about how to be authentic when views expressed (by participants or through ghost roles) do not align with personal and professional beliefs.

The team have become more confident in undertaking ghost roles and, as a result, it appears that people are clearer about when staff are bringing in information and views to develop the conversation, and when they are asking people to respond to a hidden or missing perspective.

An area for development might be in supporting and giving people permission to express their feelings fully in a way that is safe for them and the group; to help everyone recognise that strong emotions are telling them something and getting to the nub of the issue. People may be comfortable to show emotion within what they perceive to be their own cultural group, but they are often on their best behaviour in 'public'.

*Ignoring views
won't make them
go away*

Reaching a diversity of views

Facilitators aim to stimulate and inform conversation by expressing points of view that may be uncomfortable for the group to hear, particularly where a group has a lot of common ground, or where people are finding difficult to express a view they feel may be less welcome to the group. Facilitators encourage people to dig deeper into expressed viewpoints by either standing with them, physically and or metaphorically, or presenting a different or opposing viewpoint if it is not being expressed by others.

Most participants liked brap bringing the other side of the argument, giving voice to those difficult to hear parts of the wider conversation that are often missing in more traditional community consultations; and brap uses several methods to capture the intelligence needed to contribute those missing voices.

In many localities, brap has existing knowledge of the area and prevalent attitudes; in other areas brap has or builds relationships with a partner organisation who brings this intelligence; and in some, like Erdington, staff conduct on-the- street vox pop's with or without the support of a local host organisation. Where partner organisations have strong local networks (and possibly where brap knows more organisations in the patch) it is potentially easier to 'fast track' this gathering of views.

One evaluation participant reported that the conversations brought in a wider group of participants in Sparkhill than would usually attend a similar event. Several events nevertheless, seemed to attract 'the usual suspects', people who are already active in their area and/or known to brap or the host organisation.

In some instances there was a broad consensus of views in the room, on the surface at least, and facilitators found it necessary to interject more frequently in ghost roles to create a diversity of views for discussion. People responded to this technique quite well – although a small number did find these roles confusing especially where they weren't fully aware that the facilitator was using a role to bring a new perspective, while others found them a little 'fake' or condescending.

It may be that attracting people who genuinely have views that differ from most attendees can create discomfort for people in a way that facilitators undertaking ghost roles may not, as the example shows.

The evidence reviewed for this report suggests that, while brap has reached diverse groups of people across Birmingham in different areas of the city, there has been more common ground (of varying kinds) than diametrically opposing views expressed in sessions overall.

There was a report from one session about how uncomfortable people felt with someone in the room who had been to prison; a participant suggested that he had disrupted the comfort and consensus in the room. A great example of process work in action.

One conversation is not enough

Several people expressed frustration that there was only one conversation in their area; they would have liked a longer conversation time or the chance to have multiple sessions. This indicates that they found the approach useful in creating space to have meaningful and different conversations about issues that matter to them.

In Erdington, where there were several community conversations, people felt that it took at least 2 or 3 sessions for the conversations to deepen and explore the 'heart' of the issue.

It is worth noting that the Erdington sessions generated more active engagement in follow up interviews and the community practitioner focus group than conversations in any other area. This suggests that where people are exposed to more than one conversation their personal understanding of the possible impact of process work is heightened. People became more confident and engaged with the process and more focused on an 'outcome' or making a change because of the conversations.

Likewise, where people had attended two or more of the 'one off' conversations in other areas, they demonstrated a more nuanced understanding of the benefits of process work in helping people to have more open and honest conversations about the things that concern or matter to them.

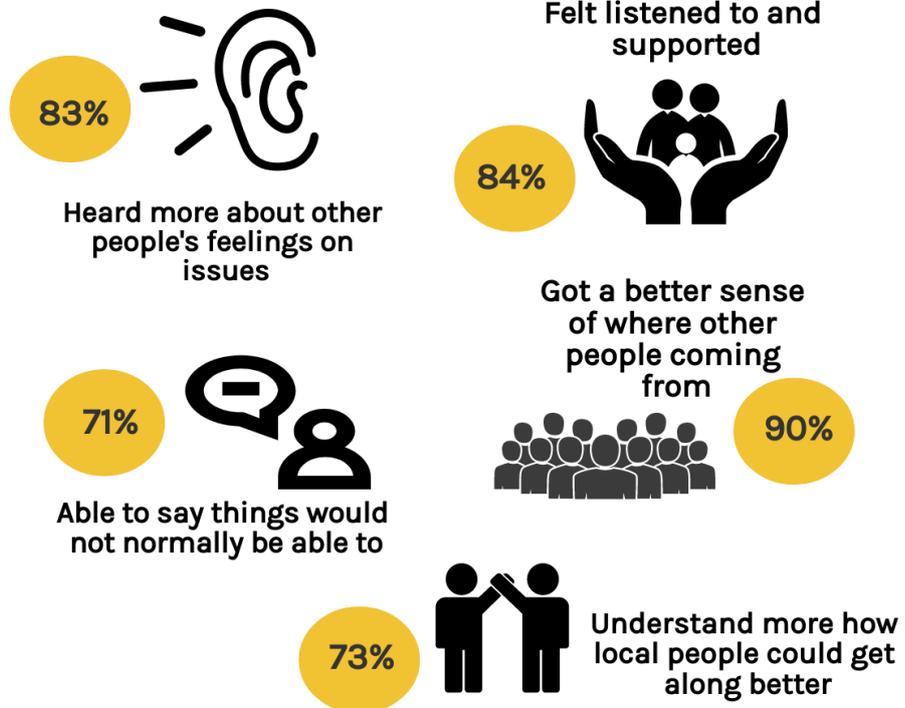
There was little evidence that people were ready to initiate follow up action for themselves, most appeared to be looking to brap to support them with acting on any insights they had gained from the sessions.

“A great session, a great opportunity to meet people from different walks of life and backgrounds.

Very well organized by caring, real people and delivered in a lively and often humorous manner – despite the serious nature of the evening.”

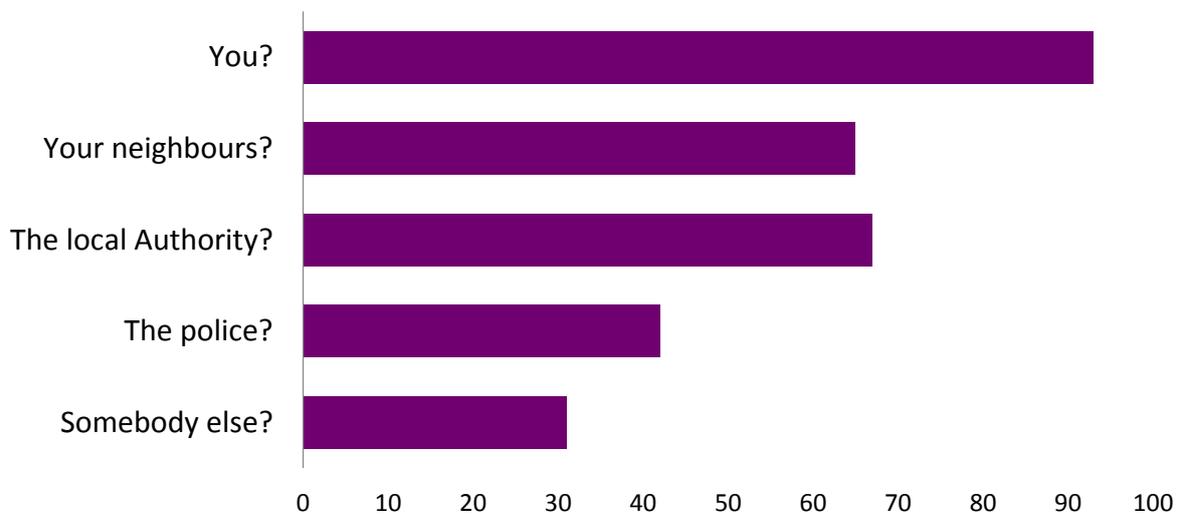
A summary of output data

Process Work sessions feedback



brap data March 2017 - May 2018 12 sessions/174 people max.

Who has responsibility for improving how people get along with each other from different backgrounds in the area?



Reflections on process work as a method for community conversations

Many of the people who attended brap's community conversations had little or no experience of coming out to 'have their say' for no purpose other than to understand each other better; and many were pleasantly surprised by this outcome. People found group process a useful way to explore their own and others' thinking. It provided space to broaden conversations about integration and challenge the ways in which people become 'other' or 'not like us.'

The consensus from participants is that process work has much to offer in developing individual thinking on a range of issues that people experience in their day to day lives. It offers the chance for people to explore the 'edges' of issues that are common across communities, where issues like littering and parking have become cyphers for people's concerns about the changes in their community.

This is where process work differs from traditional deficit-model community consultation in which people are asked to identify the problems in their area with a view to getting them fixed (by someone else). Process work interrogates why littering is perceived to be a problem and identifies the assumptions, habits and traditions that underlie the behaviour.

Traditional participatory models of community engagement use 'consensus building' techniques to identify common ground, such as concern about littering, and often get stuck there, focusing on what people agree about. While this can be a useful process to help people recognise they have things in common, the risk is that the things people disagree about are put to one side and not discussed in case they disturb the harmony of the group, they are not opened up to scrutiny and can be left to fester, unacknowledged, swept under the carpet to resurface later. This can happen particularly when a facilitator lacks the underpinning theoretical knowledge and confidence to have the difficult conversations. Process work facilitators are trained to understand why people behave the way that they do and are equipped to hold together strongly expressed feelings and opinions with enough confidence that people in the group feel safe and are able to get to what lies beneath. That is when it can become a transformative process.

The Pushing the Boundaries evidence suggests that people did feel able to say things they don't usually say, that they understood more about people from backgrounds different to themselves and felt they knew more about other people's feelings on a range of issues. In one instance, however, this threw up a challenge when one review participant described that process work had 'given them permission' to freely express their religious view against homosexuality in (what they felt) were neutral ways, not intended to 'upset or challenge or discriminate against' anyone from the LGBTQ community, but without apology for their belief. They were happy that they no longer had to feel apologetic when explaining this view to others.

Overall, there is a sense that people feel that the quality of the conversation was different, better than traditional methods, and because there wasn't an expectation around seeking consensus or feeding back views to policy makers or commissioners, people felt less concerned about how they expressed themselves in public. What is less clear is how the community conversation experience will support them in thinking or doing differently in the future, although interview evidence suggests that the conversations have provided food for thought and that in itself is a powerful starting point for personal change.

Conclusion

Over recent times policy and practice has moved towards a language that tacitly denies (or hides) prejudice of any kind and which has made it almost impossible for people to voice their personal views in anything other than private space.

The world is changing and, in a country divided by the immigration debate and the Brexit vote, there has been a move towards 'saying it like it is'. This could potentially make it easier to engage people in process work, as they become accustomed to hearing 'unacceptable' (i.e. illiberal/hidden) views more frequently. Now is the time to have conversations that get under the surface of those views to understand where they come from and what they are disguising.

Against this backdrop brap has created spaces for a different sort of conversation, one that encourages and shines a light on the need to democratise shared spaces and encourage people to listen, consider and reflect on their own and other views and improve understanding of people who are different to you and through this foster better integration in local communities.

Recommendations

It looks easy – but...

brap have employed high level communication skills coupled with good local intelligence and excellent facilitation skills with an in-depth knowledge of how to 'do' process work to engage people across Birmingham in a range of community conversations. The group process often appears effortless to participants, easy and natural, and this could encourage some people to feel that having attended one or two process work conversations that they can use the technique for themselves. We are aware that the brap website addresses this in more detail but it may be helpful to be explicit in event publicity that if people want to take this approach further and use it to have more interesting conversations in their community, then brap is able to support them to do this.

Facilitators of process work use the concept of roles and ghost roles to bring forward voices and opinions that are not present or not being voiced. Where a facilitator brings in a 'ghost role' they do this by first drawing on their own emotions and feelings to understand themselves and then use this self-understanding to authentically give voice to the person not the room to speak for themselves.

In addition to these ghost roles, facilitators need to give voice to the wider views of the community that are not present or not voiced. These place specific roles need to 'chime' and be relevant to the community or area where the community conversations are taking place. This context specific role requires intelligence gathered either through local links with organisations who have their finger on the local pulse or considerable 'leg work' to talk to people in shops, in pubs or at school gates, for example.

It may be interesting for the team to explore any noticeable differences in role content and potency and to identify which approach to intelligence gathering brings the widest and most generally unheard views into the conversation.

The team are at different points in their individual process work journeys, some are more experienced than others, and should consider how to continue developing their joint facilitation approach to further enhance the flow and impact of the group process. Maybe continue to build sets of cues and signals to support their delivery of process work as a 'tag team', so that they can indicate to each other when the assumption of a role or ghost role may be useful, or when to support people physically when they are speaking, or when there is a temperature change in the room and a different intervention might be needed.

Appendix 1: Difference between traditional consultation and process work

Group consultation/engagement	Group Process
Topic for discussion is set	Topic(s) for discussion is established by the group
Talk to people about what they think	Help people to understand and uncover their own thoughts and feelings
Use facts, logically arguments to make progress	Recognise and respond to feelings and emotions, which often drives behaviour
Broadly accepting of what people think and say	Inquire and explore the beliefs that have been expressed and the drivers behind particular views
The views of people in the room are those that are heard	The views of those who are in the room and the influences of other views (which might not be in the room) are also discussed
The issues that people raise are those that are discussed	Discuss not only what people raise but also pick up on their body language as a means to help them to express what they might not feel able to say
People tend to take a point of view	People are encouraged to change their minds and can hold several views at the same time
Non-speakers are considered passive	Non-speakers are considered to be active and hold information about the process
There is little attempt to create a shared understanding between the group	The process attempts to create a shared understanding of the issues presented
Individuals use their own personal power/privilege to dominant spaces and create authority over particular issues	Attempts to use personal power to persuade or dominate are highlighted by facilitators – so that individuals are freer to make decisions and have a better understanding of those who seek to influence them
Contestable issues are often shut down	Contestable issues are put on the table
Spaces are created for discussion and debate	Spaces are created to equalise and democratise contributions, so that people can hear and understand one another

Courtesy of Joy Warmington, brap (© 2018 brap; all rights reserved)

Acknowledgements

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