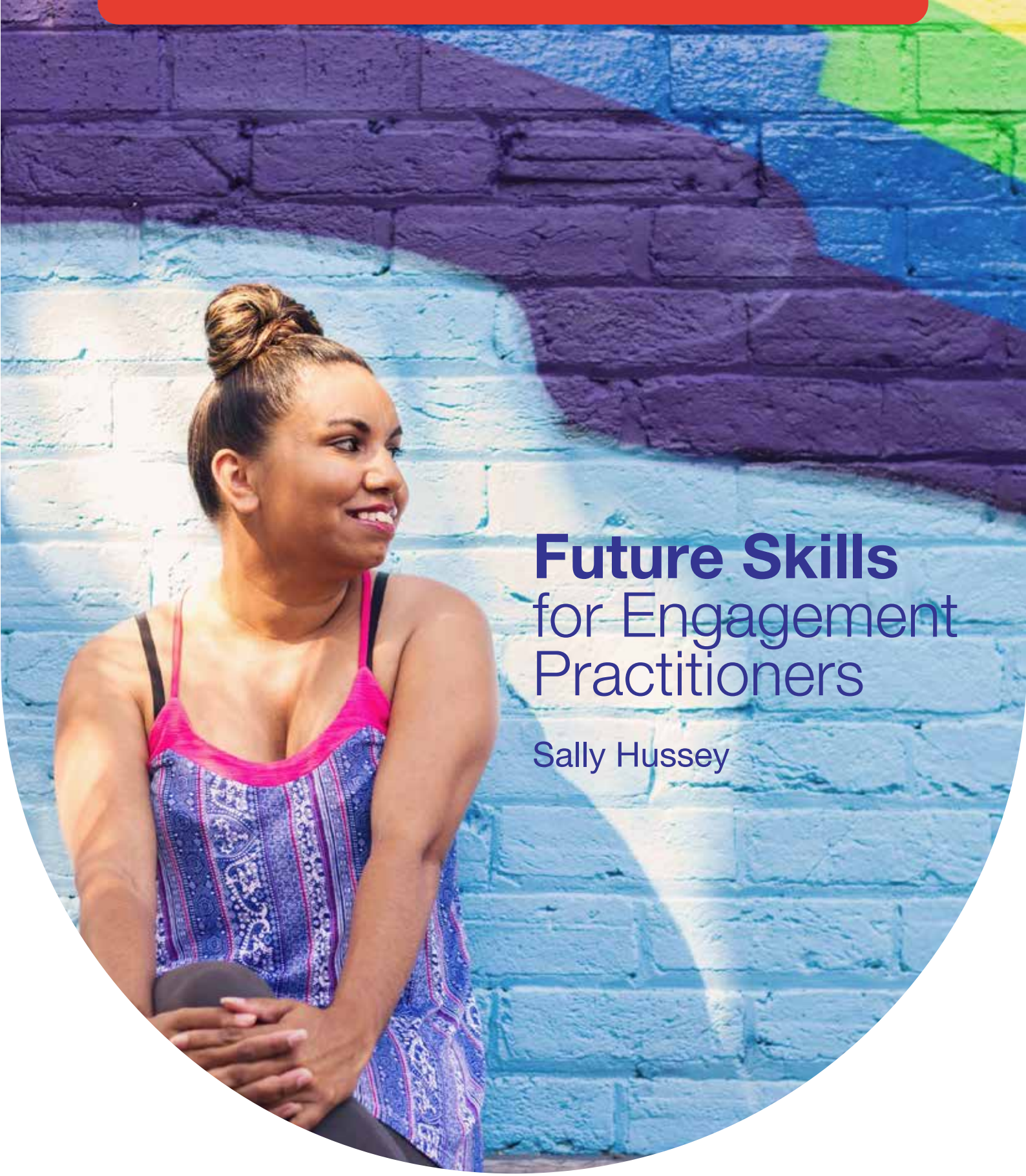

Future Skills for Engagement Practitioners

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Future Skills for Engagement Practitioners

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IAP2 endeavours to champion the world's largest community of engagement professionals by offering leading professional development, trusted services, events and advocacy across Australia and New Zealand.

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Preface

If you're reading this ebook, there is a good chance you would like to make sense of the contemporary practice of community engagement. Perhaps as an engagement professional wrestling with its rapid evolution; a policy- or decision-maker seeking a handle on a complex practice; or a student of public policy or planning who is looking for a conceptual and critical frame for a pathway into a vocation. Or perhaps you are curious about what community engagement actually means?

This ebook came about through a desire to investigate more deeply the role and experience of the community engagement practitioner today. Indeed, the profession is evolving in unforeseen ways. With the disruption of the coronavirus pandemic, for instance, traditional face-to-face engagement was upended through the confines of physical distancing. Subsequently, with the rapid uptake of online methods, digital engagement was no longer perceived as the nascent tool it once was. Without doubt, contemporary public engagement is shaped by a constant flux raising the question: what might the future of community engagement look like? Particularly given the variables at play: the rise of citizen-led democracy, the global uptake of deliberative methods and the current backlash against the failings of liberal democracies indicated by the lowest ebb of trust in governments across the developed world.

It's possible to say that the community engagement space is often bereft of rigour, left significantly under theorised and under researched. On the one hand, utilised as a 'spray on solution' by government and private organisations, it lacks legitimisation. On the other hand, it has moved into a place of prominence in the public administration imagination through its increasing legislation, particularly in Australia. This ebook is less an antidote to this impasse than an exploration of the assumptions that lead to this dilemma. Surprisingly, as this ebook uncovers, it is often the assumed democratic 'good' of community engagement that holds back its innovation.

Identifying five fundamental challenges that face engagement practitioners today

Future Skills of Engagement Practitioners is intended less to instruct than to offer a reflection on the current state of the industry in Australia. That is, to take a critical lens to what is often left unexamined in the notion that community engagement is inherently 'good'. Identifying five fundamental challenges that face engagement practitioners today, it tests commonly-held assumptions and proposes recommendations that serve to recognise the unique experience of the engagement practitioner.

Through the course of my research for this ebook, I was fortunate to interview key actors in engagement in Australia today – from public engagement scholars to consultants working across public and private sectors with a wide range of experience. Not only was I able to ask questions relating to their expertise, but unfettered by project demands or overriding policies, I was able to glean a close-up look at unexplored aspects of engagement practice that serves as a litmus test for the industry today.

While the interviews alone presented me with enough material for another ebook, the breadth of the subject matter presented a fundamental challenge. Primarily, how do you ask what the future skills of engagement practitioners might be when engagement itself lacks any agreed definition or concrete professional contours?

My main goal is to make this research accessible and useful for engagement practitioner, policy-maker and wider audiences alike.

In responding to this dilemma, I have divided the ebook into three parts corresponding to:

- an overview that provides a frame for the practice of engagement and the engagement practitioner;
- five key challenges that beset community engagement practice today;
- and, as a counterbalance in response, recommendations for future skills for engagement practitioners.

My main goal is to make this research accessible and useful for engagement practitioner, policy-maker and wider audiences alike. I have further offered selected readings that will help orient readers to the significant shifts in contemporary engagement practice.

I wish to acknowledge all interviewees especially Helen Christensen, Max Hardy and Emanuela Savini for their invaluable insights into what has become an important, vital ingredient of how communities might thrive in democracies.

I hope this ebook will serve as a resource that enables a more nuanced understanding of the role of community engagement in Australia today. One of my hopes is that it will encourage practitioners, decision-makers and curious readers alike to reflect more deeply on the experience of the practitioner and perhaps find themselves differently oriented to the great commitment that is community engagement.

Part One

Introduction

What are the future skills for engagement practitioners?

Doubts about the veracity of community engagement as an agent of democracy are few. As a support for local democracy, it has the ability to provide a platform for civic participation. And when it is culturally, socially and economically responsive, it can serve to address chronic inequities that undergird liberal democracies globally. In short, community engagement's interface with democracy underpins its practice and overarching work to empower people and communities to have their say on issues that affect their everyday life. Over the past fifty years, there has been a marked global increase in public participation. No less than 60 models of international public participation have sought to develop a vision of shared decision-making. That is, to shift power and influence in public decision-making. With the proliferation of these models toward the end of last century – and, coincidently, the emergence of the IAP2 spectrum – we also see a marked increase in the professionalisation of public participation and the rise of the community engagement practitioner.

> *'If you put the word 'community' in front of it, no-one's going to argue against it.'*

But it is a varied practice. Despite it being a component of democracy, community engagement is definitionally complex. Too broad, too vague, to-date it has neither agreed upon nor unified notion. This flows onto the fact that, in Australia, there is often no standard definition where it fits within organisations. The flip side of its celebrated position as an agent of democracy, then, is the absence of a greater understanding of just what community engagement is. Recent research suggests, 'more often than not, it is being used as a catch-all feel-good phrase that gives a sense of purpose, value and connectedness to the work we [practitioners] do.' But few things limit engagement when it serves public 'good'. As one scholar put it in interview, 'If you put the word 'community' in front of it, no-one's going to argue against it.'[1] (Indeed, this can also apply to the word 'democracy', especially where democratic principles may fall short of inclusivity in engagement processes. That is, to use the words of Arthur Lupia and Anne Norton, 'inequality is always in the room.')

Narrowing definitions of engagement practitioners are equally problematic. There are consultants who are engaged as specialist support, on the one hand, and practitioners who work within public organisations on the other. The latter often performing roles that serve clients and communities with, what public engagement scholar Helen Christensen refers to as, 'divided loyalties'. The specialist consultant, too, is often charged with striking a balance between countervailing interests. As one consultant put it in an interview, 'on the one hand communicating opportunity, change, and development – whatever the business driver is – on the other hand, meaningfully representing stakeholder constituency to ensure that you bridge the gap between the two.'[2] Add to this the diverse professional backgrounds through which practitioners arrive at community engagement – research, education, communications, journalism and public relations just to name the most prominent – and any attempt at coherence around the term 'engagement practitioner' is confounded.

1 Interview with author.
2 Interview with author.

Countering 'democratic malaise' and the promise of engagement

Despite this, in Australia, contemporary engagement practice is well evolved. A component of local democracy, community engagement is now embedded in key functions of local governments and procedures of public administration and management practice. In fact, it can be argued that legislation has given rise to its prominence and is largely responsible for the visibility of engagement across Australia. Yet, legislation alone doesn't make practice. Legally required community engagement and top-down decision-making seldom achieves engagement outcomes. Instead, it 'fragments communities and creates dissatisfaction amongst people who feel they haven't been heard.'

Increasingly, governments are challenged with the task of undertaking collaborative community engagement – a result of greater connectivity and a rapidly changing environment with more community members demanding greater say in public decision-making. Greater dialogue required between governments and communities has further instigated a turn to deliberation across developed countries. Indeed, deliberation serves to help address what the OECD have identified as 'democratic malaise' by giving voice and agency to a much wider range of citizens, rebuilding trust in government and leading to more legitimate and effective public decision-making. In Australia, too, government organisations increasingly look to deliberation to counter community disengagement, connect in inclusive ways, and strengthen relationships by building mutual trust and collaboration.

But challenges facing the contemporary engagement practitioner are many. The increased legislative prominence of engagement, for instance, raises questions around the quality of practice and democratic drivers of equity and inclusivity. Does the promise of engagement hold more authenticity than its practice? What assumptions do practitioners arriving at engagement from variety of professional backgrounds bring to the role? How do practitioners respond to increasing uncertainty, rapid change and endemic mistrust of governments? Particularly in the context of the pandemic where, in Australia, the federal government's 'shallow response' and reliance on state-based responses redouble the virus' exploitation of social fault lines and inequalities. With the rapid digital uptake necessitated by social distancing measures to curtail the virulent spread of COVID-19, the use of online needs and engagement have come together at an unprecedented rate. This raises questions around digital capabilities not only for deliberative processes, discussed below, but around empathy in participation.

> *Legally required community engagement and top-down decision-making seldom achieves engagement outcomes.*

How, then, can community engagement practice continue to evolve to respond to increasingly complex and changeable contexts? To learn more, I interviewed experts across the sector including practitioners, training consultants, and public engagement scholars on challenges shaping practice in Australia today. This ebook throws some much-needed light on the biggest challenges facing contemporary practitioners and how

> *How are next generation practitioners to become part of engagement practice?*

future skills might navigate these changeable contexts. How are next generation practitioners to become part of engagement practice? Where does responsibility fall for training, and indeed educating the future generation of engagement practitioners? With no university degree in community engagement and, as one interviewee put it, 'no theoretical background to fall back on,' how do current practices ensure practitioners will have appropriate skills into the future? Also, where is the line drawn in relation to engagement practitioners' ability to shape practice in the face of changing legislation, especially for the emerging practitioner?

Prevailing challenges facing the 21st century engagement practitioner

Providing a focus on engagement practitioners is not new. In 2019, public engagement scholar Helen Christensen published her findings on tensions facing practitioners in engagement work with public institutions.[3] This included interviews with senior practitioners and examined, amongst other things, their divided role serving both the community and public institutions. Here, however, I look at the prevailing challenges facing practitioners less to unpack ideas around their role in relation to public institutions, but to provide a litmus test of where current the practice stands. This establishes a base for understanding the skills required to meet current needs of practitioners. I also shift the focus from the public practitioner through interviews with experts from across the sector including consultants working across government and private organisations with varying experience ranging from five to over twenty years.

Five major challenges are found to currently impact engagement practitioners. Broadly, these are:

1) The gap between emerging and established practitioners.
2) A disconnect between engagement methodology and practice.
3) The need for internal alignment within organisations.
4) Lack of understanding of what community engagement is.
5) The need to address and deepen equity in public decision-making.

> *... the gap in practitioner experience is made deeper through the disconnect between the understanding of engagement methodology and implementing it in practice.*

These are not discrete categories. Indeed, all five challenges cannot avoid implication in the need to clarify understanding of what community engagement is. However, their overlap shows the flow on effect current challenges present engagement practice. For instance, the gap in practitioner experience is made deeper through the disconnect between the understanding of engagement methodology and implementing it in practice. Internal alignment and agreement on engagement projects needed within organisations relies on clients re-appraising the inherent value of community. This, in turn, gives much needed attention to equity, listening and downstream advocacy – particularly in the context of Indigenous engagement.

3 This includes detailed interviews with practitioners with more than ten years in the sector and examined the increasing professionalisation of the practice, the divided role and uniqueness of community engagement practitioners who simultaneously cater for the community and public institutions. The tensions relate to three areas: the need to serve both the community and the engagement sponsors, their position in either the public sector or as private consultants to the public sector, and the constraints and behaviours of public institutions. See Christensen (2021)

Part Two

Current challenges

1. Mind the (practitioner) gap

'We've got a lot of really senior practitioners. There's a handful of the 'elders' that have been around for 15, 20 and more years now. And then there's lots of people with less than five years' experience. But there's quite a gap in the middle and there's an issue in feeding them.'

In Australia, it can be argued that legislation has enabled, if not endorsed the growing professionalisation of community engagement. As mentioned above, it has become embedded within key functions of local governments and procedures of public administration. But this professionalisation is uneven at best and produces a noticeable gap in experience between established and emerging practitioners. Previous research finds the imbalance in practitioners' skills has consequences for the efficacy of engagement – something that the interviewees here reinforced. This can be informed through the notion of where practitioners gain experience, particularly early experience. With the impacts of the coronavirus pandemic, for instance, infrastructure has become key to government economic restimulation with the acceleration of projects in the built environment providing the bulk of current engagement work. As one interviewee put it, 'infrastructure is influencing the practice in terms of where a lot of people are getting their early experience.'

More significant, however, are legislative reforms that that are driving practice through a narrow schema that, perhaps unwittingly, serves to reinforce the divide in practitioner experience. Over the last two decades, incremental reforms and legislation have informed engagement practice across State Governments in Australia. This has, in part, undergirded the professionalisation of the engagement space, and coincidentally, finds Australian practice relatively well evolved in comparison to countries across the developed world. Further to this, in March 2020, the State Government of Victoria passed a new Local Government Act requiring councils to implement deliberative engagement practices for major strategic planning.

Of course, the push to deliberative engagement, more generally, speaks of governments engaging in a deeper dialogue with communities who are increasingly demanding it. (It also indicates a more empowered role for communities in public decision-making.) But interviewees agreed that legislating deliberative engagement imposes an uneven responsibility on practitioners. A responsibility that is best arrived at by many years of experience, understanding of engagement methodologies and conceptualisation of community engagement. For emerging practitioners, implementing deliberative engagement is a reach beyond their experience. As one interviewee responds:

'How do we give [emerging practitioners] tools to be able to say, 'well no, here's a line. Beyond this it can't be called deliberation' and give them a sense of agency around that. There are some consultants who are the leaders in this space. But then there is this other layer of practitioners that aren't as experienced – are they starting to call something deliberative because they've been told they have to do something deliberative?'

2. ‘Like preparing for war’: the lack of internal alignment in engagement processes

‘There’s a mindset that engagement is something that we have to do. We don’t really want to do it and we don’t really see it adding much value. Why would we invest in it if we think the community is going to be myopic and only capable of pushing for their own personal interests? It’s perilous and we need to manage it as best we can. And they prepare for engagement like they might prepare for war.’

A second major challenge facing contemporary engagement practitioners is the absence of internal alignment or agreement on engagement projects within an organisation. Practitioners in public organisations, unlike some consultants, often have less decision-making power and influence. This is a result of either being brought on late in an engagement project, where a project has been largely mapped out, or through being sought out to ‘manage’ rather than ‘engage’ community. As one interviewee put it, ‘they don’t have a lot of clout.’ Here, the engagement practitioner often ends up ‘carrying the load’ in place of the people who have the responsibility for sponsoring or overseeing projects at an executive level. They become ‘engagement champions’: those ‘who get a project up, who write the brief, who work with consultants or who do engagement on projects themselves.’ That is, those who buoy the very concept of community engagement while carrying out engagement within environments that are both unsupportive and almost seek to suppress it. In the latter, as one interviewee suggests, engagement is often fused with marketing:

‘People who are the most passionate and committed to doing engagement don’t have a lot of authority. They go and do a [training] course and they get very enthused about it and when it comes to trying to apply it, or practice it, they find they’re brought on very late in the piece. That the project has already been mapped out. Internally, the idea of engagement is basically marketing how good the project is and people are told to make sure they manage the community so there’s no opposition.’

The misalignment of engagement as communications, public relations or journalism within organisations has fed much of the misconception of community engagement. It also deepens the schism around the value of community:

‘It comes from people who have a particular background in comms [communications] which might be a public relations background – journalism even – and their whole craft is around how do we win the battle of messaging in the community? How do we counter opposition? They are still at that place of ‘you can’t please everyone’, so you just have to basically market it and make sure we win the battle in the media’. And it just makes things worse. It is changing, but it still exists. And dealing with that is definitely a challenge.’

Reaching agreement, particularly with complex projects that are likely to be controversial, is not solely reliant on the experience of the practitioner. It is informed by the experience of the key executives and decision-makers in an engagement process:

'Sometimes people who have responsibility for overseeing projects at an executive level have never had a positive experience with engagement and aren't all that confident. They're very nervous about it, fairly risk averse. They've been part of fairly unsophisticated processes dealing with a lot of public anger at the pointy end of a project and that's been their only experience of engagement.

They're not wanting to go in 'messy' – before a project's been fully formed – when there's the opportunity to influence and shape it. They haven't had that experience of it being a worthwhile journey or appreciating the skills and knowledge of practitioners in organisations who actually build and strengthen relationships.'

Interestingly, reaching agreement and support for an engagement's purpose can override the gap between established and emerging practitioner, external consultant and practitioners in public organisations. In particular, around advocating the value of community.

Here, the challenge within an organisation far outweighs the community-facing aspects of an engagement process. To put it another way, in an engagement process, practitioners are well-used to diversity of community opinion and community outrage in the extreme. Yet, this doesn't measure against the roadblock that can occur within an organisation.

'People talk about some of the challenges of dealing with people who are very assertive in the community. But the work you do inside an organisation can be much more challenging. That is, those who are sponsoring – or believe they need to do engagement or are told that they must do engagement – can be the major challenge practitioners have.'

3. 'A deer in the headlights': the disconnect between methodology and practice

'One of the biggest challenges is the models that have become popular now and whether they're being applied in a way that they were initially designed to be used. Or whether people are just picking up these labels and using them around their practice, which has an impact on the way they're perceived into the future.'

Gradual reforms embracing participatory engagement over past two decades have produced a scaffold for practices of deliberation in Australia.[4] Given the context of declining trust in governments, the legitimacy of democracy depends on a real – and tangible – link between the public and public policies. And, ideally, practices of deliberation respond to ways governments can engage people so they feel more involved in public decision-making beyond voting. In this way, the four-year review to reform the *Local Government Act* in Victoria, introduced in March 2020, requires Councils to employ deliberative engagement practices for major strategic planning with 'the aim of ensuring all Victorians have the opportunity to engage with council on local priorities and the future of their community.' Although showing government commitment to connecting with communities in an inclusive way, the improvement of engagement practice weighs in the balance.

4 Despite this, as Emanuela Savini and Bligh Grant suggest, in Australia, 'deliberative practice has been implemented on an ad hoc basis' in, Legislating Deliberative Engagement: Is local government in Victoria willing and able?

Indeed, one interviewee suggests that, while at the avant garde of global practice, legislating deliberative engagement might, in fact, narrow down improvements in practice:

'While Victoria is ahead of the curve considerably with [implementing] deliberative engagement, I don't think there's one thing that you can do that will improve practice. Part of it is a requirement to do it. But the requirement to do it alone, won't improve practice because then it becomes a tick box exercise of making sure that we've done it and moving on to the next thing.'

This democratic innovation, then, comes at a price in relation to substantiating practice.

'Because the practice is quite varied there's certainly a risk that it might be seen that this push toward deliberative engagement isn't a panacea at all. It's more of the same and it's just a word and doesn't really have much substance behind it.'

The impact of legislative reforms presents a challenge not only for practitioners grappling with the practice of deliberation. As one interviewee summarised, 'deliberation started as a concept around vested interests that have too much sway over political decision-making. Bringing in the community ensures that all the different perspectives are heard and we can come to a decision for the common interest.' In its misapplication, it 'ends up undermining the whole practice' in the extreme:

'These models were created for a reason they were created to address a perceived problem. Now, the practice is moving away from that because the label has become so attractive and they are not being applied in their truer sense, in the sense that they were conceived.'

This misapplication, however, can also relate to an organisation's readiness to undertake deliberation:

'You can grab a term but it's no different than talking about 'collaboration' on the [IAP2] spectrum. The practice hasn't caught up to what that looks like. Part of the dynamic is that the government has imposed this upon councils who don't necessarily have the internal readiness and just applying the word 'deliberative' to the engagement you're doing doesn't make it deliberative.'

However, it nonetheless increases the burden of responsibility on the engagement practitioner:

'The community of practitioners needs to be able to say, 'For what you want to achieve here, this is not the right model.' Are organisations questioning, 'What does it mean for our organisation for these [deliberative] documents? Or is it more, 'here's a product off the shelf, this person says they've done a couple of them. We'll just hand it over to them.' That's a big responsibility for practitioners. And are they taking on that responsibility? Are they going to develop the practice to make sure that they really are deliberative and not just another form of consultation they're calling deliberation to appease the client? I think that consultants [and practitioners] have been put in an awkward spot because it is legislative. And I would say practitioners would go, 'I have to do this because it has to be deliberation. I know it's not really deliberation but I'm stuck.'

The outcome of deliberation cannot be predetermined, especially given the unpredictable and potentially discordant nature of deliberative processes. At its core, deliberation requires weighing up competing arguments around policies and public decisions in a context of mutually civil – and diverse – discussion. In this way, people themselves can decide on the merit of policy decisions through the provision of solid information. This is essential to democracy and, as I have argued elsewhere, deliberative processes allow for facilitated social learning.

The indiscernible nature of government's view of deliberation, ironically, fails to distinguish the process of deliberative engagement for the practitioner:

'State government hasn't articulated what the objectives of deliberative engagement are. They provided objectives that relate to any form of engagement. Government hasn't done a very good job of explaining what the term means or why there's been a thrust in this direction and they stop short of saying, 'Well, essentially deliberative engagement is about this journey.' It's not just about what's in and out of scope. It's not just about being able to report back on how you've used the process. It's that quality of inviting people to be part of a journey and arriving at a judgement. And they stopped short of saying that, which is a lost opportunity.'

Interviewees were quick to add that, in this instance, this shows not only 'good intent', but positive innovation in making councils more accountable to communities for decision-making. However, it is the long view of practice that presents a challenge:

'For councils, for whom doing fairly conventional engagement isn't their strength, now saying 'do deliberative engagement', they're asking, 'What is it?' Where do I go to say, 'How this should be done?' or, 'What does it mean and how do we do that?' They're like a deer in the headlights.'

Challenges around deliberative processes are also amplified by increasing digitisation. To be sure, online engagement is relatively new in relation to deliberative methods. On one hand, it has been argued that online engagement can adapt face-to-face deliberative dialogue. Processes like dialogue facilitation, for instance, can uptake online capabilities to capture thoughts and ideas, verbatim comments, and create a 'reflective' space. On the other hand, the digital platforms are demonstrably limited in facilitating deliberative processes:

'I honestly don't think that online platforms, at the moment, really serve us as well as they could in terms of community engagement. As much as we like to think they're interactive, it's very hard to understand the mood of a room. And sometimes you can't even see people's faces in these deliberative processes. And that's really important when you're running a deliberation, getting a sense of how people are responding in the space. And I've seen that really lost through digital.'

4. 'Difficult conversations': just what is community engagement?

'The lack of definition and slapping community in front of anything is probably something that the industry will struggle with for a really long time. But the risk, of course, is that if the practice doesn't improve, people will move on to another trendy term.'

The lack of agreed definition around community engagement is not new. It's adherence to many fields of inquiry (e.g., sociology, public administration, democratic theory) and loosely arrived at professionalisation contribute to the lack of consensus and how it is best defined. Indeed, the 'near-ubiquitous' term has been open to misapprehension, where ambiguity contributes to its contestation. Particularly where narrowing down definition relies on levels of community involvement. (In this way, in 2007, IAP2 outlined five incremental phases of public impact – inform, consult, involve, collaborate and empower). In an effort to provide a response to this dilemma, I have elsewhere suggested that it is both an orientation toward the importance of community members lived experience to influence interactions between government organisations and communities and an approach that guides the process of those interactions.

Lack of definition, somewhat ironically, can be seen as a result of what underpins community engagement as an agent of democracy. That is, as mentioned above, the very definition of engagement serving the 'public good'. As one interviewee put it: 'Everybody wants to be seen to be doing it [but] there isn't necessarily a great

understanding of what it is. It's just one of those things that we know it's kind of good.' This continues in the vein of the critique set out by Mowbray and Bryson in their 1981 article, 'Community: the 'spray-on' solution?'[5] As the interviewee continues: 'This idea, if you put the word 'community' in front of it, that's good because no-one's going argue against it':

'The standard is really sketchy and that will probably continue until everyone agrees on what it is. In its attempt to be all things to all people, it winds up being a weaker version of what it could be if we're talking about proper public participation, democracy and deliberation.'

This challenge bears some resemblance to the disconnect emerging from shoehorning engagement practice into a deliberative model as we see occurring with the legislative approach in Victoria. Hanging practice on the idea of deliberative engagement without a comprehension of the methodology mirrors the notion that anything and everything can be community engagement – nothing is excluded from its ubiquitous parameters. (One interviewer, for instance, mentioned that recruitment drives at universities, while far from engagement activities, are viewed as 'community engagement'.) However, that community engagement without clear definition itself becomes 'another trendy term' relies, in part, on stymieing practice or seeing practice as somehow inert. For growing the practice and identifying the future skills required to meet these challenges – ironically – relies upon shoring up the definition of what engagement is:

'Whereas some people go, 'it's risk management' from a communications point of view, other people go, 'it's a way to build relationships.' Everyone comes at it in slightly different angles. Whether a more difficult conversation needs to be had of what it is and what it isn't. I think that it's endemic to the issue of what community engagement is itself – in that it excludes people from the practice – because it's about democracy, it's about inclusion and it's about all of those democratic principles.'

This boundary is as much about what is included as what is excluded:

'Nobody wants to make the call of excluding what some of the boundary issues around what community engagement is, which is why it gets dominated by communications, strategic communications and those sorts of areas. But it's not a comms strategy. Engagement cannot be a tick-the-box exercise because as soon as it's just about communications and keeping people informed but not involved, then you're losing the ability to broker or infuse trust.'

Lack of definition also has an internal impact to engagement culture, where disagreement exists within the very function and mechanisms of engagement itself. One interviewee noted the disagreement around facilitation where it determines engagement practice is distinguished from evaluation and design work, resulting in contestations around 'where the core knowledge is and where the overlapping knowledge is.' The upside of this, however, is the emerging professionalisation: 'it's starting to splinter and specialise, which is exciting, because it's needed for the professionalisation to happen.'

5 Mowbray, M & Bryson, L 1981 'Community: the 'spray-on' solution?' in *The Australian Journal of Social Issues*

5. Equity and decision-making: waving not drowning

'The biggest challenge that I see is are we creating the space in conversation to ensure equity and decision-making? How do we make sure that First Peoples are contributing meaningfully to a conversation around Country, particularly in a progressive state like Victoria, where we're having treaty conversations? How do we make sure that newly arrived migrants and refugees are equally contributing to a conversation around community and not being drowned out by dominant voices?'

Without question, equity has recently been prioritised in public decision-making and policy-making. Indeed, the impact of equity on trust in government is in the throes of receiving much attention globally. Transport and health inequity in public policies, for instance, are prioritised where access to adequate and affordable mobility and health provision are crucial to serving racialised, marginalised and low-income communities. Alternately, city-based responses to the pandemic that veer toward privilege, are being called out in roadmaps for radical change. Particularly in calls to climate action where certain groups of society are made unequally vulnerable to climate instability.

Equally, the community engagement sector in Australia is advancing equity in engagement. Recent commitments to support engagement with Aboriginal people and their communities, for instance, signal a strong desire within the community engagement sector to engage with First People's culture and knowledge systems. This is evidenced by authentic engagement and frameworks developed by many local councils. It is also crucial to redressing its longstanding absence in engagement activities, in particular placemaking. But for engagement practitioners, this raises as many issues as it seeks to clarify. Can a decolonising lens inform engagement processes in an Indigenous context without perpetuating marginalisation and absence? How is power negotiated in engagement activities?

'Certainly, it's really complex in that there is an emerging desire to learn from, and engage with, First Peoples' culture and knowledge systems. It's been absent from the conversation as it relates to placemaking for far too long, particularly in the role of designer and architect and their responsibility. What it means to build on Country, on unceded Aboriginal land, is something that practitioners are currently engaging with.'

But addressing concerns around equity and public decision-making is a less easy challenge to decipher. Existing inequalities – unaffordable housing, deep racial divisions, access to healthcare, for instance – have been accelerated by the COVID-19 crisis. As a result, a more nuanced understanding of ways engagement is conceptualised and practiced within these settings has greater significance. Within an Indigenous engagement context, there is a cultural and political dimension that also comes into play – not to mention the shortcomings of reconciliation that have led to Uluru Statement from the Heart. (Interestingly, research has suggested that much commentary on Indigenous community engagement fails to acknowledge the social, cultural, political and economic dimensions and their respective impacts.)

Public engagement, however, is one of the ways governments use to identify policy priorities in Indigenous contexts. Where outcomes are at odds with the kind of changes desired by Indigenous communities, it has, unfortunately, become 'a repetitive cycle.' The challenge, then, is how engagement processes ensure the inclusion of the diversity of Indigenous communities to counter their marginalisation.

'When you've got a population, some of whom haven't got a voice to parliament, how can you create the space in the conversation to articulate longer-term, broader strategic aspirations from a project-by-project exchange? Especially, if you're being pulled in 50 different directions at any one point in time in a small organisation with limited resources.'

To-date, Indigenous community engagement has included redefining engagement from Indigenous perspectives, as well as looking to appropriately resource engagement activities and building an evidence-base to learn from engagement investments. Most importantly, however, is the 'need to move beyond the rhetorical language used in many policy documents and frameworks.' The increased expectation for practitioners in the engagement sector to engage with First Peoples incurs a necessary and immediate evolution of conceptual frameworks around engagement itself:

'The flip side of that increased appetite [to engage with First Peoples' communities] is the increased expectation that is happening as it relates to finding narrative or cultural identity for a particular place. Certainly, the market needs to evolve its conceptual framework for what it means to engage the responsibility to give back to First Peoples who are so generous in sharing their experiences and culture.'

Where engagement is expressed through bottom-up approaches (community ownership, 'relevance' to the community and collaborative approaches) researchers identify 'the challenge of seeking a universal definition of community engagement is unproductive.' For engaging in 'bottom-up' approaches that scope, identify and respond to community needs and aspirations and acknowledge cultural contexts, outweighs a 'defined' approach. (This is in stark contrast to the challenge presented by the lack of defining what engagement is.) While beyond the scope of this article, this introduces the greater need for values-based outcome for engagement activities. The challenge for practitioners, in this context, is to anchor engagement processes in a values-based approach – an approach that comes with its own potential discomfort in relation to listening to community feedback. As one interviewee remarks:

'Engagement as a tick-the-box [activity] diminishes the listening that is so important to the downstream advocacy that needs to happen on behalf of the constituency that you've been engaging. How do we make sure that there is a willingness on behalf of the client to listen to what stakeholders are saying as part of supporting a more comprehensive values-based outcome?

How do we make sure – and we've certainly got a responsibility when we take on [engagement] work – that the people that we're working with are not uncomfortable to hear feedback?'

The greater challenge for practitioners in advancing equity in engagement outcomes, more generally, is ensuring communities are reflected in the very design processes:

'Equity in engagement outcomes, whether it's gender equity, whether it's cultural equity – how do we make sure that the people designing those processes reflect the communities that we seek them to engage?'

Part Three

Future skills for engagement practitioners

Developing innovative skills that build on existing skills is essential to the evolution of engagement practice. This is in concert with navigating a complex policy environment. Not to mention the chaotic environment currently afforded by climate crisis and the coronavirus pandemic and the ever-deepening effects of disruption and loss to communities. In articulating and understanding prevailing challenges, we can envisage innovative and collaborative skills, tools and frameworks to improve engagement practice. To know how to engage all stakeholders effectively and have confidence in effective and appropriate implementation of engagement methods. But, more critical, understanding how skills might meet these prevailing challenges speaks to how the sector can improve the experience of practitioners.

This section offers eight key recommendations in the belief that they can have a profound impact on the sector. The insight, assessment and overview of industry provided by the interview-led research above, underlines these as a response to meet current challenges and underpins a commitment to improving practice. They are largely for practitioners, to strengthen practice outcomes, improve professional learning and the experience of on-the-ground practitioners. For to empower practitioners is to empower communities.

A cornerstone recommendation is for education. However, this infers a wholistic approach. It takes the form of self-directed learning, calls for a clear anchor role for peak bodies to provide a visible focal point for improvements in practice for practitioners and clients, as well as calls for visibility in the tertiary sector in the form of accredited degrees.

1. Self-directed learning

Self-directed learning meets major challenges in two ways. Firstly, it can help close the widening gap in experience between the established and emerging practitioners – a gap that recent legislation has deepened in prescribing deliberative engagement. This involves a multi-faceted approach of training, education and experience and, where possible, accessing mentors, as well as navigating informal pathways to obtain information (e.g., webinars, podcasts).

Secondly, and salient to the advancement of equity in engagement practice, self-directed learning serves to lift non-Indigenous people's cultural intelligence as it relates to connection to and caring for Country and cultural expression. This is crucial to understanding of First Nations cultures, particularly 'when they have been so generous in their knowledge.' This shifts the unspoken burden of responsibility on Indigenous people in engagement processes and build practitioners' level of cultural intelligence – not on a project-by-project proposition – but understanding the layers of complexity more universally.

'Engage in some self-directed learning to lift non-Indigenous people's cultural intelligence and prevent the impost and inequality of value exchange.'

2. Educate clients

This underpins the challenge surrounding the current disconnect between practice and methodology. It helps early-career practitioners develop a voice and ability to draw the line in relation to the appropriate fit of engagement methods to a project, as well as assists organisations grappling with legislative reforms that prescribe collaborative engagement approaches such as we see in the requirement for deliberative engagement.

However, this recommendation is less relevant to a community of practitioners than the peak bodies who represent them. In questions around developing the practitioners voice, it is understood that 'the only way that can happen is if these different ways of engaging are better understood by clients. It's education that needs to happen to clients.' The ability to reflect on where deliberative methods are at odds with practice, for instance, is currently left to discernment of the practitioner – at times with the least experience when it comes to early career practitioners.

'Organisations like IAP2 can do well in educating clients and saying if we're really going to call something deliberative, we have to find ways to find the dilemma and then consultants can get better at saying 'well that's not deliberative. If you want me to do that, that's consultative'.'

3. Rewrite narratives around engaging for 'democracy'

This might fly in the face of the 'good' of community engagement. That is, engagement as an agency of democracy. For it squarely faces the overriding cost benefit and risk assessment that stymies any internal agreement in organisations. Part of the challenge for practitioners is not necessarily arguing for 'this is the kind of world we want to be in and let's have a really flourishing democracy.' The language practitioners need to learn to speak is that there's enormous cost benefit to engaging well and early and working with community could be the main factor to a project being delivered on time, within budget and with an enhanced reputation. This draws on the practitioners' community-facing skills and ability to deal with diversity – 'with people being pissed off, concerned, passionate, scared' – and applying that internally in an organisation.

'We need to apply what we know and can do in community within the community of interest, which includes executives and superiors. People who need to be on board. And we need to understand what's important to them. And what's important to them? Reputation. Managing risk. Managing dollars. We need to learn a narrative where we can speak that language.'

4. Practice strategic questioning

Get agreement upfront within organisations through practicing strategic questioning. It's difficult to win the 'battle of words' with people who have more authority or influence in organisations. Instead, there is a lot of power in asking strategic questions to help guide process and avoid reactive exchanges:

'That skill of asking strategic questions to get people thinking differently about the project – being able to scope the project and the purpose for engagement. You know the headline, 'Why is the community being engaged about this?' Instead ask, 'Why is an organisation inviting the community to be part of something? What are they being asked to help on?' Just asking the question that way, invariably people haven't thought about. They just know they have to do engagement.'

5. Unlock stories of 'failed' engagement

This might seem ironic. To create skills around unlocking stories of failed engagement. But because there may not be much appetite to listen within an organisation especially around engaging early in a project, drawing on other people's experiences and stories can help understand engagement processes. Not only to reach internal agreement, but to re-appraise the inherent value of community. So, instead of negatively framing setbacks in an engagement process, unlock the stories to create an alignment of strengths and empowerment to facilitate and enact change.

'The stories [of failed engagement] are important. Everyone, at some point, certainly across the sector, will have an experience of where things might have been done better. And we don't really give a lot of space for those stories to be shared. One way of unlocking the

stories is inviting people to share about time when they got some insight from what wasn't working well that lead to doing something differently. Being attentive to something that didn't work well and could be done differently can lead to making changes in how projects are managed.'

6. Acknowledge diversity in profession

Community engagement is an emerging profession with no singular professional background through which practitioners arrive at it. Practitioners come to engagement from planning, policy, health, education and research, to name only a few. This needs to be explored and acknowledged. This isn't to suggest identifying professional backgrounds in a solely declarative way. But as a strength of the legitimacy of the profession. It helps practitioners take stock of the diversity brought to the table and helps shape practice.

'People need to start identifying what their professional backgrounds are so that when you're in a room with community engagement practitioners you don't assume you're all coming from the same professional background – because you're not. And it will shape the way you see the work.'

7. Support training with education

Supporting training with education not only improves practice but delivers a conceptual understanding of what engagement is and what the struggles are in its practice. Calls for a graduate and postgraduate qualification would increase legitimisation of the field and its professionalisation. The proliferation of modules of community engagement practice within different fields and disciplines goes some way toward this. Compulsory modules in planning, design and policy courses might increase the legitimacy of the space. In the wait to reach an agreed body of knowledge around what exactly community engagement is, however, postgraduate and graduate qualifications weigh in the balance.

'Most practitioners don't have that theoretical background. It would be great to see a postgraduate qualification, even graduate qualifications in this space. But it needs to have an agreed body of knowledge first. There's still a market and a mass that needs to be hit for these to all click and fall into place. We're at the beginning of it, and we'll see more and that's a good thing.'

8. Create cultural equity in design approach

The design of culturally respectful and appropriate community engagement methodologies should recognise that not one size fits all. In an Indigenous engagement where there are layers of complexity, for instance, the need to advocate for sufficient time to implement a methodology is crucial. Ensure methodology is infused with a value framework that guides outcomes as much as defining the strategic objectives. Designing an engagement approach that makes space for cultural equity involves thinking of partnerships and governance models that embed First Peoples in co-designing program outcomes and reciprocity in terms of value exchange.

'Design a meaningful engagement approach that creates space for cultural equity and decision-making, whether that's through the recruitment of community ambassadors or whether it's making sure that the engagement practitioner is themselves from the community.'

Conclusion

Next steps: the profound why?

'If you don't have a solid alignment or profound 'why?' – why do we do community engagement, why does it matter – it's easy to be pushed this way and that way and do a fairly superficial job just to get it done and move on to the next project. I think there's some fairly important things at stake for all of us and I think it's important we do it with integrity with a longer-term view about why it's important.'

The demands of community engagement are immense and, in part, act as a release valve for the greater systemic problems of liberal democracies we currently see across the developed world. Greater inclusivity; improving transparency and legitimacy between governments and communities; giving voice to communities who increasingly demand it – community engagement is often charged with the ability to rebuild trust in and of government. However, it is not entirely the purview of community engagement to set store to current 'democratic malaise'. Identifying prevailing challenges facing contemporary practitioners shows that there is substantive scope to not only improve practice, but also, to improve democracy.

Looking at the current challenges also provides a vantage point that suggests there is much substantive work to be done, especially in relation to education. Professional accreditation of engagement practice is still in its infancy. Just as democracy requires continuous critique if its principles are to be maintained and upheld, the practice of engagement requires evaluation and innovation in skills to continue to evolve. Professionalism and the harmonisation of engagement practice across the sector may face some criticism, as these challenges and recommendations suggest. In particular, in the ability to deliver democracy where both organisations, public institutions and the community are not equally content. In advancing equity in engagement, too, we need to know how to deal with the increasing uncertainties demonstrated in our current pernicious environment.

Just as democracy requires continuous critique if its principles are to be maintained and upheld, the practice of engagement requires evaluation and innovation in skills to continue to evolve.

Community engagement speaks less to project-by-project outcomes than to how communities thrive in democracies. Either we reinforce mistrust and scepticism that characterises the current malaise, or we create opportunities where we can meet prevailing challenges, learn new skills and develop new ways of being. Underscoring the future skills for engagement practitioners, then, is the commitment to improve practice for the profound why.

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About the Author

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Sally Hussey is a writer, researcher and lead editor who interrogates global challenges in public engagement and community consultation. Her writing and research informs on-the-ground practitioners, policy and public engagement professionals and the wider community through providing cutting-edge insights and analysis to better understand the vital issues affecting how communities might thrive in democracies.

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