



The importance of being taught: improving public engagement in resource management through learning by doing

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Abstract

While public engagement is a legal (and moral) requirement in many countries, good engagement is hard to do. Bad public engagement is too often the norm, often ending in court cases or protests. While government and industry proponents often do not see public engagement as important, in turn practitioners often assume it can be done “on the fly” to comply with the law. We argue that the appropriate role of community engagement, building relationships and ownership of initiatives within communities, is neglected and its promise of improved community-Industry/government relations overlooked. Recently, there has been a resurgence in the creation of engagement tools enabling effective discussion and progress on shared agendas. Unfortunately, as many do not understand or practice engagement ethically, these tools and the deepening understanding of public engagement is underutilized. Our answer to this challenge is to teach university courses that explicitly focus on how to do good public engagement, the importance of many different approaches and the requirement to implement custom supports. Many of our examples are drawn from the authors’ own engagement practice and experiences. We try to teach students, through our own example, a willingness to be a different sort of practitioner: making a difference in the world. We stress that public engagement is key to increased civic engagement and democracy. In this article, we use personal and professional reflection to examine the need for good practice, our own understanding of it and how we teach good engagement practices at a Canadian university, including developing an innovative practice.

Keywords Public engagement · University teaching · Teaching public engagement

1 Introduction

When done well, public engagement¹ looks easy, which is why so much public engagement is badly done (Booth 2017; Booth and Halseth 2011; Booth and Skelton 2011a; Eversole 2012; Ermine 2007; Gregory 2017; Hunt et al. 2020; Lee et al. 2018), as people believe anyone can do it. The complex requirements of supporting dialogue across difference require solid education, knowledge and mentored experience before practitioners can facilitate good engagement. There is little research on the need for, or impact of, offering courses

that educate future professionals in how to undertake good public engagement (Kausch-Zongo et al. 2021 is an exception), but very few professions simply allow practitioners to “wing it” when it comes to necessary skills. Given the consequences of poor engagement we suggest education is important for professionals.

Public engagement, good or bad, happens around the globe, usually meeting a legal requirement within government processes requiring public consultation. Thirty-one countries, plus the European Union and Antarctica, require environmental assessments (https://ceq.doe.gov/get-involved/international_impact_assessment.html). Public consultation is required by municipal governments, state/provinces, and other agencies in multiple levels of governments. However, a legal requirement to do something, including public engagement, is not a requirement to do it well; indeed, in our opinion, much legal engagement is performative, intended to

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¹ In early research, this is called public participation; we use the word engagement as more evocative of the depth and complexity of the processes we advocate for.

meet the most minimal expectation (see Booth 2017; Booth and Halseth 2011). Such performative responses not only morally fail the tax-paying, voting publics, they also create a real risk of time-consuming legal challenges to proposed projects, and/or organized public opposition, both sometimes successful, accompanied by a very real impingement on relations between governed and those governing. We suggest that agencies, NGOs and governments have a probable interest in understanding and practicing good public engagement. Our belief is that, while the need for good public engagement is increasingly recognized, to enable good engagement you must actually teach people to conduct it. In this article we explore the relevance of teaching students about engagement drawing from the authors shared experiences of teaching in a research focused northern Canadian University.

Planners on the ground frequently encounter the results of poor public engagement. Sadly, there is a dearth of literature or training speaking to the ‘how’ of promoting community engagement as professional practice.² This leads to a lack of understanding on the extent of, and the nature of, the problems that emerge from poor public engagement. One solution is to start building a workforce of practitioners trained, skilled and willing to practice meaningful engagement work. Currently, poor outcomes persist, and un(der) trained practitioners waste the valuable investment of time and effort of gathering groups together to work on contentious issues. This further divides publics/communities, making further public consultation in that community even more difficult for both the community and the next engager. We note that there are no professional certification requirements we are aware of for practicing public engagement; anyone can ‘professionally’ offer engagement services, but it is very much a case of buyer (and public) beware³ (as ‘professional’ certification may not ensure a well-trained and ethical practitioner). There are ethical considerations in undertaking engagements without a solid foundation of training and experience. If the public expects a process that allows them to be heard and have impact on public policy development but are, instead, led into a quagmire of misunderstanding and

failed engagement, then a belief in their own powerlessness to fight city hall, other governments and industry, will be reinforced.

In contrast, good public engagement skills become a necessary tool kit for any professional practitioner expected to engage with the public during their career. In defining professionals, we include anyone whose profession might require or expect an obligation (legal or ethical) to understand and take in to account the opinions and knowledge of a public. This could include public and private institutions, governments, and consultants working in government mandated processes (such as environmental assessment), and also professional organizations, NGOs, even universities and colleges. As the public confronts increasingly complex issues, good public engagement improves democracy, where citizen engagement is vital. The professionalization of such training may be a path to ensuring rigor and professionalism, but that evolution will be shaped by the emergence of skills on the ground.

1.1 What is good engagement

We follow Arnstein’s ladder and its subsequent development (1969), and Reed et al.’s wheel (2018). These define ‘bad’ engagement as token, merely telling people what’s happening. ‘Good’ engagement brings people into the decision-making process, is meaningful, inclusive of all affected publics, and develops useful and relevant contributions to the subject/issue of the engagement. We argue that the best way to ensure good public engagement, in both the public sphere (often legally mandated), and in the private sphere (enhancing and improving decisions and actions), is to teach people how to do it with opportunities to safely practice and be mentored while learning.

1.2 Article organization

In this article, we share our experiences in teaching university undergraduate classes on sound public engagement, while building the practice of public engagement skills. We discuss first the challenges we have identified around how public engagement is actually implemented, including the lack of a link between research on good engagement and what is actually done in practice. We present a short overview of key engagement theory, before discussing our practice in teaching. We conclude by offering ideas for how engagement can be taught to produce professionals with strong engagement skills. This article also reflects the friendship and professional reciprocity we have built up over the years, a circumstance that has improved our own practice and the ability to learn from each other. While we teach from the perspectives of planning and environmental/natural resources fields, the theory and practice we provide

² The outside world already acknowledges the need for the so-called softer skills and moving to fill the gap. See, for example, National Collaborating Centre, 2013: as they say themselves ‘...[this resource is offered to support the public health practitioner in adopting community engagement as a central strategy and supporting community participation as a core competency for public health practice. It is a cornerstone of community-focused public health and a key approach to improve health equity through action on the social determinants of health.]’

³ The International Association of Public Participations (IAP2) offers training and certification, but while they offer excellent resources, which we share with our students, most organizations/agencies do not require such certification.

are relevant across a wide range of practice, from municipal hearings to forest management.

2 The Challenges

2.1 Professional responsibilities and the public

As professionals in academia, in planning, in public engagement and in our communities of practice, we grew to understand the clear responsibility of professionals working with the public to release themselves from their role as “experts” to respectfully support the community. This does not mean that we deny our knowledge or experience, but that we respect and honor the knowledge and experience within the community equitably. We must respect their efforts, recognizing that communities understand their own issues quite well but often need assistance in both coming together and clearly articulating their needs and concerns for outsiders. Or they may need the certification of the professional engager to have their knowledge and expertise accepted within government processes.⁴ If we adopt the stance of coach and supporter, along with having the knowledge to enable communities to explore their challenges, opportunities and aspirations, it means accepting that the major task is to create equitable space where all can contribute—including the practitioner (Ermine 2007). This is in contrast to processes where the professional shows up to explain to the public what will happen, or to indicate that the decisions must be made by technocrats, or to “facilitate” the process toward reaching the proponents’ desired outcomes. We teach engagement that foregrounds the public as partner and expert within their own knowledge/experience; engagement work with Indigenous Nations is often a quite instructive study of practitioner versus the expert (Booth and Skelton 2011a; Carter et al., 2021).

This is not easy to convey within a post-secondary institution, selling the notion that non-contextualized knowledge makes you a qualified expert. It is also difficult, when the engagement is part of a legally mandated process, to convince agencies or industries who just want the job done with as little public fuss as possible and within a limited government mandated timelines. In these cases the skilled facilitator will find themselves between the devil and the deep blue sea as both the community and the agencies/proponents desire speedy progress in decision making, and this requires different skill sets and knowledge. Somehow, the facilitator

will have to meet all the opposing agendas and expectations, even where contradictory. Educated professionals may offer more flexible approaches.

2.2 Engagement is not a checkbox

The real challenge is that public engagement is too often seen as a checkbox to be satisfied quickly, barring legal challenge or mass protest. When poor engagement occurs—if it occurs at all, it comes too late to assure a public that their concerns are heard, or if heard, will have an impact on a decision usually already made. Public opposition to an initiative that politicians and business owners believe is beneficial is not welcomed by decision-makers. Vehement opposition to a proposal, or badly divided opinions, can make some project proponents unwilling to undertake effective public engagement, fearing to “lift the lid on a can of worms.”⁵

Such circumstances requires that knowledgeable and experienced engagers recognize the need to try and remediate the situation for the benefit of the public, the proponent and the public good. A poor engagement “expert” may not recognize the difficulty of their position.

2.3 Linking theory and practice

A last challenge with public engagement is a profound disconnect between theory, research and practice. In the last forty years, public engagement has emerged as a discrete field of study with practical application. For a well-qualified and engaged practitioner, the rapidly growing body of knowledge and sophisticated and impactful tools is challenging to keep up with, and practitioners must be ready to live with a learn-trial-reflect-adapt iterative cycle in their practice. This contrasts with the public engager who believes that the standard, and inadequate, Open House is acceptable.

The growing field of public engagement theory and practice offers profound and powerful methods that create genuine, even transformative, engagement with the public on issues that affect, or will affect, their lives, their families, and their communities. When stakes are high, people will be mobilized to participate in political processes. Good public engagement is an opportunity to improve political participation and investment in the body politic, enhancing citizenship in a community or nation. In the age of the Anthropocene, integrating the engagement of ordinary citizens within collective systems is necessary to address the intersectional nature of challenges facing humanity. Addressing and mitigating major environmental and/or social challenges requires an active and educated citizenry.

⁴ Both authors, holding PhDs and “recognized” as experts, are often called upon by communities to serve as “conveyors” of local/Indigenous knowledge/expertise because that externally recognized expertise is more likely to be accepted by agencies.

⁵ This unattributed quote, and the others used in this article, are drawn from notes from our many public engagements over the years.

A critical solution to such challenges will be found in the classrooms of post-secondary institutions where future public engagement practitioners could be given a foundation of knowledge and practice. Understanding that a profession with a strong community focus requires a solid foundation of public engagement as practice, as methods and a set of tools, will create the competencies that should be a hallmark of programs educating professionals whose work will affect the public.

Teaching good engagement means creating good facilitators. There is profoundly little research on what creates good facilitators, or even on the importance of teaching good facilitation skills. Kausch et al. (2021) do note that:

1. Implementing...participatory measures requires civil servants who hold favorable opinions on public engagement, and who appreciate and encourage deliberation processes and inclusion (willingness). Furthermore, public sector officials must be appropriately equipped to introduce and manage civic participation (skill)... university curricula must be adapted in order to qualify graduates adequately.

They also note how rarely such teaching is available in university curricula.

Escobar (2019) notes that poor facilitation exacerbates public cynicism. Becoming a good facilitator.

2. Is a contingent, pragmatic and bodily endeavour that resists standardization. It is learned by doing, imitating and adapting, in a developmental process in which personality traits and contextual demands are entangled. (p. 2)

Further,

3. Facilitation is a craft...and includes mentoring and peer networks in various arenas throughout a facilitator's career. Understanding facilitation work as a craft, rather than a discipline, challenges those involved in training facilitators to find new ways of negotiating the somewhat paradoxical nature of teaching practice (pp. 4–5)

Our teaching explicitly reflects these few published resources.

2.4 Some engagement theory

Since the publication of Arnstein's Ladder of Participation (1969), the literature on public engagement has exploded, offering a myriad of excellent resources. There is also a generous community of practitioners from various disciplines that share resources and cheerfully field test each other's

ideas and provide feedback on adaptations and challenges.⁶ Further research documents underlying theories, best practices and wise tools. There is also a growing literature on failures, offering useful lessons (Booth and Halseth 2011; Eversole 2012; Hunt et al. 2020). Studies demonstrate significant benefits from good public engagement in decision-making (Mitchell 2005); they also demonstrate that poor engagement creates problems, especially in controversial issues (Booth 2017).

The original literature, stressing public hearings, referendums, or surveys, with experience and research changed to reflect discussions of power differentials in decision-making between government and citizens (Mitchell 2005). Arnstein (1969) was a significant catalyst as her "ladder of citizen participation" made clear that most public engagement never rose above "non-participation" or "tokenism" of differing degrees (in truth, it still does not). Her top three rungs described true citizen engagement but was and remains little desired by decision-makers.⁷

Presently, defining public engagement: what it does, how it does it and what the intentions of it are, becomes the key question in theory and in practice. Much literature examines the use of engagement to address mandated government consultation (Eversole 2012; Gregory 2017; Quick and Bryson 2016). However, public participation exercises rise or fall on the quality of the engagement and the engagement practitioner.

Research has begun to suggest that "successful" consultation requires that transparency, honesty, and trust be created by the process (Booth and Halseth 2011). Research further suggests the need to include all stakeholders, to share information openly, to engage participants meaningfully, and to attempt to address, if not satisfy, multiple interests and positions. Successful processes also require careful timing, capacity development, and equity among participants (Shepard 2005; Wagenet and Pfeffer 2007). Carefully planned processes are particularly critical when governments use them to address the "wicked" problems of the twenty-first century.⁸ However, after years of research and practice, several authors assert that there is still no clear consensus on what constitutes "good" public engagement. We speculate

⁶ There are also resources that require payment and strictly control their tools. Regardless of value, such requirements put them beyond the reach of many practitioners or publics.

⁷ Arnstein's Ladder has been updated, see Connor (1988), Pretty (1994), and Reed et al. (2018) for Ladder revisioning. The point still stands: most engagement does not ascend far up any of these models.

⁸ "Wicked problems" is a term coined by theorists Rittel and Webber in 1973, highlighting how intractable and complex social and political questions have become. These problems are not easily solved, are frequently emergent and evolving, and require collaboration and design thinking as processes on a path to solutions. See: Interaction Design Foundation, (IDF) Wicked problems. <https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/topics/wicked-problems>.

this may be the outcomes of both changing expectations and changing legal requirements, both perpetually moving targets. Nor is the challenge posed by Arnstein (1969) so long ago meaningfully addressed: much public participation continues to fall upon her bottom six ladder rungs, partnership, delegated power and citizen control have only occasionally been achieved. Researchers such as Sheppard (2005) found that when engagement remains in the more “traditional” box, such as open houses and public comment periods, it results in low public satisfaction with process and outcome, a result confirmed by others (Chambers and Beckley 2003; De Marchi and Ravetz 2001; Duinker 1998).

Governments and development proponents, in proceeding with a poorly done engagement, assume that an unhappy public will not be able to, or interested in, launching a backlash. Seeking legal remedies is expensive and time-consuming and may not result in a stay or ending of the project. Organizing an effective protest is time-consuming, often unsuccessful and people often believe they cannot fight. Further, doing good public engagement takes money, time and expertise, many agencies tasked with doing engagement simply do not see the point. Finally, despite decades of research and experimentation on methods and techniques that facilitate meaningful engagement, few practitioners/consultants appear aware of this literature.

Surprisingly, little literature examines what the recipients of such consultation think (Booth and Halseth 2011), nor evaluates the effectiveness and appropriateness of methodologies from the perspective of the publics subjected to engagement. Knowing that the “public” is, in fact, many “publics,” and knowing which publics need to be engaged, is vital (Hunt et al. 2020). To do this, public engagement as a practice needs to be practitioner-based—their reflections and insights are vital. Too often, however, there is little discussion of what can or does make a difference for the publics or for those needing to conduct a meaningful process. Given these challenges, it is even more important to introduce future practitioners to the possibilities of practice while students.

3 Our practice

The authors bring to this reflection two different approaches and experiences. Theresa Healy is a professor in a Planning school and comes out of a practice of community engagement largely around social concerns, including with Indigenous communities. Annie Booth is a professor in Environmental and Sustainability Studies, but teaches engagement to multiple majors, most with natural resources management foci (i.e., forestry, wildlife management). She has an engagement background coming out of government, including collaboration with Indigenous communities. These two

different backgrounds have created different approaches to our teaching. Planners (Healy) are usually embedded in larger communities, usually serving in long-standing institutional positions (smaller communities may rely on external consulting planners, creating different issues that still require a primary attention to relationship building.). Thus, they are taught to consider engagement as a long-term investment in their community as they will return often (or should) to community members for their opinions. Planners focus on relationship development and building as long-term processes.⁹

Resource managers and/or consultants (including many planners) (Booth, also a Registered Professional Planner) too often parachute into a community on a short-term basis (Indigenous communities should be an exception). They may be obligated to engage for legal reasons but have not usually had the opportunity to develop long-standing relationships or local knowledge around a community.

Theresa Healy has been teaching in the School of Environmental Planning at the University of Northern British Columbia (BC, Canada) for over 12 years. While also running a small but successful consulting company, her fees acknowledge a co-authored engagement process that has built many mutually respectful relationships, enabling her to call on community partners for teaching/learning experiences. Believing that “the things we need to learn we can only learn by doing”, her 3rd year Environmental Planning course, Public Participation, Mediation, and Negotiation, utilizes extensively the existing relationships and the reputation she carries in community. Students from other disciplines register, creating a multidisciplinary cohort. The range of engagement, from organization, to community, to national groups, provides rare opportunities to test engagement techniques and approaches.

Annie Booth’s experiences have been colorful, given that they often involved engaging people without much time to build relationships (and engaging more unusual communities). She had to learn to engage with users of a nude beach (while clothed), finding that time and tolerance on both sides proved critical. She negotiated interviews with farmers who greeted her with a loaded shotgun and the hostile query as to whether she was from the (add expletives) government. She learned two crucial lessons in parachute engagement: 1. Research the community’s history of engagement (very crucial if the public cannot distinguish between different sections of a government agency), and 2. Never let the public get between you and the door, after a small focus group on park use turned into a large angry mob intent on discussing aggressively a government decision to reintroduce the fisher in their area. Through engagement stressing

⁹ We acknowledge not all planners will choose to do so, although the results may not end well for their communities or their employers.

providing mutual benefits, she negotiated the participation of Indigenous communities in a successful US Congressional proposal. These experiences have become the basis for her approach to teaching her 3rd year Environmental & Sustainability Studies course, Public Engagement for Sustainability (taught for 12 years), which is required for multiple natural resources/environmentally related degrees.

We now discuss our practices in teaching public engagement to document what we see as essential core curriculums and/or practices to jumpstart others in thinking about teaching public engagement skills, but we acknowledge that there are many effective instructional approaches (see Kausch-Zongo et al. 2021). We also encourage potential emulators to recognize that we both teach our courses on an almost non-existent budget, given our university's constraints, so a course requires only an experienced practitioner-instructor to be offered.¹⁰

3.1 Theresa Healy's practice

In ENPL 304, students learn public participation theories, realities and enjoy an experiential learning immersion allowing consideration of these theories and realities in practice. The underlying architecture of the course supports a journey through all the stages of researching, designing and delivering a public participation exercise based in local community priorities. A variety of participation tools, methods, and processes support the students in their class project. By the time students are introduced to their real-life clients, they have acquired not just the theory, but have also practiced with a range of tools and can design their public engagement effectively, based on matching what they experienced with each tool in class with the hoped-for outcome of their public engagement.

3.2 Annie Booth's practice

Created at the explicit request of the professional forestry advisory committee, Booth's course begins by encouraging an understanding of why engagement is so critical for future resource and environmental professionals, and what budding engagers need to consider in developing an engagement. This is done through the posing of a series of questions, that students learn to answer throughout the semester:

(1) Why am I doing engagement?

- (2) Should I be doing engagement, DIY, or do I need an expert?
- (3) What are the consequences of a bad engagement process, and can I afford one?
- (4) Understanding thoroughly WHAT, WHEN, WHERE, WHY.
- (5) Determining WHO are my publics or communities (and am I sure)?
- (6) What methods do I choose?
- (7) And,
- (8) Why do I think they are the most appropriate for my public?

A significant portion of the course focuses upon identifying and distinguishing between publics while also learning how to effectively and ethically engage overlooked and under-engaged publics: women, youth, Indigenous communities, people of color and vulnerable populations. Dealing with angry and hostile publics, coping with failures and learning to understand and cope with institutional constraints are also critical components. Actual methods are introduced and practiced throughout the semester and through conducting an actual engagement with a community client.

3.3 Shared teaching practices

Real world partners are key aspects of both courses. In ENPL 304, public participation exercises have been conducted across a range of different sectors. For example, in one community considerable ill feeling had resulted in two Farmers Markets. At a session held during a blizzard, only a small group showed but they were key players and one of the fiercest advocates of the division admitted, "I can see we have to talk." Two years later, the two markets co-exist at opposite ends of a major thoroughfare, providing a popular contribution to a downtown in need of revitalization. In another example, understanding various levels of governance has emerged through a teaching and learning partnership with Downtown Prince George, a quasi-governmental body which provides support to the class annually and has hired summer student interns from the class. The Planning Department of the municipal government has also provided a strong learning partnership and student projects have addressed downtown issues, including presentations to the Council and Staff.

In ENVS 326, students have worked on issues such as public participation in the annual Clean Sweep community cleanup, riverfront protection and wildlife preservation. Other clients have included local businesses and service agencies such as the local hospice (who wanted an evaluation of the satisfaction of client's families). The university has also used the course to assess everything from

¹⁰ Although if you have a budget, we suggest investing in common engagement "tools" (we purchase our own), inducements to attract participants in projects, and the budget to run a real engagement as a workshop for students.

satisfaction with the campus food services to the experiences of international students.

Aside from valuable lessons such as "what do you do when only five people show up because of a blizzard," students learn the importance of taking time to build relationships and listen to the voices of the community they will serve. Developing a capacity to bridge the expertise they can bring to the table along with appreciating and working with the community's wisdom and knowledge is an integral element of successful public engagement work. Community members express their appreciation for what they perceive as unexpected benefits. "We could not have afforded to buy what the students brought to us," reflects a common assumption—that while the community will support student learning, they start without a high expectation of what they will get in return. Overwhelmingly, however, communities report that when they unite around a shared desire to ensure students have a positive learning environment, it often becomes a longer-term commitment to each other. In essence, the outsider view of the students gives back to community members a picture of their communities in a way they had not found themselves.

Table 1 summarizes typical methods utilized in our classes that ensure the public can meaningfully engage in a process. There are many more not mentioned, and/or being developed as we write, that we might move toward using in our courses. We offer these resources for those thinking of offering a similar course (or to expand their own practice beyond another survey). All of these methods are introduced to students by using them as teaching techniques and as first tools in the engagement toolbox.

3.4 Impacts of these courses on the community

Many of our student projects leave a legacy because community members are able to take the solutions they had a large part in shaping and run with them in pursuit of goals that now seem credible and doable. At the same time, students learn first-hand the difference they can make when their approach is to enhance community strengths as the bedrock for meaningful engagement. At the beginning of the semester students are often resistant, reluctant and fearful, and even resentful. By the end of the semester, they are hyper-critical of public consultations unless they see the space for meaningful engagement. The School of Planning and Environmental & Sustainability Studies both have an enviable record in student success in employment after graduation, most report, post-graduation, the utility of the course in gaining professional positions.

One advantage that UNBC enjoys is a unique relationship with Northern communities, as the university was born from community initiative. This means a vested interest in the success of university manifesting as a willingness to support

field-based education. Community participants and organizations have been grateful for the work of students providing high level of services beyond their budgets. This does not, however, imply that other universities and colleges cannot find their own paths to engaging with their communities on skills such as public engagement.

4 Lessons learned and a conclusion

From our own experiences, we have identified some compelling lessons that speak to the potential of field-based teaching for improving public engagement.

4.1 Lesson 1: be flexible

A practitioner's ability to acknowledge the challenges of doing public engagement well AND of developing the confidence of the practitioner to switch up an agenda, adapt or change tools, on the fly in response to what is happening in or outside the room. This is only possible when the practitioner has learnt about and practiced such skills in safety. Saying to a group of students "*Well, this isn't working is it? Why don't we try xxx*" early in the semester emphasizes the need for nimble, flexible thinking. This is important in encouraging students to not see mistakes as failure, which is counter intuitive to university assignments where failure is only failure. Rather, we model the willingness to see failure as a step to getting it right, giving student practitioners the opportunity to understand and practice letting go of agendas or predetermined activities and rely on an in the moment presence. With this foundation, students are able to address switch ups in a way that is not simply a seat of the pants answer but a grounded and effective facilitation technique. In-class supports to this principle include solid grounding in the reflective cycle and much experience in tools and their "best used for" scenarios.

4.2 Lesson 2: embrace the difficult

Accept and embrace the difficult with useful literature and new tools, growing the capacity of both teacher and learner. To be vulnerable and to use the inevitable challenges and failures as learning moments is more instructive than illustrating a perfect practice. *This may be new for many professors; admitting not knowing and demonstrating an ethical path through hard situations is, however, instructive.*

4.3 Lesson 3: keep learning

Keeping up to date and experimenting with new ideas develops the confidence to redesign, adapt and adjust to the realities in the room and to see such opportunities not as a

Table 1 Community engagement tools used in teaching

CE tool	Description	Desired outcomes	References
Open space	A form of “un-conference” based on the premise that an agenda created by the presence of those present means action is more likely to result	The transfer and equalizing of power; decisions are made and acted on in the room, and/or carried forward by those in the room	Owen (2012). <i>H. open space technology, a user's guide</i> . https://elementaleducation.com/wp-content/uploads/temp/OpenSpaceTechnology--UsersGuide.pdf
Troika	The group divides into triads of a speaker and two listeners, the speaker shares a dilemma, and turns away, listening only as the two listeners discuss	Solution to issues, often contentious, are generated and heard	Troika consulting. https://www.liberatingstructures.com/8-troika-consulting/
Spiral journal	An exercise to pause and support participants in reflecting and focusing before the work of the agenda begins, through guided reflection on key questions	Initially participants are uncomfortable, not used to silence and the exercise allows guided self-reflection; work emerging after this exercise is often more creative	Mendez, J. (2019). spiral journal and the uncomfortable power of self-reflection. https://www.jesumendez.ca/spiral-journal-and-the-uncomfortable-power-of-self-reflection/
Traffic lights	This method allows participants to generate their a) issues, b) barriers and c) potential actions individually (using red, yellow and green sticky notes), then using the generated ideas to develop a collective analysis	Collation of issues, barriers and actions is realistic and collectively owned, avoiding only problems or a totally blue-sky bias	Wates, N. (2014). <i>The community planning handbook@How people can shape their cities, towns and villages in any part of the world</i> . routledge. http://www.communityplanning.net/
The fish bowl	A circle of 5–7 seated participants with one empty chair available. All other participants gather around this circle. The empty chair is an invitation for anyone in the outer circle to join. There always has to be an empty chair, so someone must leave each time a new person enters	A method of supporting group discussion that honors those who prefer silence as well as those with lots to say, and those that need time to warm up to speaking	Experience fishbowl. https://www.liberatingstructures.com/18-users-experience-fishbowl/
World café	Tables with a host are tasked with gathering information from those gathered at their table. Every table has a different question; the table groups advance after a set time to tackle a new question at another table	This structure for a gathering allows community wisdom to be gathered	World café method http://www.theworldcafe.com/key-concepts-resources/world-cafe-method/
<i>Recommended resources</i>			
Community planning network: a treasury of community planning techniques freely shared and set up to be accessed globally			
Liberating structures: a compendium of community engagement techniques developed and shared by practitioners			

moment to panic, but as the invitation to include the community more closely in developing the processes that work in these circumstances. *Admitting the challenge in a society valuing experts is difficult at first.*

4.4 Lesson 4: know thyself

Start with the self and self-reflection framed by the principle of, “first do no harm.” Many communities have been harmed by unethical, self-serving and profit-making consultations that exploit the community and only serve outside interests. Indigenous communities, in particular, have been harmed by unethical practices that have damaged individuals and communities and have left many deep scars (Booth and Skelton 2011a; 2011b; Lee et al. 2018). Building the relationship first and enabling the community to take the lead is a paramount prerequisite without which the ethical stance is to decline the work.

4.5 Applying these lessons in your practice

In your own body of work, you must be willing to be flexible and nimble, while having a backpack of diverse ideas and thoughtful ingenuity and being willing to innovate when needed especially if the innovation is being shaped by the community. Adopting, and practicing honestly, the humble learner stance keeps you out of the way of community leadership. This is not to underestimate the place of theory and academic learning in conducting good public engagement. Practitioners need to develop a sound architecture for an engagement process—the underlying structures that support effective engagement enable power sharing. Investigate the stages of group development, the psychology of groups, and be aware that each stage of the process requires different sets of skills and tools that apply in one stage but not another. From this, overall, emerges the confidence to adapt agendas and tools; there is no one size fits all. We believe these lessons have relevance wherever your practice takes you. As we noted early, democratic governments, at all levels, usually have some obligation to engage professionally and usefully with their constituents. If nothing else, enlightened self-interest would suggest that such engagement will assist come election time, but we believe there are moral obligations to so do as well. In addition, businesses, NGOs and other groups (such as post-secondary institutions¹¹) might well see the utility in meaningfully engaging with those they are responsible for or interested in understanding.

¹¹ The authors developed, at the request of our university’s President, a workshop for senior university administrators on meaningfully engaging students, staff and faculty; such engagement can lead to better institutional inter-relationships (at a university that has seen multiple strikes in recent years).

5 A conclusion

All of the above come out of experiences that have led us to recognize the need to learn, and teach, a variety of public engagement tools and the knowledge on how to plan for and apply appropriately these tools to future professionals expecting to engage with the public. Many of these lessons have emerged out of failures that were shifted to solving problems together. Our experiences have driven us to teach this knowledge to others, to improve from the ground up the understanding, the practice of, and the valuing of good public engagement practice. Regrettably, while there are a great many studies on good versus poor public engagement, techniques and case studies of individual processes, we could find only two studies on how practitioners of public engagement, good or bad, are created. Thus we are not really able to demonstrate any evidence that our sort of educational initiative of teaching students the importance of, and how to do, good public engagement, works outside of our own experiences of learning, being mentored and mentoring. We believe, too, that the key to our teachings is the combination of learning and doing, as all students conduct real engagements for real clients under supportive supervision.

While we introduce students to groups such as IAP2, we hesitate to recommend “professional certification” as a regular and desired outcome. This is a controversial topic, as we are well aware, but we are also well aware that a certificate may not be a guarantee of anything especially if there is no concurrent experience under mentoring. Lastly, we often see certification processes as “tools” training only. We believe engagement education needs to be linked with understanding the challenges practitioners will face in the field, many of which we have experienced in terms of working with publics. However, more challenges stem from the workplace where the practitioner might be employed, with supervisors’ intent on cheap, quick and checkbox. Our courses offer the context, good and bad, in which a practitioner must practice. Thus, we try to teach a willingness to be different in the world by making a difference with the publics with whom our students will one day engage. In doing so, we ourselves practice public engagement in the classroom as the foundational key to good future public engagement and essential civic and ethical engagement in the world. While we cannot clone ourselves as a way of spreading the good word, what we can do is encourage committed, talented practitioners to invest in undertaking similar work, making good engagement something well worth learning.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest We declare we have no conflicts of interest nor receive financial benefits from this work.

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