Speaking Out in Community Engagement: A Review of Fifteen Years of Refinement of the *SpeakOut* Model

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Abstract

In December 1990, community planners Wendy Sarkissian and Andrea Cook developed a new model of community engagement, the *SpeakOut*, as part of consultation for the redevelopment of the Salisbury Town Centre, South Australia. Since then, they have conducted a large number of *SpeakOut*s in widely varying Australian contexts, the model has become a mainstay of the work of their two consulting firms (and is now used overseas) and they have published a suite of award-winning advisory materials to assist practitioners and others.

This colourful, illustrated paper focuses on a the development of the model and variety of innovative ways of using the *SpeakOut* model in urban and rural contexts over 15 years, ranging from projects in the Gold Coast and Redfern in Sydney to Footscray in Melbourne.

The cornerstone of the paper is the 2004 Footscray *SpeakOut* for the revisioning of central Footscray. This *SpeakOut* will be used to illustrate the evolution of the *SpeakOut* model with respect to more direct facilitation involvement of community members and more creative and interactive activities through which people can make their contributions and thoughts felt.

Practical and theoretical issues are discussed in this exploration of a flexible and creative community engagement model.

Keywords
Consultation, engagement, techniques, planning (urban/regional), events

What is a *SpeakOut*?
The *SpeakOut* is a lively, innovative, colourful and interactive staffed exhibition — a hybrid event combining some of the characteristics of a meeting and some of an exhibition or 'open house'. The purpose is to provide an informal and interactive 'public meeting' environment where a wide range of people have a chance to participate. It is designed to facilitate structured 'drop-in'

participation about planning and design issues. Participants come to the venue, find the issues on which they wish to 'speak out' and have their say.

A *SpeakOut* is used in any community planning process and can be organised at the start of a process — to introduce a community to a project and generate early enthusiasm and participation — or at the end of a process to 'test' material generated in other consultation processes and 'wrap up' a substantial consultation phase. The applications of *SpeakOut*s are really only limited by one's imagination, as it can be tailored to a number of issues and to a range of communities.

A *SpeakOut* has broad appeal and allows a wide range of participation. The *SpeakOut* works well where specific community feedback or input is sought (for example, a redevelopment, a design process, a needs analysis, etc.). It can be effective when wide community participation is sought and a less structured time format than a formal public meeting or workshop is acceptable (or desired) — as a result, it attracts a great deal more interest than the typical public meeting (a *SpeakOut* generally attracts several hundred people). It can be used in the early stages of a participation process to gather ideas (issue identification) or in later stages where the results of studies/planning are being communicated back to community members.

Some common and key features of a *SpeakOut* are:
1. A *SpeakOut* is organised around local issues. Typically, a *SpeakOut* is structured into a number of 'issue stalls' which relate to findings of earlier consultations and to the specific project goals. So, for example, in an urban renewal project, the issue stalls may be organised as follows:
   - Registration
   - Getting around (transport)
   - Arts and culture
   - Housing
   - Retail and shops
   - Rest, relaxation and recreation
   - Community safety
   - What is important to children
   - What is important to young people
   - How to get involved.

Figure 1. ReVisioning Footscray *SpeakOut* (setting up)

2. A *SpeakOut* is facilitated and recorded. Unlike a typical 'open house', a *SpeakOut* is a carefully facilitated event. A trained Listener pays close attention to what people are saying and asks pertinent questions, while all their comments are clearly recorded (on butcher's paper or pre-printed panels/exercise sheets) by a trained Recorder. A range of interpretive material is used to encourage people to comment on issues of local concern. This is really a 'listening session' focussing on the community's views. As the *SpeakOut* progresses, the walls of the venue become covered with community views. Reading their neighbours' comments often encourages shy and hesitant people to speak out.

Figure 2. Salisbury *SpeakOut* facilitation and recording

3. A *SpeakOut* goes to people rather than asking them to come to it. The location of a *SpeakOut* is an important consideration and we have had our best successes with *SpeakOut*s by locating them in places that people naturally congregate — the local park, the town square, the retail area, the pedestrian mall. A *SpeakOut* relies on passers by as well as invitations and it needs to be located centrally where curious people, about their other business, will 'drop in'.

4. A *SpeakOut* is an action-learning model. The *SpeakOut* allows us to build on the ideas and material generated during previous consultation activities and will influence final stages of consultation and/or recommendations and action for the project. A *SpeakOut* day is designed to maximise participants' opportunities to find out more about the project, as well as to identify issues relevant to community. Emphasis is placed on identifying opportunities that will make community projects/planning/renewal successful, as well as seeking advice on the most effective ways forward in the project development, methods to further consult with local communities and how to best communicate future information to people.

5. A *SpeakOut* is a social activity as well as a consultative one. An important aspect of all *SpeakOut*s is to provide a non-threatening, informal and fun day for local people to participate in decision making. Interactive activities at 'issue stalls' are complemented by opportunities for informal discussion over a BBQ lunch and music. An important aspect of *SpeakOut*s is to build enthusiasm for participatory processes and 'consultation' amongst people who may have felt cynical and/or excluded from other types of process.

6. A *SpeakOut* caters to children as well as adults. The voices of children are often missing from consultation activity and the *SpeakOut* has always involved methods and techniques specifically designed to involve children. We normally have a separate children's consultation space where specially trained facilitators use techniques such as drawing, model building (with food or with recyclables, as examples) or interviewing (while doing a fun activity such as face painting) to probe children's aspirations regarding the future of their community.

Figure 3. Facilitating children's involvement

7. A *SpeakOut* is well advertised. We use combinations of letterbox drops, newspaper advertisements, radio advertisements, online invitations and information, billboards, flyers and posters and word of mouth to generate interest in the *SpeakOut*. We start advertising a month ahead of time and reinforce that advertising up to the day of the event.

8. A *SpeakOut* doesn't leave people to guess what is going on. We emphasise the point of providing clear indication (through signs, badges, flyers, etc.) of what is happening, who is involved and can answer questions and how to participate in the *SpeakOut*. Stalls are all clearly labelled and have verbal prompts (questions to think about or answer) as well as visual ones (photos illustrating issues from the local area, for example). Any interactive exercises require clear, plain language instructions on display.

Figure 4. Facilitator's badge

These points provide a frame of reference for the basic elements of all *SpeakOut*s, from those we ran initially in the early 1990s to those we have run in the past six months. While these elements have remained core to the practice of *SpeakOut*s, some points have changed and evolved.

The evolution of the *SpeakOut*

The first *SpeakOut* was held in Salisbury (suburban Adelaide), South Australia, in December 1990 to engage members of that large suburban community about issues surrounding the redevelopment of their town centre. The authors have now been involved in the organisation of over 12 *SpeakOut* events in the past 15 years in a variety of Australian communities (rural, urban, suburban) in Victoria, South Australia, Tasmania, New South Wales and Queensland.

Some things don't seem to change. Fifteen years after pioneering the *SpeakOut*, we still find ourselves renting dusty storefronts or setting marquis up in town square so as to be 'in the thick of it' (imagining these blank spaces filled with balloons and otherwise transformed...), we still chat with the local service groups or local restaurants to provide the food, we still find local musicians to add music and excitement to the event, we still need 'industrial strength' supplies of Blu Tac

and Artline markers and we still want large photos and aerial maps of the neighbourhood to display.

But some things have changed and evolved.

While each *SpeakOut* brings its own new challenges and opportunities, the following are some thoughts on how we have generally changed and enhanced the practice of the *SpeakOut* in the fifteen years since running our first in Adelaide. The two key areas of change, discussed in more detail below, have been:

- facilitation
- issue stalls and interactive activities.

We focus specifically on our experiences conducting a *SpeakOut* for the ReVisioning Footscray project in inner western Melbourne in December 2004. This project involved a wide range of consultation/engagement activity between August 2004 and December 2004 and in this instance, the *SpeakOut* was the final consultation event (Figure 5).
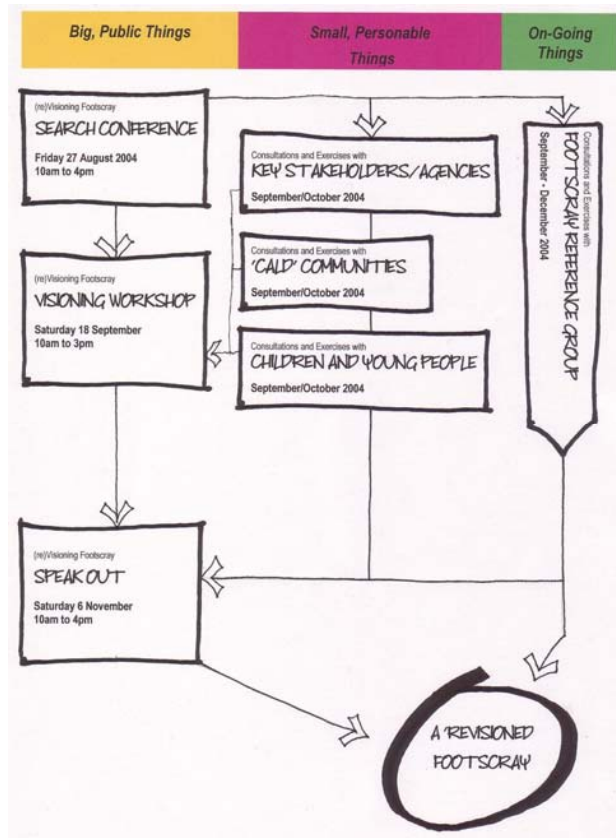

Figure 5. ReVisioning Footscray consultation processes

Facilitation

Our approach to *SpeakOut* facilitation has changed and is now more reflective of a 'capacity building' approach to community planning and development. As our work on *SpeakOut*s has evolved, so have our attempts to involve local community members directly as trained facilitators and recorders. Community facilitation is part of broader models of community capacity building and, from research to peer review and accountability group development, we have sought to evolve our support of community-based skill development.

In many communities (particularly smaller rural communities, communities with diverse cultural dimensions or for communities of young people, disabled people, etc.), having local people as

'ambassadors' to a *SpeakOut* is encouraging to participation. People see a familiar face and come to participate.

In particular, we have found the involvement of community facilitators who speak local community

languages to be vital in certain areas. Often, having translators can be impractical and trained community facilitators with key local languages can ensure as wide a range of participation as possible.

We provide training and support to community facilitators — for example, facilitation work is paid, we provide reference letters, we carefully acknowledge community facilitators' contributions in our written material and we fully brief and debrief *SpeakOut* sessions with community facilitators and recorders, including their feedback into our reporting of *SpeakOut* events to clients.

Figure 6. A community facilitator draws a local in to 'speak out'

Figure 7. ReVisioning Footscray *SpeakOut* Facilitator Debriefing

Issue stalls and interactive activities

An exciting development for the *SpeakOut* has been the application of more interactive exercises[1] at issue stalls. Where we once had simply facilitated discussions with local people participating in *SpeakOut*s, we now augment that with a whole range of interactive displays and consultation 'games'. Some of the activities we have devised as part of recent *SpeakOut*s are described below:

'Where do you live?' map — at the registration stall, we generally ask people to place a dot on a large laminated map or aerial photo to represent the location of their house. It is a good 'ice breaker' and introduces people to the interactive format of the *SpeakOut*. At the end of the *SpeakOut*, one is left with a spatial representation of where the participants have come from.

**Figure 8. Locating where people live**

Vote with your hands — participants create a handprint in a specific colour to indicate their interest in dimensions of an issue (for example, arts and culture). There is a legend corresponding to each colour and people annotate their hand print with comments about their 'vote'. In addition, participants can use colours corresponding to the Vote With Your Hands to mark an A4-size map to show the desirable locations related (again, arts and culture as an example).

Figure 9. 'Voting with your hands' (mid-process)

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1 We acknowledge the inspiration of various community planning sources in the development of these *SpeakOut* activities. Please refer to the references at the conclusion of the paper.

Mapping exercises — participants can be involved in many sorts of mapping exercises. We have asked, for example, that participants map 'preferred' retail precincts (i.e. what they would like to see in the future). These preferences are drawn on a laminated map with a photo taken before the map was wiped clean for the next person.
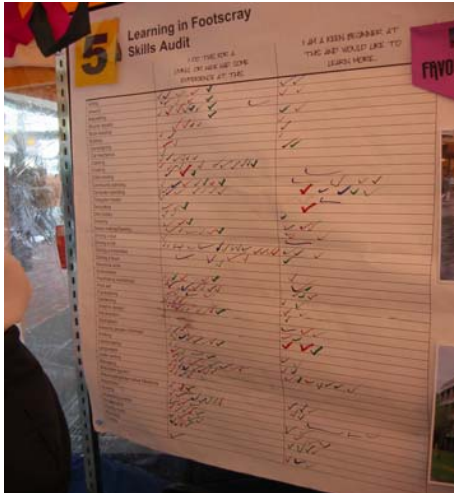
Skills audit — an audit undertaken to discover what people in the community are skilled at already and what they are interested in learning. In the ReVisioning Footscray *SpeakOut*, this was managed through the use of an interactive graph showing a comprehensive range of skill areas with participants invited to place a tick next to areas of interest. This exercise was particularly (and unexpectedly) popular with the Footscray community, possibly because newly arriving migrants are focussed on education needs.

Figure 10. Community skills audit on display

Roaming range maps — asking people to map out their 'roaming range' (i.e. where they travel to on foot, by bicycle, on public transport, etc.) is a useful tool for developing composite pictures of how public spaces are used (or avoided). Participants are invited to mark on A4-size maps their usual/ preferred routes for walking, cycling and for using public transport and maps are posted on the wall for all to refer to.

Housing 'building block' exercise — using building blocks (Lego or similar), we have experimented with participants constructing housing density/height around their city/neighbourhood. Each participant built their own density/form map, it was photographed and the base map cleared for the next participant. This proved a very useful exercise in a neighbourhood where there was development and planning pressure for increased densities but community members were concerned — it allowed people to express where higher density development was acceptable, specifically, and that the community saw as limits to heights.

Figure 11. A housing 'building block' exercise

Building a 'fun' graph — We have employed a graphing exercise where people were invited to build up sections of a large 'bar graph' with symbols reflective of how they enjoy different types of recreation (for example: team sport; individual sport; enjoying nature; restaurants and cafes; pubs and clubs; attending organised events and hanging out). Each person is given a symbol, with a space to write comments, which are added to the 'bar graph' according to the category, giving us an indication of preferred ways of enjoying the community.

Figure 12. Constructing a 'fun' graph

The benefits of introducing these interactive exercises into the *SpeakOut* processes have been multiple and, in some instances, surprising. We have found, for example, that:

- by supporting visual exercises (as opposed to language-based tasks) with facilitators speaking local languages, a greater cross-section of people with English as a second language (as well as people with low literacy) are able to participate

- we generate committed support through entire processes by resourcing community facilitation training and that that support is a catalyst (and occasionally also a 'peer mediation' where there is conflict) to wider community participation

- using exercises has meant that children can participate in the 'main' *SpeakOut* rather than necessarily having to have their own activities separate from the adult consultation

- the mix of media means appeals to a wider audience, allowing people with different skills and strengths to 'shine', not just the people who speak eloquently

- we have gathered more specific evidence regarding 'hotspots' or problems as people, if facilitated well, are able to narrow down where problems (for example, traffic congestion or fears for personal safety) occur on the maps we supply.

Conclusions

The *SpeakOut* model is one pioneered in 1990 in Adelaide and applied in close to 20 community participation processes throughout Australia since that time. In the fifteen years of our practice, the *SpeakOut* has remained a fundamentally engaging, fun and productive method of gathering a wide range of community viewpoints on 'complex' topics such as urban renewal, community needs and aspirations and future visions of people's communities.

In those 15 years, we have also refined the *SpeakOut* to include more direct facilitation involvement of community members and more creative and interactive activities through which people can make their contributions and thoughts felt.

We'll leave the last word to a community member from Footscray, who said about the *SpeakOut* held there in December 2004:

"This *SpeakOut* is the best [consultation] Council has ever done"

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The authors are pleased to discuss any aspect of the *SpeakOut* model with interested community and professional people and can be contacted at the following email addresses:
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References

While a wide range of reference material informs our community planning practice, the following references have been used specifically in the development of exercises applied at various *SpeakOut*s:

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