

6

DELIBERATIVE DESIGN AND STORYTELLING IN THE AUSTRALIAN CITIZENS' PARLIAMENT

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Over the past decade, several deliberation scholars and practitioners have discovered the importance of personal stories in public deliberation.¹ Stories describe experiences that relate to some kind of problem. They are told through the eyes of a character, who typically is both the protagonist and the storyteller. When people tell complete stories, their tale has a clear beginning and end, plus something in the middle, like a surprising turn of events, that makes it seem worthwhile to the listeners, who derive meaning from its telling.

The Australian Citizens' Parliament (ACP) provides a special opportunity to examine the role of storytelling in deliberative events because it provides a complete transcript of the small-group discussions that constituted the heart of its process. Though the organizers provided the Citizen Parliamentarians (CPs) with complex analytic tasks each day, the CPs sat in small groups of just six or seven persons each and found the time to tell stories.

It is our contention that one cannot understand what transpired at the ACP until one takes stock of those stories, and that is the purpose of this chapter. We investigate the stories citizens told about their own—and other people's—experiences, as well as how the other CPs responded to these stories. In addition, the variety of discussion methods at the ACP lets us consider how those influenced the telling of stories over the course of the four-day event.

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What Stories Accomplish

Storytelling is an innate part of human life, a fundamental way that we make sense of our social world.² From infancy on, we listen to and learn from stories, and stories are pervasive through many aspects of our adult lives. Stories reproduce cultural values, and many of our fundamental understandings of morality come to us in narrative form.³ We use stories to describe events in our lives, give meaning to these events, and even make sense of who we are.⁴ Thus, it should not be surprising to find that people in deliberative forums exchange personal stories.

Deliberation involves both analytic and social purposes (see chapter 7), and storytelling has implications for how participants accomplish these tasks. Even humble “introduction” stories can help deliberators accomplish social tasks by building relationships, displaying values, and establishing a shared understanding of their goals and priorities.⁵ Stories also bring deeply held values and beliefs into the conversation and can thereby invite perspective taking and dialogue in the group.⁶

Stories can accomplish analytic tasks by helping group members build arguments and think through the implications of different policy choices.⁷ Stories provide examples of people’s experiences related to the issue at hand and can influence the group’s decision making by pointing out positive or negative aspects of a proposal or by critiquing expert sources.⁸ These “argument stories” can be adversarial, in that they highlight divisions among deliberators to sharpen disagreements within the group, or they can be consensus-building stories, which are told in a way that demonstrates connections between different people’s experiences and promotes a collaborative approach to problem solving. Finally, some stories told during deliberation can be used to help frame a vision for the future, which can enable people to imagine how policies might influence their communities in the long term.⁹

Research Questions and Method

The ACP may have elicited a rich variety of stories by using a varied set of deliberative methods.¹⁰ The primary format was similar to a 21st Century Town Meeting, but the organizers added many other processes.¹¹ On Day 2, participants engaged in a World Café discussion that involved switching tables every fifteen minutes.¹² Day 3 featured a “fishbowl” session, in which