

CRITICAL THINKING STUDY INSIGHTS PART 1: THE RESEARCHER

mosaiclab.com.au/news-all-posts/2017/1/30/critical-thinking-research-indicating-broad-benefits



“There is a general distrust between people who make decisions and everyday citizens. Many don’t believe that citizens have the capacity to interrogate information successfully or to make difficult decisions – but they do. Critical thinking enhances their capacity to do this.

— Lyn Carson, Professor of Applied Politics, University of Sydney Business School and Research Director, newDemocracy Foundation.

From increased trust (between both participants themselves and between participants and decision makers) to increased ability for participants to question and understand information (including complex or technical data), the work is highlighting how these skills can enhance and transform both processes and participants.

While critical thinking is not a new concept, the project is unique because it involves testing techniques in ‘real time’. The work has seen us take activities developed in a university context and use them with citizens in live sessions while modifying and improving our approach as we go, based on results and observations.

TWO PERSPECTIVES: INTERVIEWS WITH THE RESEARCHER & THE FACILITATOR

While we await the development of the final report, we have some interesting and thought-provoking insights into the process to share with you from two different perspectives – the researcher and the facilitator. This post is in two parts - stay tuned for the next interview with MosaicLab facilitator Nicole Hunter next week!

INTERVIEW WITH THE RESEARCHER

Lyn Carson, Professor of Applied Politics, University of Sydney Business School and Research Director, newDemocracy Foundation.

Why did you get involved in this study?

There were a number of influences. I have spent 25 years teaching in the field of deliberative democracy, and there hasn't been much research around everyday citizens and their ability or capacity to think critically. My past work included designing a course on using critical thinking for the University of Sydney Business School. This forced me to consider practical ways to apply these concepts, because I had to cater for thousands of diverse students, some of whom had cultural differences in terms of thinking and reasoning.

When MosaicLab contacted me about doing some research I was immediately interested. Not only is it unusual for a consulting firm to consider commissioning research, it's also unusual to be so open to investigating critical thinking (which sets MosaicLab apart), but it was very timely, because I wanted to trial exercises developed in a university context and apply them in a deliberative setting such as a citizens' jury.



Hobsons Bay 2030 community panel members 'speed dating' with speakers (witnesses) and asking questions inspired by critical thinking concepts.



Hobsons Bay 2030 community panel members discussing how to apply critical thinking to their deliberations and using MosaicLab's new critical thinking cards.

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— Lyn Carson, Professor of Applied Politics, University of Sydney Business School and Research Director, newDemocracy Foundation.

What has this work highlighted so far?

When I first interviewed participants about what critical thinking meant to them, they gave varied and interesting responses. After being exposed to these processes, 8 of 9 participants gave extraordinary, fascinating definitions. And I thought to myself ‘these people really get it now’. I was delighted at their response. It has proven that these concepts work when applied to the everyday citizen, and that critical thinking is not just the realm of academics, researchers and the like.

The kind of questions participants are asking during a deliberative process (after they have been exposed to critical thinking concepts) are not the kind of questions you usually see participants ask. We know it is enhancing their ability to interrogate information, which is why, later, we introduced these skills into the South Australian Nuclear process. We know we have something significant here.

Additionally, after being introduced to critical thinking techniques, the trust between participants improved, and participants not only trusted government a little more than before, but that they can also better understand how difficult it is to make some of these big decisions.

Academics and researchers across the world are showing interest in this process, and newDemocracy has commissioned a new video that explains the six key approaches or skills to apply when attempting to think more critically.





Jurors on the Geelong Citizens' Jury hear from and interview experts (witnesses) after participating in critical thinking activities.

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Why is critical thinking useful in a deliberative process?

There is a general distrust between people who make decisions and everyday citizens.

Many don't believe that citizens have the capacity to interrogate information successfully or to make difficult decisions – but they do. Critical thinking enhances their capacity to do this,

It is essential that citizens have the ability to question 'expert' knowledge. Every citizen needs a way to test claimed expertise, so critical thinking is relevant to life, not just to a deliberative process.

Additionally, decision makers are reassured by the integration of critical thinking into a process. Citizens are reasoning around not just what they know or hear but are getting 'underneath' opinion and seeking facts. This is particularly relevant in a technical or

scientific context, where decision-makers can fear that citizens are unable to grasp the depth of a complex issue.

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newDemocracy's Research Director, Lyn Carson, was commissioned by Mosaic Lab to develop a critical thinking exercise for citizens' juries. The exercise was designed to enhance the analytical capacity of everyday citizens. It was first trialled in Hobsons Bay (Victoria) in August 2016, then in Adelaide (South Australia) in October 2016. This film was developed by newDemocracy (with creative input from Brett Hennig) and can be used as one element of the critical thinking exercise.

Tell us more about your approach to this research.

Firstly, we conducted research via the Hobsons Bay City Council's community panel. We interviewed participants at the beginning and end of the process, and used activities to introduce critical thinking concepts to them. I observed the process, and worked with MosaicLab to refine their approach by reflecting on what was and wasn't working.

These learnings were then brought into the South Australian Nuclear Citizens' Jury – and the response to our approach confirmed that these concepts work best when coupled with a number of 'fact checking' tools and exercises.

It's an 'action learning' approach, where we modify as we go. At every iteration, we are trying different ways of delivering these tools and concepts, including ways for participants to identify and capture information gaps and what further information is required.

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What's next?

I am now writing the research report and this will likely appear on MosaicLab's website – we'll also link to this report from the newDemocracy website.

We will also happily support anyone looking to incorporate these critical thinking exercises into any 'mini-public' they are undertaking.

Questions for experts devised by members of the Geelong Citizens' Jury in a critical thinking activity.

STAY TUNED – FABULOUS, EASY TO USE RESOURCES IN DEVELOPMENT

If you would like to see participants in your processes better equipped to grapple with data, make informed decisions and provide high quality input, stay tuned. The learnings, tools and techniques coming out of this project will be able to be applied to a wide range of scenarios and MosaicLab is working on some fantastic activities and resources you can use in your own processes.

In the meantime, take a look at some of our [other free resources](#)

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