

511

Referendum Education in Australia

This supplementary submission:

- further unpacks the three-pronged approach made as recommendations made in the original submission;
- includes PDFs of examples of information design presented at the Inquiry hearing on 5 November 2009.

Polarising positions of Yes/No or Winning/Losing can dominate the agenda of civic education to the extent where focus shifts from the real priority: building quality public information materials through which citizens can engage, deliberate and ultimately cast a ballot.

.....

CONTENT DEVELOPMENT how to get there

1. MODEL (Pilot Study)

WHY MODEL?

- To simulate what the Commonwealth's public information materials might comprise in actuality;
- To allow a closer assessment of their potential efficacy via inexpensive and rapid prototyping in physical form derived form.
- For panel members and parliamentarians, the 'model' arrived at provides the opportunity to evaluate, validate and further refine their ideas and findings in embodied form.
- It allows approaches (called co-design) to be developed and in place well before a referendum is called.

WHY A PANEL?

- To give some distance from claims of partisanship that have plagued previous iterations of Yes/No cases.
- To move from an adversarial to a more discursive approach of contested positions.

WHO WOULD BE INVOLVED? WHAT SKILLS ARE NEEDED?

A trans-disciplinary team. Suggested areas of expertise required are:

- CONSTITUTIONAL LAW: subject expertise;
- EDUCATION: particularly in the field of community engagement;
- WRITING: can use language eloquently to clarify complex ideas; to eliminate the partisan flavour dominating previous referendum arguments;
- INFORMATION DESIGN: can make ideas tangible, even when concepts are at nascent stage, as propositional response deriving from recommendations;
- PUBLIC KNOWLEDGE: to give genuine insight eg of perceived deficits in previous public referendum materials (older voters) and perceived lack of knowledge in the process/how to best use emerging media (younger voters).
- OTHER: choice dependent on expertise needed during various stages of the process.

WHAT ROLE IS THERE FOR MP'S?

- They will determine referendum proposal
- They will provide raw data for both positions.

WHAT IS WRONG WITH AN ADVERSARIAL APPROACH?

- It polarises rather than informs.
- It can lead to misinformation and extravagant claims. Ultimately, it leads to crude, blunt information without nuance.

WHAT OTHER MEANS COULD BE EMPLOYED TO INITIALLY DISCERN VOTERS' CONCERNS?

- MPs could distribute a series of questions via their own newsletters or websites to constituents asking of their Referendum experiences, concerns, lack of knowledge, what they feel is a deficit to understanding materials and so on. Results could be posted online or there could be a drop box at the electorate office, local post office, etc. This data would be passed on to the Referendum panel for review.

WHERE COULD THIS PANEL BE 'HOUSED'?

- Be part of the portfolio of the newly-formed Office of the Information Commissioner. Where this portfolio has specific functions, it could also extend to public information materials associated with referendums.

2. IMPLEMENT

- Recommendations arrived at in the modelling stage would be implemented – with necessary adjustments - by an independent panel. Members could include, but not be limited to, the modelling panel. This panel would oversee various aspects of implementation - such as working with external professionals eg information design – to ensure quality of content and of design quality. It takes the role the 'audience advocate'.

3. EVALUATE

WHAT IS THERE TO EVALUATE?

- To discover strengths and weaknesses of the rollout of public information materials: Did voters use the officially sanctioned materials? How did they use them? What media was most beneficial and why? Was the information comprehensive enough to allow the voter to make an informed decision? Were the arguments clearly and fairly stated? Were secondary support materials used and were they useful?

WHY?

- To better inform the next Referendum's public information materials.

WHO WOULD DO THESE EVALUATIONS?

- Academics whose ongoing research encompasses civic education via ARC grants.
-

DELIVERY OF CONTENT a multi-platform approach

Overall design needs to be modular in approach to better target particular groups and levels of understanding.

PRINT PAMPHLET

- Delivered to every voter, available to all
- Needs to be designed/written with boldness and relevance
- Can carry words plus images/visual clues
- Is portable/transferable

WHAT LEVEL OF INFORMATION COULD BE CONTAINED IN THE OFFICIAL PAMPHLET?

- Proposal
- What this proposal aims to do ie why it would be beneficial to the community, make governance more seamless, reduce duplication etc.
- Two positions outlined
- Series of questions posed to each position to answer
- Part of the Constitution under evaluation, annotated.
- Links to further information in other formats/in more detail eg web
- Links to official partisan sites

WEB AND OTHER ELECTRONIC MEDIA

In 2007-2008, just 67% of Australian households had home internet access (ABS, 18.12.2008). Of this group, 78% have Broadband access. Hence, web delivery should be considered a strong platform though with the above figures in mind.

WHAT LEVEL OF INFORMATION SHOULD BE CONTAINED IN AN OFFICIAL WEBSITE?

- As per pamphlet, but can also accommodate the moving image eg animation, and more interactive components eg blogs.

TELEVISION

- Short animated sequences explaining aspects of a proposal can be unpacked in this platform.

WHAT LEVEL OF INFORMATION SHOULD BE CONTAINED IN A TELEVISION FORMAT?

- Concise versions of both positions of proposal.

RADIO

- SBS is particularly useful for those whose first language is not English and who prefer to receive information this way.

WHAT LEVEL OF INFORMATION SHOULD BE CONTAINED IN AN OFFICIAL RADIO ADDRESS?

- As per pamphlet, but spoken by three voices, and in smaller sound bites ie ability for aspects of a proposal, as identified via the set questions, to be used.

AURAL/ FACE-TO-FACE

- Useful for those such as indigeñous communities who traditionally share information through aural tradition.

WHY WOULD ALL LEVELS OF MATERIALS BE PROFESSIONALLY DESIGNED?

- To ensure engagement and seamless delivery across media;
- To ensure appropriate visual language is user-friendly;
- To ensure that arguments are visually presented with equal status so that the reader can unpack positions with ease and have insight/ space for reflection through visual schematising of arguments.
