What we've learned about evaluating discussion events

Practical tips on evaluating discussion events aimed at adults, gained through our experience with running the Dana Centre, our adults-only café and events space.

When you're planning the event...

Seek to promote successful dialogue by aiming to ensure that speakers and participants feel:

- **physically comfortable** and can see and hear adequately
- **emotionally comfortable**, with a sense they belong at the event
- that their **intellect is respected**, their **contribution valued** and they have **learned something**
- that the event generates **social capital** by being worthwhile and constructive.

Select a topic that has **controversial angles**, and then research up to five themes to tackle during the event. To get an insight into attitudes towards the topic, consider running a focus group – a structured discussion with 8-10 potential audience members. Then agree the **aims and objectives** for the event and invite a balance of speakers to contribute, plus a chairperson.

To gauge whether the event is a success...

Depending on the resources available, you could **observe** the event, and/or **conduct a survey**.

Observation is a simple but valuable tool. Use an observation sheet to note:

- whether all can see and hear, how many stay to the end or beyond
- discussion length, how much the chair has to intervene and why
- discussion quality – does the debate move forward?
- whether all participate, do people take sides, is anyone losing interest
- level of emotional engagement throughout, and how people seem at the end.

There are many options for conducting a survey, including:

- self-completion paper questionnaires are quick and cheap but you have no control over the sample, and tend to hear predominantly from dissatisfied customers
- interviews face-to-face or on the phone are time-consuming but you can choose a representative sample of people, and probe for more detailed answers
- postal questionnaires can be effective but you may need to send follow-up letters to reach a return rate of 60% at which the data is considered reliable

- email questionnaires can be effective especially if sent out on Fridays, as people answer them at work

- web pop-up surveys tend to get a low response rate but may sometimes be the only way.

You can **interview the speakers** to see how they felt about the event.

A focus group conducted after the event gives a rich insight into audience members' reactions, but will not yield data from which numerical conclusions can be drawn.

To make future events even better...

Compare your survey or observation results with the original aims and objectives, and report back to the team the positives and negatives for constructive future planning.

Further resources:

Find out about how to run a discussion event by reading another sheet in the *What we've learned* series:

- What we've learned about running discussion events

Read more about the indicators that dialogue is taking place in an event and afterwards:

www.danacentre.org.uk/documents/pdf/questionnaire_recipe_book.pdf

See a planning guide for a discussion event:

www.danacentre.org.uk/aboutus/eventdiy/planning_guidelines

Find out how to run a focus group:

www.danacentre.org.uk/aboutus/eventdiy/focus_groups

Read more about how to observe an event:

www.danacentre.org.uk/aboutus/eventdiy/observing

See a sample audience questionnaire: www.danacentre.org.uk/aboutus/eventdiy/audience-questionnaires

See a sample interview with speakers:

www.danacentre.org.uk/aboutus/eventdiy/speaker_interviews

Read a paper on how to write good questionnaires:

www.danacentre.org.uk/documents/pdf/questionnaire_recipe_book.pdf