

A Social Innovation to Rethinking Parent Engagement

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As we think about the theme of this issue -- "Social Innovations in Community Civic Engagement: Parents as Consumers of Education?" -- we might do well to start with several questions:

- *Why do educators need to be engaged with parents?*
- *From their perspective, why should parents want to be engaged with you? What do they want from being engaged?*

Spend a minute or two to reflect on these questions. Then, perhaps jot down your responses.

As experts, either through formal (e.g., professional) expertise, or through personal (lived) expertise, we almost always have normal, knee jerk answers to the questions proposed, let's rethink those answers.

Let's start by rethinking what we mean by engagement (either civic or community), as well as how that rethinking may lead us to the steps we need to take to bridge what Daniel Yankelovich calls "the expert-public gap."

The Metaphors of Engagement¹

The term "engagement," whether "civic" or "community," or any of a number of other possible modifiers, is a metaphor that brings different images to different people's minds. When I've asked people what image comes to mind when I say the word "engagement," I get three different kinds of answers:

1. There are responses that bring to mind what I would call *rules of engagement*, a phrase that conjures up images of the military, or the 2000 movie with that title. Rules of engagement are essentially rules that govern the conditions under which -- times, places, and ways -- soldiers may come into contact with the other side, the enemy. They are designed to maximize one's control over the situation, one's own safety and, if necessary, inflict the greatest damage on the other.
2. There are responses that bring to mind the image of gears engaging -- two or more objects coming together as part of a larger mechanism. When those objects come together correctly, the mechanism works well. When they don't, there's a terrible grinding experience.
3. The final set of responses this term brings to mind, is of images of people getting engaged to be married -- what I've come to call "reciprocal engagement." In *reciprocal engagement* people come together with a

sense of reciprocity -- of giving and getting, of both teaching the other, learning from, and learning with the other. In reciprocal engagement all parties are engaged with others in ways that brings the others in as collaborators or co-constructors.

The Expert-Public Gap²

Daniel Yankelovich, once referred to as the “Dean of public opinion polling” and co-founder with Cyrus Vance of the Public Agenda Foundation,³ has argued that there is typically a gap between the public and formal experts in any field. This gap is created because experts tend to view the world through the lenses of their area(s) of expertise -- education, economics, public policy, technology, etc. -- while the public tends to look at the world through the lenses of daily experience. This leads to three kinds of differences between the ways experts and the public view the world, which I will briefly illustrate using education as a focus:

- Different points of departure:
When thinking about curriculum, school leaders tend to focus on grade-level curriculum or on how students will move through the curriculum from year to year. Parents, on the other hand, tend to concentrate on what their child needs now or is learning at any given moment.
- Different/confusing uses of language:
When talking about curriculum, and sometimes when

talking about how students are progressing from grade to grade, educators may talk about scope and sequence, or about scaled scores on standardized tests. At best, such language is opaque to parents, at other times it can alienate parents who really want to talk about whether their child is succeeding or not, or how much progress their child is making, often defined by a teacher-given grade.

- Different notions of what counts as a solution: When describing school or grade-level improvements, educators often work to provide programs that serve the needs of most, if not all, children at a given grade level, or who are experiencing different kinds of challenges. Parents, on the other hand, focus on whether the program engages their child(ren) in day-to-day experiences that help their child experience daily success.

These gaps are not insurmountable but closing them requires experts to change their perspective about, and approach to, parents.

Closing the Gap through Reciprocal Engagement

There are three broad reasons to engage with others, each of which is associated with a different metaphor of engagement:

1. To inform them, or tell them things we want them to

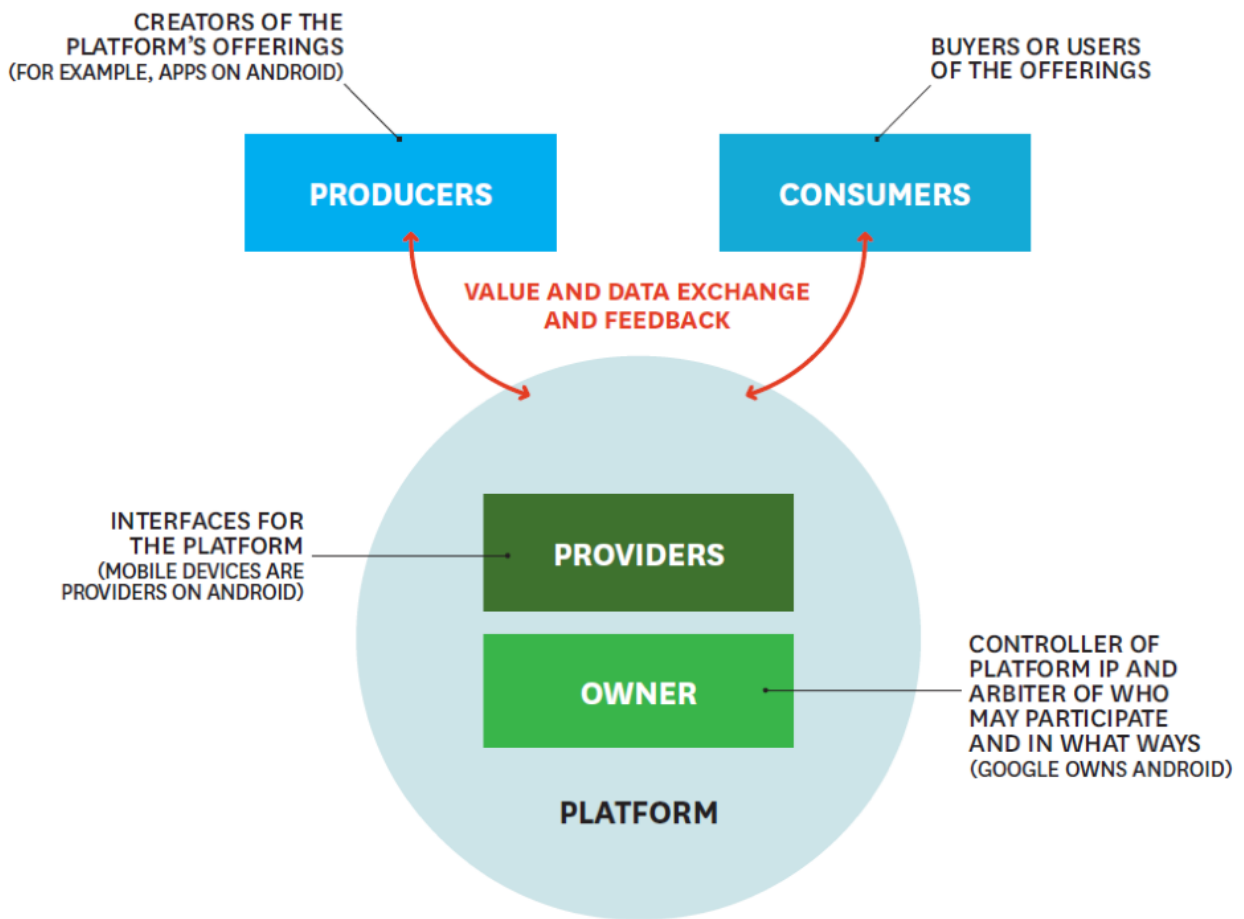
know -- most often associated with "rules of engagement;"

2. To get feedback from them, or hear their response to our directions, suggestions, or requests -- most often associated with mechanistic engagement or gears engaging; and
3. To build common ground or areas where we can work together so we can all be more effective in achieving individual and shared goals -- most often associated with reciprocal engagement.

It should be clear that reciprocal engagement requires that experts shift their relationship with parents, adjusting their language, eschewing expert terminology in favor of using words and concepts that connect with parents' experiences. They must also work to understand and connect with the parents "points of departure" -- often, where parents' concerns come from. At the same time, experts must work to understand what parents believe are acceptable solutions. Doing all of this can help close the expert-public gap.

Engagement as a Platform

One implication of closing the expert-public gap by moving to reciprocal engagement is the notion that such engagement creates something like a social platform in which "consumers" or "customers" and "producers" are interchangeable -- think Lyft or Air BnB.⁴



58 Harvard Business Review April 2016

In the model proposed by Van Alstyne, et. al., producers create the platform's offerings, while consumers buy or use the creator's offerings. In Lyft, for example, someone may be a driver on one day, but a rider of Lyft the next. Or I might stay in an Air BnB offering in one city, while someone else is staying in my house as an Air BnB user at the same time.

While the platform analogy to education is not perfect, talking about reciprocal engagement as creating a kind of platform in education might well be instructive.

The normal, pipeline view is that educators are the producers and that students go through the pipeline and

come out a finished product (e.g., with a diploma).

Students, or perhaps their parents, consume the service provided by the educators. Engagement between producers and consumers is either on the "rules of engagement" or "gears engaging" model.

If we think about shifting to a "reciprocal engagement model" we ask how and what educators, students, and teachers can give and get from each other; what they teach to, and learn from with each other. Indeed, great educators at all levels -- pre-K through graduate level -- will often say they learn as much from their students as they believe their students learn from them. And one of the premises of having students, parents, and educators together at meetings to develop and assess progress on Individual Education Plans (IEPs) is that each actor has lots to learn from the others. Together, they collaborate on, and co-construct, not only the student's learning plan, but the instructional plan of the educators, as well as co-construct the way the parent-student-teacher relationship will evolve to support those plans.

The Pottstown School District Example

We see this emerging in the Pottstown Early Action for Kindergarten Readiness (PEAK) program in the Pottstown School District and community. Over the last three years, we have been working with them to create opportunities for reciprocal engagement among teachers and those parents/families who have been least engaged with

district/community education programs. As part of this work, we've worked with the district to create a "family advisory council" (FAC) composed of interested, but disengaged parents/grandparents. And we've worked with the FAC to create "Let's Talk" forums in which parents come to talk with each other about specific issues -- e.g., bullying, behavior at home and school, homework, social-emotional learning, special education, and more. Each forum starts with a short presentation from the district after which participants break into small groups to talk about what they heard and what that might mean for their behavior and for the way they work with the school district. The FAC develops recommendations for parents and for the school district based on the results of those forums, recommendations which are then discussed, and when appropriate, implemented by the district. In this relationship, it's difficult to tell who is producer and who consumer, who is the expert and who is a non-expert.

Conclusion

Rethinking what we mean by engagement can lead us to rethink the roles of producer and consumer in education. Focusing on "reciprocal engagement" can, in turn, lead us to think of education as a platform in which the role of consumer and producer can shift among students, parents, and educators so that rather than thinking about buy-in, we think about the ways in which they become partners in co-constructing the educational experience of

each.

¹ Sokoloff, Harris. "Engaging the Public: How school boards can call for community involvement in important school decisions." *American School Board Journal*, September 2001, pp. 26-29.

² Yankelovich, Daniel. *Coming to Public Judgement: Making Democracy Work in a Complex World*. Syracuse University Press, 1991, pp. 91-98.

³ <https://www.publicagenda.org/>

⁴ Van Alstyne, Marshall W., Parker, Geoffrey G. and Choudary, Sangeet Paul "Pipelines, Platforms, and the New Rules of Strategy." *Harvard Business Review*, April 2016.