Continuums: classic, axis, cluster, card

Type of Activity: A number of ways that continuum's can be used as a group facilitation tool

Length: Flexi ½ hr – 1 hr depending on which continuum you are using

Purpose/Objectives: To encourage participants to express their opinions and explore different positions in a group process. This may also lead to people shifting their positions. Continuum tools can be particularly useful when supporting group decision making.

Group: These tools can be used with groups of varying size. However, they are most successful with groups of 30 or less, as this size enables all participants to actively participate and share with one another.

Facilitator knowledge and skills needed: Standard facilitation skills, with the ability to draw out peoples' reflections to a level beyond the superficial.

Resources needed: Card and markers can be useful.

Instructions:

Classic continuum:
A continuum can be particularly useful if the group you are working with is trying to decide between two key positions or if the group is trying to articulate different feelings and thoughts about an issue.

To create the continuum, clear the floor space (ideally, its good to have a space that is at least five metres lengthwise and 2 metres across). Now, explain that one end of the room represents position A and the other end represents position B and ask participants to stand and arrange themselves along the continuum to reflect their own views. If a participant strongly agrees with position A they will stand at that end of the room and if they strongly agree with point B they will stand at the other. There are also a range of positions in between the two ends of the continuum that participants can choose.

N.B. If standing is uncomfortable for participants, you can offer everyone a place marker and ask them where they would like it to be placed to represent their position. The facilitator can then play the role of moving the markers for people.

Example: If a group is trying to articulate their thoughts about sexism in Aotearoa New Zealand, you could have a continuum with 'sexism is prevalent in Aotearoa NZ' at one end of the continuum and 'sexism doesn't exist in Aotearoa NZ' at the other end. Participants then position themselves in relation to the continuum to show what they believe to be true. Once participants have placed

themselves on the continuum, the facilitator can invite participants from varying places to explain why they placed themselves in that position. The continuum serves a useful purpose of getting to find out where everyone in the group positions themselves (of course, this is limited in the sense that participants may position themselves in the place that they think others will find most acceptable, rather than articulating their honest views). After hearing from others, the facilitator can then offer participants the opportunity to shift their positions after hearing from others.

A decision-making example could be a group deciding whether or not they are going to support legalising same sex marriage. One end of the continuum would be 'yes, I think we should support same sex marriage equality' and the other end would be 'I don't think we should support same sex marriage equality'. In between, there may be positions like 'yes, I think we should, but I don't want to be too public about it' or 'I'm open to the idea, but only if .... group also supports it', or 'I think same sex couples should have all the same rights that heterosexual couples do, but I don't support marriage' etc etc. The facilitator can then use the continuum and the information that it provides to support he groups decision making process. (This tool is being written on the day that same sex marriage was legalised in Aotearoa NZ, hurrah!)

Axis:
To add another element to a classic continuum, you can make an axis. This is helpful when the group wants to develop a more nuanced understanding of various members positions. You begin with a classic continuum (as above) and, on completion of this conversation, add a second cross-secting continuum. A visual example is provided below.

Welfare Justice Focus

Campaign ——————————————— Education

Child Poverty Focus
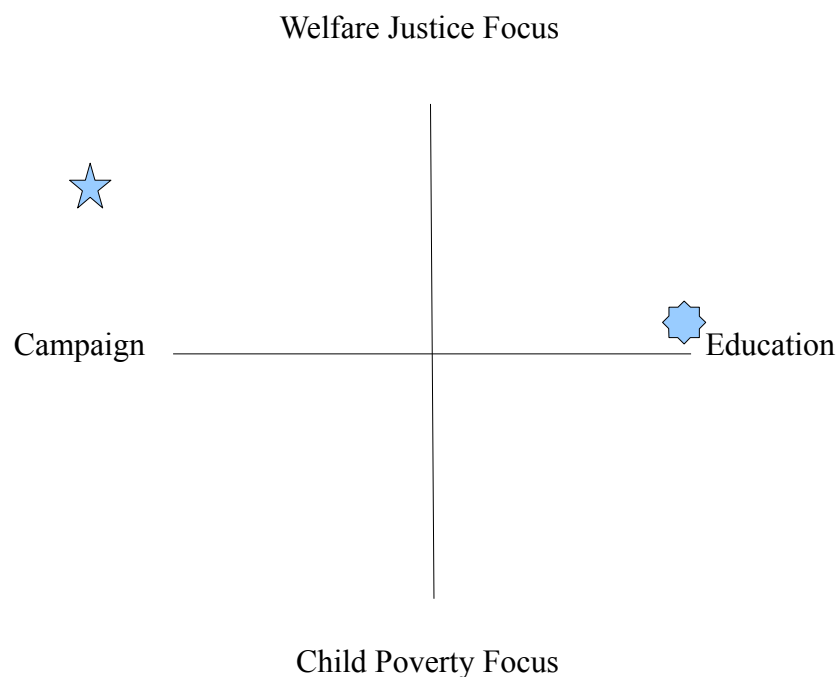
In this hypothetical example, a group working on poverty is trying to reach agreement on their key focus. Some members of the group want to focus on welfare justice while others want to focus on child poverty. The initial continuum explores this tension.

There is also disagreement within the group about *how* people want to work on poverty. Some group members want to run a campaign while others want to focus on community education. The addition of the second continuum's explores this conflict.

Rather than getting the group to switch places and create a new continuum, when you add the second continuum you combine the two. Participants move into a new configuration from the place that they are standing on the original continuum. So, if someone someone is standing on the welfare justice end of the continuum and they also want to work on a campaign, they move to the top left hand side of the continuum (⭐). If someone is in the middle of the first continuum, because they don't mind if they work on welfare justice or on child poverty, but they strongly believe in the importance of education work, they move to the middle right hand side of the axis (✴), and so on.

The axis can be used to create a more complex picture of where the group is at, before continuing the conversation from there.

Cluster:
The cluster isn't technically a continuum at all, but can be a useful way of having similar conversations.

In a cluster, a workshop participant stands in one part of the room and makes a statement about themselves. Everyone else then positions themselves in relation to that person, standing close if that statement is also true for them and further away if it is not. Another participant then moves to a free space in the room and makes a statement about themselves and the process is repeated.

This continues until all positions have been articulated. This activity can be done quickly, or it can be deepened by asking participants to share their reasons for where they are standing.

The cluster is useful as it is not limited to two ends of a continuum with a variety of positions in between. It is also more dynamic and active, with participants continuing to shift and move throughout the exercise.

Card:
This is my favourite version of the continuum. The set up is the same as the initial continuum, however in this version, rather than standing on a fixed position, the group stands off to the side.

The facilitator begins by explaining that the purpose of the exercise is is to generate as many different perspectives as possible. Therefore, participants are not limited to articulating their personal position and are welcome to place the card at any point along the continuum and argue from that place. This helps elicit more diverse views and provides the opportunity for participants to stand in 'someone else's shoes', articulating a perspective that they may personally disagree with.

The facilitator then provides a piece of card that says 'agree' and invites participants to place the card on the continuum and make an argument from that position. Participants place the card and make their arguments one at a time, with the next participant moving the card to a new place. This creates a dynamic energy, with the card moving back and forth along the timeline. Participants can move the card and speak as often as they like, as long as there is space for everyone to participate. Participants passion often becomes evident as they hurry to move the card. If the energy is lagging, the facilitator can 'play the devils advocate' by placing the card in an unpopular position and making an argument from that perspective. This often encourages swift responses from re-engaged participants.

Once the group has articulated a large range of perspectives, the facilitator can invite reflections about the exercise, how it was for the group, and what they noticed. The exercise can be finished by inviting participants to stand on the continuum and show their own personal position (as you would in the classic continuum). When working with non-profit organisations, I have finished the exercise by asking the group to stand where they believe their organisation is positioned. This often leads to useful clarifications and sometimes highlights lack of organisational clarity about policy positions.

Facilitation tip: It is important to think about how the use of a continuum fits within the rest of your workshop design. The use of a continuum is not necessarily sufficient in and of itself, and requires skilfully facilitated dialogue in order to be a valuable exercise.