
STREET DEBATE

THE WORD CARRIER



A DISCOVERY GUIDE



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What is a Word Carrier?

A Word Carrier is a workshop that uses public areas and spaces to gather opinions of citizens. Using a question that deliberately appeals to shared experience, passers-by engage in discussions around a certain theme. The question and its answers are then reflected on large boards placed in public to cause some interaction, in order for the survey to continue and for a debate to take place.



It allows access to a large pool of opinions by enlarging the involvement of a large public and in particular, those who may feel their opinions are not valued. It facilitates consultation of a varied sample of the population on a given theme, and sets the basis for a study, an action or any citizen-based initiative.

The Word Carrier permit to develop some street debate with citizens that usually do not express in public their political and societal opinions.

A Word Carrier can achieve several objectives, namely:

- It gives value to every participant's point of view, whether controversial or not, in order to create a mosaic of the diversity in thought. In other words, stances that one does not share are still displayed (although, within permissible boundaries), as they are a testimony coming from personal experience.
- It opens an area to active discussion and listening for people. This allows constructive arguments to emerge, as well as construction of arguments, which the interviewees may not have been able to properly formulate before.
- It allows exchange and debate by displaying opinions that should be in part diverse and in part unique/unshared by the vast majority of society.
- It gives participants time to think about a topic, which affects them, or to shed new light on a topic, which may affect people they know.
- This enables the re-purposing (or re-appropriation) of an area for gathering and exchange among persons who did not know one another before (e.g. from different cultural, national or indeed, social backgrounds, or from different generations). It favours social engagement.
- It creates encounters with the « unknown » that lies in the same area. Discussions can happen with investigators or with other participants

The Word Carrier is not:

- **A tool to convey specific information:** going into depth in the topic must be done elsewhere (for example, at a table a few spaces away with refreshments, where participants who wish to continue their exchange may gather and carry on).
- **A tool for activism:** the facilitator should allow the participants to organize their thoughts, or their point of view, on the subject at hand, and should not convey values or ideas as guidelines for participants to follow.

Organising a Word Carrier

Considerations

There are several steps to hurdle over before achieving this type of workshop, and sufficient time should be given in order to gather facilitators and prepare a Word Carrier. The requirements are outlined below.

1. Choosing the theme and the question;
2. Testing and validating the question (if the question is not validated, it will require another test) ;
3. Choice of venue and moment;
4. Organisation of the team of facilitators;
5. Setting up the venue.

The entire process can take time (from one day to several). It varies according to the goal, the experience of the team, whether the workshop is at an event, the objectives of the organisers and so on.

Human factors: A workshop team should ideally comprise of 3 to 6 facilitators. Depending on the situation, each facilitator may adopt a specific role, or even, on the other hand, be versatile. There should generally be one scribe in charge of writing the boards, one person to physically organise the boards in order, a photographer and several interviewers. As far as possible, one of the latter should be an organiser to which all other facilitators can look to for advice or reference.

Weather: Being outdoor, the weather is crucial in the success of a Word Carrier. Rain or adverse conditions will not be conducive to people stopping to discuss opinions, so it would be ill-advised to organise such a workshop if the forecasts do not seem favourable – unless there is a backup area where the workshop can take place, or if the area is covered.

Choosing the theme and the question

Together, organizers first shortlist a number of themes they wish to address about during the workshop and eventually chose one they feel is the most appropriate in terms of culture, lifestyle, ability to engage with pedestrians. They then devise a question, or series of questions, to stimulate thought and debate around that theme. Remember that there is no stupid question !

This has two implications. Firstly, anybody and everybody should be able to answer the questions, regardless of their level of education, social background, age or gender. Secondly, a person discovering this unusual installation as stroll through the streets should be able to answer the questions hung.

This is to say that the survey must appeal to them, and the question should be one which can be answered easily, lest they move on without stopping to voice their opinion at all.

Some examples are listed below:

Why do you live here?

When did you felt different ?

What do we over-consume?

Is ecology a matter for rich people?

Is it easier for a man to succeed in life?

Can we live without petrol ?

Do you feel European ?

What make you happy ? – What make you angry ?

Can we all live together ?

Can we change the world make shopping ?

The world would be more fair if.....

The life would be even more (adjective: such as peaceful, green, beautiful etc....) in (name of the city, village, neighbourhood) if.....

What is important for you in your neighbourhood ?



The discussion taking place during the workshop will guide the interviews towards those topics interviewers wish to tackle – bearing in mind that the objective is not to influence opinions or get specific answers out of people, but rather to obtain the opinion of a wilful participant on a specific subject.

Testing the survey question

Despite the thought process in designing the survey, it is necessary to actually verify that passers-by can easily understand and answer the questions proposed, if they appreciate them, and whether they evoke memories or experiences. The questions should be formulated in a way which encourages free thought without inadvertently guiding answers discussions into a specific area.

In pairs, interviewers, acting as investigators, stroll through the area they have chosen with a board on which the question is printed. The aim is to catch people's attention while remaining relaxed and approachable.



This serves as a preliminary survey to make sure the topic and question involved are appropriate. The answers collected are documented – if the question is deemed suitable, those answers become a resource for the first “answer” boards to be displayed at the beginning of the workshop.

Confirming the question

Following the preliminary survey, interviewers-facilitators share the answers they collected among each other and discuss their sentiment on the outcome. It is necessary to determine if the question works – if it does not, a new brainstorming begins to reformulate the question, or even to devise a new one. Either way, it is important to repeat the previous step to make ascertain that the new proposition serves as intended, until a fitting question is found.



In order to verify that the question is interesting and can interest a large public you may also use your family and relatives as “cobaye”. Indeed each facilitator can confirm the question with a specific target group compose with a very diverse public as explain a facilitator “To verify a question I use to call my grand-mother and my brother, and meet my best friend, my hair cutter and the waiter of my favourite bar; if all of them have something to say, I’m quite sure that we have a good question !”.

Collecting the first answers

To start the street debate you will need to hang the question and some “first answer” to make the workshop understandable for the passers-by: one question, different answers. To do that you can re-use the answer that you collected during the test of the question.

You can also go to meet some people that you know and that will for sure have a different opinions, feelings, stories or experiences about a same question. The idea is to hang from the beginning some very diverse answer to not “oriented” the workshop versus a specific kind of question.

Indeed, the passers-by should directly answer that it possible to give his/her own answer without some “filter”. If from the beginning, the answers are very different, the passers-by will feel authorize to express his/her own specific views.

To start the workshop, you need at least 4-5 boards with the answer and maximum 8-10 (to let some space for new answers).

Identifying a venue for the workshop

Now that the questions intended for the survey have been gathered, it is important to find an area suitable for the workshop, and not all spaces are well-adapted for events of this kind.

Outdoor logistics should be considered (for example, there needs to be available space to hang up the boards). Organisers should understand the vicinity of their workshop in terms of sociology of the public, influx of pedestrians and the use and purpose of the selected public space. Noise from construction or traffic will induce fatigue in participants as well as organisers and will hinder the smooth-running of the event. The area must be welcoming for people to stop and take the time to read as well harbour an exchange one of the interviewers.

It is necessary to envision how the workshop can be set up in order to be visible for all, and how to make it attractive to the eye. It is crucial to arrange the boards so that they seem as part of the scenery and not as eye-sore.



The venue may be divided into sub-spaces which can be set up a few metres from one another – distancing the different sub-spaces can be critical in making a successful or failing workshop. Each sub-area can be

used for a different group of interviewers, or for the scribe to be able to print out the opinions of participants.

As with choosing the question, if the space is not deemed appropriate after a visit by the organisers, another space should be considered using the aspects mentioned.

Choosing the good moment

To make a street debate in the same square on Monday morning at 7am, on Saturday at midnight or on Sunday at mid-day it's obviously not the same thing. A public space may have a different identity, function or public according to the moment. To each hour of the day will correspond a certain public: end of the school, lunch break, after-work etc... The choice of the day is also very important, during the working day there is less people in the street. The week end, people have usually more time for their free time.

Obviously the choice of the moment can be also related to your specific target. If you aim to reach in particular young people, the Saturday night might be a good option and if you want to reach a public of student a day during the week will be more appropriated. Of course the choice of the moment depend of many different local and cultural factors. The period of the year can also modify your debate (more tourist than locals). You can also focus your action during a specific day that gather a specific public (event, festival or other traditional and sub culture meetings). Well you should choose your moment and not pick it by chance.

Organising the team

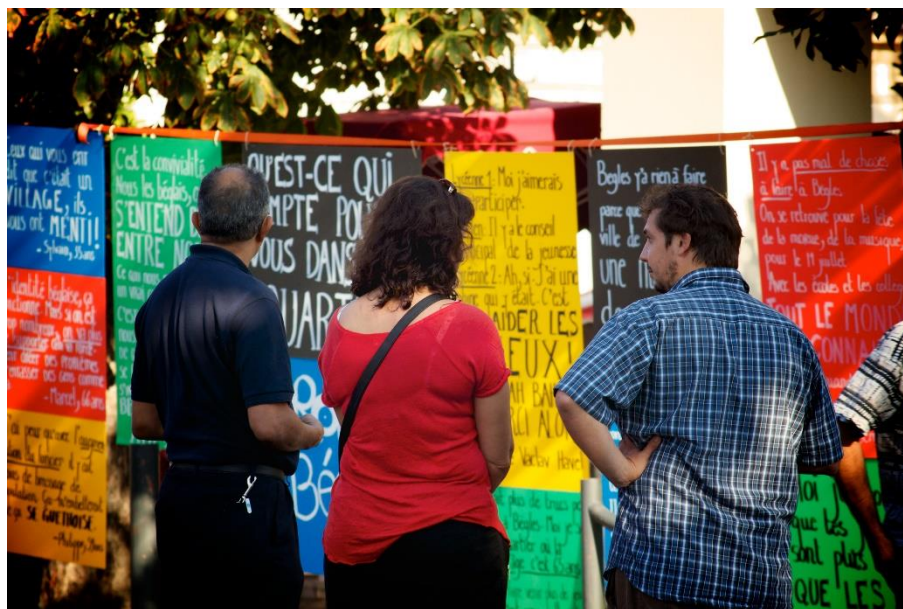


The Word Carrier is done to facilitate the participation of the diversity of citizens to the debate. It should also be adapted to the diversity of the team. We are not all at ease in the meeting and exchanging with unknown people or at ease with logistics or graphic matter. That is why it's important that each member of the team find his/her place or role. The Word Carrier offer to the team of organizers different way to contribute: direct facilitator/interviewer, the scribe, the

person in charge of the scenography, the person that help the interviewer to sum up the answer etc.. It's very important that each member of the team find a way to get pleasure from the workshop. The passers-by will not get the will to exchange with a facilitator that seems bored or not at ease.

On the other side, most of the time the work of the facilitators/interviewers start as soon as the first board are hang and can last a while. To actively listen, take some notes and participate to the discussion is tiring and the facilitator should have the opportunity to make some break and be substitute by a colleague. We recommend to establish a planning to alternate moment of active participation and break.

A facilitator might also not feel at ease with some people, argument or kind of discussion. The main organisers should have a look on the team to be sure that everyone is all right. To avoid also the endless discussion, each group may define a code to help a facilitator to end up a discussion (we call it an hostage taking).



Sequences of a Word Carrier in pictures

Setting up

Again, the choice of place is essential. It should gather favourable conditions as seen in *Identifying a venue for the workshop*.

The equipment is prepared: boards are prepared, one with the question and some others with written answers, as well as ropes for hanging the boards. A few steps away, a table is set up with one of the organisers to transcribe more answers collected during the interviews onto additional boards as the workshop progresses. The table is intentionally kept away so that it does not impede reading for passers-by, but to also subtly let them know that they will not be accosted. They reserve the choice of whether or not, and to what extent, they wish to participate.



Before the set-up



Hanging boards up, with the first pedestrian's attention captured

The workshop

Facilitators/Interviewers are launched; interviewers should remain available for people to approach and begin a discussion, while giving ample space to those who simply wish to read the boards so that these people do not feel cornered.

Interviewing is demanding and requires specific competences and attitudes for the Word Carrier. The interviewer should, for instance, be able to break the ice and start a conversation, unlike a more typical interview where a premise and discussion is already set.

The aim is to extract the essence of opinions, going beyond the banality behind which most participants will naturally start to hide. The interviewers should encourage participants to delve deeper into their past, their everyday experience, or their outlook.

What makes a point of view unique is that it is uncommon, and by virtue of its intimate link to a living human, it bears much power to influence thought.

The interviewer should make notes of their discussion with a participant, which should be read back to them at the end of the interview. Together, they can then choose what exactly will be printed and displayed on the board. This gives confidence that a participant's voice will remain their own, and that their view is represented in a way they agree with. The name and age of the participant will accompany the answer and provide context to readers.



Interviewing passers-by

A participant (left) discusses with an organiser (right) on the parts of his interview which will be pasted on the board.



Transcription of collected answers

Once the interviews are over and the final text has been written, the contents is passed onto the scribe whose job is now to write it all on colourful boards.

The scribe may vary the size of the boards, fonts, colours to emphasise parts of the message and to make reading easy. This is to highlight the diversity in opinions, bringing forward radically different perspectives to allow other passers-by to read from afar. It may so happen that some people wish to respond to an answer that has already been printed, or that participants decide to start a discussion of their own, which will turn the workshop into a truly social event. The boards will then also serve as a means of exchange, enhancing the question-answer and discussions participants have with organisers.

Being busy with the task at hand, the scribe cannot themselves approach people. Therefore, they should also allow curious pedestrians who feel coy or shy to come forward and encourage them to share their opinion, as in a Word Carrier, all opinions are valued.



Transcribing the final text



Writing participants' answers on a board



The scribe (left) at work with an interviewer (right)

Hanging up the boards



The boards are arranged with varying colours and diversity in their contents. If necessary, they can of course be rearranged mid-event to improve the visual impact.

Boards hung up as the interviews progress

Boards being re-arranged



The reading

While the interviews are being conducted, some pedestrians may gather to read answers already displayed. The number of readers will inevitably vary throughout the workshop; there may be just one person at a given time and sixty later on.

A gathering of people in front of the workshop will spark curiosity in others, allowing the audience to grow without anyone feeling exposed or threatened. There are several ways to obtain a critical mass which will start appealing to those witnessing the event from afar.



People approaching a board for reading, which later attracts more people to gather



Some will later return to see their answers on the board



Involvement of the public



Two groups that had arrived separately continue debating together



People remain around the workshop to keep discussing the boards

Aftermath: exhibition



In some cases, the boards can be left exhibited for some time following the actual Word Carrier workshop. They serve to provoke thought and deliberation over their contents, acting as their own animators as pedestrians walk past and reflect on what others think.

