

The Right Question Project in Israel

A report by Dan Rothstein, Co-Director, The Right Question Project



In February, I had a very special opportunity to offer a quick introduction of the Right Question Project's (RQP) educational strategy and the idea of Microdemocracy to some extraordinary people in Israel who are working hard to build a strong civil society in the country, support community organizing and advocacy efforts and build bridges across different ethnic and religious communities. The participants reported learning lessons similar to what we often hear all over the United States; that RQP's strategy can be used on multiple levels - by individuals to advocate on their own behalf, by organizations to address neighborhood and community-wide programs and by advocacy and civic engagement efforts to help make democracy work better.

But, I also learned from the participants about the potential of RQP's strategy to be a resource for tackling very difficult issues and tough conflicts between different communities and groups in a very complicated context. There's a lot more to be learned about all this, but for now, I wanted to share with you a quick report on my fascinating experience in three different settings in Israel.

Asking Questions and Focusing on Decisions – Universally Relevant Skills



RQP is “a practical, substantive [strategy] important for strengthening weak populations that struggle to change the reality in which they live.”

-- Sultan Abu-Obaid, Co-Director BeerSheva office of Shatil

The workshop focused on briefly introducing our *Question Formulation Technique* and our *Framework for Accountable Decision-Making*. These are our core methods for teaching people skills they can use to advocate for themselves and to participate in decision-making processes that affect them on any level. There was limited time, but that was manageable because the RQP strategy is grounded in the principle that “less is more;” that learning essential skills and applying them to different challenges is more effective than overwhelming people with information. For there is no end to the amount of information, specific training and experience people can use to advocate for themselves and to participate in democracy. We have learned that when people acquire essential skills for formulating their own questions and focusing effectively on decisions, they learn as much and accomplish as much as if they had received hours, days and even months of training.

Why? Well, the short answer is that these are gateway, fundamental skills that help people think and act in more productive ways. These are skills that can be used not only for self-advocacy, but also for effective participation in decision-making, for holding decision-makers accountable and for more effective democratic action. These are simple, but potent tools that can go a long way towards changing traditional power dynamics. And, the success of the work in Israel is the outcome of years of work trying to find just the right mix to make our methods powerful while keep them simple to learn and to teach.

I also offered a very quick introduction to our idea of Microdemocracy and the need for more people to participate effectively in decisions beginning in their frequent interactions with public agencies.

The workshops in Beer Sheva and Jerusalem



In Beer Sheva and Jerusalem, the workshops were hosted by Shatil, a very impressive technical assistance and resource organization supported by the New Israel Fund. Sultan Abu-Obaid, who works with Bedouin communities in the Negev Desert and is Co-Director of the Beer Sheva office said that he saw RQP as “a practical, substantive [strategy] important for strengthening weak populations that struggle to change the reality in which they live.” Devora D., an Ethiopian immigrant who works with Ethiopian community organizations, observed that the RQP strategy “invites participation” and Galia Bessudo, a resident of Sderot who works with a range of organizations, felt the “strategy can greatly strengthen work in the field.” Asaf R., who works on environmental justice issues was struck by “on one hand, the simplicity of the [strategy], and on the other hand, the change it can produce.” Warda, who works on a Bedouin women’s leadership program, talked about both the “simplicity and the depth” of RQP’s approach.

Yarona Ben-Shalom, Co-Director of the Beer Sheva office of Shatil, also appreciated learning about Microdemocracy, describing it as “a really important term, which in many ways may have a significant effect on democratic process and participatory democracy (and personal/ community empowerment).



Sometimes, its personal affect is greater than the usual advocacy/ social change actions.” Gili Baruch, who works on social and economic justice and employment issues, commented that the concept of Microdemocracy helps her “see the importance and the connection between daily encounters and

the “big” democracy.”

In Jerusalem, Shatil staff members who are working on national advocacy, lobbying and organizing efforts also found great value in the workshop. Milana Yaari, who immigrated as young girl from Uzbekistan, saw RQP as a “very important tool” for her work with immigrant parent groups, and was eager to learn more. Einat Levi, who provides organizational development and facilitating support to non-profit organizations described RQP as a “simple tool for getting complicated work done and by that empowering the public.

Many of the participants voiced an appreciation for the unusual combination of potency and simplicity in RQP’s methods. Ayelet Danon, who works in the communications department at Shatil, described RQP as “a very unique strategy that promotes the way of thinking and enabling to criticize and sharpen the goals...and it can lead to a breakthrough in political participation in different populations.”

Anat Y., working to organize university students, said that “as an Everett Fellow” she benefited from the training because it “offered very important work principles; not to take things as if they are obvious, to ask questions, and to remember to work with the questions. This training also demonstrated very clearly how it is possible to apply these principles in a relatively simple and comprehensible way.” Ilana Shpaizman, who works with immigrant youth at risk of dropping out, echoed that observation describing RQP’s strategy as “simple but not simplistic.” She also was interested in how the idea of Microdemocracy is similar to microcredit, which their organization already works on quite a bit: “You are showing how investing in people on a micro level can have an effect on democracy.”

The Haifa Workshop – Using the RQP Strategy to Create a Common Plan of Action



The full-day workshop in Haifa afforded more time to work with a group of dynamic leaders of Jewish and Arab educational, social service and advocacy organizations who are partners in a joint learning and action project sponsored by the Jewish Community Relations Council in Boston, Massachusetts. They jumped right into a learning mode and moved quickly into spirited, animated and thoughtful discussions. They added an interesting perspective on the value of RQP's educational strategy.

Carmit Shay, whose organization provides legal advocacy to elders liked the “translation of new ideas into practice” and described RQP as “a simple strategy that makes you think deeper,” and that the workshop showed a way to increase participation in decision-making.” Kareem Nasser, the principal of a school serving Arab and Jewish children with severe disabilities, noted his desire for the parents with whom he works to be better advocates for their children, and that he say RQP as a special tool that can help accomplish that because it offers “speed, simplicity and effectiveness.” Suad Shahede, the director of a community center in the Wadi Nisnas Arab neighborhood, noted that RQP “is a different process from others. I work with a weak population and most of the time, they are not part of the decision-making process. This method convinces people to participate in the process.”

Because participants in the Haifa group had more time, they had a chance to work on how to apply what they learned to big common challenges facing them in the Haifa region. They quickly came up with a long list of topics demanding immediate attention. They decided to focus on the very challenging issue of how to improve inter-group relations and promote more interaction between the Arab and Jewish communities in the Haifa area. Working in small groups, they all focused on the same challenge, and then were surprised to learn how each group came up with distinct, creative and constructive ideas for effective action. One group, for example, looked at how to offer job training opportunities for youth while another looked at how to promote common learning and educational opportunities that would bring people together.

As they shared their work, one group comprised of a mix of participants from different communities, reported: “this process could help us tackle really difficult issues much more effectively.” Elias Sussan, a social worker at a half-way house created to help released prisoners from all communities, said that RQP “makes possible an analysis of issues...the technique is very effective for finding realistic ways to get solutions.” Claudia Goodich-Avram, the coordinator of women’s advocacy project, noted how the RQP process can be helpful because it “is built in levels and is simpler

to implement” and Najat Shahade, the Director of a school serving Arab and Jewish special-needs children, expressed a desire to continue learning more about how to apply RQP’s strategy in her work. Amos Gino, working with a community center serving Ethiopian and Russian immigrant families, described RQP as a “simple and effective strategy for addressing multi-dimensional problems.’

Making the RQP educational strategy more widely available

At various points over the past ten years, we have worked with visiting staff from organizations in Central America, Eastern Europe, Russia and South Africa. They have all mentioned how valuable RQP could be for their work and were eager to get more training. Given our constant heavy workload and financial constraints, we’ve always been limited in our ability to support them. But, this recent opportunity to work with such dedicated, idealistic and smart people in Israel spurs us to explore ways to offer more extensive training in RQP’s educational strategy to organizations in different parts of the world. They feel we have a lot to offer them and we believe our strategy can be helpful as they take on urgent and complex challenges, day in and day out.