

Tips for bites that “give a voice”

Giving everyone a real opportunity to express their views is never easy. Some are too shy to speak in a group, and in all groups, even those which are expertly managed, it is difficult not to let those who like the sound of their own voices, and/or have very strong, often fixed views, to dominate. Everyone else can be irritated, then bored, then switch off.



Global bites that work in a **drop-in context** (most of the craft activities, for example) do make **small group discussion** easy although it will depend on the numbers attending the event whether at any one time you have the four or five needed at once for a good discussion.

Managing these small group discussions needs constant vigilance and often sensitive intervention by the leader, who may themselves be very involved in the discussion.

Always try to be an equal partner; you are not there to be the fount of all knowledge and wisdom. Watch points are that people joining in may give wrong information or express views strongly which you feel sure are flawed or unethical. You are there to provide the balance, and also to have access to factual information when needed. You can help with this by having a handout giving a range of views very overtly, and with website references to lead people further.

With **fetes, fairs, coffee mornings** etc, participants are not going to return to your stall, so there is no opportunity to debrief with them the opinions of everyone who has joined in the discussions. **Conference breaks, workshops, social gatherings** are different. Provided it is planned in, you have the opportunity of a debrief at the end of the event when you can sum up peoples' views. Using methods like **building block graphs, spots on statements** (see *Garden Show case study*) or **on pictures or on maps, voting pots** (see *Cooking stoves bite*), can all be used. The first two, properly devised, can give you a good visual display of preferred views. Do avoid “death by post-it” - trying to read a summarise cogently a large number of post-its is well-nigh impossible.

For larger groups where you have the whole group's attention for a short time, the “**On the Line**” method is superb. Adaptations include the “**Four Corners**” method where participants choose one of four corners to go to – the labels are the same, but they cannot choose intermediate positions. “Four Corners” is good for work outside, identifying the corners by garden features – it works well with children and teenagers who need to run off some energy, rushing from corner to corner! But you need a loud voice, and it can be difficult for all parties to hear the discussion, and quite hard to control.

More elaborate large group methods include **priority wheels, ranking exercises** etc. Some of these are wonderful methods, but are whole meals, rather than bites, and would form part of full-scale workshop sessions run by experienced teachers and leaders.

You do need to consider what will happen to the outcome of discussions afterwards. Where you have a block graph or spotty picture or map this, or a photograph of it, automatically saves the outcome of the discussion for you. On the Line discussions are more difficult to “capture” unless you have note-taker or record them, and this can well constrain people's willingness to speak freely. For the individuals involved, the **handouts** you can supply which give them leads to further information and reading are all-important.

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