

Two practitioners look 10-years back (A Reflection)

By Wendy Quarry and Ricardo Ramirez¹

Brief intro

We met in 1984 during a “Methods & Media in Community Development” gathering in Labrador, Canada, an event, organized by Andreas Fuglesang and Dale Chandler with the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation in Sweden. Here we came across practitioner- champions from around the world who were using media to engage with people in exciting ways. A decade later, we reconnected and collaborated through some FAO work in Pakistan. Since then we have continued our practice working together on various communication strategies, much shared writing, our never-ending Skypes, and our disagreements... How else can one work as a team?

The conversation

WQ - There is an article that has been part of my collection for quite a long time (about twenty five years) with the title, *Participatory Action Research as a way of life: a personal account* (Pyrch, 1990). I was drawn to the article by its title. “A way of life” made me think that approaching work through participatory action research was more than just another methodology but a way of being. Looking back on about 45 years of communication work I believe that this could be said of communication – that it is a way of thinking and viewing the world. Fanciful as this might seem, it is something that I believe has come to shape our working lives over the decades. Just listening to a proposal or conversation on any development issue triggers my brain to frame it through a communication lens. What is the intent? Who is the project trying to reach (audience) and what is their (audience) preferred form of communication? And most important of all - what needs to be done to listen to what they have to say? For me this way of thinking simplifies things even if presented with complex situations. But here is the dilemma. Perhaps communication thinking is so simple and straightforward that we (and communication scholars) have muddied the waters by thinking that it must be more complicated if it is going to be something to study. Nowhere do we come up against this so-called ‘simplification’ dilemma more than in the midst of a training session or capacity building.

RR – A way of thinking is not something that is easily taught... Yet in the past ten years we have both invested more effort into capacity development. This has happened at the university graduate level and within consultancies. At the academic level we sought opportunities for students to learn through practice, something known as *community service learning* in academia. Our academic experiences have been short-lived, as the hosting programs are shaky in funding and lack institutional commitment.

WQ - After many years of trial and error (often error) we’ve finally and definitively concluded that one-off workshops (even one week workshops) do not work as a training tool. Participants

may or may not understand or be compelled by some of the ideas as they listen, but as soon as they get back to their 'day' jobs they find it extremely difficult to apply the newly found ideas. That's the reason why we decided to commit to a workshop only if there is built-in mentoring or coaching time after the event to help people apply the new ideas to their real life situations.

The same thing has happened in our efforts to involve our partners in the communication design process. We have learned the hard way that preparing a communication strategy for others without involving them in the process usually means that the strategies ends up sitting on the shelf and are rarely implemented. We are trying to now work 'in tandem' with the stakeholders so that the strategy unfolds through their thoughts and input, and where possible we ask them to draft their own communication strategy. Remember in [our article about the Land Law in Mozambique](#) (Quarry and Ramírez, 2012) we jokingly refer to this as "participatory suffering": no pain = no gain.

"Listening" on the surface is another one of those simple but hard to put into practice notions. We feel that we are only now learning how to do this ourselves even though it was the thread of [our book](#) (Quarry and Ramírez, 2009). Trial and error has taught us the importance of interaction and dialogue - literally listening before telling in almost every circumstance. Listening to where people are at, what they know, and what they expect, is then in itself far more important than the fight to get your own point across. A simple notion that is painfully hard to apply. How many times have people come to you talking about their presentations, their messages, and their script? Our culture seems to have hard-wired us into thinking about communicating 'at' rather than communicating 'with'.

RR - Exactly, and as a result we have learned to use less jargon. As we write this reflection, we honour William Zinsser who died this month. His book *On writing well* (2006), that sold over a million copies, helped us write clearly. Every time we work with institutions we are shocked at the opposite use of language to magnify and obscure. Once again, simple is better, yet we live in a reward system that honours the big word, the complicated notion and the convoluted argument. Narratives and story telling are perceived as second class and the term anecdote is often referred to as unreliable. However, stories happen to be a most effective way of conveying case studies with all the richness of context. Stories captivate the imagination and they are easy to remember. Together with some colleagues, we recently produced a short report on the future of international development at a Canadian university, in the form of a two-chapter novel (Rose, Pinnington, Kupp and Ramírez, 2012). [When we presented our findings during one of the gatherings](#) the response was very positive. Someone in the audience asked: "so what happened to Paloma?" – We encouraged her to read the second chapter; we had her hooked. Narrative has unexplored power to capture and convey information that connects with people.

WQ - Yes, that makes me think of the rise of recognition of the story, or the importance of story telling. Finally people are realizing that others will listen to a story much more easily than reading a text. This certainly is full circle when you think of several generations back when story telling was the norm – and still is in other cultures. *And* contrast this with numbers. Knowing how many hits you have on a Twitter feed or a Facebook page does not necessarily mean that communication has taken place. A year or so ago, I was part of a team to evaluate the

communication component of a polio campaign in Nigeria. Throughout that period I never once heard the word ‘communication’ but only the numbers as to how many people had been ‘reached’ or more to the point, how many were missed.

RR – I agree, and in a way this relates to the notion of ‘readiness.’ The very idea of ‘readiness’ has gained prominence in our work. This idea comes from the early steps of Utilization Focused Evaluation, where an assessment is made on the extent to which organizations and individuals are ready to learn from evaluations. We have applied this notion to communication and found it relevant. How many times have we been called in to help develop a communication strategy when it is being put in place simply to conform to an outside demand, or to fulfill a blueprint. Any sense of people within the project team being committed and willing, let alone able to understand the ramifications of a communication approach, is hard to find. In this sense, an assessment to ‘readiness’ can be seen as a complement to a situational analysis. Recently we have been combining evaluation and communication mentoring (others call it coaching). While this is work in progress, the two areas share principles, and some planning steps can be combined: The shared principles have to do with strategic planning, flexibility and openness to adjustment, and engagement of champions. In both evaluation and communication you need to appreciate the context (project and organizational readiness; situational analysis). You need to decide who will be involved in the design process (evaluation users or ‘owners’; communication team). You need to capture what the evaluation is all about (evaluation uses or purposes); and what the communication is about (communication purposes or functions).

Our communication practice has shifted towards the field of research communication. Research communication is a challenging area. On the one hand there is much talk about evidence-based policy making, the opposite is often the case: what a colleague refers to as “policy-based evidence seeking”. Yet, there is still room to become more effective in planning to share research findings from the start of a research project, not as an add-on at the end. We have found that effective research communication is no different than effective agricultural or health communication: a number of readiness factors need to be in place for the magic blend of planning, methods and media to emerge into truly participatory communication. The shared steps that are mentioned above are relevant, for instance differentiating the communication purposes, be it active listening to find out what the policy-making community is interested in, or a targeted network effort. We emphasize audience analysis as a way to confirm the referred methods, media and learning moments among policy-makers and their intermediaries. We are well aware that research communication is but one contributor to the policy making process - and that often times “it works” only when windows of opportunity open.

WQ -Certainly research communication is reflective of all other forms of communication around different sectors. There is the same “knee jerk” reaction to communication only being important when researchers feel they have found something to communicate about. Again there is the feeling that communication is about selling a product, whether it is the evidence from new research or the need to wash your hands. Rarely is communication a means to shape the research agenda itself.

But through all this reflection, something that continues to strike me is the reality that you and I both continue to be in touch with so many of our former students or colleagues who have begun to think in this pattern. It doesn't seem to matter whether they are actually working in the field of 'communication' or are involved in something else. It could be community development, immigration support programs, politics etc. etc. and still think this way. As a result we seem to be immersed in a network of like-minded people, and that to me is a wonderful result.

By way of conclusion

WQ & RR – Our conclusions are based on our humble 'aha moments' of the last decade. Experience shows that communication for development evolves through action-research. People learn best through experience. We have seen how neither the theoretical side -nor the philosophical one- infiltrates the development industry in a noticeable way. These institutions seem impermeable; their inward machinations dominate the agenda. The bulk of quick-fix development planning remains blind to the conditions – the readiness- that allows communication to bloom. Nevertheless, we stubbornly plough along. We try to create spaces for innovation; for experimentation with reflection that can challenge both methodology and institutional practices. We often come out a bit scarred, at best with very mixed feelings. Give us ten more years, and we will share some stories of humble success.

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