

Participatory film making: How development communication experiences from Nepal are being applied to rural communities in Northern Ireland

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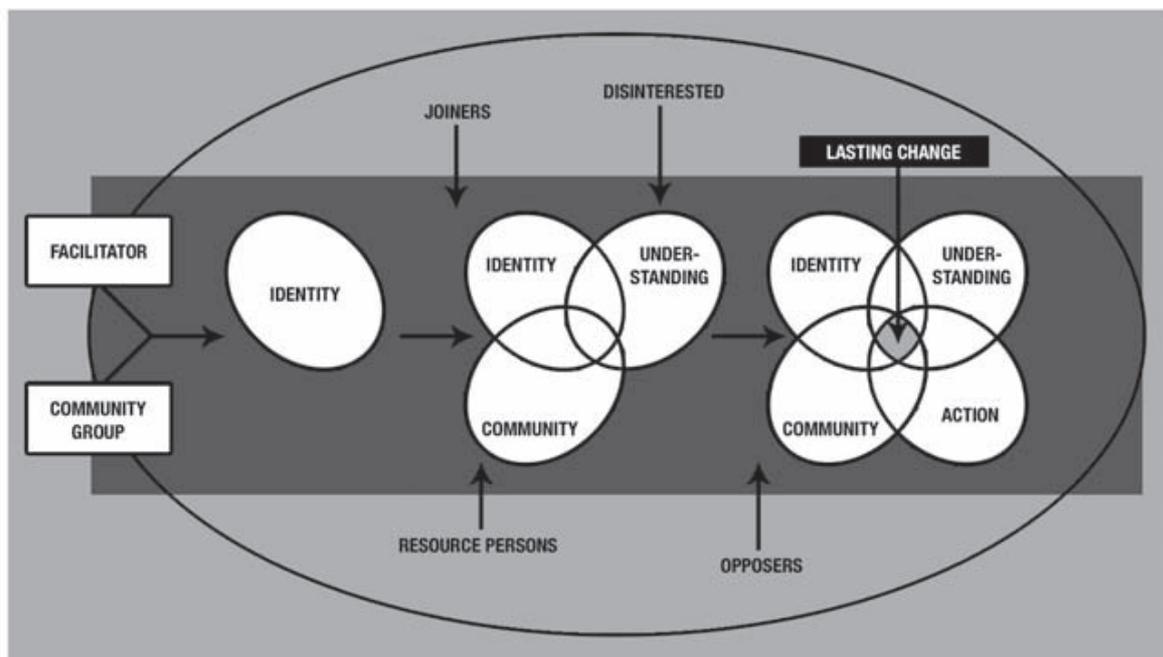
Since the 1950s, organisations and governments have been concerned with the role of communication to support development activities. Originally it was thought that the mass media could multiply the effects of extension workers, thereby enabling economically poorer countries to compress into decades the sort of development that economically richer countries had achieved over centuries. Top-down models of communication, based on the ‘bullet theory’, saw target audiences bombarded with messages of all kinds, but few development advances were made. In response, people said that development communication should be an interactive process, so ‘feedback’ as a concept was introduced into the communication chain. However, it became clear that feedback did not automatically lead to interaction, but in most cases placed the message ‘senders’ in stronger positions to manipulate their target audiences.

As development theory and practice evolved to embrace principles of participation and empowerment, development communication scholars recognised that such principles were being ignored when it came to communication activities. Assertions were made that “development communicators must play a critical role in offering new philosophies, concepts, and models which facilitate the participation of people at all stages of the development process” (Nair & White, 1992). During the 1990s the Development Media Workshop (DMW) explored participatory approaches to development communication and, largely from projects with communities in Nepal, formalised a process called ‘Community-Centred Dialogue’ represented in illustration one. This approach now underpins all the work that the DMW undertakes both overseas, and at home.

County Fermanagh is Northern Ireland’s most sparsely populated county, with a population of about 30,000 people. It has traditionally been a small-scale farming community, but increasingly the next generation of farmers is migrating to cities like Belfast and Dublin, or moving across to Britain. However, the past five years have seen a large influx of migrant workers, coming largely from Poland and Lithuania. Estimates of migrant

workers now living in County Fermanagh range from 2,000 to 4,000 people. Northern Ireland is not known for having communities that readily embrace people of different cultural traditions. Some development organisations have anticipated the potential for new cultural divides to emerge that may lead to conflict between immigrant and local communities. It was against this background that in 2006 The Fermanagh Trust, a local development charity, commissioned the DMW to undertake a film project with the local migrant worker community. The film project involved five stages: establishing a participant group, planning film content, filming and editing, screening and interacting, and evaluation.

Illustration One



COMMUNITY-CENTRED DIALOGUE

Establishing a participant group

Contact with migrant workers was made through a local organisation running English Classes. A discussion meeting was held with class tutors who were women from Lithuania and Poland. These women took the idea of participating in a film project back to their families for further discussion, with the result that two extended families committed themselves to participate.

Planning film content

The two families consisted of eleven people in all, spanning three generations. Working in the evenings, the group used a flipchart to think through the issues they thought important to share with others. These included issues like motivation for coming to work in Fermanagh, expectations in terms of monetary benefit, cultural differences, and main problems experienced. Having identified key issues, the group discussed how these issues could be related to their own personal stories, so that the film would be based on their own realities. It was recognised that this would help to not only ensure that the film was genuine, but interesting as well.

Filming

Participants learnt how to use a broadcast quality camera (a Sony PD170), and how to record good sound. They began filming by taking the camera home and interviewing themselves around the themes agreed upon. This was a non-threatening introduction to both being filmed, and to filming others. Over the next three months filming was undertaken with both families in different locations, and for different issues. The Lithuanian family used a local medieval fayre as a backdrop to discussion about the importance of having an interest in the country where they had come to live. The Polish family centred their filming upon their setting up of a local Polish food shop. Filming included going back to Poland to buy stock, during which time they were able to film their flat in Poland, and interview their former neighbours. Some parts of the film were filmed by participants themselves, and other parts were filmed by the facilitator from the DMW, under the guidance of the participants. This was because for some participants, the telling of their story was most important, and they did not feel the need to do the filming as well.

Screening and interacting

The final film, entitled *Setting up Shop*, was initially screened to an invited audience of about 120 people in Enniskillen on October 5th 2006. The audience was made up of a wide range of local people whom the participants, and The Fermanagh Trust, thought important to engage with. The screening of the hour-long film was followed by a supper of Polish food, during which time the participants and audience intermingled.

Evaluation

The evaluation consisted of two sections. The first explored the views and experiences of the film's participants through focus group discussions. The second part aimed to provide feedback on the film itself through an eleven item open ended questionnaire which was distributed to attendees at the end of the film premiere. Demographic details were collected, alongside open ended questions which explored people's first impressions, their perceptions of migrant workers and their families, the film's intended message and its potential usefulness for raising awareness about migrant worker issues.

Participant feedback

The overall response was one of overwhelming enjoyment and excited anticipation for the forthcoming screening. The words used by the group to describe their experience included; "interesting", "exciting", "amazing", "fun", "enjoyable", "memorable", "incredible", "unique". A resounding agreement centred upon the common bond that both families and family members shared in relation to their experiences of migration, despite their differing backgrounds and country of origin. The varying experiences of individuals was also apparent with some saying they enjoyed the filming of themselves, while others liked to watch the film maker at work or getting to see the end product when everything had come together. The overall participation was repeatedly viewed as rewarding; "I never thought I would be doing something like this, not even in my own country but here in this country, it really was amazing". The potential impact and educational benefit of the film was raised and acknowledged by the group as something that will serve not only the migrant communities in Fermanagh but the local people as well; "they will see that we are normal like them, we only want the best for our families and to have better chances".

The aim of the film and its proposed message was to increase awareness about the lives of migrant workers, the countries they come from, the changes and challenges they face and their desire to become part of the community. The group members were reticent but hopeful about how others might perceive the film and the underlying inferences about migrant life; "I do hope other people will think this film is good and we are good people"; "This is a good way to let others know about our people and how hard we work for better chances for our families. I think it will be good for people of Fermanagh, so they get to know us a bit better". The group's hesitation about how the film would be received was coupled with their excitement and pride

of having participated in such a project. They commented on how the process and especially the upcoming premiere had made them feel a great sense of pride in themselves and their culture. The individual benefits included; increased sense of self worth, improved language skills, gained knowledge about other cultures, developed creative interest in film making, gained social support and friendships.

Audience feedback

A total of 65 questionnaires were completed after the film premiere including responses from members of the Police Service Northern Ireland, Sperrin Lakeland Trust, Fermanagh Libraries, Polish Association Northern Ireland, Roman Catholic Church, Omagh Ethnic Community Group, BBC Ulster, and the Department of Employment and Learning.

The audience gave an overwhelming positive response to the film based on their first impressions. Specific comments included “thought provoking, all too often people do not realise the issues immigrants face simply to create a better living”. The messages taken from the film were two-fold. There was a consensus about the need for communities and people to live together with each other despite differences in background and culture. The views expressed tended to be unidirectional suggesting that it was the responsibility of local people to be more open and inclusive of migrant workers coming to their area. The second major theme referred to the attributes and characteristics of migrant workers and their families. The film was viewed as portraying migrant workers positively through the emphasis on their skills, work ethic and dedication to family life. The visual representation of life in another country appears, from the responses recorded from individuals native to Northern Ireland, to significantly contribute to a greater awareness of the issues faced by migrant workers; “it is a good idea to show Irish people other cultures”, “it was brilliant showing the reality of Polish cities”, “They are not different after all, nor are they opportunists, they are nice people”.

The suggestions for how best to use this film centred on education, awareness raising and understanding. Specific organisations indicated how they could use the film to promote understanding about the needs of migrant workers and awareness about the barriers they face. A focus was also placed on improving relationships between different groups through mutual understanding and respect by using the film as a vehicle to provide insight.

References

Nair, KS & White, SA (1992) *Experiences on Development Communication*, Sage, New Delhi.

Dr Michael Brown is founder and director of the Development Media Workshop, a not-for-profit resource based in Enniskillen, County Fermanagh. He lived in Nepal from 1990-1995 working in development communication, and has since undertaken projects in about 15 countries across Asia, Africa and Europe. His PhD, based on participatory development communication processes, remains the underlying principle of the DMW's methodology. He has just completed a series of films with young people in Fermanagh exploring issues of sustainable living and the local ecology, and is now undertaking a two year participatory advocacy programme in Nepal working with conflict-affected children traumatised by the Maoist/Government civil conflict.

Dr Katrina Collins is a Research Psychologist based in Lurgan, Co Armagh. Her research interests include bullying in schools and the workplace, peer relations and self-esteem, sexual identity and youth culture and arts based methodologies and research.