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Development Communication Training Values -
Have They Kept Pace With The Changing Paradigm?

By

Nora Quebral
DEVELOPMENT COMMUNICATION TRAINING VALUES - HAVE THEY KEPT PACE WITH THE CHANGING PARADIGM?

Nora C. Quebral 1/

Questions about training values in development communication bring us into the domain of curricula and those who make, implement and go through them. It is in training institutions where knowledge on paradigms, research, practice, training and theory must finally meld into a well-ordered body for passing on to learners. Sooner or later this consultation had to get down to training curricula where new ideas or shifts in thought in development communication are expected to register in due course. That they may not do so as fast as expected is a mark of the dynamism of the field, but perhaps also of some disarray in it.

A curriculum, educationists tell us, is not just the component courses. It is also the teaching methods, the course materials and aids, and in truth the entire experience that the students undergo in the learning environment. All of them embody values, sometimes conflicting, that consciously or unconsciously shape the learners.

Training values may be explicit or hidden. A curriculum may declare its goals, philosophy and objectives, although it is not necessarily true that when it does its parts are then all pulling in the same desired direction. More often than not, values have to be inferred. Even when they are clearly stated, teachers may not

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unanimously hew to them, whether because of their own training or their personal motivations. In such cases, their action tends to drown out their precepts, to coin a phrase. An oft-quoted aphorism is that values are caught, not taught. At the least, some of them are best taught by example and teachers make very potent models. We should not forget also that a student or trainee will have a previous set of values caught or taught elsewhere before coming to the training institution. That too should be thrown into the pot in considering the present state of communication training values.

Assumptions

But first a word or two about the assumptions of this paper. Training is sometimes differentiated from education in terms other than the length of the learning period. Training is delimited to the acquisition of skills and techniques either by quick recruits to a profession or by old hands who only need some upgrading. Education, on the other hand, is seen as a fuller construct in which the student's intellect as well as his values are nurtured alongside of skills for his own enrichment and that of society's. Whatever the merit in other fields, or even in other branches of communication, of separating the two in substance, the distinction blurs in development communication whose meaning is defined in greater measure by the concept of development.
Now, every student of development knows that it is an idea simply rife with values. That is precisely why it is so susceptible to debate. The values attached to it may differ from one culture to the next, but it would not be the human goal that it is without an accompanying vision of the good life for the individual or the society and the appropriate ways of gaining it. So how can values be cut out of training that purports to be on development communication? It would not be devcom training then but media training - something like a shell without the moving spirit. So we shall not distinguish here between training and education in the matter of teaching of values.

Another assumption of this paper is that development communication training values consist of a whole constellation: the social, economic, cultural and ethical ones often cited by development scholars, but also those prized by the communication profession and the academic community in which development communication seems to have acquired some standing. This variety is in truth a trademark of the field, characteristic also of its concepts as well as of its problems.

Development Paradigms

It used to be that the question was: Development communication - what is that? Nowadays, it is more like - which one? And this mainly because development thinking has not stood still for any great length of time. By hitching communication to development, development
communicators found their lot cast with the latter. The result
definitely has not been inactivity.

From Rostow to Gunder Frank, from the Pearson Commission
Report to the Brandt Commission Report, from Lerner's Passing of
Traditional Society to the MacBride Commission's Many Voices One
World is a span of only 30 odd years. But in that time, four major
development paradigms have been hailed and challenged in scholarly
circles. Goulet summarizes them into the growth, redistribution
with growth, basic human needs and development from tradition
strategies. Excluded are variants or recombinations of the four.
Now, there is ferment for you. Not many fields of thought are more
vigorous.

It should be clear by now that what has been changing mightily
is the development paradigm. Communication has merely been trying
to keep in step. Perhaps more accurately, it is trying to keep pace
not with one paradigm that is changing but with four at the same time.
For, Rogers notwithstanding, in the practical world where theories
translate into action, paradigms do not pass; they just accommodate
to each other.

One reason is that development administration also has its own
innovators, early adopters, late adopters and laggards insofar as a
recommended approach to development is concerned. Within a country
at any one time, one is likely to encounter programs and projects that
espouse alternative development philosophies. Communicators, who
do not decide working policy but at best only influence it, must go with the approved thrust even while they may try to edge in their own ideas. They should be able to design communication strategies suitable to official policy at the same time that they do what they can to steer the communication component of the project in what they think is the right direction.

Another reason that early paradigms do not quite fade away is that the old and the new are in most cases not independent of each other. The new ones tend to improve on the previous, but certain features of the latter remain sound and may realistically do better in certain situations. An example is the diffusion theory which has come in for its share of debunking. In an Asian agricultural university or research center which still operates along commodity lines according to the land grant college orthodoxy, the so-called top-down approach associated with growth strategies continues to be useful, remains a valid approach, in fact, at least in the immediate term. Which does not mean that fresh approaches are not tried in other projects in the same university or center. In short, as long as long-standing social structures stay in place, development administrators may sometimes deem it more expedient to use development strategies that correspond.

Goulet collapses the four strategies into two, in effect, when he picks out two main strands in the development debate: the call for a New International Economic Order and the stress on basic human needs
as the core of alternative to purely growth strategies. The first, he
says, seeks equity among nations while the second is for equity among
people. Which of the two should communication training values keep
pace with? Or, to rephrase the question, which of the two concerns
should development communication curricula address?

The rational answer is both, which presumably some Asian
schools try to do, at least at the cognitive level. It may be a different
story at the level of instrumental skills. Most undergraduate students -
those in Asia anyway - are pragmatic creatures with very down-to-
earth reasons for getting into a college course. When the B.S.
development communication curriculum at the University of the
Philippines at Los Baños had just been approved and some of our new
students asked to be briefed about it, I was somewhat taken aback to
realize that the main thing they wanted to know was what sort of jobs
they could get into. The message here is that a communication
curriculum, no matter how normatively inclined, had better be good
preparation for some definite jobs too.

Development Communication Curricula

Communication curricula in Asia, following the Western or, if
you like, the Northern mode, are usually labeled journalism, broad-
casting, public relations, advertising or mass communication
according to the media jobs that they prepare students for. The
geography of mass media in Asia virtually dictate the location of most
of these jobs in the metropolises, to which also the majority of
communication schools have gravitated.

Since the 1970s, communication curricula or single courses specifically called development communication have appeared in the Philippines, Thailand, India, Malaysia and Indonesia. The more focused curricula are those in universities which have traditionally been into agricultural and rural development and which are located outside the capital cities. The few found in cities or mass communication curricula that their faculties consider development-oriented are those that are involved in family planning projects or in provincial or community journalism. One exception is development communication training at the Communication Foundation of Asia in Manila which espouses human development with social and political overtones and which, incidentally, put it at odds with the Philippine government during the Marcos regime.

It is probably no coincidence that development communication curricula have found a home in colleges of agriculture or in training institutions with ties to a Christian church. The former profess an obligation to rural people and the latter to the poor. In much of Asia those two are really the same. Churches and agricultural colleges share interests remarkably like those of development communication - particularly the basic needs school - which largely explains their willingness to support development communication training programs. Training institutions on a quid pro quo relationship with urban-based communication industries are not likely to, except perhaps a course
or so just to familiarize their students with a new area of communication.

For our purpose, then, we have to look at existing development communication curricula, which today are mainly in agricultural universities whose missions and strategies are strikingly like those of the basic needs approach. Influenced by their surroundings, these curricula incline essentially towards the basic needs strategy in their skills aspects, although the new world information and communication order debate figures prominently in the sessions on what development is - at least at UP at Los Baños and other schools whose curricula are patterned after it. The UNESCO-led effort to incorporate in all communication teaching programs - development curricula included - the universalistic communication values that will bring forth a new world information and communication order, while eminently valid and should be supported, belongs on another plane, it seems to me, and is not the main issue here. What we are dealing with are the teaching programs labeled development communication and seen as distinct from the other branches of communication study like journalism, broadcasting and advertising in such mundane matters as job placements.

Some Questions on Training Values

In assessing the relevance and up-to-dateness of development communication training values, several questions might be considered:

1. How inclusive and current are training programs on knowledge about the kaleidoscopic concept that is development? Short skills courses
are not exempt by our assumption, although necessarily the amount of time spent on developmental values will be limited. But what human development means ought to start off every training in development communication and color the skills instruction that follows.

The record here is not too encouraging. Most nonformal courses for communicators in development agencies concentrate on media skills. Information on the national circumstances under which the skills are to be used is taken for granted. Formal curricula are ostensibly better in that sessions are allotted in the syllabi to the development topic. But ill-stocked libraries, the high cost of books, dated faculty water down the intention. Curiously enough, international thinking on development fares relatively better because one copy of any book or article is all that is needed for a photocopier to capture foreign material. It is local stuff that is meager because homegrown development scholars are few and are too busy to write much. Students and practitioners end up not knowing enough about the rationale and progress of development thought in their own country.

2. What is the value placed on science and technology in relation to the humanities? Following American standards, Asian communication educators are mindful of the desired 75:25 ratio between liberal arts and communication courses in a communication curriculum. Generally, only token natural science courses figure in the 75%; the rest of it is taken up by the humanities and social sciences. This practice traces back to conventional wisdom in journalism that history, political science, literature and other classical subjects make proper background
training for public affairs reporting.

Without diminishing in any way the importance of the humanities, a case can be made for more science education for communicators in the light of development needs. A more rational viewpoint in solving problems - their own and their prospective clientele's - would be one of the gains. Also, in spite of periodic attacks on technology by those who see it as a destroyer of cultural values, few developing country leaders would consider not using it as a tool to achieve greater productivity. Future communicators will be better prepared to communicate useful technology if early in their education they acquire a surer grasp of the principles of science and the scientific method.

A related issue is whether specialized scientific subject matter should not be part of the training of communicators. More than a decade ago, Wilbur Schramm wrote: "Most thoughtful critics of training for journalism and news broadcasting feel that in the years to come it will no longer be sufficient for a new entrant to the profession to be able to write about "anything"; he must be able also to write with depth and understanding about something. That is, he will need a specialty in which he is substantively trained and able to interpret professional findings for lay readers."

Dr. Schramm was actually speaking about middlemen for social science research, but his statements apply as well to future interpreters of research done in agriculture, nutrition, population education, health, peace and other areas of basic human needs.
3. How central are mass media still in the education of communicators for rural development? This seems to be a particularly stubborn hang-up for development communicators. In spite of piled-up evidence from both research and experience that at this time, for various reasons not all of which have to do with the media per se, rural people do not depend for most of their information on the mass media, Asian communication education remains dominated by them. Curricular majors are named after the media; professionals are known by their media specialty; skills training all too often means media production training. The influence of Western education on teachers and of available literature just seems too strong to overcome.

Perhaps another reason is that in Asian agricultural colleges where American extension is the prototype, face-to-face communication has been preempted by agricultural extension or agricultural education departments. In American colleges of liberal arts, on the other hand, it is the province of speech departments. For most people including communicators themselves, communication is mass communication - as it is in the United States and even in Europe - and development communication is not an exception. Even when communicators get into communication between individuals and within a group, they end up talking about personal and group media, so weighty seems to be the media factor.

Again, without belittling the importance of media in general and the mass media in particular, it behooves development communication
educators to acknowledge reality in rural Asia and to attach greater value to the study of the face-to-face communication process. They could begin by adding the interpersonal dimension to training on communication skills. In the longer term, perhaps the two streams of communication education adopted from American universities should be merged in Asia in the interest of development.

4. Has communication research in Asia matured enough to wean itself from its beginnings? The answer here has to be no. The science of communication is a Western concept which diffused to Asia chiefly through its graduate students sent to the United States to study advertising, mass communication or agricultural journalism. Much of Asian communication research remains true to its American origin in the choice of problems and methodologies. It is media-centered; it loves to be known as quantitative; it makes undiscriminating leaps from non-Asian assumptions. Because of these, a lot of graduate student research is methodologically sophisticated, statistically correct, but intellectually a dead-end. Development communication research in particular appears repetitive and is mainly of the administrative type described in Anglo-Saxon communication research literature.

Asian communication researchers as a group simply have not acquired enough self-confidence to strike out on their own. The relative youth of the field is certainly one reason. Communicators lack research experience because support is feeble for a discipline that has not demonstrated its worth, and while it has not, funding remains scarce.
This circularity is true of development communication research as it is of communication research in general.

A second reason related to the first is that communicators, especially those in development and including those who are in the universities, are continually coopted as producers of communication materials, so great are the needs in development programs for practitioners. The result is that research may be more prestigious, but materials production is more rewarding financially and in terms of the grateful regard of superiors.

5. Is systematic practice equally recognized along with formal research as a source of data for development communication planning and policy? It already is, to a certain extent, by practical Asian development administrators, but not by decision-makers of international funding agencies, more is the pity. In the well-ordered world of Western academics, research precedes policy, is the foundation of policy. But given scarce research funds, few and untried researchers, and the pressing need for development action in Asia, I shall commit the ultimate heresy and suggest that, for the moment at least, practice be accepted also as a legitimate basis for decisions on development communication policy. Practice informed by methodological observation is a loose form of action-research that has found acceptance in Asian universities and that can be no worse than bad formal research. Development communication itself did not spring out of theory and research alone but is just as much a product of the
experience of development journalists and administrators.

6. What are communication educators doing to flesh out and institutionalize better developmental news values? Not as much as they should. The need for an updated set of news values and to redefine what news is in developing countries, while verbally endorsed, has not been sufficiently addressed by educators in journalism laboratories. They appear to be leaving the burden of demonstration to practising newsmen.

7. Are present classroom teaching methods in development communication compatible with the values that it advocates like participation, self-reliance and use of indigenous resources? Not that anyone would notice, I am afraid. Trainors of development agencies doing nonformal training in the villages seem to have a better track record in the application of development values to their teaching.

If the preceding analysis seems unduly negative, it is because I have purposely picked out those aspects of development communication training which could do with some more innovating, not because I have written off development communication training as hopelessly reactionary and imitative. How can it be when it is probably the one branch of communication education that has broken more new ground in Asia than any other?