

Teaching Development to the Communication students: challenges and Prospects

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Introduction

The development sector in India had long not been viewed till recently as requiring communication professionals. Communication for Development was like rendering assistance of non-technical nature, which involved educating people on various development issues and promoting highly diverse and unstructured activities. It was realized later that the development work required techno-managerial assistance who are well-trained on communication strategies to reach out to the under-developed communities. These communication professionals were such set of people who have exposure to multi-disciplinary knowledge and training in development communication concepts and methods. The learning on the approach to development reinforced this on the nature of input further. The significance of communication for development approach in producing long-term outcomes became apparent. The strategy was understood as providing learning to the local communities by organizing them so as to build their self-reliance. That is enabling them or “helping them to take care of themselves...do for themselves today what others have done for them yesterday.” Otherwise, the approach involves building the capabilities of the people or rigorous human resource development efforts. It requires qualified and trained professionals to facilitate such a process.

The Jawaja experiment in “Educational Innovation” that was initiated by a group of faculty members of IIM, Ahmedabad and National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad was first of a series of “Experiments in Educational Innovation” initiated under the auspices of “The Rural University”. It was carried out in the Jawaja block of Ajmer district of Rajasthan that aimed to address issues on rural poverty and in turn accelerate the process of development. This could only be possible by professionally qualified and educated youth to work in rural areas. The experiment validated the following assumptions underlying the questions “What can the poor man do for himself?” and “How far unorganised individuals can be helped to become self-reliant?” “Is there any way out, so that development communication professionals can help them?” The objectives of the project were to use learning as the basis of development and provide contextually relevant learning to the disadvantaged communities, tailored to their needs. The primary concern of the change-agent (interveners) was to develop self-managing capability and mutuality of people, thus making oneself dispensable in the process. Such initiatives were able to build and retain professionals in the sector. They developed good operational skills. However, it was found that due to varied educational backgrounds, they needed exposure to formal education in social sciences and management to function effectively.

Evolution of Devcom

India, after independence had always viewed media as a complementary platform to aid the development activities carried out by it. Radio was used extensively for informing farmers related to agricultural practices and, spread the awareness with regard to policies and programmes. Thus, disseminating social welfare and development was the sole purpose behind the radio and television broadcasts. Satellite Instructional Television Experiment (SITE) is one such example of the welfare agenda of the state. Over a period of time, development journalism also started taking roots into the journalism education. Alphonso Dagrón says that “Unfortunately, Journalists often got labelled as experts in communication. There is little knowledge about

how the communication work covers a very wide range of skills that a journalist is not prepared to deal with. A journalist is prepared to work with the media, to write, to report, to produce for radio, television and newspapers. By appointing journalists to posts that are designed for specialists in communication, development agencies were already doing a choice to work mostly towards mass media". Nonetheless, there was little choice. There are thousands of journalists but very few specialists in communication. The schools of journalism can be counted by hundreds in the whole world, each one producing every year dozens of journalists or public relations professionals. On the other hand, there are no schools to train communication professionals. Many universities decided to change the name to their school of journalism, but the contents remains almost the same in the apparently new "schools of social communication". In the early nineties, UNICEF realised that its information and communications officers at the field level were appointed under about 50 different names. From the straight forward "communication" or "information" officer, to "social mobilisation", "advocacy", "development support communication", "community mobilisation", "social marketing", "development communication", "media", "external relations", "public relations" officers. Even the distinction between "communication" and "information" is not very clear to many. As it is true that the word "communication" is a wider concept that contains all the others, it is also important to make the difference between the one-way (information) and the two-way (communication) process. It helps at least to distinguish the journalists from the communicators. The basic premise guiding theory and practice in development communication has been the notion that human societies are just and fair distribution of resources to individuals and groups within them, and that all people, with some effort and help, can achieve the benefits that societies have to offer. Thus, an articulated in the dominant paradigm of development, if an individual or group does not possess "desirable" attitudes, opinions, behaviours, or other attributes, or does not participate effectively in a society's affairs, it is the individual who is deficient and thus needs to be taught skills and provided help (Dagron, 2000). The earlier development communication models have accepted such a victim-blame hypothesis.

The origin of development communication in India can be traced to the agricultural extensions field, which was initiated in the fifties in many developing countries. The study of the diffusion of hybrid crop by scientists in 1942, established the critical role of technological information for increased farm production. Agricultural extensions education, as a part of the agricultural sciences, branched off as a specialised field to help evolve theory and practice of modern methods of agriculture. This approach of spreading innovation, new ideas, practices, and technologies in agriculture to the farmers in the developing countries became very popular as agricultural extensions during the 1950s. In view of the heavy dependence of agricultural extension of communication techniques and methodologies, in due course, communication applied to agricultural extensions came to be known as agricultural communication. This was the time when development communication, as a specialised area of communication, was recognised, and became very popular. It slowly diversified into rural communication when extension specialists with knowledge of communication principles transferred like health, hygiene, nutrition, sanitation etc. Instead of confining developmental activity to the rural areas alone, the urban section was also included to help the poorer sections living in the slums. Thus, communication theory and practice applied to help stimulate the development process in developing countries.

Pedagogy

Development Communication as a course has been taught for a long time in most of the mass communication and Journalism programmes all over the country both in regular as well as in the distance mode. It can be observed that Development Communication is taught as one of the course, but most of the

university departments are not totally dedicated in creating development communication students or practitioners. Though, there is a huge demand from the social sector for IEC officers, Communication consultants, media officers, BCC officers. But the 'only one' course is not able to cater to the requirements of the students and the development sector. Most of the 'value added' learnings are acquired by the students on job, or they keep experimenting with communication approaches while implementing development programmes. This could be a major reason why our communication campaigns are failing or are not able to deliver the requisite results. Holistic attempts to train and equip the students on the various aspects of developing communication messages need to be designed. Courses need to be structured in such a way that the students learn the theories and are also put to practical training. The students are taught extensively about the various development paradigms, emphasizing more on the western model of development and its criticism.

Lack of fieldwork to better understand the concepts learnt in the classes is very much missing. A tour for a day or two to a nearby place does not suffice the theoretical understanding for the students. This segment need to be designed and should be amalgamated into the regular course work. Field work should be given credits or marks to motivate the students appropriately. The field work will provide learning on development issues and strategies through studies and practice. This will help in enhancing the students' adaptability to the rural environment and improve students' observational, analytical and conceptual skills (simply, research skills). The field work will also deepen their understanding of development issues and they would eventually build their appreciation of constraints and possibilities in development. Theory combined with field practice and exposure would enable students to understand inter-relationships of various aspects of social life and their bearing on development. A congenial social environment has to be constructed and sustained at the all levels during the course. The pedagogy adopted needs to be interactive and diverse. The students should have a greater role in the learning process and it needs to be self-propelled with faculty being the facilitator. The adoption of various methods caters to the learning styles of various students. The faculty also needs to provide regular feedback to the students about their performance and behavior. The hindrances to learning need to be identified and rectified immediately through obtaining feedback from the students regularly. The faculty should also provide counseling to the students whenever they face personal difficulties. Students of development communication need to better appreciate the importance of this so-called thread that weaves the social fabric together. A better understanding of development communication leads to more meaningful applications of its methods in development work. Hence, this course should enumerate and discusses concepts, theories, principles, and methods central to development is deemed necessary in any communication curriculum, particularly in the developing world. As a result of which the students will have more intrinsic approach to the more specific application of various communication with relation to changing the behavior and attitude of the people. Development Communication as a course should be spread evenly over the entire post graduate programme for benefit of the students. The initial module should familiarize them with the basic concepts of mass communications, theories, and models governing the various perspectives. It should orient briefly about development communication through case lets drawn from Indian context. The succeeding module should provide the conceptual framework necessary for a proper understanding of the creative, theoretical, practical and technical competencies essential to the study of development communication. Course content should include definition of communication; introduction to the communication; analysis of basic components of communication; models of the processes of mass communication; basic theories and an introduction to the practice of development communication. It shall analyse the process of communication paying particular attention to the production of messages, their distribution, gate keeping characteristics and constraints of the media channel in the communication process

and issues relating to the functioning of audiences. It would also base primarily on case studies in communication pertaining to the best practices in communication. The main objective of this course is to increase understanding of communication theories as they apply in social change and development programmes, public health practice and advocacy. The course should also explore various approaches including behavior change communication as an interactive process with communities to develop tailored messages and approaches using a variety of communication channels to develop positive behaviors and sustain individual, community and societal behavior change; and maintain appropriate behavior. It should also illustrate the importance of communication for social and behavior change, focusing on the application of communication models and strategies in health, social and other development fields. The term end seminar should serve as a forum for discussing current research in development communication and change from various perspectives. The course should employ case discussion as the most important teaching methods along with lectures and discussion, documentaries, assignments as other teaching methods.

Conclusion

A student undergoing the development communication programme should accept and pursue development work as their career to start with and in the process of working with disadvantaged segment of the society, where they will be able to shape their thinking and action towards looking at their work as part of their life styles. They will themselves should set goals for themselves that they would create as much as opportunities and enabling environment for the poor to find out solutions for their problems. It will become the priority area in their life. They would feel satisfied and motivated to take up challenging tasks in order to influence the external environment through strong grassroots action. It means staying alive with the purpose of poverty reduction and development. As development communication students working with the communities will get disturbed and will be able to question the status-quo to bring appropriate changes and motion in action by tirelessly pursuing equity and justice by displaying higher standards of Honesty and Integrity. They should also seek excellence in action by setting internal standards and continuously strives to do better than the previous best. They should also strive to build (enable) and empower the development players in general and the poor in particular through continuous experimentation and finding appropriate solutions for the context specific issues. They try to understand what is there first through a systematic study, then build on what needs to be done to bring the desired change in the environment by believing and working on collaborative approach. Development Communication students uses his/her knowledge and skills rigorously towards the cause of humanity and urge to contribute significantly. He/she will take responsibility of building new knowledge from the people (disadvantaged segment of the society, government, NGOs and other partners) with whom he/she is working and making it available for further development action. This will be ensured through writing reflective reports, cases and case studies, issue based reports, personal reflections etc.

The development communication course should be founded on the social need that high quality professionals have to work directly with/for the disadvantaged segment of the society (poor farmers, women, children, old age people etc). The development communication professionals have to work at the (village/urban slum/coastal villages/tribal areas) micro level, where development has to be fostered. They are not envisaged, in the short run, to serve the requirements of organizations involved in promoting development at macro-level through conventions, protocols, declarations and policies. E.g. Funding agencies, training institutions or policy advocacy organisations. It is evident from the preceding description that the course envisions development communication professionals as having largely the appropriate attitude. Professionalism is more of attitude than knowledge and skills. However, it is not thought that

knowledge and skills are less prominent. The emphasis on shaping the attitude has its implications on the role of the faculty. Faculty will take the role of a mentor, not just a teacher. Besides, faculty should exemplify the right attitude. The learning's in field and the class rooms should be experiential. The grooming has to be largely through 'learning by doing'. As the intensity of grooming is on the attitudes, equally on building knowledge and skills, action-reflection cycle will be emphasized. Situations for action with the disadvantaged segment of the society and development practitioners will be created through fieldwork which would strengthen their belief system and conviction to work with poor and challenges to be faced in the process will get more attention. The use of electronic media for social change has already seen an impressive evolution. Since the fifties many associations, unions, community groups or NGOs, have challenged the dominant radio and television networks with small stations broadcasting towards specific communities. While bigger and bigger trusts are concentrating the control of the most influential mass media in the world, alternative networks of information and communication are flourishing often supported by the use of Internet. The challenges of communication are constantly evolving, as new possibilities but also new needs emerge. The new communicator has the capacity to navigate from one media to another, to choose between the multiple communication tools and adapt strategies to a particular situation. His or her experience may range from helping to strengthen union organizations to covering social issues for media stations, devising participation strategies for development projects at the community level, facilitating the networking of non-governmental organizations, and/or producing educational materials. This flexibility to use communication strategies in various cultural contexts provides a training that is second to none.

References

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