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Communication Choices to Engage Participation of Rural Indonesian Craftspeople in Development Projects

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Abstract. In participatory design projects, maintaining effective communication between facilitator and participant is essential. This paper describes the consideration given to the choice of communication modes to engage participation of rural Indonesian craftspeople over the course of a significant 3 year project that aims to grow their self-determination, design and business skill. We demonstrate the variety and subtlety of oral and written forms of communication used by the facilitator during the project. The culture, the communication skill and the influence of tacit knowledge affect the effectiveness of some modes of communication over the others, as well as the available infrastructure. Considerations are specific to the case of rural Indonesian craftspeople, but general lessons can be drawn.

Keywords: Communication Mode, Rural Craftspeople, Participatory Design, Participatory Development

1 Introduction

In theory the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) should assist rural business to access and compete in global markets. However, scholars widely acknowledge that ICT application in rural business is problematic [6,9]. There is a lag in uptake of ICTs in rural areas and review of a wide array of disparate initiatives found that interventions are best undertaken through multi-channel approaches and intermediaries [3,5]. However, imposing the use of ICT may not always meet the needs of rural people nor might ICTs suit the local context. Instead of beginning with the assumption that ICT in some form is needed to enhance the livelihoods of rural people, this project begins by examining how rural craftspeople communicate and how they engage to participate in projects to develop their livelihoods. Such understandings would in any case need to underpin efforts to adopt ICTs. This paper describes a case study of a participatory approach to engage participation of rural craftspeople in a development project, focusing upon the communication modes used by the intermediary.

Rural craftspeople producing traditional handmade products currently struggle to stay in business. The common problems of rural craftspeople are lack of innovation, management skill and capital. One rural craft industry which currently faces these difficulties is the Jombang glass bead craft industry in Indonesia. There used to be hundreds of craftspeople running glass bead businesses, but in the last decade the number has decreased to just over 20, and it is still decreasing.

Advisory programs have been provided to address these problems such as design and management training, and facilitation to sell craft products. Such advisory programmes are common for rural craft industries in Indonesia. While these programs offer value and give new insights to craftspeople, they do not fully engage the imagination, capacity and innovation of craftspeople. As top-down policy initiatives, these programs overlook the unique potential of the participants as well as the local context. Additionally, the complexity of the rural craft community with its inter-related aspects of communal life was ignored.

This action research project has undertaken participatory design with rural craftspeople in order to explore how they can develop their craft practice and livelihoods. Participatory design involves them fully in decision making processes, is grounded in their local context, respects their skills, allows them to exercise self-determination, and respects the unique potential of each participant.

Communication is one key to success of a participatory project. Therefore, it is necessary to examine how communication occurs and effective modes of communication. This knowledge can inform application of ICTs for rural craftspeople.

2 The Participatory Approach

Participatory methods have been used in many fields. The fundamental tenet of participatory methods is empowering participants to have a better say in determining their future. Good communication enables better quality participation. However, engaging participants can be challenging. As stated by Bebbington et.al, rural people will not share their problems nor their ideas in situations that are not conducive [2]. Knowledge of cultural sensitivity and the local political situation is essential to creating conducive situation. Interpersonal and political skills of facilitators are also needed to create conducive situations [11].

2.1 Communication as an essential aspect of participatory project

The most crucial phase of participatory projects is “entry to the field” and building an initial relationship with participants [4,11]. Nevertheless the success of this phase depends upon the communication skill of the facilitator.

In the literature that examines the effectiveness of different communication channels, Maltz argued that the chosen communication medium will affect the quality of information, in terms of its richness, spontaneity and speed [10]. Hollingshead argued that communication medium is less influential on the quality of group decision making [7], which is influenced more by the equality of social status among members in a group. However, Hollingshead did not consider the role of facilitators. In participatory projects involving intermediaries, the quality of communication and resulting

decisions also depends on the facilitator's skill to mediate the discussion in order to avoid domination etc.

2.2 The challenge of initiating the participatory project

Different societies hold different understandings of participation based on their local value systems [13]. Facilitators should understand the values in the community [13] and how to deal with them before initiating a participatory project. Western techniques for engaging participation are not necessarily suitable for eastern cultures [13]. Negative consequences of relationships caused by misunderstandings can occur. There has been little research exploring communication for engaging participation from the context of eastern culture.

2.3 Overview of the three year participatory project

The communication strategies described below have been developed as part of a three year project. The first phase in year 1 involved ethnographic study, interviewing craftspeople about their livelihoods, artistic and business perspective and attitudes towards sharing. The second phase in year 2 involved a series of collaborative design workshops between industrial design students from the local urban university and the rural craftspeople in which they worked together to develop new designs that both reflected their own values and local culture but that also tapped into the design expertise of formally trained students. This series of workshops led them to collaboratively create new designs that were sold in government craft outlets, and served to increase their design confidence. The third phase in year 3 involved the craftspeople developing their own project. They decided to increase local awareness of their craft by taking a road-show to local schools and engaging school children in making glass products with them. They were very proud to demonstrate and teach their skills and to raise awareness of the local craft. This paper discusses communications in year 3.



Fig. 1. Napkin Rings designed together by craftspeople and designers

3 Method

The researcher acted as facilitator, along with 4 young design students from local institutions and 2 professional designers in the participatory project. All have a similar cultural background with the rural community, enabling them to understand sensitive issues within the culture. Additionally, the first author has 10 years experience of working with rural craftspeople, which is advantageous for approaching participants.

However, a similar cultural background is not enough to build trust and a close relationship for further collaborative projects. Strong interpersonal skills gained from experience and maturity are more influential in fostering the process. For example, when the conversation with craftspeople unintentionally moves to a sensitive issue within the community, the facilitator must give an appropriate response to maintain a neutral position as well as to keep a positive outlook.

Facilitators were also aware of social hierarchy as a hallmark of Javanese Society [1]. Therefore, the facilitator identified and approached the community leaders, whose recommendation usually influenced the community decision.

3.1 The community meeting to decide a project

Once the researcher gained the trust of the community, she organized a community meeting on a weekly basis for two months in 2012. Each meeting was attended by six to twenty craftspeople. Most of participants had graduated from high school.

The first meeting began with icebreaking in order to create an informal and joyful situation, using a game that involved pairing Indonesian celebrities, and a discussion of punishments for participants who made unconstructive comments, yielding laughter and a relaxed atmosphere. A modified ‘string game’¹ was employed to make sure that everyone had a turn to speak and share their opinion. These initial activities were crucial to get craftspeople comfortable in participating. Then, through the intensive discussion in the community meetings, the craftspeople decided to organize events to promote the industry to local buyers through a glass-bead-making workshop. Local high schools surrounding the industry were selected as targets for pilot projects.

The glass bead making workshops for high school students aimed to provide insight into glass beads as a part of Indonesian history and culture, as well as allowing the students to experience making glass beads with assistance from craftspeople. Each workshop lasted 3 hours.

By the end of the events, craftspeople gained a positive response from schools. In total, there were 160 participants in the workshops. Two schools asked for further workshops and enthusiastically allocated the project as an alternate extra-curricular activity for students. Meanwhile, some students expressed their desire to implement their design and meet craftspeople in their place. Overall, the participants showed that they respected and were interested in the local products.

¹ Each participant chooses one of provided strings, then he must talk as they slowly wind the piece of string around their index finger. The person must keep talking until reaching the end of the string. (source: <http://www.icebreakers.ws/small-group/string-game.html>)

There are social and economic benefits for craftspeople through these workshops. The social benefits were indicated by the new network built with local high schools while the economic benefit was gained by the product sales and payment as a tutor for the workshop. The glass-bead-making workshop has a strong potency to enhance the craft industry because; firstly it spread the information about the industry to local buyers, secondly it enables future networking between the craft industry and schools. It also developed confidence in the craftspeople to engage externally in this way.



Fig. 2. The glass-bead-making workshop: high school students learnt to make a glass bead, assisted by craftspeople.

4 The Choice of Communication Mode

The researcher used both oral and written communication modes during the project. Oral communication was delivered by face-to-face contacts and phone calls while the written communication was mainly by texting (Short Message Service / SMS). Researchers also used printed material (a letter) and email, but did so rarely. Communication was not only about the project, but also to express appreciation and greetings related to special community occasions such as the coming of Ramadan.

Table 1. shows that the oral mode of communication was more commonly used than written mode. Collective face-to-face interaction was the oral mode most frequently used during the project, followed by individual face-to-face, then by phone. Phone calls were used to contact community leaders; first to introduce the researcher prior to meeting, second to make an appointment, and also when certain issues needed to be discussed with certain people. Meanwhile, SMS was the only frequent mode used for written communication. Most SMSs were sent collectively, ie from the facilitator to multiple recipients. However, it was one way rather than reciprocal communication. Mail and email were the least used modes. The researcher had tried to spread

information through this mode, but there was insufficient response, so she used oral mode and SMS instead.

5 The Use of Language in Each Communication Mode

We combined Indonesian and Javanese language for communication during the project. The bilingual use of language is common in current Javanese society. The Javanese language provides a sense of closeness and facilitates building relationships with participants. The local language is commonly used in oral communication, but is rarely used in written communication. On the other hand, Indonesian as the language of formal instruction in school is used for reading and writing purposes, as well as in formal situations. Thus, we used the Javanese for oral mode, but Indonesian language for written mode. In collective meetings, we used both Javanese and Indonesian.

Table 1. The Use of Communication Modes in The Participatory Project

	Communication Mode					
	Oral			Written		
Purpose	Face to face Individually	Face to Face Collectively	Phone Call	Texting (SMS)	Mail/Flyer	Email
Approach						
Introduce the researcher	V	V	V*	-	-	-
Initial discussion	V	V	-	-	-	-
Organize The Project						
Make an appointment	<i>Only if needed</i>	V	V*	V**	-	V*
Make an invitation	<i>Only if needed</i>	V	-	V**	V	-
Share problems/ideas	V	V	<i>Only if needed</i>	V**	-	-
Make a resume	-	V	-	V**	-	-
News Update	V	V	<i>Only if needed</i>	V**	-	-
Arrange work distribution	V	V	<i>Only if needed</i>	<i>Only if needed</i>	-	-
Miscellaneous						
Appreciation	V	V	-	V**	-	-
Greetings	V	V	-	V**	-	-

V* : only to community leaders
V** : sent collectively
Only if needed : means an additional communication effort

Nevertheless, the use of local language must be done carefully. Javanese speech consists of some levels that reflect politeness and honorific expression [6]. Inappropriate use is impolite and reflects cultural insensitivity. Accordingly, the facilitator used a high level of Javanese speech (*Kromo*) when speaking to an older or respected person; and medium level (*Ngoko*) to a person of similar age and social status.

The other important issues of communicating with craftspeople orally are the intonation and the type of sentence. The facilitator kept speaking in an informal intonation to maintain friendliness, expressing ideas as questions to solicit feedback. This gave craftspeople a chance to interact, engage their responses and avoid passivity. Otherwise the facilitator would miss key information about their ideas or feelings.

The use of Indonesian language in written mode was to ensure that the message was understandable. Nevertheless, it created a formal impression which means distance. Therefore, the facilitator must maintain friendliness feeling and politeness when sending SMS, by using a structure of: “greeting (thanks to God) + main content + thank you”. Craftspeople did not necessarily reply to messages. Replies usually comprised only one or two words, such as “Yes mam”. Nevertheless, no response did not mean they were not interested in the issue.

6 Discussion

The most effective mode of communication during the project was face-to-face interaction and SMS. Face-to-face meeting conveyed tacit knowledge by the style of speech, dress, or even means of transportation used; in addition to the verbal message. Tacit knowledge builds trust and rapport which are essential to effective networking practice [12]. In addition, collective face-to-face interaction enabled immediate response from community leaders and other members. Rural communities have a strong cohesive culture in which their decision will be greatly influenced by a respected person or persons. Collective face-to-face meeting accelerated effective engagement.

The low usage of email or mail was apparently caused by the limited written communication skill of craftspeople. Email was also less popular as the infrastructure is insufficient to support a reliable communication, creating more obstacles to use than SMS or phone.

7 Conclusion

Communication choices to engage participation in this context considered several aspects: the communal culture, the limited written skill and the influence of tacit knowledge. The influence of community leaders, as is characteristic in rural communal culture, affected the communication effectiveness as well as engaging participation. The limited written skill of participants meant that oral modes were used more than written mode, especially when immediate responses were needed. The use of language and mode of communication must be carefully selected, as it taps into tacit knowledge which is essential in building trust and rapport while communicating with rural people.

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