

Changing professional attitudes Complementing use of participatory techniques with attention to the 'here and now'

2

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Introduction

The *Proyecto Capacitación Profesional en Gestión de Recursos Hídricos para Uso Agrario (Proyecto CGRH)* conducts training sessions for professionals working in irrigation management transfer programmes to help them develop facilitation skills for participatory processes. The course focuses on the knowledge and skills required for developing a facilitatory role for supporting communication with water users. Its main aim is, however, helping participants to define and adopt certain professional attitudes that are required for successful facilitation. The course encourages its participants to discover, through experience, their own personal style of facilitation.

In this article, I would like to share our progress in, and ideas about, helping participants to work on their behaviour and attitudes. I will give a summary about learning and teaching 'attitudes', followed by a presentation of two of the exercises we use in teaching our participants about attitudinal change. In conclusion, I describe the challenge, both for trainers and professionals working with rural communities, of complementing the focus on participatory techniques with equal attention to the interaction between workshop participants themselves.

Changing attitudes

Many of the problems we – participants and trainers alike – face in facilitating participatory processes do not stem from a poor application of participatory techniques but from the way in which we interact through body and speech. This is something that often goes by without being remarked upon, although hardly ever unnoticed. When we communicate, we not only transmit a message; we accompany this with implicit information about how we see ourselves, and about how we see others. These views are based on our attitudes. Attitudes are not permanent, but they are very stable. They are both the result of a lifelong learning process and the norms and culture of the society in which we live. In Peru, development workers often assume the role of 'problem-solver' in front of the rural population and usually the rural population assume that they have this role. This is frustrating when, for instance, a development worker has gone to a local community with the mandate to assist its members in resolving their own problems.

Let us illustrate this with an example from the Proyecto CGRH course on analysis of farming systems, conducted in northern Peru.

Shortly after the workshop's introduction, the facilitator asked one of the participants: "Don Antonio, why don't you grow more plots with products that you could sell in the market?" The question takes Don Antonio a bit aback, as the engineer does not explain why he needs the information. Moreover, he is asked neither which crops he cultivates at present, nor what difficulties he faces in this. While Don Antonio contemplates the question, the facilitator comes up with an announcement on what he perceives as Don Antonio's lack of enterprising spirit: "Don Antonio, you fail to make use of the market's opportunities".

At this point, Don Antonio would like to mention that the mill owners make him sow a large part of his terrain with rice, as a means to repay the debts he has accumulated with them; that he doesn't have enough family labour to extend his cultivated area; that the irrigation water that is essential for his secondary crops often arrives very late; that...etc., etc. O, how difficult it is to explain all this to someone who hardly knows the zone; to someone who appears to be in a hurry, as in less than two minutes he is already suggesting changes in Don Antonio's way of farming. Instead of expressing all his experience, Don Antonio resorts to an answer that is used very often, although it is hardly an answer at all: "Yes, yes, mister".

Our professional performance consists of knowledge, skills and attitudes. Improving performance implies a need to work on all three aspects. While the facilitator in the above example knows what facilitation is and how to apply it, his inner (and by no means uncommon) urge to be a 'caretaker' of the people's problems prevents him from adopting a truly facilitatory role. Our courses, therefore, offer learning opportunities for knowledge, skills and attitudes, and for integrating the three in hands-on practice.

¹ The 'Project for Training of Professionals in Water Management for Agricultural Purposes' is an inter-institutional initiative by IPROGA (a national organisation for the promotion of irrigation management transfer), IMAR (a group of NGOs aiming at management transfer of the Chancay Lambayeque irrigation system), CEDEPAS (an NGO working with mountain communities) and SNV, The Netherlands Development Organisation.

The process through which we learn attitudes is fundamentally different from learning knowledge (by reproducing it) and from learning skills (by applying them). Learning attitudes is a highly social process, in which:

- we need to see the benefits of changing a specific attitude, in terms of improved effectiveness in our social interactions;
- we need to identify with, and imitate, a positive example;
- we need time, dedication and a supportive environment; and above all,
- we need to have a positive feeling about ourselves in order to free the energy for working on our attitudes.

Attitudes are personal property and, as such, can only be changed by their owner. Therefore, participation in activities concerning attitudes is voluntary, although we will

ask participants who 'opt out' to observe the activity and share their observations with others attending the course. Up to now, all our trainees have participated keenly.

In our training courses, we finish the day with about an hour of reflection. Initially, reflections focus on the process of learning new knowledge and skills, but by the third day, we change the focus towards reflections on personal attitudes. The members of the facilitatory team participate in the reflections along with the participants; in order to emphasise that working on one's attitudes is a life-long and continual process. Generally, we use a number of methods for facilitating reflections, two examples of which follow in the next section. With each method, we will describe the objective, the desired interaction, the required steps, alternatives, an example and tips for use.

Nicknames	
Objective	To introduce, in a very 'light' manner, a focus on one's personality
Interaction	Each participant feels accepted by other participants for his or her personal style
Method	Choosing nicknames based on observed behaviour during the past few days
<p>Step 1: Ask each participant individually to prepare a nickname for each member of his or her working group based on their behaviour. We usually have three parallel working groups.</p> <p>Step 2: The working groups have a meeting in which the nicknames are exchanged and during which the group has to reach consensus about the names finally selected. The final choice may be one of the options contributed by the members, or a new and better option identified through open discussions. The person receiving the nickname decides whether to accept it or not. Nicknames are written on cards but not yet put on the participants' lapels.</p> <p>Step 3: The working groups identify which positive attitudes are highlighted through the nicknames and identify what is the possible pitfall if the participant over-emphasises this good quality. Again, the person under discussion has to recognise himself in the descriptions and approve the use of the nickname in the plenary.</p> <p>Step 4: In a plenary session, each working group member is introduced in turn. Participant A introduces B, B introduces C, etc., until the final member introduces A. The introductions cover the nickname (now written on stickers or cards and attached to the participant to which it refers), its motivation, the quality or qualities expressed in it and the possible pitfall. Each person gets applauded.</p> <p>Step 5: Ask participants to express how they feel about the exercise. Finally ask whether they would like to continue to work on attitudes the next days as well.</p>	
Alternatives	
<p>A possible sequel to this activity is asking participants to think about how their life's history has led them to become what they are. Ask them to prepare a five-minute description of their life history, which they will be asked to present in turn during the workshop. This additional step can best be introduced by one of the facilitators giving his or her life history.</p> <p>In our last course, participants adopted this activity as their 'thermometer' for change – i.e. as a way of monitoring changes in behaviour and attitude. Every fifth day, they would repeat the exercise in order to ascertain whether their personal development continued. They exchanged suggestions about issues requiring each participant's attention.</p>	
Example	
<p>One of the members of the Proyecto CGRH team was branded 'Tarzan' for his ability to improvise at the last minute. He always finds a 'liana' to swing by. Nevertheless, relying heavily on this ability also has led him to be weak on planning. Through his life history, he told us that having to face heavy responsibilities at an early age combined with the positive example of his uncle has led him to this confident style.</p>	
Tips for use	
<p>1. This is an introductory activity and generally the participants will choose nicknames with a positive connotation. In case of a tense atmosphere among the participants, this may not always be the case. Therefore it is important to insist on the constructive use of nicknames. Better still, organise an activity to concentrate reflection on the tense atmosphere in the group if this situation persists.</p> <p>2. Some nicknames are heroic, while others appear dull. Give special attention to those participants that appear to be less pleased. Help them to gain self-esteem through their life history, or in the plenary, highlight the moments in which they successfully evade their pitfall.</p>	

Dilemma Museum

Objective To let participants identify ethical values that underpin their attitudes and to guide them towards using these values as a resource for resolving personal dilemmas

Interaction Increasing willingness to discuss personal issues. Respect for and understanding of choices different people have to face and their outlook on these choices.

Method Analysing personal dilemmas with the help of a colleague

Step 1: Start with a plenary brainstorm about values. Instead of trying to define this tricky concept, suggest that participants give examples of possible values.

Step 2: Explain the complete procedure in a plenary session. Emphasise that not all will succeed in resolving their dilemma but that it is sufficient to reach a better definition of their dilemma, without resolving it.

Step 3: Ask participants to form pairs of their choice. In pairs, both work out – on a flip chart – a dilemma that they face in their work or in their personal life. For this, they provide a short description of the dilemma and identify the two options between which they cannot choose. Below each option they describe the considerations in support of that option. In a final step, each will identify which personal values underpin these considerations.

Step 4: Participants put their flipcharts on exhibition in the plenary meeting hall, while all are invited to visit the museum. In this museum there is no guide, but participants are encouraged to discuss the 'pictures' on exhibition.

Step 5: In a plenary session, participants are asked to express how they feel about the exercise. Ask whether some succeeded in resolving their dilemma.

Alternative

To get into the 'mood', we have been introducing this activity with a meditation exercise (controlled breathing from T'ai Chi). We have explained participants that we do this to bring them closer to themselves and to help them reach their values more easily.

Example

One of the members of the Proyecto CGRH team was in doubt about the right moment to intervene in the field exercise included in the course in which participants had to facilitate a meeting of water users. His options were either to intervene early on, or to allow the participant – through much sweat and doubt – to discover his or her best way of facilitating. He liked option 1 as it would assure the success of the meeting and maintain the enthusiasm of its participants, while option 2 was supported by the knowledge that a participant has to make errors in order to learn. The Proyecto CGRH team member then identified which values, in his view, underpinned the arguments for each of the two options. Values underpinning option 1 were compassion and perfection, while option 2 was underpinned by perseverance, a long-term outlook and, again, by perfection.

Tips for use

1. This activity requires the group to have worked on attitudes and to have reached a fair degree of cohesiveness.
2. In the brainstorm of values, often one or two negative values will be mentioned. Include these but explain that these are the 'negative' of another value and that in the following exercise we only use positive values.
3. The facilitator(s) join in this activity. Moreover, they can resolve situations where one or two participants remain left over in the forming of pairs.
4. If participants do not form pairs through not having personal affinity with any other members of the group, this should be reflected upon, as it says something about the interactions in the group of participants.

Conclusion

Through my own experience, I have learned that changing one's attitudes is an important prerequisite for adopting the role of a facilitator of participatory processes. Attitudes exist in us and only become visible in the way we interact. Methods, such as the two described in the previous section, are useful ways to give workshop participants a procedure by which to work on attitudes, but fail to make direct use of the interactions taking place during the training course itself. It is important to use the interactions that occur 'here and now'. Doing so is far more important than any method to approach issues concerning behaviour and attitudes, but requires considerable facilitation skills.

Many of those seeking to improve their skills in facilitating participatory learning and action approaches tend to rely heavily on methods and techniques. Nevertheless, the ability to support attitudinal change in participants includes an ability to intervene in the 'how-s' and 'why-s' of interaction in the meeting place. For example, *"I notice that we are all very restless – why is this?" "Why is it that this working group always is debating in raised voices?" "Why did you choose to neglect the suggestion of the participant on the third row?"*

In the tips for use given in the two methods presented previously, we suggest that problems that arise when applying the methods be used as starting points for reflection. With each method, we have described the

desired interactions next to the desired objectives. Deviations from the intended interaction could trigger a reflection on other interactions and, through this, on attitudes as well. A third way in which we support the participants to reflect individually on attitudes is by providing personal feedback, and by encouraging mutual feedback among the participants.

Using what occurs 'here and now' in the training sessions as a starting point for reflection on interaction and attitudes remains a challenge. As a team, we frequently debate how we perceive the interactions taking place and coach each other in developing and placing the right interventions at the right time. Though this is not easy, it certainly is inspiring.

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Notes

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Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Ana Cecilia Angulo Alva, Carlos Silva Velasquez, Javier Bobadilla Leiva, and Wilson Coronel Guevara; who have made the first course an unforgettable experience.