

Rivers of life

18

by ZIAD MOUSSA

Introduction

Rivers of life is one of the most powerful tools I have experienced in my professional life as a trainer and facilitator, as it helps groups to 'bond' quickly. It allows participants to reflect on personal experiences and influences that have motivated them in their personal and professional life. Participants are invited to use the symbol of a river to reflect on key stages in their lives, positive experiences and influences, and difficult challenges.

Preparation

As preparation, I suggest that you draw your own 'river of life'. Do this exercise with someone else if possible and share your experiences.

During the workshop, much depends on the space available. I have found that it is very useful to hang the flipcharts on the wall and let participants draw.

Time

- 15 minutes to prepare the 'rivers'
- Sharing depends on the time available



Photo: Ziad Moussa

Participants drawing their 'rivers' at the RCPLA workshop in Cairo, March 2008.

The time needed to share the results of the exercise depends on what you expect to achieve and how much time you have in your workshop. Ideally, it is advisable to share the outcomes of the exercise in a plenary session.

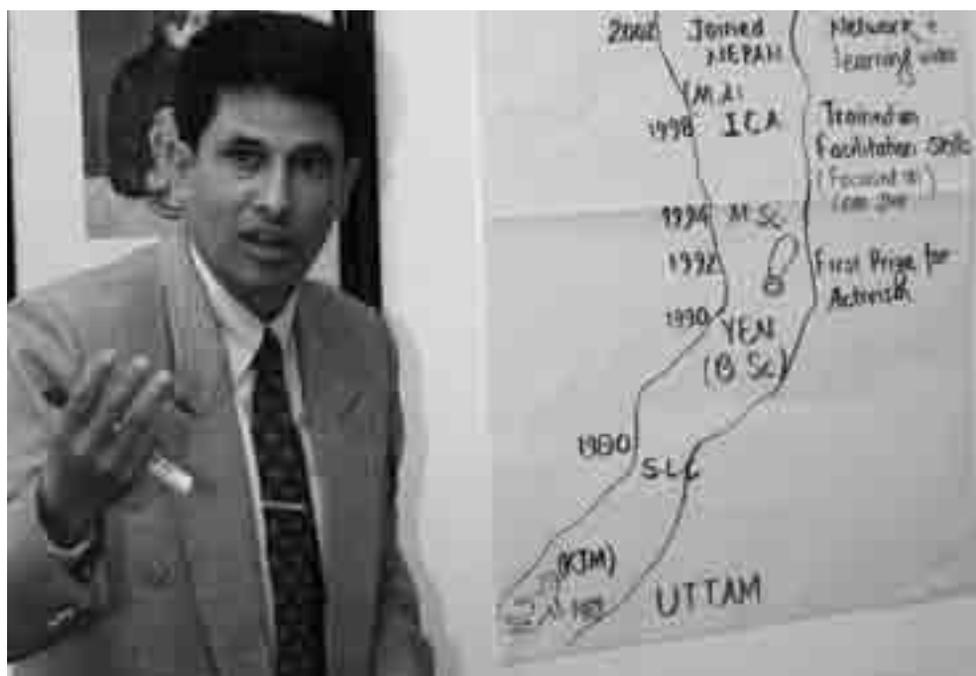


Photo: Ziad Moussa

Uttam Uprety from Nepal Participatory Action Network (NEPAN) presents his 'river' at the RCPLA workshop in Cairo, March 2008.

Apart from the 15 minutes needed to prepare the rivers, you need an average of four to five minutes per participant to present them. So if the group size is 12-18 you can do it in plenary but you would need to ensure very strict time keeping. For groups of 18 or more, you can divide them in smaller groups of 9-12 participants each.

Materials

- Blank piece of paper and pen for each participant
- Flipchart

Optional

- Multicoloured paper
- Coloured markers, crayons, pens
- Magazines, scissors, glue

Method

Step one

In this activity participants are invited to use the symbol of a river to reflect on their

own personal lives. Explain that a river is a meaningful symbol in many cultures and that people may find it quite natural and stimulating to think of their own lives in terms of a river.

Step two

Ask each person to take a piece of blank paper and a pen (or for a more creative approach, provide them with additional materials).

Step three

On the flipchart write the following:

- River of life: key stages in your life
- Tributaries: positive experiences and influences
- Rough waters: difficult challenges

Step four

Demonstrate how you might draw the river, tributaries, and rough waters and then ask each person to draw their own. Various points on the **river** represent significant stages in one's life:

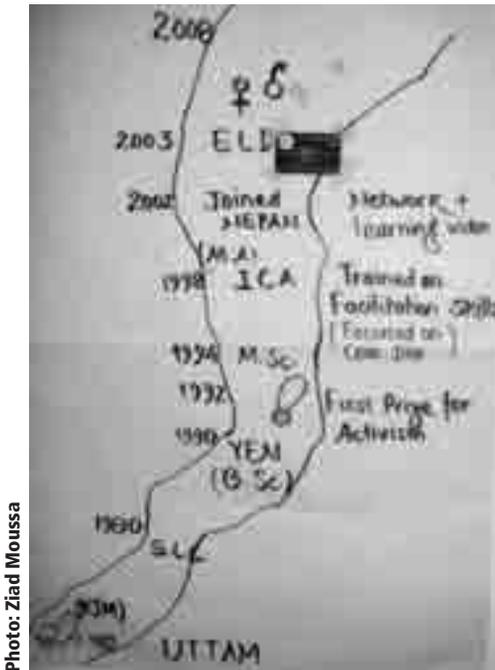


Photo: Ziad Moussa

A typical 'river', where the participant chose to benchmark his river along key dates in his life.



Photo: Ziad Moussa

An example of how a team has drawn their rivers in parallel to each other's.

- **Tributaries** are drawn to indicate key influences (e.g. people, education, books, experiences, events, etc.) that have contributed directly or indirectly to their lives and work.
- **Rough waters** in the river illustrate times when one has encountered difficult challenges in life that have potentially been the source of valuable learning.
- The river can run straight or it can twist (e.g. on **turning point moments** in one's life). It can also become narrow or widen, depending on the horizon perspective at a particular moment in time.

Step five

Encourage participants to be as self-disclosing in this exercise as they are comfortable with. Explain that they will be asked to share some of these experiences either in small groups, or in plenary.

Step six

Allow five to seven minutes for drawing the river. If using additional materials (e.g.

images from magazines), allow more time for cutting and pasting. Encourage the group to be creative, for example, use colours to express different moods at different periods of their lives. I sometimes ask the participants to dig in their pockets and stick on the drawing pictures of themselves and their families, business cards, souvenirs, etc.

Step seven

Discuss the rivers in plenary. Each participant explains her/his river while standing next to it and the other participants can move around the room as the rivers are being presented.

Step eight

To close the activity, emphasise the wealth of experience that is gathered in the room. For example, you can ask the participants to highlight how many years of experiences they have and sum them up collectively... they can add up to many centuries. You can also mark on a roughly drawn map of the

world the countries in which the participants have lived, studied, and worked. The result can be impressive too!

Variation

Many people view their life as a 'pathway' or 'roadway' rather than a 'river'. As facilitator, it is important to be flexible to see which metaphor works best for people. Also, some participants may not feel comfortable drawing. Have them write out their river of life rather than draw it.

Another variation of the exercise when participants are part of a team, is to ask the team to draw their rivers in parallel and make the rivers meet when the participants came across each other.

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