

Using participatory video to develop youth leadership skills in Colombia

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Introduction

This article describes how participatory video (PV) was used as a tool to help young people focus on their leadership skills. The young people were from a rural conflict zone in Colombia. Participants created a concrete product (a video to be shown to peers), which was completed by the end of the course. In a previous workshop, stand-alone activities were used to focus on different leadership skills. This second workshop offered the young people an opportunity to consolidate these skills by using them in a more realistic setting.

Facilitators of participatory processes often focus largely on the impact of the **process**, such as the skills that are learnt and the bonds of trust and communication (social capital) that are created. But this experience highlights the fact that the importance of the **product** for the participants themselves must not be forgotten. It is the product that makes the exercise of these skills important. It motivates the participants to apply these new skills to the highest possible level. This insight helps us to improve the process impacts of participatory experiences.

Background

This work was carried out by the Communities and Watersheds Team at an agricultural research centre in Colombia.

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The team was looking for rural partners to research ecosystems and their role in the long-term maintenance of environmental services. This led to us working with young people. Young people are the future managers and beneficiaries of natural resources in rural watersheds. We found that they had a natural interest in understanding and preserving the resources on which their livelihoods will depend in the medium and long term.

The first participatory diagnosis of research needs that we conducted with young people in rural areas resulted in a diversity of topics. These included:

- forest management for firewood production;
- watershed storage capacity for water availability;

Participant explaining how to use a video camera to one of the facilitators



Photo: CIAT

- water rights and distribution;
- food security practices for diet diversification; and
- forest characterisation and sustainable management for income generation.

We decided to strengthen the research projects with training in leadership skills. This would support the application of the findings and increase the impact of the young people's research. We started with the design and implementation of a series of leadership workshops. These were aimed at giving rural young people the tools to gain self-confidence, improve their communication skills, and work in teams.

Following Van Linden and Fertman (1998), we adopted a definition of youth leaders as individuals who:

- think for themselves;

- have the ability to use their personal strengths;
- can communicate their thoughts and feelings;
- can influence and motivate others for a common goal;
- work collectively to obtain results; and
- have high standards of achievement.

The idea was to develop a leadership skills programme where each component of this definition is practiced and assimilated by the young people with suitable exercises and activities. It is hoped that these components will then be applied and practiced in the research activities and in the dissemination and application of their results.

Participatory video

Participants learn how to use video equipment, using participatory video processes, exercises and games. They then use

Course
participant
filming and
directing a
shot



Photo: CIAT

this knowledge to make a video. Participatory video has been used in many different ways over the last 30 years: for community development, conflict resolution, sociological research, and to allow disempowered groups to make their voices heard and feed their views into policy-making processes. Shaw and Robertson (1997) list the benefits of PV as:

- participation (i.e. getting people actively involved in processes that affect them);
- individual development;
- communication;
- community development;
- critical awareness and consciousness raising;
- self advocacy and representation;
- capacity building and self reliance; and
- empowerment.

The underlying principle of participatory processes including PV is that it is participants themselves who are in control of the process. The extent of this decision-making power – and its balance with the decision-making power of the facilitator – will depend on the purpose of the process, the level of confidence and ability of the participants in that field, and the desired outcome. In some processes, the decision-making power will rest largely with the facilitators. Participants will only be consulted about key decisions. In others, the decision-making power may be shared between facilitators and participants, or the participants may have complete control of the process and refer to the facilitator for advice.

The different balances of decision-making power between participants and facilitators have been described as a 'participation ladder'. Participants with no decision-making

Participants
planning the
timeline



Photo: CIAT

power are shown at the bottom of the ladder. And participants who are completely in charge of the process are shown at the top (Arnstein 1969, DeNegri *et al* 1999). Roger Hart (1992) has adapted this idea. He has developed the Ladder of Youth Participation. This refers to the balance of power between young people and adults involved in a participatory process.

The impact of young people taking control of the process is considered as important as the impact of the final product (whether this be a video, an agricultural research investigation or a local development plan). Involvement in participatory processes can have many impacts on participants' social capital, such as:

- increased self awareness;
- increased self confidence;
- changing of power structures within groups; and
- creation of trust and communication channels.

The process becomes more important when the aim of the intervention is to create these process impacts. In this case, the specific aim of the process was the development of leadership skills. White suggests that when video is used to develop personal skills, it is the process that is of utmost importance. The video is 'not intended to have a life beyond the immediate context' (White 2003).

Using participatory video to develop leadership skills in Colombia

The participatory video process we used was the second stage of the programme focusing on the development of leadership skills for young people in rural areas. Forty young people attended a residential workshop. They were split into two groups. Those attending the leadership skills workshop for the first time (32 participants) did the stage one workshop. Those who had participated in a previous stage one

workshop (eight participants) took part in the stage two video workshop.

The stage one workshop consisted of a series of stand-alone activities. Each was followed by a discussion. These were designed to help young people practice and reflect upon the different components of leadership. For example, 'working collectively to obtain results' was explored using a series of activities. The group had to work together to overcome a physical challenge, such as crossing over an imaginary 'acid swamp' using ropes and planks of wood. In another activity, participants created a flag that represented them to present to the group, as a way of focusing on 'communicating their thoughts and feelings'.

The video process

The stage two participants took part in a two-day workshop. This was designed as a series of different video-based activities. Each focused on a different leadership quality. Each activity was followed by a plenary session to discuss the lessons that had been learnt through the activity. These included:

- technical points about using the camera, lighting, sound etc.;
- process points about making videos such as how it feels to be filmed and what can be done to put people at ease in front of the camera; and
- discussions and lessons learnt about leadership qualities.

For example, the first activity was a video version of the name game in which people presented themselves to the camera. Then they discussed how we present ourselves, and how we are perceived by others (communicating thoughts and feelings).

The activities each served to focus on and develop a different aspect of leadership, just as activities in the parallel level one workshop had done. For example, interview activities in the video workshop allowed the young people to focus on communication skills. Planning more complex scenes, and planning the final film provided a focus for influencing others and resolving conflicts within a group. Filming the sequences provided a space for examining working collectively, taking on different roles within a group and achieving high standards. After each activity, the group discussed their experiences and what they had learnt about the different leadership skills.

The video workshop differed from the level one workshop. Each activity was also designed as part of a sequence through which the young people worked towards a final outcome – the production of a video. This was to be shown to their peers on the last day of the workshop. By contrast,

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the level one workshop was a collection of stand-alone activities.

Using video as a way to develop leadership skills proved to be more expensive than the activities in the stage one workshop. This was due to the nature of the equipment required. However, we judged it to be a worthwhile tool. The young people had already demonstrated interest both in the research projects (being involved in research projects for more than two years) and in the development of leadership skills (had participated in the previous workshop). The benefit was twofold. The primary aim of this workshop was to develop leadership skills. But we hope that at a later stage, the young people will use their newly developed technical abilities alongside their leadership skills in their communities – as a way of facilitating discussions on the use of natural resources, and facilitating community planning and action. In the long run, this also allows the young researchers to reach bigger audiences of rural young people. At this initial stage, however, the video was being used by the participants themselves, and not as a tool to use within the wider community.

Like any other participatory tool, with PV the product impact is important (the impact the video has). But so is the process impact (the impact the process has on the participants). In this process, the space for the participants to make decisions themselves was limited, as both the medium (video) and the subject (leadership) had been chosen by the facilitators. But within these parameters, the facilitators tried to leave as much space as possible for the participants to make their own decisions. They were given space to decide what to film, how to film it, and what to put into the final video. Group decisions were taken using a range of participatory tools such as ranking, group brainstorming, spider diagrams and group discussions.¹

¹ See, for example, *A Trainer's Guide for Participatory Learning and Action* (Pretty et al., 1995).

Participants receiving certificates at the end of the course.



The young people learnt the basics of using the video equipment very quickly. The games at the start of the workshop focused on allowing the participants to learn through doing, and learn through making mistakes. The facilitators took a decision to intervene as little as possible when the participants were planning and filming their work. This was to allow them as much autonomy as possible in deciding what to film and how to film it. In practice, this sometimes meant compromising the quality of the final product (for example, allowing a participant to film a shot in a badly lit area, despite facilitators being aware that the lighting was poor). The facilitators agreed that the process and the participants' autonomy were more important than the quality of the final product. So it was necessary to compromise on the quality of the final product.

Results

The participants and the facilitators considered both the level one and level two workshops a success. Comments from participants of both workshops suggested that they perceived the video workshop to be 'the real thing' in terms of the young people exercising their leadership skills.

The difference that they perceived between the two workshops was that in the video process, there was an ultimate goal that had to be delivered. This meant that the young people were not just 'practicing' their skills but were using them in a real situation in which they had to deliver. Failing to deliver had a 'real' consequence. Compare the imaginary 'acid swamp' they would fall into if the groups had failed, with the failure to have a product ready at the end of the programme, or showing a badly made video to their peers and friends.

Box 1: The final product

The final film that the group showed was an exploration of the six different components of leadership they had explored. The group chose footage that exemplified each of these aspects. In some cases they used footage that had been filmed during the activities, for example interviewing each other on their leadership activities within their communities, or explaining their body maps to the camera. They also filmed new scenes to fill in gaps. For example, they filmed themselves building a human pyramid as an example of collective working. They developed a short drama about peer pressure to demonstrate the concept of people thinking for themselves. They also filmed each other directing shots as an example of influencing and motivating others for a common goal. The quality of the film was generally very high, although there were sections where sound quality or lighting could have been improved.

Decisions were taken as a group. They worked on a collective time-line and decided what to include or leave out through group discussion and group ranking. The exception to this was that footage of people could not be used without their explicit consent, resulting in some individuals vetoing certain clips.

The group 'topped and tailed' their film with a scripted introduction about what they had done, and their conclusions on the whole process and how they would use their skills. They gave their decisions to the facilitators who then took charge of the digital editing process. A rough version of the final product was shown to the group for any last changes, before being shown to peers. The end result was a very watchable, humorous and insightful film about leadership from these young people's point of view.

This division may seem contrived. Ultimately, both activities were run within the safe confines of a workshop. The worst consequence of failure in either activity is feeling embarrassed or inadequate. However, the difference proved to be very important for the young people themselves. This may be because making a video and using the equipment involved is perceived as a more serious activity than the games and arts-based activities that were used in the level one workshop.

Some of the level one workshop activities also had tangible product outputs, such as each person making a flag. However, each was a stand-alone activity. If a young person was uninterested, they could sit out that activity while still being included in the workshop as a whole. In the video process, participants have to remain involved throughout. They had to continue using their leadership skills even when the situation was challenging, as they had a product to deliver. Working collaboratively in a group of people with different ideas becomes more challenging when there is a deadline to meet and a product to deliver. The participants were putting into practice leadership skills in a more authentic situation.

“Working collaboratively in a group of people with different ideas becomes more challenging when there is a deadline to meet and a product to deliver. The participants were putting into practice leadership skills in a more authentic situation”

This proved to be a good test of leadership abilities.

In the participants' evaluation of the video workshop the activity they considered most effective was showing the video to the group. This suggests an important lesson about the way skills are taught through participatory processes. The practitioner may focus on the process. But creating a product is where the skills are practiced. Whether the product is 'real' or 'contrived', it provides a focus for participants, giving the sensation of achievement through practising these skills – as opposed to the skills being an end in themselves.

Our participants felt the facilitators should have intervened more to ensure the technical quality of the film was higher, and avoid some of the basic mistakes. This highlights the difference between the views of the facilitators and the young people regarding the relative importance of the process and the end product. For the facilitators, the process was more important, and technical glitches seen as less important than the participants' autonomy to make mistakes. But the participants placed more importance on the end product. In an ideal world, there would be time to train participants so that they could both work autonomously and avoid mistakes. However, often due to lack of time, decisions have to be taken about what to prioritise. Sometimes the priorities of the participants differ from those of the facilitators.

Conclusions

We think useful lessons can be learnt from this experience. Understanding the importance of the product for participants helps us as practitioners to improve the impact of the process. Making the end product as real and meaningful as possible, and giving it a high level of importance gives people more motivation to exercise the skills they are learning, and often pushes them to exercise those skills in a pressure situation. For example, a video 'premiere' can be organised, and invitations sent to relevant people outside of the process. This suggests that even when video is used to develop personal

skills the product is as important as the process, even if it does not have a life beyond the immediate context as White (2003) suggests.

Ensuring the end product has meaning for participants is also important. In this case, making the film had real meaning and relevance for the young people. It was a medium that engaged and enthused them instantly. It was something they were very familiar with through television. Yet having the power to control it was a new experience. The young people felt that expressing themselves on video gave their opinions and experiences gravitas, and made them more powerful, and more likely to be heard. This teaches us the importance of ensuring that participatory processes are working towards an end product that motivates its partici-

pants. In ideal circumstances, the participants themselves would choose the end product. However, in this case video proved to be a powerful tool for working with young people.

We realised that the product is important. These young people not only learnt, but also practiced their new skills within the process (the process impact). This has led us to reassess our assumption that the process is more important than the product. Without focusing on the product, facilitators may in fact diminish the participants' motivation to exercise their leadership skills. This can be true for other participatory process, especially those that focus on process impacts. It requires the facilitator to consider carefully the relative importance that is attributed to process impacts and product impacts.

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