

Pairing of proverbs to find your partner

Ced Hesse and Pippa Trench

Introduction

This is a variant of a well-known introductions exercise used as an 'ice-breaker' to introduce participants to each other in workshop settings. It was 'invented' at the 1999 annual workshop of the regional action-research programme on the 'Shared Management of Common Property Resources in the Sahel' project, jointly undertaken by SOS Sahel/GB and the Drylands Programme of the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED).

Objective

To break down language barriers and initial feelings of embarrassment between workshop participants not all speaking the same language. The game pairs participants by different language group (English–French) and, once paired up, gets them to interview their partner as best they can and then present him or her back to the rest of the workshop.

This game works best when there are participants from two language groups in roughly equal numbers.

Materials

Paper, markers and two containers (bowl, box, hat, etc.).

Steps

Preparatory phase

- Prior to the workshop starting (i.e. the evening before), discretely ask roughly half of the participants from both language groups to give you a proverb from their country, area, home town, etc.. Insist on those that are unusual or funny. Do this in a way which makes them think you are just interested in proverbs.
- You need one proverb per two participants. For example, if there are 20 participants you will need 10 proverbs. Collect more proverbs than you need in order to have some choice.
- From the stock of proverbs, choose an equal number of proverbs from each of the two language groups and

write them down in their 'original' language on a piece of paper. Fold up these papers and mark clearly in shorthand the language in which it is written (e.g. FP = French proverb; EP = English Proverb). In the example of 20 participants, you will have five proverbs in English and five in French.

- For each of the proverbs chosen, identify an 'action' that could be mimed to illustrate the proverb. Write this action in the **other language** on a piece of paper, fold and clearly label in shorthand (e.g. EA = English action; FA = French action). Again, in the example of 20 participants, you will have five actions in English and five in French.
- Put all the English Proverb and English Action slips in one container and all the French Proverb and French Action slips in another container.

Workshop phase

1. At the start of the workshop, or at the moment when you want the participants to get to know each other, explain that you will be doing an introductions game with a difference.

2. Ask all English-speaking participants to choose one slip of paper from the English language container and the same for the French speakers. Beforehand, you will have ensured that you know who are the English and French speakers and that the numbers are equal. This may require asking some people who are bilingual to accept to be one or other language group for the purpose of the exercise.

3. Ask each person to read his/her piece of paper in silence and not to comment on it.

4. Now explain the game.

- All those people with a slip of paper coded EA or FA should rise and come to the front of the workshop. All the others with EP or FP slips of paper are to remain seated.

- Explain that those in the front of the workshop have instructions to mime a specific action which illustrates a

specific proverb held by a seated person who is in the other language group.

- Explain that those people with the 'miming actions' have to act them out while those with the 'proverbs' have to identify which of the mimes matches their proverb.
- Once they have identified their partner, they should spend 10-15 minutes interviewing each other with a view to presenting back to the main group.

5. Ensure that everyone understands what is expected of him or her and why and then ask them to begin.

Our experience

It sounds very complicated, but in effect it is quite easy and proved to be a very successful exercise in pairing up people with someone speaking a different language to his or her own. Laughter was the essential ingredient in breaking down people's inhibitions in expressing

themselves in a language they do not usually use. Below are the proverbs we used at our annual workshop.

- He who walks heavily always steps on big spines (Niger)
- When two bulls fight, only the grass suffers
- When you see an elephant, you don't kill him, you kill his shadow (Sudan)
- If a woman were an axe, she could not crack a head (Sudan)
- Too many cooks spoil the broth (Britain)
- Les fesses d'un bon berger sont maigres (Mali)
- Meme le lait de la vache noir est blanc (Niger)
- Là où le berger chase le lion on le deloge (Niger)
- Quelqu'un qui suivre deux routes sera perdu (Sudan)
- Un main ne se lave pas (Niger)
- On ne peut pas razer la tete d'un absent (Mali)

Ced Hesse, Drylands Programme, IIED, 4 Hanover St., Edinburgh EH2 2EN, UK. Email: ced.hesse@iied.org and Pippa Trench, SOS Sahel/GB, 1 Tolpuddle St., London N1 0XT, UK. Email: pctrench@eggconnect.net

