

**IDENTIFYING THE NATURE OF PARTICIPATORY COMMUNICATION BETWEEN STAKEHOLDERS OF A UNIVERSITY INCUBATOR**

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**Abstract:**

Participation and effective communication has become the normative approach within the field of development communication over the last couple of decades. It is reasoned that for development projects to be sustainable and truly contribute to the development of communities, the communication within these projects must be participatory in nature. Universities are under pressure from both the government and the industry to help with economic development and deliver graduates that can make a positive difference in their field of expertise. University business incubator are business incubators located within a university, and facilitate and develop conditions and support systems that ensure young entrepreneurs with new ventures will function successfully. Business incubators support young entrepreneurs by giving them access to affordable facilities and resources such as secretarial support and office furniture. The Netherlands Initiative for Capacity Development in Higher Education (NICHE) launched such an entrepreneurial support and development programme on the North-West University's Vaal Triangle Campus, South Africa in February 2009. The *bhive* university incubator is a unit within Faculty of Economic Sciences & IT with the main focus on bridging the gap between academia and business.

This article investigates the extent to which communication between the different stakeholders of the local university incubator is participatory in nature. It further focuses on determining if the development programme leads to sustainable community development, social change and if the true needs of stakeholders are addressed.

A qualitative research approach was used to collect the data, which included interviews and content analysis. Interviews with various stakeholders, explored the

premises of the nature of development communication for social change within the *bhive* University Incubator. All documentation of the *bhive*, including initials planning documents and agreements between South Africa and the Netherlands were scrutinised during the content analysis. The participant – observer research method was also used, for approximately 2 years, to gain insight into the daily activities within the *bhive*.

The research findings revealed that within the larger paradigm of heteroglossia, a element to successful and effective dialogue within development projects, there is alot of room for improvement. This study concluded by presenting the various areas for improvement and offered theoretically grounded recommendations.

**Key words:**

Business incubators; communication for social change; communication management; development communication; participatory communication; participatory approach; stakeholder management; university incubators.

**JEL Classification:** D83

## 1 INTRODUCTION

During the 1950s and 1960s the modernisation paradigm was the dominant paradigm within the discipline of development communication for social change. The supposition was that developing countries needed to diverge from their old way of life and adopt the lifestyles, ideas, technologies and innovations of developed countries (Melkote & Steeves, 2001; Mefalopulos & Genna, 2004; Chitnis, 2005). The modernisation paradigm saw development as a linear process, and subsequently communication was also regarded as a one-directional process. The receiver was branded as a passive being that could be manipulated by the media. The latter was also the strongest criticism against this paradigm, along with the fact that this paradigm ignored the importance of cultural and political development and its lack of addressing actual needs (Servaes, 1995; Melkote & Steeves, 2001; Yoon, 2004).

Taking the criticism against this paradigm into account, it can be argued that one-way communication does not lead to sustainable development (Melkote & Steeves, 2001; Servaes, 1995; Malan, 1998; Moemeka, 1999; Servaes, 2000; Mefalopulos & Genna, 2004; Servaes & Malikhao, 2008). In reaction to criticism against the modernisation paradigm, and the hunt for a theory that can explain

underdevelopment, several other approaches to communication for social change took shape, including the dependency and basic needs approach.

After the Second World War several different meanings for development took shape. It was clear that the modernisation paradigm was not successful, and from this a need arose for a more person-centred approach that took cultural identity into account. This marked the start of the participatory approach.

Participatory communication for social change may be defined as mutual communication between parties with a view to a positive change of circumstance. It is a process of negotiating and exchanging different meanings. During the process the message and individuals are bound within their cultural domain and reality to convey a particular message and to understand it. The communities understand the message and know what steps to follow to solve their problem. The outcome of participatory communication for social change is more opportunities, brought about by involving the community in the decision-making process. Participatory communication for social change also edifies individuals, communities and different cultures and improves spiritual, social and other circumstances. One-way communication as a means of persuading people is rejected and two-way communication between parties is encouraged. This is considered the core of the participatory approach (Melkote, 1991; Nair & White, 1993; O'Sullivan, Hartley, Saunders, Montgomery & Fisk, 1994; Malan, 1998).

Two-way communication and the participation play an important role during development projects. It is important to ensure that the basic needs of entrepreneurs are identified and satisfied. The focus does not only fall on material needs, but also on non-material and intangible aspects. The participatory approach portrays development as a process through which entrepreneurs are supported in the development of their new ventures (Agunga, 1996; Malan, 1998; Moemeka, 1999).

It can therefore be argued the participatory approach grants all parties an equal opportunity to share their knowledge and encourages individuals to participate freely in conversations in order to contribute ideas and solutions to problems. According to the literature the central assumption of this research is that participatory communication contributes to the sustainable development of stakeholders within development projects and that this will also be true for development programmes known as university incubators.

## **2 BACKGROUND OF BUSINESS AND UNIVERSITY INCUBATORS**

A business incubator provides a controlled and supported environment where new entrepreneurial endeavours can be established. The main purpose of a business incubator is to facilitate and develop a set of conditions, as well as support systems to support new businesses during the teething phases (Lumpkin & Ireland, 1988; Hisrich & Smilor, 1988). Business incubators offers entrepreneurs a wide range of support including affordable infrastructure, administrative support, training, risk capital and networking opportunities (Lalkaka, 2001).

Each incubator has unique characteristics, and these characteristics give rise to different incubation models or configuration frameworks (Hackett & Dilts, 2004). A university incubator uses a university's infrastructure, resources and the staff skill sets to boost economic development efforts. As the university's image/ brand is linked to this incubator it will reap the benefits of the commercialisation of the university's own research (Grimaldi & Grandi, 2005; Mian, 1997).

### **2.1 The *bhive* university incubator**

The Netherlands Initiative for Capacity Development in Higher Education (NICHE) launched an entrepreneurial development programme on the North-West University's Vaal Triangle Campus, South Africa in May 2012. The *bhive* university incubator (*bhive*) is short for *Bridging Business and Education by Establishing a Hub of Innovative Ventures and Expertise*. The goal of this UI is to develop innovative learning approaches and to empower young entrepreneurs to start their own businesses.

## **3 DEMARCATION**

Even though UI's are extremely successful in the Netherlands, it does not mean that these incubators will automatically be successful in South Africa. According to the literature (Malan, 1998; Melkote & Steeves, 2001; Moemeka, 1999) on development communication for social change, emphasis should be placed on participatory communication between all stakeholders, during the different stages of a development project. However, it often happens that not all stakeholders are considered during the planning and implementation stages of a development project. The latter complicates project buy in as communication can be seen as one-directional and asymmetric, subsequently leading to the incubator not truly identifying and considering the true needs of its stakeholders. Lack of participatory communication can have a severe impact on the sustainability and success of the development project.

This research rests upon the premise that the *bhive* functions on the same basis as other development programmes. Therefore communication with the stakeholders of a *bhive*, should be in such a way that it develops its entrepreneurs so they can become independent from the UI, enhance their lives and boost the living standards of their community.

#### **4 THEORETICAL ASSUMPTIONS**

In order for development projects to be sustainable and truly contribute to the development of communities, communication must be based on the premise of the participatory approach to development communication (Malan, 1998; Melkote & Steeves, 2001; Moemeka, 1999). Participatory communication for sustainable development is focused on empowerment, which leads to self-sufficiency, dialogue and cultural identity. The latter are the basic indicators to the participatory approach (Nair & White, 1993; Rahim, 1994; Melkote & Steeves, 2001).

##### **4.1 Indicators to establish development for social Change**

###### 4.1.1 Dialogue / Communication

Communication can be described as the symbolic, interpretative, transactional, and conceptual process of sharing a specific message and transferring knowledge or information (O'Sullivan *et al.*, 1994; Waisbord, 2001; Lustig & Koester, 2005; Roberts, 2010).

Communication is a prominent human need, and more than the mere transmission of information. Complete and effective dialogue is the product of multiperson interaction, and no communication relationship can be built without dialogue. Each individual has the need to send and receive messages, and to express his or her thoughts (Kamboura, 2008; O'Sullivan *et al.*, 1994; Waisbord, 2001; Roberts, 2010). It is important that there is interaction between the members of a community and that they share dialogue, experiences and opinions with one another (Rahim, 1994; O' Sullivan *et al.*, 1994).

Without effective and efficient dialogue, the objectives of the development project cannot be achieved. When people are in a position to express their frustrations and talk about their problems, plans can be formulated collectively to solve these problems. Effective communication influences productivity and performance and leads to sustainable development (Melkote & Steeves, 2001, Kamboura, 2008).

#### 4.1.2 Heteroglossia

Heteroglossia is a term developed by Mikhail Bakhtin, and can be seen as the presence of two or more expressed viewpoints (Roberts, 2010; Bailey, 2012; Alam, 2015). Heteroglossia tries to denote different traits into the same language, formalising it to become readable and understandable to the heterogeneous stakeholders of an organisation or institution, so creating a programme specific glossary.

Heteroglossia can therefore be interpreted as the simultaneous use of different kinds of words or signs, a diversity of voices within a discourse. It can be seen as all the different ways we speak to one another and how we attempt to understand these different dialogues and make it part of our organisations world. Heteroglossia denotes these different traits into the same language, formalising it to be become readable and understandable to the heterogeneous stakeholders of an organisation or institution. This means that in any place within the organisation, at any given time the words uttered by members of that organisation will have meaning, due to a set of conditions that was formed as part of that organisation's glossary (Roberts, 2010; Bailey, 2012, Alam, 2015).

A programme specific glossary, allows the sharing of information, perceptions and opinions among the stakeholders of an entity or programme and ensures they understand each other. Once stakeholders understand what is expected from them, only then can tasks be completed successfully, creating the feeling of accomplishment (Maslow, 2000).

#### 4.1.2 Empowerment

Empowerment can be seen as the process through which power is divided between different individuals or groups so that all parties have more or less the same power. During participation, communities share power and knowledge on a social, economic and political level. The flow of information and communication are key elements to establishing empowerment. Within the development context, this implies that power is delegated so that each individual in the community has some form of power that they can use to help themselves, at the very least. Empowerment requires of individuals to take ownership of the power they receive and to improve their intellectual abilities and individual potential (Langenhoven, 2001; Agunga, 1996; Waisbord, 2001).

Empowerment is when people transform of their own free will and build self-confidence in order to achieve independence. In this way individuals can take

control of their lives and achieve their full potential, in the process improving their standard of living (Agunga, 1996; Waisbord, 2001; Langenhoven, 2001; Schultz, 2003). It is however not purely centred on economic pursuits, and focuses on improving the quality of life of communities by meeting their material and non-material needs (Malan, 1998; Waisbord, 2001).

#### 4.1.3 Cultural Identity

Cultural identity and sensitivity plays a very important role in the participatory approach to social change. Servaes and Malikhoa (2008) emphasise that the participatory approach complies with the principles of the multiplicity framework. This framework suggests that development agents need to take the unique culture of the group they are working with into account. This cultural knowledge, indigenous knowledge of specific resources and their support in the development project, is crucial for the development project to take place and be successful.

When a cultural identity is formed, it provides individuals in the group with a framework of how other people, groups and cultures behave and what it is that interests them. One can for example identify differences in language, physical contact, space and time within different cultures and communities (Lustig & Koester, 2005). Each community assumes a particular culture and thinking pattern, which is what makes them different from one another. Development is not a fixed recipe that different cultures can follow. The recipe must be adjusted for each project and must be unique in order to fulfil the needs of the specific culture. Considering the needs and inputs of different cultures builds trust, and without trust, no development project can succeed (Servaes, 1995).

Cultural identity therefore highlights the fact that development projects cannot be blueprinted. Programme leaders are encouraged to take the culture and traditions of all interest groups into account during a development project, ensuring that the project is planned and initiated accordingly.

### **5 RESEARCH APPROACH AND METHODS**

Qualitative research is an interactive, in-depth exploratory investigation during which non-numerical perceptions and perspectives of a certain situation is formed (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Struwig & Stead, 2007; Babbie & Mouton, 2001). Qualitative research focuses on all aspects of a specific research topic and thoroughly investigates them in order to gain an understanding of the situation, whereas quantitative research broadly highlights certain tendencies found during the research (Wimmer & Dominick, 1991, Fouche & Delpont, 2006; Babbie &

Mouton, 2001). This study sets out to investigate the nature of communication between different stakeholders of the *bhive*, and made use of a simple random sample to select possible participants (Wimmer & Dominick, 1991).

### **5.1 Semi-structured interview**

Semi-structured interviews can be defined as pre-set questions that are posed to respondents in an orderly way. The interview schedule is seen only as a guideline to the researcher. Respondents are given the opportunity to address issues that are not on the interview schedule and to provide the researcher with more information, which includes their experience and perception of communication. The interviewer may also ask follow-up questions to clarify any ambiguities (Struwig & Stead, 2007; Babbie & Mouton, 2001).

Semi-structured interviews, was the primary data gathering method that was used. Interviews were conducted with 5 management members, 30 staff members within the School of Economic Sciences and 10 young entrepreneurs within the *bhive*. The questions were arranged according to the three indicators discussed previously and were transcribed and sorted objectively so that the perceptions of those involved could be investigated (Poggenpoel, 1998; Flick, 2009).

### **5.1 Qualitative content analysis**

A second means of data gathering was qualitative content analysis. Content analysis assisted in understanding the social realities in a scientific way and to analyse the actual perceptions and meaning of all the stakeholders (Poggenpoel, 1998; Babbie & Mouton, 2001; Flick, 2009). This was achieved by analysing and evaluating certain themes, patterns and concepts within certain contexts in a controlled manner (Babbie & Mouton, 2009:385; Flick, 2009:323). The aim of the content analysis is to understand social realities in a scientific way and to observe and analyse the actual perceptions and meaning of the stakeholders (Poggenpoel, 1998; Babbie & Mouton, 2001:78,493).

Due to the nature of the study, conducting interviews alone will not lead to sufficient data, therefore the participant-observer method was used to strengthen and capture as accurately as possible the views and interpretations stated during these interviews (Schurink, 1998). The systematic observation process is a qualitative research method that studies and collects information on the daily way of life, behavioural patterns, perceptions and actions of participants in a natural way (Wimmer & Dominic, 1991; De Vos, Strydom, Fouché & Delpont, 2005). It is important that the researcher observes the mode of operation of stakeholders in

order to verify and understand the information gathered from the interviews, and to correctly interpret what happens in the particular context (De Vos *et al.*, 2005).

## 6 FINDINGS

Very little research has been done in the field of participatory communication for social change and incubators.

**Table 1 Discussion of findings taking indicators of literature into account**

<p><b>Fulfillment of needs</b></p> <p>Taking Maslow's (2000) hierarchy of needs into account, it can be seen that the <i>bhive</i> UI meets various physiological needs, but there is a shortfall in the other elements present in the hierarchy, leading to self-actualisation. Some of the elements include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A devoted, and trained competent team.</li> <li>• A team devoted to the <i>bhive</i> at all times. There is a great need to appoint permanent staff members who can assist with the development and empowerment of young entrepreneurs.</li> <li>• Continuous development of entrepreneurial &amp; start-up programmes. Research is needed to determine whether this training meets the needs of the entrepreneurs and what needs should be further addressed. The needs of the entrepreneurs can only be met if they are known and only then can development start to take place.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Empowerment</b></p> <p>The following means were identified as the main means of empowering the <i>bhive</i> staff. Chitnis (2005) argues that no communication can take place without dialogue, and without communication, learning cannot take place.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Training seminars and workshops</li> </ul> <p>Each of the partners of The Netherlands Initiative for Capacity Development in Higher Education (NICHE) who visited the <i>bhive</i> during the first couple of years, provided unique skills, knowledge and views that helped the <i>bhive</i> to grow.</p>

- Guidance from the Dutch partners

Different teams that are affiliated with NICHE visited the incubator and assisted the *bhive* personnel with administrative and implementation issues. Visitors sat down with members of the *bhive* and addressed some of the accruing needs and revisited structures as well as protocols to adapt them to the current situation.

The South African entrepreneurs need a bigger call to action and organising training within two weeks will not produce a large outcome. This could also be ascribed to the fact that not all students on campus know about the *bhive* or its services. A longer and more extensive marketing campaign is needed to motivate students/ young entrepreneurs to become involved in the *bhive*.

- Networking opportunities

A number of selected delegates had the opportunity to visit the Netherlands and experience first-hand the differences between the two cultures. During these visits to the Netherlands delegates had the opportunity to discover different ways of business incubation, new and vibrant ideas of the use of technology in the classroom, and innovative ways of teaching and learning.

Out of the above mentioned training possibilities one can see that NICHE went to great lengths to assist the *bhive* in making it successful. However, the one big challenge faced was that the knowledge was provided, but no practical experience was offered.

### **Communication**

One major cause for concern is that, it became apparent during the study that there is no clear and effective communication structure available within the *bhive*.

The absence of a communication structure causes a diversity of voices, as the focus of the university incubator is communicated by different managers. The diversity of voices, also known as Heteroglossia consists out of two different forces, namely a binding force and a centrifugal force. The binding force is called centripetal and creates coexistence. Binding of words means that everyone has the same information, point of view and goals. This is not the case with the *bhive* as

not everyone has the same information available to obtain the goal at hand. The second force, centrifugal, causes conflict between the voices and pulls the coexistence apart. If words and ideas are torn into different directions new ideas and expressions can be formed that are not in line with the project plans or goals. The constant creation of new ideas causes the *bhive* not to meet the real objectives of the project and to meet needs that are not true needs. The *bhive* should pay attention to quiet the differentiation of voices and to create a centripetal, binding words and ideas together to achieve the goals.

### **Cultural identity**

During visits from the Dutch partner, fervent debates took place as the Dutch partners could not grasp the major cultural differences amongst the South African students and the challenges these students face. The most prominent issue that arose was the quality of the ideas formed by South African entrepreneurs. The ideas of the Dutch are more high-tech ideas, where our entrepreneurs are low-tech, and focused on making ends meet. The ideas South African entrepreneurs come up with are not innovative nor sustainable ideas. Another challenge faced is the difference in the way the two cultures form an event timeline suitable for both the Dutch and the South Africans. Scheduling workshops and training was very challenging due to the fact that the South African and the Netherlands' holiday dates and lengths differ greatly.

## **7 RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following recommendations can be offered based on the findings as discussed in the previous section.

### **7.1 Strategic planning**

The participatory approach requires all stakeholders to participate in the decision making process. Annual strategic planning sessions should be held. During these sessions time should be spent to see if the programmes/ activities held by *bhive* were successful and if the goals set out were achieved. More time should be spent to determine how the programme/activities can be improved, new goals for the following year should be determined and the responsible person for the project should be identified.

### **7.2 Nominate *bhive* ambassadors**

As part of the marketing and communication campaign, the *bhive* could nominate key role players to take part in different *bhive* activities. These key role players/champions should include personnel of the North-West University. These key role players can then motivate other personnel members to also participate in *bhive* activities. If the personnel are informed about the activities and what the activities entail they will more likely participate in the events.

### **7.3 Get everyone on board**

Regular meetings should be held with stakeholders within the *bhive*, including once a month formal meetings, social meetings and team building activities. The stakeholders of the *bhive* will be more likely to participate with one another if they know each other's communication styles, and that communication is motivated and that everybody's input is very important.

### **7.4 Communication awareness campaign**

More time and attention should be paid to the marketing and communication of the *bhive*. Without an efficient marketing communication campaign the *bhive* will not expand. As part of the marketing and communication awareness campaign, the *bhive* could create a professional video that will visually explain *bhive*, their services and their different projects. These videos can also be used on various social media sites.

### **7.5 Communication mediums**

In addition to the marketing communication campaign, the *bhive* should determine their target audiences and choose communication mediums according to this. The latter will ensure that the correct message is communicated and that the target audience understands the messages, which will motivate them to take action and get involved in the *bhive*.

### **7.6 Videos, manual and seminars**

Due to the fact that there is currently a shortage of personnel within the *bhive*, the current volunteers and staff can produce lecture videos. These videos, along with a manual will guide an entrepreneur through the different phases. For example: An accountant can record the process through which the entrepreneur should go in order to register his or her organisation. Not only can the entrepreneur revisit the

video should he or she forget anything, the video can be viewed at any time and as frequently as wanted.

### **7.7 Coaches/mentors**

Another element that could be implemented to ensure that the personal relationship between the *bhive* and its entrepreneurs is not lost is to appoint a coach or mentor to each entrepreneur. The mentors can guide the entrepreneurs to identify their true needs. The mentors could help to guide the entrepreneurs to focus on both material and non-material needs. The mentor can also help the entrepreneur to develop his or her business to address the need of the community; because if the business does not address a need, the business will be of no use and will not be successful.

### **7.8 Creativity**

As part of the pre-incubation process the entrepreneurs can attend creativity workshops. These workshops will help to stimulate their ideas to come up with the best possible business ideas and concepts, and how to market these concepts.

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