A review of the use of indigenous communication systems in development work: the case of drama, theatre and puppet shows

Enoch Kwame Tham-Agyekum and Bright Loggoh
Department of Agricultural Extension, University of Ghana, Legon-Accra.

ABSTRACT

Communication is a very essential element for the reins of development. Indigenous communication systems have increased relevance in terms of their localized application in developing countries. The study aimed at unearthing the use of indigenous communication systems in development work with special focus on drama, theatre and puppet shows. Contrary to popular opinions that indigenous communication systems have lost their relevance, the study found that it is very effective for family life education, dissemination of information, sex education, extremely sensitive issues, increasing self-efficacy, development of pronunciation and interpretation skills, oral language proficiency, self-help communication projects. Notwithstanding the influx of modern communication systems, the study recommends a renewal of culture whereby Africans will do things according to their culture.

Introduction

Africans together with their development partners have often tended to extrapolate communication models from the developed world and apply them wholesale in local environments (Mushengyezi, 2003). But most of these foreign communication strategies often do not impact on the rural masses for which they are meant because they are not "contextualized" to the local settings, their cultural dialects and their worldview (Mundy & Lloyd-Laney, 1992).

According to Van den Ban & Hawkins (1996) interest in the use of indigenous media is now increasing in less developed countries as a credible and acceptable source of information because mass media have been less successful in promoting rural development (Van den Ban & Hawkins, 1996; Yahaya, 2003). Communication planners should therefore not overlook the significant role indigenous forms such as theatre, drama, puppet shows, drumming, village criers, storytellers, orators, songs, using a bell, folk tales, proverbs and announcements (Kamlongera & Mwanza, 1993; Mundy & Compton, 1991) have played and continue to play in communication among rural and poor communities (Mushengyezi, 2003). It is important to note that these indigenous communication systems are peculiar to specific societies; borne out of the people's culture, religious conviction and experiences and so their interpretation may vary from one society to the other. In any case, they do reveal the ethics of each society.

Ansu-Kyeremeh (1998) defined indigenous media as "any form of endogenous communication system which by virtue of its origin from/and integration into a specific culture, serves as a channel for messages in a way and manner that requires the utilization of the values, symbols, institutions and ethos of the host culture through its unique qualities and attributes". Van Der Stichele (2000) also defined indigenous communication media as the vehicles the common people or rural farmers employ for the delivery of their messages such as folk scripture, folk music, folk dance or folk painting. These systems of communication are passed from one generation to another and are also derived from society's experience and thoughts over a long period of years (Dobb, 1961).

According to Mundy & Lloyd-Laney (1992), if indigenous communication is ignored, the result might be inappropriate development efforts. Indigenous communication has value in its own right, has a wide range of coverage, has high credibility, is an important conduit of change and finally, it offers opportunities for participation by local people in development efforts. Although they have their own limitations, they still remain valuable to African people even in the face of modernity and scientific discoveries. Therefore, the objective of this study was to unearth the use of indigenous communication systems in development work with special case of drama, theatre and puppet shows.

Theoretical Framework

Contemporary theories of cognition and communication can be used to explain the role of indigenous media as complex, non-formal methods of educating people and changing behaviours. The function of indigenous media is consistent with Bandura's social learning (cognition) theory, which states that most behaviours are learned through modelling. This theory explains that vicarious learning from others is a powerful teacher of attitudes and behaviour.

Bandura believed that individuals learn not only in classrooms but also by observing role models in everyday life. Accordingly, indigenous media performers are role models from whom people learn. Hence drama, theatre and puppetry are primers that provide the basis for residents of rural communities to discuss and diagnose their socio-cultural and health situations and that enables them to take steps to find solutions to those problems.

Tele:
E-mail addresses: donsprakels@yahoo.com

The role of indigenous media further subscribes to Rogers's communication and innovations theory, which explains how an innovation can be sustained within communities or groups of people after it has been adopted by the leadership of that community or group.

Materials and Methods

Secondary data was primarily used in this study. The researchers meticulously reviewed the research documents and other literatures relevant to the topic and concentrated the inner thoughts in the article. During the course of study the authors also discussed the issues with professionals and colleagues in academia who are experts in the field of communication to gain a better understanding on the core issues within the subject. Three areas were the main issues discussed in this review article: sex and family life education, language and communication proficiency and finally, community development with much focus on developing countries.

Results and Discussion

Drama

Drama is a literary composition involving conflict, action crises and atmosphere designed to be acted by players on a stage before an audience. Drama activities infuse lifeless and written print with feeling, imagination and thought for the learner. It is useful in motivating students, holding their attention and stimulating their creativity (Wessels, 1987).

In terms of sex and family life education, a theatre project called Offender Development through Drama (ODD) in the United Kingdom seeks to help young people develop important skills and knowledge on drug abuse, teenage pregnancy and family conflict. This is being done in order to influence politicians to do something about the situation of the youth in Manchester (Puffett, 2010). A similar programme goes on in South Africa where the Theatre for Life (an edutainment NGO) travels to schools providing interactive, social life-skills education to school-going youth with the goal of enabling informed choice and developing resilience within the youth. The changes on all the indicators across the total African Repertory Educational Performance Programme (AREPP) for the three year period were statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). These results were triangulated against a control group and against learner focus group input and educator interviews. The results were encouraging and there was clear evidence that the AREPP: Theatre for Life interventions did increase a sense of self-efficacy (Nell & Shapiro, 2005). These two examples have focussed on the youth because, they seem to be the future of every nation, so if they "mess up", their respective countries have no future to hold on to.

Three different studies have been conducted on how the use of drama techniques can influence language proficiency. A study was carried out in Turkey to determine whether native language teaching courses that utilize creative drama activities are more efficient in developing oral communication skills in primary school students than the traditionally applied native language teaching courses. The elements of oral communication skills of primary school students were investigated in terms of pronunciation and interpretation skills. Prior to conducting the experiment, a *t-test* of the averages of academic performance of the experimental (25.09) and control groups (24.81) showed no significant difference between the two groups. A post-test analysis using the *t test* of the means of academic performance showed significance ($p < 0.01$) between the experiment and control groups (Experiment group - 39.28). Results showed that

the application of drama activities in native language instruction improved development of pronunciation and interpretation skills when contrasted with traditional, teacher-centred course-book methods (Ulas, 2008). In Cameroun Ebong (2004) determined to find out whether the use of drama and puppet shows can have a positive impact on the motivation of the learner of English as a foreign language. Results showed that in using the drama or puppet shows, students who were bored with the lessons immediately became alert. Their alertness was probably not for the direct purpose of making any linguistic gain but for the sheer entertainment of taking part in a drama or watching the display by puppets. When drama or puppetry is used, it can help improve on the present negative attitude of foreign language learners. Finally, a study in Singapore by Stinson & Freebody (2006), on the impact of drama strategies on the development of oral language proficiency at Secondary 4 level (Normal Technical Stream) was conducted. Evaluation results show that drama strategies had a positive impact on the participating learners and facilitators and that the profile of drama has been raised significantly as the Ministry of Education has shown greater interests and willingness to accept drama as part of the education process.

In community development activities, the Small World Theatre (SWT) collaborated with Tanzanian performers to find out what prevented people, particularly women in economically poor communities, from participating in elections by voting and standing as candidates. The project used drama as a research tool. It functioned as an intermediary through which groups of people from the communities collaboratively created narratives and discussed the realities of women's lives. This formed the basis from which to build performances which actors replayed to larger audiences in those communities (Shrosbee, 2000). In Ghana, Adeyemi (2000) also observed the pioneering work done by Alec Dickson in the former Gold Coast in the 1940's on how he used dramatic techniques in mass education, social welfare and community development programmes. His aim was to change the social atmosphere and empower the local people. His efforts led to the creation of the Social Welfare Department's community development programmes in the country.

Theatre

Theatre is a branch of the performing arts. While any performance may be considered theatre, as a performing art, it focuses almost exclusively on live performers creating a self contained drama (www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theatre). It is a tool to better understand a situation: not meant to produce a masterpiece. The purpose of the theatre is to express feelings, tell a story, bring up community concerns around an issue and be used to present information to other communities, decision makers and/or other interested parties (FAO, 2002).

The theatre has been used in sex and family life education. For example, in Nigeria and Ghana, it has been shown that theatre programmes have helped to convince local communities to abandon outmoded and dangerous practices like female genital mutilation (FGM) (Adeyemi, 2000). It has also helped to educate curious crowds about pertinent health issues, such as family planning, breast-feeding and HIV/AIDS. Evaluations conducted by the group have realised that these frequently provoke discussions on the issues portrayed as well as provoke audience responses to the negative behaviours that were displayed. Community discussions on appropriate actions are collectively determined to address those issues (Swalehe & Wakati, 2000).

In terms of community development and poverty reduction attempts, a workshop using theatre was aimed at raising awareness amongst the Shehias and District leaders in Ethiopia. The participants were motivated by "Theatre for Social Development" performances and the workshops were very active. The participants forgot their status and raised all issues that hinder their development. They identified the main sources of poverty in their areas and also committed themselves to spreading the knowledge they gained to others. They were even ready to participate in spearheading the programme of poverty reduction to a successful conclusion (Mdoe, 1980). Similarly, in Nigeria, an NGO (BASICS) used the folk theatre (or a play) to spur the need for role-playing or participation in implementing certain self-help community projects such as a broken bridge in Nigeria (Lagos State Ministry of Health/BASICS/USAIDS, 2001).

It could be realised that the theatre has not been used much in the area of language proficiency. This could be that, the theatre itself is meant to be a performing art: a tool to better understand, express feelings and tell stories (FAO, 2002). With these attributes, it could be difficult to use it as a tool for teaching language skills.

Puppet Shows

Puppetry is the process of animating inanimate performing objects. Puppets are used to represent characters which act out the issues and/or story determined by insiders (www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Puppet_show). Puppets are not viewed as "real people" so they can often deal with sensitive situations and more easily obtain feedback from the audience (FAO, 2002).

The puppetry has been used mainly in the area of sex and family life education. For example, in India, Sovannah Phum used a shadow puppet theatre to create awareness about HIV/AIDS and drug prevention, with a focus on information related to risky behaviours, fighting against discrimination and informing people where to seek treatment. The focus was on youth and women. Sovannah Phum staff reported that pilot testing and evaluation established that there was 75% level of understanding shown by audiences of drugs and HIV prevention/awareness issues during project implementation (Sovannah Phum, 2000). Similar initiatives have shown in Kenya that puppetry has been used by the Africa Alive Project to deliver messages on sensitive topics such as HIV/AIDS, STIs, gender issues, female genital mutilation, environmental conservation, hygiene and adolescent reproductive health. The project found that there was increased knowledge about HIV/ AIDS, increased use of counselling services, increased condom use and increased discussions on sex issues within families (Choro, 2004).

In Ghana, evidence from reproductive health projects being implemented by CARE International in the Wassa West and Adansi West Districts of Ghana suggests that puppetry and storytelling is useful to stress the need for social harmony. Anecdotal evidence shows that it has helped improve spousal communication in the communities (Annual Report, 2000).

In Egypt, the CATALYST Consortium, a global reproductive health and family planning outfit enhances knowledge, attitudes and practices with regards to population and reproductive health (PRH). Puppet shows and plays were major components of this innovative approach. Pre and post-test results using the chi-square test of independence ($p < 0.01$) showed an increase in participant awareness and knowledge on several PRH issues (such as need of newborn to be examined and vaccinated, identifying potential danger signs during post-natal, suitable family planning methods to be used during post-natal). Audience members in some remote areas arrived at performances with literally no knowledge of postpartum family planning but most of them gained knowledge after the session (Catalyst Consortium, 2005).

Conclusions and Recommendations

The conclusions that can be drawn from the study include; the use of indigenous communication media is indispensable in sending messages at the grass root level. Indigenous communication media offers opportunities for participation by local people in development work. The enthusiasm of the learner of a foreign language tends to be improved by the use of drama and puppet shows. Drama can be used to influence politicians to act on the problems of the youth in society: drug abuse, teenage pregnancy and family conflict. It can also be used to enable informed choices and developing resilience among the youth. The use of drama activities can also improve development of pronunciation and interpretation skills.

The theatre can be used to change a social atmosphere and empower local people to partake in community development initiatives. It can also be used to convince local communities to abandon outmoded and dangerous practices like female genital mutilation (FGM), educate people about pertinent health issues: family planning, breast-feeding and HIV/AIDS. Since puppets are not viewed as "real people", they can be used to break the ice and provide an opening for a discussion on sensitive issues that are taboos in many societies. It can also be used to motivate people to spearhead poverty reduction and self-help programmes. Puppetry can be used to create awareness about HIV/AIDS and drug prevention and cause an increased knowledge about HIV/ AIDS, use of counselling services, condom use and increased discussions on sex issues within families.

The African man has been deculturalised regarding the use of indigenous communication systems although there are moral values inherent in them. This study has shown that if indigenous communication systems are ignored, the result might be inappropriate development efforts in terms of sex and family life education, language and communication proficiency and community development initiatives. It is time for Africans to realise that we cannot do without our culture because it still remains valuable in the face of modernity and scientific discoveries. The study recommends that, in this modern age of new information/communication technologies and mass media, the cultural values and relevance of indigenous communication systems (drama, puppet shows and theatre) must not be disregarded.

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