

The Language of Community Engagement in a Regional and Indigenous Context

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Abstract

Do the processes of community engagement employed by federal and state agencies genuinely engage the target community or is the language of bureaucracy another means of reinforcing 'in-group' and 'out-group' stereotypes?

Using case studies of government programs designed to engage people in small rural communities and Indigenous Elders from the Bundjalung Nation in Northern New South Wales, the authors examine the experiences of targeted communities as they attempt to deal with what agencies describe as genuine engagement to review management options and to gain access to government programs. The authors look at the impact of schema theory on the outcomes for both groups as they engage in the consultative process. They have also identified some of the language-related issues that affected these outcomes. All of which beg the question regarding such government programs of who is responsible to whom?

This paper highlights the need for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous managers to gain a better understanding of language capabilities, knowledge systems, educational levels and protocols in order to ensure quality input and better outcomes for targeted groups. The authors focus on some of the underlying cultural issues that need to be addressed by governments and their agencies, before they seek to intervene in rural and Indigenous communities, not the least of which is the importation of their own cultural, educational and corporate sector values.

Keywords

Marketisation, globalisation, schema, ICT, literacy

Introduction

Communities the world over look to their governments to help them deal with a wide range of issues that require community engagement. There are a plethora of such programs here in Australia at all levels of government. This paper will look at just two of the many areas in which governments seek community engagement — access to information and communication technologies and environmental resource management. Although the subject areas are diverse, the authors believe that fundamental to having genuine and effective community engagement is

the need to have a good communications strategy in place, one which recognises the diverse language and literacy issues which are embedded in all community engagement initiatives. Greville (2000) states (p. 33) "Literacy is often understood to mean the ability to make and read meaning through text; a neutral skill, possessed to a lesser or greater degree, allowing an individual to 'function effectively' through being able to read and write...and that 'literacy problems' are meted out unevenly in a fundamentally inequitable social system." However, the authors believe there is nothing neutral about literacy skills for small regional and Indigenous communities when it comes to dealing with governments at all levels. Greville says (p. 34) "In cross-cultural settings, a functional account of literacy is inadequate to describe or explain the ways that individuals and groups are differently positioned according to social and cultural relationships."

Fairclough (Cope and Kalantzis, p. 163) states, "We are living through a period of intense social and cultural change which is pervasive and universal in its global, national and local effects...these fundamental changes are changes in languages, different dialects, different genres, and different discourses." Fairclough believes that the language issues of marketisation and globalisation also arise out these changing discourses. He states (Cope and Kalantzis, p. 164) "The processes of marketisation are in part linguistic in nature: they involve a marketisation of language, in the sense that the language of areas like public services are being colonised by the language of the market." He goes on to say (p. 165) "Much of the debate on globalisation has focused upon economic changes, but cultural globalisation is also an important aspect...cultural globalisation can be seen to include a globalisation of language practices of ways of using language which to a degree cuts across boundaries between language."

Not only is marketisation reflected in the language governments and their agencies use, but it is also used to frame and deliver economic rationalist policies in such a way as to reinforce 'in-group and out-group' stereotypes. Stillwell states (1993, p. 157) "Regional economic policy operates in a world of constant change ...The policy changes in federal/state financial relations have taken place in the context of a wholesale restructuring of the Australian regional economy, initiated not by the State but by capital...Perhaps the most general casualty of the last decade has been the commitment to resolving the imbalances in the process of structural change through economic policy. The liberal-Keynesian view of the appropriate role of the state has been radically challenged by the ascendancy of 'economic rationalism' emphasising the superiority of market forces over government intervention."

Unfortunately for regional and Indigenous Australians, not only have globalisation, marketisation and privatisation become significant drivers of change, but they have also impacted on

community engagement practice. Although mitigation strategies have been implemented by various government agencies — such as the Australian Government's Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, Bureau of Rural Sciences, *Towards Whole of Community Engagement: A Practical Toolkit*, and Carson and Gelber's Toolkit prepared for New South Wales Department of Urban Affairs and Planning, *Ideas for Community Consultation* — they often overlook basic language and literacy issues that can and do impact on achieving truly effective community engagement as you will see in the following case studies.

Case study one

In Australia, following the initial, partial sale of our national telecommunications carrier — Telstra, proceeds were used to establish the Networking the Nation (NTN) program. NTN offered access to funding schemes, some of which were designed to promote economic development in regional, rural and remote communities through access to a variety of information and communication technology (ICT) programs. However, the language used in the documentation that supported some of these programs often inhibited the targeted communities from actually applying for funds.

Not only were there technology and communications issues that needed to be addressed, there were also social and political implications to be considered in the design and roll-out of these programs in order to provide equitable access to this funding. However, all too often, the process of applying for funding for these programs turned out to be dependent on the language and business skills of the applicant communities.

The New South Wales Community Technology Centre (CTC@NSW) program was jointly funded by NTN and the New South Wales Government. The CTC@NSW program was specifically designed to assist small rural and remote communities in New South Wales harness the power of information and communications technologies in order to foster regional economic development. However, NTN also funded a Regional Transaction Centre (RTC) program at the same time, which had similar aims. The CTC@NSW program was often seen to be in direct competition with the RTC program or visa versa — depending on which community had applied for what program.

Although the momentum for establishing a CTC came from the communities themselves, it quickly became evident that there would be a steep learning curve in dealing with the requisite documentation. The first hurdle was a lengthy expression of interest (EOI) form; then if that was approved, the communities received an application kit on a CD-ROM, which provided them with the voluminous documentation in 'soft copy' that was designed to assist them in completing their applications. This also meant that the CTC regional coordinators assigned to the eleven regions targeted by this program had to be able to interpret the 'governmentese', business and

technology languages found in this documentation and translate it into 'plain English' for the applicant communities.

While the application kit was created to assist communities in preparing their applications, much of the information it contained was written by bureaucrats who were used to writing for other bureaucrats who operated in the same paradigm. However, because the language used in these kits was not always in plain English it often posed a significant challenge for the communities that had to deal with it. In fact, over half the communities that De Weaver had initial meetings with regarding the preparation of an EOI advised that they did not want to proceed with an application because they did not have the time or energy to deal with the technology issues or they found the wording in the documents too confusing and, in some cases, it was both.

Not only did the communities have to deal with 'literacy' issues in order to apply for a CTC@NSW grant — they also had to deal with technical literacy issues as well. Luke and Gilbert state (p. 5), "To refer to 'technology' in association with 'literacy' can signal a number of discourses concerning literacy, technology, and various combinations thereof...technology *for* literacy, literacy *for* technology, literacy as technology and technology as literacy."

For example, in the Technology section of their applications those communities who wanted to use Apple Macs had to deal with information such as, "It is recognised that there is a strong rationale for using Apple Macintoshes particularly in the multimedia field (*Refer relevant sections below*). In recognition of this, and the fact that most CTCs will be running PC based infrastructure, the question then becomes how to integrate the Macs into a PC based network. Although there are a number of ways of doing this, and this has become somewhat simpler since the release of OS 10.1, we still recommend the Macs only be linked to the network via an IP address..."

It became increasingly apparent, as applicant communities came to grips with the technology driven and corporatised language of the CTC applications, that there was a 'literacy *for* technology' issue that had to be addressed. In one community, when we circulated a usage survey to determine the type of ICT services that residents might like to access, some of the answers gave a clear indication that we first had to deal with a literacy in technology issue. For some of them, ICT meant being able to have public access to a facsimile machine so they could fax in their benefits claim forms, or having a public pay phone outside the general store or being able have mobile telephone reception in their area. However, for those 'in the know' — the three-letter acronym — ICT conveyed so much more.

Shepherd (1998, pp.19-20) states, "Project documents are peppered with buzzwords. These are required by financing organisations which must account for their spending or lending in the most up-to-date or fashionable terms. The buzzwords are often used by people with little understanding of what they might mean – so they take on a hollow, artificial tone...Language can also easily prevent understanding. Frequently outsiders and insiders think of a phenomenon in quite different ways. If the outsider has power to impose his or her thinking, unfortunate consequences many follow."

In another community, the very first question on the application seemed to set the tone for the community discourse that was to follow: "What vision do you have for how the CTC will match the needs of groups and people in your community?" The Chairman of the Planning Committee immediately responded with a question of his own, "What do they mean by 'vision'? I used to have 20/20 vision but these days it isn't so good, just like the town since they closed the bank!" The next question in the application was, "What is/are your target market(s)?" Another committee member replied, "The 'roos in my back paddock!" Although they were intended to be humorous at the time, these interjections were also indicative of the committee's discomfort with the tone and manner of the wording in the application.

Quite apart from the technological jargon, the density of the language in these and other similar grant applications, has been exacerbated by governmental policies supporting economic rationalism and the ensuing corporatisation of the language now used by government departments in much of their documentation — both internally and externally.

According to Walmsley (Sorensen and Epps 1993, p. 46) "The arguments of the economic rationalists found expression in many ways. One was the move towards privatisation that gained strength in the 1980s. This extended from selling off government assets ...to the introduction of market principles in welfare services... Some writers have interpreted these moves in terms of capital seeking new markets and growth areas..." He went on to say (p. 49), "The economic rationalist agenda adopted by the Hawke and Keating administrations is impacting, and has the potential to impact even more, on rural areas. In many instances, the impacts are far from positive."

Economic rationalism has brought with it a corporatisation of the language used in funding programs. This is evident in the CTC program's application as well as that of other similar programs. For example, under the heading in Part 4 of the CTC application, Managing Your CTC, communities were required to, "...provide details of the structure of your organization and its relationship with any other relevant committees and bodies in your community." The application

went on to request details on the members of the management team, their qualifications and experience related to the proposed project and their involvement in the community. It also sought information on their experience and skills in undertaking such tasks as; managing grant funds and a budget, managing a community-based enterprise, developing and supporting the implementation of a business plan, selecting and managing paid staff and volunteers, publishing and marketing services and then asked that they identify the strategies they propose to use in identifying other funding and grant opportunities.

While some of the communities on the New South Wales North Coast had the necessary business acumen and skills to successfully complete their applications, others did not. Discussions with a number of applicants found that all communities struggled with the question on strategic linkages: "What strategic linkages, in terms of participation and communications forums, will your centre develop in relation to the key regional stakeholder groups that are conduits or providers of grants monies and income sources?"

MacLacklan and Read (1994) perhaps summed up the greatest need when they stated (p.58) "Contextual cues may also provide support for a particular reading of what it is that's going on...In the case of written texts, generic markers or cues perform a similar 'how-to-read or meta-communicative function, since they help to establish a frame for our understanding of what is going on." However, all such supportive text was sadly lacking in the CTC application as De Weaver was often required to 'translate' the more densely worded questions in the application so that communities could understand just what sorts of answers, and information, the questions were designed to elicit.

Case study two

This case study was undertaken to address the need for western-based skill development amongst the Bundjalung people, in recognition that current education practices do not adequately accommodate the requirements of Indigenous Australians, nor equip them with necessary language skills in order to provide meaningful input into existing environmental resource management structures.

The value of Aboriginal belief systems and spiritual and related thinking, extending to patterns of resource use and management, is being increasingly recognised (Tindale 1974, Baker 1992, Alderson 1997), and over the past twenty years there has been considerable effort employed in the development of consultative processes and collection of traditional information to involve affected communities and relevant stakeholders in the management of natural resources, with Aboriginal representation on advisory committees existing as the predominate technique (Morgan

1998; The Review Steering Committee 1998; Banerjee 2000). It is widely accepted that optimal environmental protection will only arise through a collaboration of western science and Indigenous knowledge systems (Worboys 2001).

Traditional Aboriginal knowledge describing ecological food chains and human protocols of respect, along with modern Indigenous knowledge systems of this century, are ineffectively conveyed to individuals of other cultures (Everett 1997). Also, generally little effort has been made to incorporate such knowledge into day-to-day management strategies of western-based environmental resource management (Libesman 1995; Birch 1996; Dermot Smyth 1996). Valuable Indigenous input is often overlooked due to differing 'world views' (or schema) which impact on their communication and negotiation success with various government and nongovernmental organisations (Walker 2002).

Lack of meaningful involvement in land management can be attributed to a variety of factors predominantly related to inadequate western-based education and limited skills acquisition. In this regard, Morgan and Slade (Morgan 1998) cite a general inability to accommodate philosophical and cultural differences within education processes as the primary downfall. It is well understood that Aboriginal connection with the land is mythologically and spiritually strong. However, to benefit from institutional education and succeed in acquiring managerial positions within western-based resource management structures, Aboriginal students find that they must participate in processes of knowledge acquisition and assessment that differ profoundly from the more holistic, contextual processes they have learnt and continue to use within their own community, and with which they are more familiar (Morgan 1998) (Christie 1985). From an Aboriginal perspective, a general poor understanding of western-based knowledge systems is regarded as a severe disadvantage when confronted with dominant European management structures and decision-making processes (Walker 2002).

By tabulating data and responses, distinct patterns, weightings and relationships emerge that are useful in reducing bias and thus developing a training program that accommodates the needs of the wider Bundjalung community. However, in keeping with qualitative research principles and effective analysis of ever changing conditions and circumstances, a more powerful tool for appropriate program development lies in the recognition of personal opinions and attitudes.

High priority and concern from all respondents was allocated to understanding legislative and policy related issues, especially those that concern Aboriginal people. In reference to the legal system as a 'tool' for management and change: Key Informant #3 observed that "Aboriginal people do not have tools. Aboriginal people do not use modern tools in society — we think we

can use old tools". This informant also noted that "Aboriginal people need to know the rules of the game". A general feeling of frustration and disillusionment was evident, with the same informant noting that "Aboriginal people are not in control. They don't manage their culture. They're not managers, controllers or owners — only clients or recipients", and another claiming that "We are fighting a system from the outside" (Key Informant #7).

In terms of providing meaningful input, Informant #6 stated that "Aboriginal people get caught up in processes — we don't know what we're getting into and how much of our information will actually be absorbed". In particular, legislation relating to land ownership and control was identified as being significant: "When we talk about a bit of land — who owns it?" (Key Informant #5).

An understanding of resource science and basic skills concepts is also favoured as being of high importance, along with a thorough understanding of human related impacts, mitigation and solutions. With reference to the opening of Belongil Creek (at Byron Bay) to the ocean, for example, Informant #5 commented that it is "easy for us to say open it up — but we don't know the implications", while in reference to building a bridge over a creek, the same informant noted that "all the time something goes wrong and the sand builds up in the creek, then someone explains that this is what happened.... we need to know these things".

Identifying western-based land values was also rated highly: "We don't know what's there. We want to know what needs protecting, and what has good value" (Key Informant #1). Informant #3, referring to Indigenous people's poor understanding of western scientific knowledge as being detrimental to maintaining a sound reputation, commented "It's important to make connections with science and biodiversity because Aboriginal people are often seen as wanting to hold onto black-magic".

It is also interesting to note that in identifying needs to improve Indigenous input into western-based resource management processes, a high level of concern was placed on understanding government agencies processes of identification, control and management of culturally significant areas within existing management systems. "You'd think (that Aboriginal people would have knowledge of Indigenous practices and culturally sacred sites) so, but no", says Informant #9 "No way! Most of them blokes have no idea and this is a major problem". Informant #4 is concerned that "there is Aboriginal People on Regeneration and dune care groups, but some fellas have no experience in finding Aboriginal sites — it's disastrous".

Committee procedures and protocols for natural resource management are also highlighted as being of widespread concern. Again, a feeling of frustration pervades, with Informant #2 and #1, respectively, commenting that “committees don’t check what fellas want in the first place. Aboriginal people want to know how committees will affect them”, and that “it’s too confusing, we don’t know what has to be done. So much paperwork but what does it all mean?” Frustration is combined with a lack of self-confidence or assertiveness, with comments such as the following reflecting this: “Sometimes I don’t feel comfortable when I go in there (environmental resource management related meetings), I feel like I’m going to say something wrong” (Key Informant #5). Informants suggest that procedures need to be simplified and clearly explained, with Informant #3 exposing a key problem: “I get lost in the technical talk”.

Greville states (p. 34) “Notions of literacy and illiteracy as markers of ‘success’ or ‘failure’ according to the social values of the dominant group can become embedded in a wider story of marginalisation and exclusion.” Therefore, adopting techniques and training that are sympathetic to Indigenous needs, has an effect of empowering Indigenous minority groups who are otherwise segregated and disadvantaged on the basis of cultural and philosophical differences (Sagie 2000).

How can we do it better?

Luke and Gilbert (1993) state (p. 44) “Critical social literacy has the potential to confront the social, political and ideological contexts of literacy learning/teaching, rather than ignore them.” That’s why capacity building activity should also translate in to increased recognition, respect and increased control in decision-making processes. Furthermore, and in terms of Indigenous input into environmental resource management, traditional information will be better conveyed within the dominant western-based structures (Marilee 1995). Education and training is regarded as instrumental in improving workplace relations and achieving cooperative outcomes — provided training is well suited to the intended participants (Drummond 1991). An accurate assessment of training needs is therefore essential. By identifying current work-based shortfalls or problems in performance standards, training can facilitate improvement in knowledge, skills or attitudes of individuals or groups in the workplace. Conducting a training needs analysis is a positive step towards ensuring the training is both necessary and meets a detected need.

Some interest groups have raised the concern that community engagement is shifting the emphasis of environmental decision-making too far in the political direction, sacrificing the quality of decisions in pursuit of political expediency (Yosie 1998) (Hamilton 1999). Yet for communities and locally-based interest groups the processes may be deemed to have many purposes beyond making decisions (Fiorino 1990, Beierle 1999). This might include capacity building and social

learning, conflict resolution, and networking among members (Perhac 1996). For some commentators, the process is more important than the actual input, as involvement can help rebuild communities, and initiate the poor and powerless into the mainstream (Burke 1968). Such a process is effective when participants share common 'world views'. However, when different world views collide, problems can occur. Reasons for failures of participation in programs often reside in the failure to establish common expectations and agreed goals. Many processes fail to take into account community and stakeholder group's pre-existing schema (Alba 1983) or expectations, their abilities to influence outcomes, their roles in the final decision-making process and the expectation of what can be reasonably achieved.

Schema is a generic term for a variety of memory structures that lead people to expect to see or experience certain things in certain settings (e.g. water conservation means building a dam to an engineer, while to a horticulturalist it may mean using water efficient appliances). Schema theory confirms that people often fail to notice anomalous information (Kardash 1988), implicitly substituting what they believe is correct, such as responding to the information they believe they have read rather than to the actual information before them (Reder 1991; Kamas 1996). Schematic knowledge has a significant effect on organisation of ambiguous or disorganised stories, in complex social interactions people employ complex sequences of behaviour with a type of schema called a script, such as a meeting script, parent script or supervisor script (Bower 1979). Scripts allow interactions to unfold almost automatically, facilitating social behaviours, unfortunately when schematic processing is engaged, people are more influenced by what they expect to see or hear than by what actually exists in the environment (Smith 1998). Thus, if the schema is appropriate for the setting, events unfold smoothly. However, if the schema is inappropriate or contrary to the setting's rules, problems can occur.

Intra-group schemata define the similarities shared by individuals enabling them to identify and be identified as members of a culture, community or group. Cultural identity is influenced by, and a product of, shared schemata (Vaughan and Hogg 2002) and is reinforced by peer group socialisation (Konner 2002). Culture provides a basic set of social attributes including values, customs and beliefs that are characteristic to, and define, a cultural group. Schemata and culture facilitate contextual order and understanding in, and of, a complex world (Trice and Beyer 1993; Vaughan and Hogg 2002). All human cultures exhibit variations of these themes (Burkitt 1999; Meyer 2001). What defines this identity is more than the observance of physical actions and interactions, but also the temporal guidelines — schema — passed down through the generations via language, religion, sacred rites and knowledge of the past. These conceptual models of the past may be re-enacted and/or reinterpreted by each generation (Layton 1989). Cultural identity

is not static but dynamic, and may be subject to slow or rapid change over time or by outside influence.

Physical features (phenotypes) and modes of dress may provide a simplified correlation of individuals to a group. However, language and dialects are greater defining characteristics of culture, as well as unique cultural practices that may not be evident at a glance. Modes of communication within groups can extend beyond words and incorporate 'paralinguistic features' such as facial expressions and gestures (Harris 1987). These features may be either culturally specific or culturally universal (Vaughan and Hogg 2002).

Conclusion

As Watson (2003, p.1) states so eloquently:

“Public language is the language of public life: the language of political and business leaders and civil servants — official, formal, sometime elevated language. It is also the language of leaders more than the led, the managers rather than the managed. It takes very different forms; from shapely rhetoric to shapeless, enervating sludge; but in every case it is the language of power and influence.”

However, when working with communities at a grassroots level, it appears that the language used by governments in community engagement processes or to fund programs designed to deliver services to rural and remote communities has become the 'gatekeeper' and is locking out the very same communities the programs were designed to assist. More importantly, the authors believe that the research reveals a serious lack of cultural understanding in the governance and accountability of various government instrumentalities when engaging with both regional and Indigenous communities.

There are many underlying cultural issues that need to be addressed before government agencies can undertake genuine community engagement, not the least of which is the imposition of 'in-group' and 'out-group' stereotypes. This also begs the question of who is accountable to whom?

Carson and Gelber state in their paper on community consultation (2001, p. 11), “When participants collaboratively discuss, they each bring their own views and understandings of the world to the table. This results — inevitably — in a multiplicity of views, not all of which appear immediately compatible. By collectively justifying and enlarging upon these views and understandings, it becomes possible to begin to understand commonalities and differences in more effective ways.” Genuine community engagement in the consultation process also brings

with it empowerment and goes a very long way to overcoming in-group and out-group stereotyping.

Although, the authors' research is ongoing, they would like to put forward some short-term recommendations:

- Applied sociolinguistics principles need to be introduced and employed in all community engagement programs for targeted populations
- Programs that have been designed to deliver services in rural and remote areas, or in any area of disadvantage in Australia, should be written in plain English and be devoid of jargon
- Glossaries of terms should be included in all documentation that deals with community engagement programs
- Community engagement activities that are supposed to facilitate capacity building programs in rural and remote communities should be 'beta' tested in a few targeted communities before they are implemented
- Programs targeting rural and Indigenous communities should be supported by facilitators who are culturally aware and sensitive to any language and literacy issues that might emerge in those communities
- Programs that promote regional economic development in rural and indigenous communities should also empower them.

Finally, by looking at all the issues that arise when investigating language and literacy issues in targeted communities, it becomes increasingly evident that, in addition to the economic rationalist policies that have been highlighted in this paper, there is a whole raft of risk aversion, risk management and other philosophies that are subliminally present in many government grant programs that contravene the basic principles of true community engagement. These are currently being investigated by the authors

Shepherd (p. 204) says, "The likelihood is that the rich and non-marginalised will always be more articulate and dominant in any community or grouping. So outsiders can play an especially critical role in creating space for poor people, economically and environmentally, in terms of rights, access to services, and control over assets and services which the poor can provide to the rest of the community; and politically, by ensuring their inclusion in associations, helping them build networks and coalitions which will protect positions gained."

Luke and Gilbert state (pp. 43-4), "A group without access to literacy in our society is relatively powerless, unless trusted "brokers" exist to act on their behalf. By examining literacy pedagogy in cross-cultural contexts, it is possible to see a new approach emerging that challenges both

traditional and progressivist theory and practice.” While Fairclough says (p. 23) “Language is a part of society; linguistic phenomena *are* social phenomena of a special sort and social phenomena *are* (in part) linguistic phenomena. Linguistic phenomena are social in the sense that whenever people speak or listen or write or read, they do so in ways which are determined socially and have social effects.”

Schema Theory may also provide the ‘in-road’ to sound and mutually beneficial interactions as the correlation of schemas to a given context — constructed realities — reveals that enhanced education as well as interpersonal and intercultural contact in turn, enhances contextual schemata in a variety of settings. Thus, more informed and experienced individuals will yield more positive intercultural, mutually beneficial results. Use of appropriate language ensures that minority groups such, as Indigenous peoples, are not rendered ‘out-groups’ rather, they become valuable contributors to a vast Australian collective.

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