DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH METHODS

Week 6, Lesson 3: Communicating research

Development Research Methods
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What we will cover in today's lecture

1. Communicating findings.
2. Communication and the research process.
3. Constraints and political considerations while communicating research.
4. Some tips to communicate research professionally.

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1. Communicating findings

- Research is one of the motors for initiating change.
- Communicating results is a delicate and important task.
- The communicator of research findings needs to be both politically sensitive and adept.
- Good communication skills can facilitate the adoption of policy change, research findings and politically appropriate policy recommendations.
- Good communication is particularly important where the research seeks to advocate on behalf of a particular group or cause.
- Communication between researchers and other stakeholders in the project is a two-way process.
- Decisions about the when, what, who and how of communicating results raises questions about power, ethics, accountability and responsibility.

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2.Communication and the research process

I. An iterative process.
II. Thinking about communicating conclusions.
III. Research as advocacy and involvement.
IV. Presenting findings.
V. Integration into the research process.

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I. An iterative process

- Good communication of policy related research requires layers of iteration.
- The initial questions, preliminary investigations, alternative research designs and discussion with stakeholders are some of the strategies to understand the explicit and implicit motives behind the commissioning of the research.
- Integration of communication and presentation into the process of research at an early stage helps in dealing with design faults.
- Policy research is often commissioned to meet political objectives.

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II. Thinking about communicating conclusions

- Thinking about communicating conclusions and presenting tentative conclusions can shape the research in productive ways.
- Communication of initial results can also highlight any misunderstandings about the appropriateness and consistency of the methodology being used.
- Communicating ideas generated early in a study helps to provoke feedback on the way you are thinking about the topic.
- Importance of establishing rapport with research subjects.
- Undertake a mapping of the stakeholder environment.
- Example- By careful talking to those involved on an individual as well as a group basis, the researcher was able to identify a core group that would help the project (work with groups supporting people affected by HIV/AIDS to design a resource centre for all the groups) to progress.

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III. Research as advocacy and involvement

- A critical question when communicating results to advocate a position is: Who owns the research?
- Much policy research seeks to consult and establish user opinions and views on the operation of public services.
- There are two issues:
  - Users do not always have the kind of language about their situation with which policy makers are comfortable.
  - These concerns get heard because of your own status as a researcher.

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IV. Presenting findings

- Research findings need to be presented throughout the research process in order to clarify analysis, try out ideas and deepen understanding and knowledge.
- Iterative processes can often enrich research and provide an opportunity to check approaches and results.
- Culture and context can radically change what works. For example, sometimes the language used can lead to misunderstandings.
- Decisions about how to organize communication depends on a range of factors:
  - Scale of the project,
  - The relationship between researchers, funders and other stakeholders,
  - The extent to which the research is ‘public’ and
  - The extent to which participation and feedback from the ‘subjects’ of research is required.

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V. Integration into the research process

- Communication needs to be built in at various stages of the process.
- Viewed as a two-way process and research becomes relevant and useful if you are able to respond to input from stakeholders.
- Structuration and evaluation of the research needs to reflect the non-linearity of the process.
- Contexts in which communication can be integrated:
  - **Ongoing policy reform-** building space for ongoing discussions and a degree of flexibility is desirable.
  - **Action research-** build in frequent review sessions, increases the need to network with stakeholders; communication strategy is an integral part.
  - Building a **pilot phase** into the research or consultancy framework can be extremely useful.

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How to construct communication-Asking key questions

1. *Who* are you communicating with?	• What are their levels of knowledge? • What are their roles? • Who holds the power? • How many are there? • Are they the right people to communicate with? • How are they likely to react?
2. *What* do different stakeholders want?	• What are their needs, their concerns, their expectations? • What matters to them? • Consider this before you decide on your own objective and strategy for handling the presentation.
3. *Why* are you making the presentation?	• What is the purpose of the presentation for you? • What is your message? • What is your objective? • What ideas, products, services are you presenting? • What kind of feedback are you interested in?
4. *When* will you make the presentation?	• At what stage of the project or process are you making the presentation? • Do you have the information you need to make your points? • Is the physical space (or document format) appropriate?
5. *How* will you do it?	• What tools will you use to help put your message across – notes, visual aids, documentation, amplification, props, etc.?

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3. Constraints and political considerations while communicating research

I. Is research an intervention?
II. What are the dangers of research becoming public relations?
III. Is it ever too early to release results?
IV. Is not communicating results ever justified?

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I. Is research an intervention?

- Policy-oriented research itself constitutes an intervention.
- For example, a research project to assess the needs of medium-sized enterprises in Poland entailed extensive interviewing with the diverse community of support agencies operating in the country.
- Researchers require an awareness of the nature of power in their work.
- Need for researchers and consultants to be reflective about their own actions and political dynamic.
- The danger lies in the differentials of power.
- Important to be sensitive to the needs of your audience and reflect on how your biases and preferences might shape their decisions.

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II. What are the dangers of research becoming public relations?

- Research is often carried out with political objectives being of primary importance.
- The dangers are that research is not undertaken in an ethical manner and 'results' are concocted with reference mainly to desired ends and outcomes.
- Sometimes, although the end 'public' outcome of a piece of work may appear to be a gloss on reality and a piece of PR, commissioners of the research may have taken on board the more serious research findings.
- Researchers and consultants draw their own 'ethical codes' around their practices.
- The greater danger, however, is lack of courage on the part of researchers to deliver critical findings.

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III. Is it ever too early to release results?

- Sometimes the timing of when to release results also presents difficult choices and raises questions about accountability.
- Being open with the press would create an opportunity for different ideological views to be fought out in public, allowing different stakeholders (particularly business and labour) to 'score points off one another'.
- **Controlling communication**: not to obscure the process of research and policy formulation.
- **Lack of communication**: a more worrying attempt to 'package' research.
- Decisions to communicate or not to communicate will depend on political judgement and the stance taken by the different individuals and stakeholders involved.

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IV. Is not communicating results ever justified?

- Not communicating certain findings can lead to difficult ethical considerations.
- Confidentiality is essential.
- It is important to acknowledge power relations between informants and researcher, or between different sets of informants and the expectations of one set of respondents.
- It is important to recognize that respondents may be viewing an investigation from a very different angle from the investigator.

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4. Some tips to communicate research professionally

I. Shaping your message.
II. Telling the story.
III. Dissemination strategies.
   a. The internet.
   b. Mass media.
   c. Using existing internet services for research dissemination.

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I. Shaping your message

- Message should be short and to the point.
- Dispense with the academic jargon and fussy footnotes.
- Catching readers interest in the first few lines and then deliver on your promise to tell them something interesting and accessible.

Key questions to ask yourself about audience

- What was the last thing they are likely to have read or heard about on your topic?
- What are the key facts and figures cited in relation to your topic?
- What are the main political or social debates surrounding your topic?

1. Know your audience

- what your message is.
- context can be everything.
- 'who you are disseminating to' and 'what they already know about your topic'.
- do not jump straight into your own unique and innovative 'take' on the subject.

2. What to leave in, what to leave out and what to do about the caveats?

- edict should be 'the shorter the better'.
- article should be –one side of A4 if it is in print, or an average computer screen if online.
- the fewer caveats, the more impact.

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II. Telling the story

1. Headline/Title	• arresting, informative and tell the reader precisely what the report is about. • avoid puns or culturally specific references. • For example: '*The curse of remoteness: why some African households fail to benefit from economic growth*'.
2. Introductory paragraph	• state your big central claim (WHAT is important) here. • give a summary of the context (often the 'problem') your research addresses.
3. Main paragraphs	• tell the reader who you are, and what your authority is (for example, your academic institution and the extent of the study you did). • flesh out the claim(s) made in the first paragraph in full. • tell the reader about your NEW research. • keep explanations of your methodology to the minimum.
4. Bullet points	• list the main empirical findings of your research in brief, bullet-pointed sentences. • particularly good for web publications as they are easier to read.
5. Concluding paragraphs	• make clear to your reader WHY your claims and findings are important. • explain where they 'fit' with current practice, policy or orthodoxy.

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III. Dissemination strategies

1. The internet

- Publishing your work on your own website is likely to be the lowest-cost option.
- To inform about the progress of your research.
- Material and sources you can publish – photographs, data, audio and visual recordings
- Make links to the relevant cross-references.

2. Mass media

- Risky as you lose control over what happens to your words and research.
- Target quality publications.
- The starting point for getting research into the mainstream press is a press or news release.
- Use the news agenda to pull the audience into your broader analysis.

3. Existing internet services

- Accessible and cheaper than print journals and books.
- 'Piggy-back' your research on one of the many online services to bring together development research on the internet.
- Huge gateways to subject-specific sites.
- (www.developmentgateway.org) is a website that relies on users to contribute development resources themselves by signing up as members.

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Key points for writing a press release

1. Length and format:
   - Keep releases to less than 500 words.
   - Ideally, send the release in the body of an email (not as an attachment).
   - Make the ‘subject line’ as snappy a headline as you would expect to see in a newspaper.
2. Who to send it to:
   - It is better to send releases to section editors (most will have a separate editor for economics, social and political affairs, for example).
   - Alternatively, email your release directly to individual journalists whom you know work on areas which your research affects.
3. Your details:
   - Include at the end of the email your full contact details, including a mobile or ‘out of hours’ phone number.
   - Be readily available during work hours, at least for the day or so after you send out the release.
4. Clearances:
   - Check with your university, funder, supervisor or employer before sending out the press release, especially if you name them within it.
   - They may have special procedures and rules you need to follow before engaging with the mass media.

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References used for this lecture

- Alan Thomas and Giles Mohan “Research Skills for Policy and Development How to find out fast”, 2007, SAGE Publications.

Refer to the paper “Communicating results” by Joanna Chataway, Avril Joffe and Jill Mordaunt in Thomas and Giles (2007)

- Vandana Desai and Robert Potter “Doing Development Research”, 2006, SAGE Publications.

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For a comprehensive literature on the topics covered in this lecture it is also suggested that students go through the reference list of the above cited references.