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# COMMUNITY NOTE

## Can participatory communication be taught? Finding your inner *phronēsis*

*Ricardo Ramírez, Wendy Quarry and Fred Guerin*

This Community Note pulls together current lessons, and past mistakes, in building capacity in the art and science of participatory communication. The science is the easy part. It is straightforward and tangible. It can be taught in a classroom or through a textbook or manual. But sadly, the science without the art often falls flat on its face. It is uni-dimensional and hollow and needs the ballast that comes from something much more ephemeral. We think of these as the 'intangibles.' Welcome the notion of practical wisdom, or *phronēsis* as Aristotle called it. Practical wisdom is the ability 'to do the right thing, at the right time, for the right reason' (Bradshaw 2009, book subtitle). It is a term that refers to the acquired skill of knowing 'how to do the right thing, in the right way, with *this* person, in *this* situation' (Schwartz & Sharpe 2010, 85). Practical wisdom *gives a name* to the capacity development outcomes we so often seek: practitioners who are able to adjust methods, media and strategy to ever-changing contexts. We hope to train practitioners who can find solutions from a menu of options, without having to follow a checklist. We have learned that the intuition we seek to nurture emerges over time through trial and error. All these years we have actually been seeking to develop practitioners' own *phronēsis* but we lacked a name for it. Now this has given us a refreshing addition to our vocabulary.

Keywords: *phronēsis*; development practice; reflexivity; reflection; communication; practical wisdom; capacity development; international development

### Introduction

*Many years ago, about thirty year to be truthful, I was on my first 'overseas' mission with the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). I had been freshly hired to introduce the concept of development communications to the Bangladesh program. I landed this position immediately after completing an International*

> *Development Research Centre (IDRC) Professional Development Award to learn to adapt my Canadian radio and television career to development work. This I had 'done' through an apprenticeship with various stations in the Radio Listening Schools in Latin America and the Centre for SITE television program in India.*
>
> *I remember the moment well. I had checked into the hotel and, having previously set up an appointment with the communication lead from one of the United Nations agencies in Dhaka, rushed down to meet this person, eager to learn how it was done 'in the field.' A young and earnest man came forward to greet me carrying a large briefcase. We sat down to talk over tea as he pulled out a satchel of pamphlets and gadgets from the case. Most important to him was a cardboard wheel fashioned so that an inner wheel could be turned to various points on the compass. The points, it turned out were various occasions where a communication intervention would be necessary - getting people to: wash their hands, get a vaccination; drink clean water etc. etc. – you get the picture. The young man was incredibly eager as he droned on and on while spinning the wheel with enthusiasm and showing me all the methodologies that were highlighted to as to how to 'get people' to do these things when the wheel stopped at one of the initiatives. It was a form of 'communication roulette.' My eyes glazed and I began to shrink into myself, my body recoiling in polite denial. 'Surely,' I thought, 'this cannot be communication.'*

Exactly. After many years of trial and error and a great deal of learning, we have come to the conclusion that there are some people who seem to have been born with a communication inner sense while the vast majority of us have to get to this through a considerable amount of hard work. The young man who Wendy met so many years ago had undoubtedly been well versed in communication methodologies but did not appear to have any instinct or, dare we say, a sense that the subjects of the intended communication exchanges were real people with feelings, knowledge, hopes and fears. Nor did he seem to grasp that there are times when no amount of communication 'wheel spinning' will work to change people's habits (or whatever) if other barriers or desires present conflicting decisions.

This paper is a reflection on teaching communication thinking and how we have spent the past ten years trying to figure out how it can be done. We question whether it might be possible to teach communication skills to people and at the same time, help them develop that inner sense or instinct to guide choices in when, or how, a communication initiative should be handled. The communication inner sense that we have encountered in some people appears to be something innate or intuitive. This is something akin to the notion of the rapid, automatic pattern recognition described in Malcom Gladwell's book *Blink* where people with enormous experience have accumulated the skill to make sound judgments on the spot (Gladwell 2005). This notion is

also referred to as "skillful means" for facilitators of participatory methods to underline the ability to respond to complex and messy situations by intuition (Chevalier & Buckles 2008). Don Snowden, the man credited with the Fogo Process, used to say that his filmmaker, Paul MacLeod had this instinct. When Wendy worked with Paul in Afghanistan years later she saw the same thing. He had some indefinable magic way of engaging people and the ability to help them see how to use video as a communication tool between disparate groups, despite the difficulties of the situation. Working with Paul they 'got it'. This, Ricardo came to learn through a philosopher friend[1], is something that is known as 'practical wisdom' or *phronēsis* as Aristotle called it. Practical wisdom is the ability "to do the right thing, at the right time, for the right reason" (Bradshaw 2009, book subtitle). It is a term that refers to the acquired skill of knowing "how to do the right thing, in the right way, with *this* person, in *this* situation" (Schwartz & Sharpe 2010, 85). How on earth do you teach that?

## Our practice

Over the past decade we have facilitated a variety of workshops all in the name of trying to 'teach' people the rudiments of communication and communication planning. Some have been more successful then others. Some have been outright failures. This has led to the firm conviction that workshops that are not followed by 'just in time' mentoring or coaching sessions provide nothing more than awareness raising and perhaps further confusion. We have also designed and taught communication courses at different universities. This has been somewhat more successful since the lengthier time to manage a complete course gave us the space to provide 'hands on' opportunities for students to 'test' some of the learning in real situations. This type of 'experiential learning' has helped contribute to the participants' greater sense of what a carefully planned communication input can actually achieve. But it does not necessarily lead to practical wisdom.

The conviction that workshops were (for us) a waste of time, if not downright harmful, without the opportunity for follow up mentoring, has been tested through our experience with an IDRC-funded global project that provides researchers with capacity development in Research Communication and in Utilization-Focused Evaluation (see DECI-2 project details in: evaluationandcommunicationinpractice.net). To our knowledge there are few precedents in mentoring in communication and evaluation jointly, although some authors have mentioned elements of this overlap (Lennie & Tacchi 2013). Our action-research project provides capacity development through mentoring at a pace and schedule defined by the partner (we refer to is as 'just in time' mentoring). Through our mentoring, partners experiment and learn from both successes and mistakes. In other fields, this approach to learning has long been incorporated as 'problem based learning' (medicine) or 'co-op programs' (engineering). Whereas in

international development, especially under the weight of impatient funders, a quick-fix culture of predicable results has dominated everything, including the capacity development field. Our experience exposes the weakness of this mind-set.

Similarly, opportunities for 'experiential learning' through a university or college curriculum can offer various opportunities for 'hands on' application or observation of others immersed in the process. For three years, Royal Roads offered a residential course in 'Development Communication' that comprised three months of 'on-line' discussion followed by a month residency in India (Ahmedabad and Goa) where students were placed with well-known local NGOs focusing on the use of communication initiatives in their work. For some, it was simply a more interesting way to get a credit but there were others who noticeably changed their perspectives on how they hoped to deal with people in the future and changed the lens through which they view the world. We believe that it was the result of the time spent observing and listening to Indian practitioners discuss their work as if this dialogue was able to magically align with some inner curiosity or inquiring spirit.

Does it stick? Hard to say but we have kept in touch with a handful of our former students who now work in a variety of professions. Many still claim that their learning through these methodologies continues to have an impact on their perspective.

> *Then came India, where the classroom lectures and discussions breathed yet again more life into the ideas of development communication, followed by experiential field experiences that allowed us to observe and discuss applied development communication. For me, each step inflated my 'development communication balloon' ever more, and this essay outlines my journey of learning about development communication, specifically with reference to the readings/classroom discussions/examples, my experience working with the NGO Utthan, and also, how I relate concepts of development communication to challenges in my workplace* (Christine Anderson, student 2012/13[2]).

Until now it has been difficult to put into words a vague notion that for some, seeing the world through a communication lens has become in and of itself a form of thought. When confronted with a complicated project or program, for example we tend to automatically start asking: *WHAT are you trying to do? WHO are the people that you are trying to do this with? and HOW do you plan to work together to make it happen?* These are very simple and straightforward questions that are not that difficult to answer and in that, may rest the problem. They are so simple and straightforward that some may think them too simple to warrant attention. We have a tendency to complicate things with words and concepts that may in the end be much simpler than

most would have us believe. This leads us to wonder whether in our practice we have been pushing towards *phronēsis* without knowing it.

## Enter Aristotle

The whole notion of Aristotle's *phronēsis* is made accessible in the book 'Practical Wisdom' (Schwartz & Sharpe 2010) as well as an engaging TED Talk by the same title. The term refers to the acquired skill of *knowing what to do when facing unique circumstances* (it is not a skill or a craft and cannot be taught). *Phronēsis* emerges from experience, from many incidents of trial and error. In the book, Schwartz and Sharpe offer numerous examples of people making instant decisions by some form of intuition. The book opens with a story of a janitor at a hospital who agreed to mop a room at the request of a patient's father even though he had mopped it before while the father was out having a cigarette. He did this because he instinctively knew that ordering the room to be mopped was the only thing the father could do for his son who was in a coma following a boxing match. This decision came from years of experience at the hospital, understanding patients' behavior and that of their relatives. This action had nothing to do with the janitor's formal job description. Most notably, that decision would likely never happen again, as the circumstances were unique.

Fred Guerin, the philosopher who introduced us to the concept elaborates further:

> *To put this in another way, when you build a house or engineer a car, the end result is 'fixed' or known in advance. But Aristotle recognized that there was a difference between making a thing and acting in the world as a person who discerns alternatives and makes wise choices in each particular situation. Here the end is not fixed or known in advance, but must be open to slight modification by the unique and particular circumstances we often find ourselves in. This kind of reasoning and insight is not, therefore, something that you could teach someone in the same way you would instruct them about how to build a house or write a computer algorithm. What instructs phronēsis, what enables us to become wise in practical situations (especially ethical ones) is a combination of experience over time and a reasoned and intuitive grasp of the general, constitutional or constitutive goods that govern a community or institution. All we know about the janitor mentioned above is that he acquired, over time, a capacity to make the right decision, in the right way, at the right time because he understood both uniqueness of the situation and intuitively grasped what course of action would be the right one given the general context of care that defines such a hospital setting. So what is the pedagogical lesson here? Is it possible to teach someone to be practically wise?*

> *Aristotle would claim that phronēsis presupposes a certain ethical ontology (way of being) which one is exposed to through the example of others and forms in oneself through habits of thinking and doing. The nurturing and good example that is provided by parents, teachers, friends and communities can contribute to the process of ethical development. Thus, over time persons can become practically wise by carefully attending to and observing how those who already possess a measure of wisdom make decisions about what is best.*
>
> *From a modern pedagogical perspective the closest approximation here might be something like 'mentoring' in the sense that the mentor is someone with vast experience who shows the novice how to determine what is best to do in this or that situation by actually 'doing' it. In other words the mentor is someone who is reflective, who asks critical questions and who tells stories about their own experience. In this sense, becoming practically wise through the example of a mentor is an ongoing task of self-understanding and self-development that is integrated into the person as a whole through inquiry, deliberation and right actions in everyday lived experience. It is not an abstract principle or process that helps here but a role model or mentor who listens to what experience instructs.*

**Translating the concept into practice**

This notion of *phronēsis*, however, might be frustrating to some project planners. It would be impossible to write a practical wisdom algorithm, program it into a logical framework, [or reduce it to a fixed number of discrete steps]. The notion of 'practical wisdom' is far from the notion of 'best practices' that some bureaucracies cherish. Best practices are akin to recipes, where there is the assumption that many factors are known and predictable to the extent that similar decisions will be warranted (Courtright 2004). Best practices suggest replication, while practical wisdom suggests uniqueness and tailoring to each moment. One could argue that best practices have an important role to play in some circumstances (such as safety checklists in the health profession). Best practices could also be seen as part of formal job descriptions; however, they fall short of capturing the essence of experience-based, decision-making that is highly desirable for many professions.

**Harnessing practical wisdom in capacity development.**

What practical wisdom embodies is a [intuitive and rational] capacity to make [prompt and wise] decisions based on experience, [where the unique character of the particular circumstances is immediately discerned and an appropriate determination or decision is made]. For trainers, like

the present authors who have worked in the field of capacity development for some time, having trainees that achieve this kind of [practical wisdom] feels like a distant goal. This applies to the fields of participatory research, communication for development, and evaluation (Ramírez & Quarry 2010). It would likely apply to several others where individuals need to respond to urgent requests on the spot. As noted, we acknowledge that there are a few individuals who seem to have been born with practical wisdom (we are sure you know a few yourselves). We can think of a few colleagues with facilitation skills that emerge naturally, even in the most challenging situations. This is similar to the notion of innate networkers -or 'mavens'- a term that Gladwell uses to refer to people who have a natural information sharing instinct (2002). However, in most cases we are talking about most people (ourselves included) who require a concerted effort to build their skill set and to gain confidence by experimenting to fine tune it.

Often the people we train face confidence challenges that are gradually overcome through practice. In the past we have encouraged trainees to take the lead in some aspect of the work; something we jokingly referred to as 'participatory suffering' (Ramírez & Quarry 2012). A comfortable place to make mistakes that one can learn from is often needed; and few project blue prints offer such spaces. This is where mentoring, practicums and internships play a key role. When one does not have practical wisdom, one resorts to guidelines and checklists. However, these are static and inevitably disconnected from the reality of turbulent, complex change. And turbulent, complex change is increasingly the background of most project interventions and environmental stewardship initiatives.

From a practical perspective, integrating the notion of practical wisdom into capacity development may have several advantages:

**Long time frames and mentoring phases**

Practical wisdom evolves through practice and this takes time. This suggests that a capacity development strategy needs to be extended beyond short-term training event(s) to an applied phase with timely support and mentoring. As the trainee seeks to apply the lessons to her own context, new challenges will emerge. Improvising ways to respond to them is a means of creating practical wisdom, especially when this happens in a supported environment where suggestions are provided, trial and error is embraced, and there is room to reflect on what worked or not and for what reasons. This is already a common practice in medical training where problem-based learning has become established. However, in international development projects, there is rarely this kind of long-term capacity development in other fields of study, such as capacity development in the fields of communication & advocacy or monitoring & evaluation[3].

**Reflective practitioners**

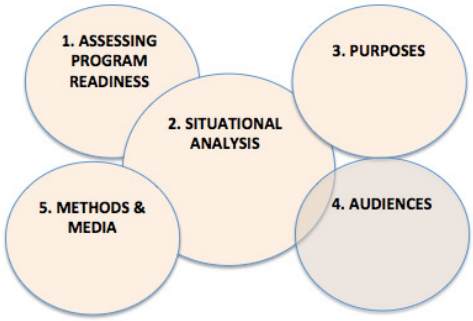
Turning the trainee into a reflective practitioner is key (Schön 1990). To do this one can borrow a step from Utilization Focused Evaluation where, upon completing an evaluation, the evaluator produces a summary of how the evaluation process evolved (a meta-evaluation). In experiences we have reported elsewhere, evaluation professionals who were given this opportunity gained significant confidence, and one could argue, achieved practical wisdom in the field of program evaluation (Ramírez & Brodhead 2013). We have evidence of one example in the literature where a practitioner describes his learning journey (Solomon & Earl 2014), and would be keen to find more of them

**Measuring capacity development gains**

In order to document progress we can lean on Outcome Mapping (Earl *et al*. 2003) as an evaluation methodology that embraces a continuum of outcomes, with an acknowledgement that higher-level outcomes are often only 'contributed to' by the intervention. We can also work with the OM notion that the trainee is a 'boundary partner' who will return to a different organizational or project context relative to the training event, where she or he will face other enabling factors or barriers. This suggests the importance of a reflective practitioner who is given a safe space to learn and the time to review her/his achievements, sometimes long after the initial project has been completed.

**Conclusions**

Practical wisdom can become a touchstone in capacity development. It brings a new argument to reinforce the call for ODA commitments to capacity development to move beyond short-term events, and assume longer-term strategies. It also embodies an advanced capability where the person is able to draw on previous experiences to respond to unique circumstances. Many management positions include this skill set in the terms of reference, yet they are equally relevant for many other jobs. Practical wisdom is a concept that can challenge the development industry's fixation with conventional project planning tools that seek predictability and 'best practices'.




In our practice we often guide learners through a sequence of communication planning steps (as shown in this Figure: source http://evaluationandcommunicationinpractice.net). In reality once

you hit the ground, things tend to change and you scramble to cover the steps, often in a different order. This comment brings to mind the famous saying attributed to Helmuth von Moltke, the elder (you haven't heard of him?) who, when commenting on an intricate set of battle plans, observed that '…no plan survives contact with the enemy.'[4] However, mentoring allows trainees to witness a flexible 'juggling' of steps, and this exposure provides them with the confidence to make future adaptations in their practice. They understand that while the steps remain a good guide (we even have checklists), in reality they are addressed differently every time they are applied. We live in a world that is flooded with manuals[5] but they are notorious for not acknowledging context-specific challenges, while blindly expecting users to have the time and enabling environment to follow the steps. In contrast, mentoring is the means of enabling trainees to learn, test, course-correct and gain confidence in improvisation. It is a means of nurturing, or discovering their inner phronēsis.

Practical wisdom gives a name to the skillset of nimble facilitator-practitioners; one that can counter the fixation on products like the health communication 'wheel'. Practical wisdom is the modern expression of Aristotle's emphasis on developing habits of thinking and doing. It has given us a refreshing addition to our vocabulary.

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**About the authors**

*Ricardo Ramírez* is an independent researcher and consultant based in Guelph, Ontario, Canada. His consulting and research work includes communication planning, participatory evaluation and capacity development. He is co-author (with Wendy Quarry) of Communication for another development: Listening before telling (Zed Books, London 2009) and co-author (with Dal Brodhead) of Utilization-focused evaluation: A Primer for evaluators (Southbound, Penang, 2013). Email: ramirez2196@sympatico.ca

*Wendy Quarry* is a consultant based in Ottawa. She brings decades of experience in Africa and India both in evaluation and communication. She has been project and a program manager in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Mozambique and Egypt. Wendy and Ricardo collaborate in the DECI-2 project that provides mentoring in communication and evaluation.
Email: quarrywendy@gmail.com

*Fred Guerin* is an independent scholar with a Ph.D in philosophy who lives in La Ronge, Saskatchewan, and runs a human relations consulting business. He is editing and publishing his dissertation, 'Critical and practical knowing through the ancient concept of phronesis' and writing an article for a volume on Aristotle with Northwestern University Press.
Email: alfred_laronge@hotmail.com

**Endnotes**

[1] We acknowledge Fred Guerin, PhD, who introduced us to the notion and provided inputs for this paper.

[2] Excerpt from a student essay; graduate field course in Communication for Development taught by Wendy Quarry in Gujarat, India.

[3] The author co-leads a project that embodies this approach where regional professionals in the evaluation and communication field learn through mentoring, see: http://evaluationandcommunicationinpractice.net

[4] Attributed to Helmuth von Moltke the elder, a German Field Marshal born in 1800 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helmuth_von_Moltke_the_Elder

[5] We are all overwhelmed with manuals and guides; a condition we refer to a 'manualitis' where the overabundance of manuals that cannot be metabolized creates anxiety and a sense of isolation. If you venture into using one of these 'guidebooks' a first symptom of this condition is the expression: "Yes, but in my context it is different and I have little time - so how would I even begin to...?"