

**Discussion paper on COMMUNICATING WHAT WE KNOW TO OTHERS
for discussion of 5-7-81 (Terry Lunsford and John Bilorusky)**

Just as working through an inquiry is best made a process of collaboration with others, communicating what we know as a result of the inquiry is a shared process, a social interaction, with our audiences. Getting into that process early in your inquiry will have made it a lot easier for you to communicate what it's all about when you are through. So, you'll want to talk about it, frequently, with friends and colleagues, as you are formulating and doing the research. For the moment, however, we want to concentrate mainly on the task of writing up what you want to say about the research. For many sharp, articulate people, writing, especially about something important, often feels like a special problem. It needn't be.

One important thing, as we've said, is to start writing early. Before you start "gathering data," when you are figuring out what you want to do, write versions of it down, however briefly, and let others look at them. It will help you to formulate your thoughts more systematically, and give others a clear, definite enough idea of what you are doing so that they can give you good feedback and suggestions. Most of all, you'll probably find that, as you write things down, new ideas come to you, and you will realize that you are thinking things that you hadn't quite said to yourself until you started to write.

Write to yourself, first. Make sense to you, before you worry about other people. Especially if, writing feels awkward or scary, try writing a lot--but only for your own eyes, so you get your writing muscles loosened up, without the fearfulness of knowing that others will see and judge what you've written. (You should know that some of the best writers in history have been people who wrote and re-wrote, over and over, before they got it "right." You needn't be ashamed of many messy notes and scratched-over drafts, if that's how you like or need to work.) The point is: do whatever helps you to get your thoughts down coherently.

Try to be tolerant of doing many, tentative versions of what you are writing--but make each of them as little work as possible. Find what feels comfortable, and natural, to your style of thinking and working. Put down notes on ideas, for example, whenever you think of them. Note down the nub of an idea, which you'll later come back and expand into something more elaborate. Or sit down, right then, and write a paragraph or so, to get the fullness of the idea into words while it is just a-borning in your mind, so to speak, of its own accord. That's often when the flow comes most easily, and the fullness of the idea will almost "tell itself."

As you get well along in your research, you'll want to work over your field notes, every now and then, pulling out of them whatever seem like the most interesting ideas, the best pieces of evidence, the most unexpected findings, the strongest conclusions. These are starts on making sense out of the "data", in terms you can communicate to others, and the earlier and more often *you* do it, usually the better.

But don't get trapped into feeling that *you* must start with the first page and write straight through to the last--or not start at all. Start at many places: the one

biggest conclusion *you* are reaching for, the heart of your analysis of the data; the framework setting part of the introduction; or whatever flows best at the time. If *you* start early, and keep at it off and on, you'll have time to draft many parts of it, in big chunks. You can pull these chunks together and give them the connective tissue that they need, later on, when the shape of the whole has begun to emerge clearly in your mind. Writing parts of it out for yourself will help that shape to emerge in a way that sometimes nothing else will.

Also, in searching for the "flow"--what gets *you* writing and making sense--use whatever crude and partial forms feel most do-able at the time: outlines, paragraphs, rough notes to capture an insight. But be working, all the time, in the direction of clarity and coherence in making your points--first to yourself, then to others. It may be useful, after *you* get started, to keep in mind the idea of some "friendly critics" whom *you* know, in such a way that *you* write to help them understand what *you* want to say, and see its conclusions as justified.

As we have repeatedly suggested, start with something that you want to say. Find what feels right to *you*, as worth saying, as the version that fits what you know about the thing *you* have been studying, the story that *you* think needs telling. Then, any modifications *you* make will be from that solid base--and *you* won't be captured by the demands of powerful audiences whom *you* may feel *you* have to reach. In fact, however, there are some delicate balances to be searched for, in this imagined discourse with your audiences.

Language is part of it. You'll want to write for yourself in whatever words and phrases grab the insights for you, and capture them for your later use. But, when you communicate them to others, you have to be sure that you put them in terms the audiences can understand. You have to use words they know the meanings of, in the first place--not fancy jargon or "in" phrases that your audience of "outsiders" may not understand. If you want employers or foundation people or government officials or academics to appreciate your research, you may have to avoid "street talk," or slang expressions that will turn them off and make you sound "unprofessional." Even little slips of grammar or punctuation or spelling can sometimes be taken by such readers as indicators of your incompetence, so it's simple sense to get someone who's good at those things to look over your work before the final draft, to clear up the small errors that you may have missed. But one of the worst effects of that kind of concern often is that people try to talk "academese," and use research terms (like "variables" and "standard deviations"), or bureaucratic language (like "utilize" and "implement" and "program planning capabilities"), when they are really unnecessary, and much too abstract to say what really is intended. Terms like that not only mess up the clarity of most people's writing, but they also get in the way of clear thinking, because they are someone else's language, which we are trying to fit to our concerns because we think we have to. They are much less clear, and have much less meaning, than the natural, direct, concrete, colorful ways of thinking and talking that engaged, involved people use when dealing with a subject they are interested in.

It can be just as important to put your ideas in terms non-professionals can understand--your own community board, co-workers, people who don't care so much about officialese current buzz-words, but who just want to know what you've

discovered and concluded that is worth something. Speaking and writing to such audiences often is the best guide to clear and coherent writing, generally. Within that general framework, your own personal variations on writing style can lend a lot of humanness and enjoyability to the reader's task of understanding you. Check it out with your friendly critics, but don't be afraid to say things in ways that are your own, and which capture the feel of what you want people to know.

A part of being aware of your audience goes beyond words to tone, content, and implications of what you are saying. You *may* want your readers to know that you disagree strongly with them--for example, that you are formally protesting the evaluation standards being used to judge your agency's performance. Then, you will want to say so, as respectfully as you feel is honest, but in clear and unmistakable terms. That's intentional, and purposive. But you don't want to slap your audience in the face unintentionally--by referring to administrators as "bureaucrats," for example, or by assuming that your audience shares with you values or political convictions that you have no reason to believe they share, or by lecturing them about the right way to act, on general principles. You'll want to avoid insulting your readers' intelligence, by not over-explaining simple things, and by not "talking down" to them from the height of your moral purity, or your new-found research knowledge. The whole "tone" of your writing--its implicit assumptions about who is talking, and to whom—needs to be as honest and natural as it can be, faithful to the real situation as you know it, without being unconscious of what your actual audiences are going to be like.

If one of your main audiences is likely to be hostile, or merely impersonally skeptical, as is often the case with funding sources and government agencies, you *may* think that this is the clear case for talking in terms that they can hear, or else their preconceptions will prevent their giving you a fair hearing. For example, sometimes it is very realistic to talk "research talk," in presenting your data and conclusions to a group that you think will have simplistic, traditional views about what "good" research is--very structured, very quantitative, very technical, very jargonized. Sometimes it would be naive and unrealistic to think that you can address such an audience, as you would talk to an Action Research seminar. But you can easily get trapped into trying to talk "their" way, and not quite make it--and in the process, lose your faithfulness to the real terms and the real point of your own research efforts. In other words, the delicate balance does involve a search for some midpoint between naiveté and defensiveness. But we'd urge that you err mostly on the side of risking some naiveté, to be sure that you don't distort your own work and the real message of your research. Besides, pandering to the terms of the audience's preconceptions, when you don't really respect or like what they stand for, can sap your self-respect, and feed a lack of confidence that you really have something to say, and methods for saying it, that have worth and solidity in them. This is one of the latent effects of that kind of specialized jargon in man X fields: to put on the defensive anyone who doesn't know the "code", and to give the insiders a leg up in any discussion, without regard to the content of their ideas. Instead of becoming a victim of that, it's better to reach for the underlying virtues of good research and good communication as we know them: clear ideas, grounded in direct contact with the things studied, tested against tough objections and alternatives, and explained in simple, strong reasoning. Those will help you put your "best foot forward," more often than not, without your having to know the right jargon-words for the particular audience in question.

Starting from that position, you may find that you have to do more than "report" your research, as to a narrow colleague group-but that can actually improve both your research and your communication. You may have to learn to educate your audiences about the importance, the background, and the frame of reference, for understanding what your research is all about. This may mean setting the stage in an introduction, which tells why you did this particular piece of research, why it's important beyond itself, what difference it makes to your community, to your organization, or to broader social-change efforts. Often, audiences outside the setting where you work will know very little about that setting, and your way of analyzing it can teach them as much as your data or your conclusions. Also, writing explicitly about why your research matters is one good way of keeping yourself honest, and your research useful and relevant--not taking off on its own, just because you got started on it. Others will often be less interested than you are, in the specific issues and facts you have studied in detail; they will want to know, bluntly: "So what?" It's a good practice to ask yourself that question, now and then, as you are working and writing, and to give your own answers to it. What does it tell us, that we didn't know before? What decision or policy or action is illuminated by it? What should anyone do on the basis of it? These are fair questions, for all or us.

An important part of the scientist's openness to change, the respect for collaboration and for correction by our colleagues, lies in our willingness to be clear about how we got to the conclusions we have reached. We should try to include some of this in all of our research writing. We are not simply giving end-results, or telling final conclusions: we are giving our readers a picture of a process, an inquiry, investigating issues and seeking for conditional truths, which we can use and offer to others as useful. That means our conclusions are only as good as our process, our evidence, the ways we formulate and reason about their interconnections. We want others to tell us how they got to their conclusions, after all; traditional research forms often do this in very irritating and stereotyped ways, which as often mask the reality they describe, as clarify it. Instead of telling something of the actual process of seeking, standard "journal" articles, for example, tend to report "data" in a retrospective "rhetoric of conclusions": terse, quantitative tables, together with mention of statistical tests used in assessing them, the "confidence levels" or other measures of reliability, and perhaps the "hypotheses confirmed" or "not supported." A brief "Discussion" section may tell something, minimally, of what all this may mean, and an even briefer "Conclusions" section will typically restate what was already said, in summary form. It is all artificial, backward-looking, cast in a pseudo-"objective" mode that is designed to look concise, precise, and rigorous: the images of "science" as the traditional view has it. But there are other ways to do it.

In community-related research, it often makes sense to start where the research itself started: with the reasons for wanting to do it at all. This may be an interest of the community board, for example, in knowing about what the agency is doing, or how well it is doing it. It may be a personal interest of the researcher. It may be an outside agency's demands, which start the research--hopefully, not the only reason for doing it. Then, one can tell about important decisions that were made with regard to the study as it went along: what scope and coverage it should have, how much money and time there is available to do it, what its main purposes are to be, who is to do it, using what methods, who else is to be involved--and so on.

Describing major changes of direction as the research progressed can be quite important, to help your readers understand the process and its results. It can also be helpful to readers if you describe whom you talked to, what kinds of documents were analyzed, what revisions and critiques were done within the organization, what changes happened in the organization as you went through the study, because of things learned in the process. (Such changes are sometimes the most significant consequences of a shared research project.) And your main ways of analyzing the data--not just the technical, statistical methods, but your ways of thinking about the issues--can be communicated concisely, with practice. In addition, there are ways of including in your report much of the "raw data" for example, in the form of direct quotations from a number of your interviewees--which give your readers a chance to check your inferences from those data, and to agree or disagree with your conclusions, from their own analyses of the "evidence."

How far to go in filling out your description of the actual process of your research is a matter of judgment, to be made in light of your study's purposes, the audiences you intend it for, the space and time available in writing it up, and so on. But the thrust of your efforts should be toward telling a full, natural, honest story of what actually happened, leaving out what is merely incidental or of passing interest, and focusing on the main points of the whole thing. But let your readers come to understand how you got there, as well as where you got. That is a better way of being "objective" than repeating the proper technical mumbo-jumbo for the research discipline you may want to impress.

These are some of the issues involved in writing about action research; obviously, there are many more. You probably have many ideas of your own about the subject, things that have worked for you. Or you may have identified "blocks," or problems, that arise for you repeatedly, when you start to do research writing. For next week, you might jot down several of those ideas from your own experience, or thoughts and questions that were stimulated *by* reading this piece, and bring them to enrich our class discussion.

