

Establishing Networks of Change: The Second International Encounter of Graduate Programs in Communication, Development and Social Change

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Abstract

This paper provides a reflection on the second encounter of graduate programs in communication, held in Bogotá on August 26 and 27, 2014 and highlights the University of Guelph's contribution and initiatives in the field. It explores the perspectives on communication that were reflected throughout the encounter and the processes that facilitated the establishment of "Redecambio", a network of academic collaboration in this area of knowledge. This encounter proved to be an opportunity to remember history and look to the future with hope and solidarity. Organized as a homage to Bolivian journalist and communication theorist Ramiro Beltrán, his theories and accomplishments were a source of inspirations for the university's students as well as for the international guests. Beltrán's Latin American perspectives on communication as an interactive, social and democratic process fostered an environment of dialogue that facilitated international participation and collaboration.

Keywords: Communication for development, University of Guelph, engaged learning, Redecambio.

*Valdría la pena tratar de no desconocer raíces que quedaron flotando en la esperanza*²
Luis Ramiro Beltrán³

Introduction

The second international encounter of graduate programs in Communication, Development and Social Change, which took place in Bogotá on August 27th and 28th, 2014, was organized by Universidad Minuto de Dios (from now on, Uniminuto) as part of the activities commemorating the International Communication week. This encounter brought together representatives from 18 programs from 9 countries Latin America, North America and Asia, including the University of Guelph in Canada. Holding this conference within this most significant week gave it a particularly dynamic flavour, highlighting the ever changing nature of communication in our present day, built upon the legacy of Bolivian communicator Luis Ramiro Beltrán and seen through the renewed vision of students. Through presentations carried out by the various representatives and through the facilitation of dialogue, these two days proved to be a true experience of communication for establishing strong international collaboration across programs and the creation of the International Network of Graduate Programs in Communication

“Redecambio”⁴. This was truly an opportunity to remember history and look to the future with hope and solidarity.

The legacy of journalist and communication theorist Luis Ramiro Beltrán was felt in indirect and direct ways throughout the encounter via student involvement and the embodied vision of communication as a participatory process. The two-day section for the encounter of Graduate Programs, which was a tribute to this icon of Latin American thought on communication for social change, opened with a documentary about Beltrán’s contribution to this field. For Beltrán, communication is an interactive, social and democratic process in which human beings exchange symbols, characterized by free and egalitarian access to dialogue and participation (Beltrán, 2010, p. 26). This was precisely the philosophy behind the week’s activities, and the unspoken theoretical framework out of which emerged dialogue fostering international participation.

Celebrating 20 years of existence, the Faculty of Communication Sciences of Uniminuto proudly showcased their students’ talents, creativity and innovation, as this week-long celebration was fully planned and carried out by them. The name given to the event, “Alternative Practices and Expressions”, framed the activities in a most conducive way, since students included conversations and presentations on new processes that have not been traditionally explored as social communication, such as graffiti and tattoos among others. The program included conferences on theatre, photography and inclusive communication, improvisation and music workshops, and provided times for discussions on topics such as alternative expressions, theatre for social change and indigenous music. A permanent photography installation by students in the program of Technology in Graphic Communication program entitled “Conectando Realidades”⁵ was displayed throughout the week. The opening remarks for the conference were presented in non-traditional formats, including a public interview with University president Fr. Harold Castilla Devoz and Dr. Amparo Cadavid, dean of the Faculty of Communication Sciences, moderated by students and faculty. Journalism students broadcasted this interview and others stories on the various university platforms, which gave them exciting hands-on experience and facilitated their interaction with the international participants. These students were intrigued by the experience of educators and researchers from other countries and, particularly, my experience as a Latin American immigrant and scholar in Canada.

Specific presentations about graduate programs took place on August 27th. Each delegate provided the historical, political context and needs out of which their program emerged. Presenters moreover explained the epistemological framework out of which the programs operate, and students and others in attendance had an opportunity to ask questions. This was a most valuable component to the week, since the presenters included professors who are in the process of researching and formulating proposals for new programs, such as the Program of Social Communication and Journalism at the Surcolombiana University, as well as professors from established programs, such as the oldest program in Communication for Development in existence, at the University of Los Baños in the Philippines. The session was an opportunity for an exchange of experiences, hopes, fears, concerns and success stories.

Representing the University of Guelph, I had the privilege of sharing my experience with communications for development from the perspective of a doctoral student who has only began

to immerse herself in this world of interaction, dialogue and exchange. I shared with the audience some of the social challenges and the historical landmarks that have shaped the Canadian experience of communication for social change. I spoke briefly about Canada as a country of contrasts in its rural and urban settings, and focused on the struggles of rural communities for access to internet and telephony, the legacy of pain that is part of Canada's First Nations experience, and the difficulties faced by a country with such a complex multicultural mosaic.

Being the only student representing her graduate program was indeed a unique opportunity, but it was my identity as a Latin American woman representing a country like Canada that coloured my experience in a most particular way. These days provided for me a vivid example of the power of dialogue and interaction in challenging preconceived ideas we may have about other countries' cultural identities. My very presence shattered some of the participants' preconceptions of what Canadians look like, or what the challenges of Canadian society may be. After my presentation, someone in the audience commented on the value of these exchanges since she had held inaccurate perceptions of Canadian society. She stated: "I never imagined that Canada had social issues such as these".

A participatory process: the establishment of "Redecambio"

Thursday, August 28th was a day of intense work, brainstorming and dialogue where the participants expressed a deep desire to give continuity to the network that was being born in Bogotá during the encounter. We were brought out of the busy university main campus to Valmaría, the headquarters for Uniminuto's graduate programs, a quiet place with a magnificent view of the city. Here at Valmaría participants felt a spirit of solidarity and shared the concern for establishing a network that can heighten the influence of Latin American thinkers and perspectives in the field of communication for development. The participants also suggested that we as researchers and teachers must do our part to help build this body of knowledge by sharing resources and initiatives. A number of concrete steps were set in place such as the creation of bilingual (English and Spanish) on-line platforms to facilitate this sharing, such as an electronic mailing list and a website. One of the first projects carried out by this network will be the publication of a book which will include detailed versions of the presentations made by each university.

After a full day of discussion and input from all participants, the network's name was put to a vote. The chosen name is a reflection of the group's strong Latin American influence. One of the group's main concerns is giving a voice to a sector that has been lost or silenced. This voice must be given a channel to, not only share existing knowledge, but also create new research initiatives. A significant amount of time was dedicated to exploring converging areas of research among the programs, encouraging future collaboration.

The University of Guelph's Contribution

I represented the University of Guelph's School of Environmental Design and Rural Development, which is home to the University's Communication for Development initiatives. As stated in official literature found on the university website⁶, the school's main concern is the creation and support of strong sustainable communities in Canada and around the world, with particular attention to environmental and rural justice issues.

The school offers a Bachelor's degree and a Master's degree in Landscape Architecture, a Master of Science in Rural Planning and Development, a Master of Science degree in Capacity Development and Extension and a PhD in Rural Studies degree. While it does not offer a full program focused on communication for development, students have the possibility to focus their Masters or Doctoral studies in this field, making them a central component of their degree and focusing on the fact that media has been a historical key player in both urban and rural development in Canada.

The communication for development initiatives at the University of Guelph seek to respond to the needs that arise from our globalized world, as well as to address issues that are reflected both locally and abroad, by inserting students into the local community through what is known as Community Service Learning, experiential learning, or to use the more recent term, Engaged Learning. This model considers the person as a whole, an individual with feelings and reactions to things, people and situations that matter to them. Engaged Learning suggests that "people learn and remember information that matters to them" (Fried, 2013, p. 2) while challenging the epistemology that has dominated western academia for centuries, namely, a positivist approach that builds knowledge on observable data and considers that teaching is as simple as transferring facts from one individual to another. This positivist ideology has been reflected in western university's organization and emphasis on discrete disciplines that attempt to compartmentalize and specialize knowledge.

Engaged Learning, or Community Service Learning, hopes not only to provide useful information, skills and emotional engagement but also to put these into context so that students are motivated to become invested personally in social change. It may involve the student in a variety of ways such as "apprenticeships, internships, work/study programs, cooperative education, studio arts, laboratory studies, and field projects". (Kolb, 1984, p. 4) The idea behind the engaged learning or community service learning approach is that, as Hambly Odame and Oram (2012) have attested, "The starting point for thinking about communication globally while acting locally is that no matter where in the world development activity happens, local individuals and communities are the main actors of social change, and therefore, processes should be focused on their own thinking, needs and actions." (p. 178). This educational approach seeks to challenge students to become involved in attitude-changing experiences while acting locally.

At the School of Environmental Design and Rural Development we believe that learning is a process and not just a transfer of knowledge flowing in one direction. We also believe that changes in attitude regarding local issues have global repercussions, and that students should be provided with opportunities to take ownership of their own learning processes. We offer a number of courses that focus on communication processes such as "Interpersonal Communication", "Educational Communication", "Organizational Communication" and

“International Communication” at the undergraduate level and “Communication for Social and Environmental Change” at the graduate level as explained on [the school’s website](#). Most of the undergraduate level courses are distance education courses. These courses attract students from various disciplines from the natural sciences, social sciences, arts, etc.

The theoretical framework behind these courses, particularly the course “Communications for Environmental and Social Change”, follows a participatory communication approach. The courses provide readings and discussion opportunities for students to explore communication and educational theories as well as the changing perspectives on what communication is and its role in development. The main component of the graduate level course requires that the students collaborate with a local community organization in a non-formal learning experience. They are to use participatory communication methods that we studied in class (Hambly Odame & Oram, 181).

We believe that engaged learning provides our students with opportunities to come face to face with local contexts, often challenging their own or their discipline’s perceptions regarding development. In the case of Canada, this context includes a vast array of similarities and contrasts where cultures, affluence, poverty, communication, isolation, immigration and First Nation communities come together to make up this uniquely diverse country. Communication for development emerged as a response to the needs of such diverse social mosaic, establishing a vehicle for rural communities to share knowledge and experiences and to demand attention from government and policy makers and to enact change from the grassroots level.

Conclusion

Colombia’s Uniminuto created an atmosphere of dialogue, remembering the roots of the communication for development field in Latin America. The university’s communication students provided a dynamic frame for this encounter, marking the celebration of the 8th International Communication Week through the methods they used and the topics they explored. The University of Guelph contributed our perspective on education as well as our historical roots and unique Canadian challenges. We are delighted to be part of the establishment of “Redecambio”⁷ so as to strengthen our collaboration with Latin America while becoming involved in this process of knowledge creation and change. We look to the future with hope while remembering the roots that strengthen our knowledge.

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² It would be worth the effort not to forget the roots that remained floating on hope.

³ Franco Chávez & López Rojas (2011, p. 176)

⁴ A combination of the spanish words “red”, network, and “cambio”, change.

⁵ “Connecting Realities”.

⁶ <https://www.uoguelph.ca/sedrd/>

⁷ “Redecambio” is presently coordinated by Amparo Cadavid from Uniminuto. Anyone wishing to obtain information about this network or to be added to the mailing list can do so by sending an e-mail to reddeposgradoscom@gmail.com