

SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES AND SOCIAL COMMUNICATION

Developing Communication Skills for Environmental Education

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Theoretical models of communication

Mucchielli (2010) shows that there are several models or theories of communication that help us to better understand how communication works, as well as to apply some theoretical propositions in practice to make communication as effective as possible. We will present three of these theoretical models, which we consider the most useful and easy to use in environmental education programmes.

The information theory model also known as the sender-receiver model was developed in the middle of the last century by two mathematicians, Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver. The model describes how information is transmitted between two individuals, similar to the flow of information over telephone lines.

Thus, a sender (Individual 1) transmits a message to a receiver (Individual 2). The message transmitted is encoded, i.e. it is formulated in a certain language, made up of sounds, letters, words or other symbols. The message is transmitted through a communication channel: through the air, if the two individuals are in physical proximity, through a cable, if they are talking on a landline phone, or through digital technology tools (computers, smart phones, satellites, etc.). The receiver, at the other end of the communication channel, receives the message and decodes it, provided he or she knows the language in which the message is encoded (e.g. knows the language in which the sender has formulated the message). Then comes the feedback or response from the receiver, through the same mechanism, only this time the sender and receiver switch roles.

The sender-receiver model focuses on the content of the message, the main concern being that the message transmitted by the sender is correctly understood by the receiver, not to be altered, because in the communication process there may be disturbances or noise.

The main questions that can guide us when using this theoretical model, either to analyse a communication process or to build an effective communication process, are the following:

What is the information transmitted by the sender?

What is the code in which the message is formulated?

Is there any scrambling or other distortion of the message?

What message reaches the receiver?

What is the receiver's feedback?

The two-level communication model emerged in the 1950s from an interest in studying forms of military and political propaganda during the Second World War. This model was then used in American media studies, especially in the early election campaigns whose messages were transmitted via radio and television (Mucchielli, 2010).

The two-level communication model describes situations where the processes of communicating or transmitting information take place in two stages. In the first stage, the message is transmitted from the source to relays, which may be opinion leaders or people with influence on the groups where the message is to reach. In the second stage, the message is transmitted from these relays to the target groups, who are the final recipients of the information.

This model emphasises communication as an influencing process. Thus, if we want to deliver a message that will bring about change in the knowledge and attitudes of certain target groups, we can use relays or key individuals that make the message have a greater impact than if it were sent from the source directly to the target groups. Mucchielli (2010) shows that this model is used a lot in advertising, an example being where messages are targeted at families but through children. Therefore, the child will be the relay or the opinion leader because he or she will be more sensitive to a certain message and will be able to convince his or her parents to buy a certain product or service.

The main questions that can guide us when using this theoretical model are:

- Who are the opinion leaders with real influence?
- Which groups do leaders influence?
- By what means do leaders influence groups?

The network communication model originates from sociological social network theory (Şandru, 2007) which shows that the contemporary world is made up of networks rather than stable and relatively closed groups and communities. People interact and communicate with each other in networks, which have no fixed boundaries, no well-defined centres, are dynamic and take both physical and virtual forms. In this theoretical model, communication is understood as relationships (sympathy or antipathy, cooperation or conflict, etc.) and relationships are the channels through which information is transmitted. The main concepts that this model operates with are: network nodes (people or groups), links between nodes, central individuals, marginal individuals, cliques (parts of a network where there is high cohesion), network brokers (individuals who link two or more networks), etc. Nowadays, much of the inter-human communication has moved from the physical space to the online environment, taking place mostly in global virtual networks, called social media.

- The main questions that can help us when using this theoretical model are:
- What is the structure of a network?
- How is information transmitted within networks?
- How can a message be transmitted efficiently in physical or virtual networks?

Communication in community development projects and actions

When working in local communities to promote sustainable development goals and produce change, a big challenge is to succeed in mobilising the different types of citizens or community groups targeted by our goals. Flint (2013) shows that the first step we need to take is to get the support of key individuals in the community: "trusted figures from various walks of life whom people listen, or whose credibility is high because of their involvement in the issue" (p. 170). According to the same author, in order to obtain the widest possible community support, it is necessary to:

Define well our objective and the problem we want to solve by clearly stating our ideas, providing relevant information, drawing on the voices of experts in the field and presenting ourselves as experts on the problem;

Communicating with community members using every opportunity, but also creating meetings where we use various means of communication - media, internet and face-to-face communication. The most effective methods of contacting

community members for a new project are face-to-face meetings, telephone discussions, letters (addressed personally), but also other methods such as e-mail, sending flyers or brochures. At this point we think it's worth considering social media communication channels such as messaging and campaigns on Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook Messenger and TikTok - to name just the most popular social media platforms in 2022 (McCormick, 2022); Asking people to do something that has concrete results so that they can see that their action is having an effect and encouraging them to take up new initiatives;

Promote support from community members and its results: "give awards, celebrate your successes (...). Let the community know that you're a public movement, with a broad community foundation" (Flint, 2013, p. 171).

Communication is key to environmental awareness

Environmental education is a process that enables individuals to explore environmental problems, formulate them, engage in solving them and take action to improve the quality of the environment. As a result of environmental education, individuals develop a deep understanding of environmental issues and have the skills to make informed and responsible decisions. Environmental education involves:

- awareness and sensitivity to the environment and environmental challenges;
- knowledge and understanding of the environment and environmental challenges;
- attitudes of concern for the environment and motivation to improve or maintain environmental quality;
- ability to identify and help solve environmental challenges.

Individual behaviour towards the environment is influenced by many internal factors consisting of knowledge, attitudes, perceptions, as well as external factors relating to the group to which the individual belongs or the people the individual considers relevant, important to him or herself. On the other hand, individual behaviour influences the environment of which the person is a part, the consequences of which manifest themselves not only at micro level but, by multiplication, at meso and then macro level, or even that of the global environment. Environmental educational actions are generated either at the macro level (as a result of awareness of environmental problems at the global level), or at the meso level, that of communities (who become aware of local problems or implement decisions at the higher level), or at the micro level, that of the individual, where direct educational actions are promoted/implemented (whether the individual recognises the need for knowledge or is involved in formal or informal actions) (Perniu and Drăghici, 2023).

For example, residents of an area dispose of household waste in an improperly area "because most of the people do it". The immediate and noticeable consequence is aesthetic damage to the environment and unpleasant smells. Then, degradable waste generates potentially toxic compounds and/or micro-organisms that can affect the population in the area. Through bio-degradation, waste generates greenhouse gases (e.g. CO₂, CH₄) so that the effects manifest themselves on a global scale (Perniu and Drăghici, 2023).

Communication for the environment - a particularly complex process - is understood in the broadest sense as the exchange of information related to the environment, an interaction that takes place at different levels of the socio-economic system (individuals, groups, institutions). Any effective communication process has three components:

- Communication focus: *what is the focus of the communication process?* The message is centred on the environment, which can be seen as a problem to be solved, as a resource to be managed, as nature to be appreciated, respected, protected, as the biosphere in which we live together. The environment is the context of life, which must be known and managed, but above all it is the community environment in which we all live together;
- The reference: *From what point of view is the environmental message being presented?* The focus is on the receiving audience, who should be sensitised, aware, educated about the environment. This requires a good knowledge of the receiving audience by the sender of the message.
- The environmental valuation is done *functionally* (by focusing on reason, e.g. by specifying legislative limits that are exceeded by a particular pollutant present in the environment), *sociologically* (by focusing on social values and norms, mentioning, for example, aspects of local culture that are/can be affected by the poor quality of an environmental factor) or *psychologically* (by focusing on emotions - fear, shock, etc. of the receiving individual, mentioning, for example, possible diseases that may occur due to the presence of a particular pollutant in the environment).

As we know, behaviours are educable, so education, based on effective communication techniques, plays practically the most important role in preserving the quality of the environment, so that it gives us the possibility of a quality life on this Earth and sustainable social and economic development.

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