Guest Editorial

Education, communication and language

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‘Yes, we get some of their material but we have to be careful how we use it. They’re pushing their own line of course’ (Primary school head teacher commenting on the education department of a well-known conservation body).

‘Education and Communication are the same thing’ (Workshop leader at an international conservation conference).

Environmental conservation organizations are made up largely of enthusiasts who believe that they have something vital to say to other people. They develop various means of communicating their beliefs. For larger organizations at least, the means may include education. Some of their education materials rightly earn high praise. However, questions arise. Do their education officers see themselves as educators in the same way as, say, teachers in schools? What is meant by education and does everyone in the organization agree about the meaning? Is it the same as communication? To answer these questions we have to think what we mean by words we use every day.

Are there problems?

Good communication is a top priority for conservationists. It should convey accurately to others what their views and intentions are. Equally, it should enable the correct interpretation to be made of what is received in reply. Whether simple or sophisticated, this is part of the technology on which an organization’s effectiveness depends.

Communication systems are, of course, dynamic: new words evolve, old words develop new meanings, meanings vary with the users or with the contexts in which they are used and new technologies for communication emerge. Environmental conservation knows no frontiers so all of this can be complicated by the effects of translation in a multilingual society where correspondences between different languages may be approximations rather than precise substitutes. The effectiveness of communication, as judged by the accuracy with which meanings are exchanged, must therefore be kept under constant scrutiny.

For many educators, however, the problem is not just evolving words or the rapidly expanding potential of communication technology but the way communication itself is understood. Perhaps inadvertently, the use made of the word by conservation bodies seems to give some educators the feeling that communication is being seen as essentially a one-way process, pushing a doctrine rather than equipping critically minded people and this may be creating sales resistance where there should be friends and allies.

Why has this arisen?

Do we sometimes forget the meanings of the two words? Education is the deliberate guidance of learning by a wide range of influences, personal, social and environmental and part of the fine tuning of lifelong development. Communication is the means of interaction between separate individuals and a necessary skill. Neither word is a substitute for the other. Educational values lie in the quality of the guidance being offered towards the realization of a competent individual (in this case environmentally competent). Communication values lie in the effectiveness of a transmission process. Thus, when the two words are used together, the quality of overall personal development is set alongside the quality of a particular vital function (one among others) and here, perhaps, lies a source of misunderstanding.

New interpretations of the word communication are coming from business, advertising and...
A problem of perception or a real conflict?
Because of the association with selling things, whether goods or policies, members of the public who think about it are inclined to be cynical and mistrustful about messages produced by professional influencers, be they commercial or governmental. In spite of this they continue to be influenced by them, particularly through the effect the influencers have on the norms of the social groups with which individuals identify. That may be all the advertiser/communicator needs but the cynicism remains. Examples of grossly misleading messages superbly communicated are common enough in society to raise calls for more emphasis on the development, in formal education, of critical attitudes towards received information and opinion. Environmental educators would generally support this strongly.

Understandably, environmental conservation organizations get caught up in this. They too have something to sell in competition with many other claims on people’s attention (often promoted with resources far beyond environmentalists’ means). They may be quite puzzled that people do not immediately respond to arguments for environmental conservation which they themselves find utterly compelling, so naturally they look around for more effective ways of conveying them. They take the risk that the public will treat their sales-talk with similar scepticism, unsupported this time by the norms and practices of their social groups. In fact for suitable, usually short-term purposes it often works well enough: conservation organizations may have a lot of sympathizers.

But how does a marketing approach relate to education in its wider, longer-term sense? Of course without effective communication there would be no education, but do the conservation bodies see education as something more than that? The way the word is used suggests not: for example, education is sometimes described as an instrument and a persistent flavour underlies the writing that the communications which matter (messages) will move, like marketed goods, in one direction from those who have (know) to those who have not, to whom they will be delivered. Is education really part of a delivery system rather than a development process to which good communication is essential?

Are we communicating what education is?
A delivery system may indeed be how some non-educator environmentalists see education – their impatience with it as a way of getting quick results probably confirms this – but the alternative may do them only limited good. Short-term campaigns may not be enough to change hearts and minds in the long-term: big ideas take root better in cultivated ground.

Education is a process of guiding the learning of people so that they may realize their potential as competent citizens – personally, socially and environmentally. It seeks to provide them with opportunities and conditions to enhance their awareness of their world, to build knowledge and understanding, to develop value systems and to sharpen action skills. The focus is on the learner: environmental competence is the competence to assess, evaluate, make judgements and take action on environmental matters in the light of one’s own experience. It is person orientated rather than issue orientated.

Where do we go from here?
What then are we to understand when we see education and communication coupled? Do they mean

(i) education as a long-term process of guiding individual development and communication as a means for doing so?
(ii) education as a learner-orientated process for long-term development and communication as an issue-orientated process for shorter-term persuasion on particular issues?
(iii) both education and communication as instruments for selling messages to people, in support of an organization’s policy?

The answer to this needs to be made clear, but each of the options has dangers.

(i) The first may allow overemphasis on methods and distract attention from both the value of the content and the needs of learners.
(ii) The second is an alliance between two things which are neither strictly comparable nor necessarily compatible.
(iii) The third will not be recognized by educators as a legitimate part of education and it would be a grave and unnecessary handicap for environmental conservation to be without the support of professional educators.

The sad truth, of course, is that neither communicators nor educators are wholly honest. Communicators (upper case ‘C’), like viruses, use the education system to deliver their own special