Technical Notes

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Participarоty Communication in Nonformal Education

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The Indonesia Nonformal Education Project is part of a large-scale development effort of PENMAS, the Community Education directorate of the Ministry of Education in Indonesia. The project was financed jointly by the Government of Indonesia and by a loan from the World Bank.

TECHNICAL NOTE NO. 17

PARTICIPATORY COMMUNICATION IN NONFORMAL EDUCATION

NOTE WRITTEN BY: JOHN COMINGS

SUMMARY: This note describes a simple processing technique which can be used for a number of purposes: information sharing, informal assessment of an ongoing project, overcoming language problems, and staff development. The note contains a number of examples from actual projects and a list of general guidelines for conducting processing sessions.

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TECHNICAL NOTES

This note is part of a series of Technical Notes based on the experience of staff members working with PENMAS, the Directorate of Community Education of the Ministry of Education in Indonesia, and with The Center for International Education at the University of Massachusetts. The two organizations have been working together on a project financed by the government of Indonesia, in part with a loan from the World Bank.

Each note focuses on a particular learning material, training technique, or issue which grew out of the experience of developing a large-scale, national nonformal education program in Indonesia. The notes contain whatever information was available at the time of writing. They present a summary of experience in the hopes that it will be of value to others struggling with similar problems in different settings. The notes represent work in progress and are not intended in any way to be evaluations, although care is taken to present whatever evaluation information is available on the effectiveness of the particular method being discussed. They are intended to be self-contained so that practitioners can immediately adapt them to use in their own settings.

As in all such projects, many people contribute directly and indirectly to the development of methods. The notes attempt to accurately credit those most directly involved, but invariably there are contributors who go unrecognized, particularly in a project which encourages participation at all levels. Throughout the five year period of collaboration there has been a pattern of extensive bi-national effort.

We encourage readers to share with us their reactions and particularly relevant similar experiences which they may have had in other settings. The notes are available in English from The Center for International Education, and will also be available in Bahasa Indonesian from both the Center and from PENMAS. Notes will be issued periodically as experience produces approaches which we feel would be of interest to other practitioners.

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INTRODUCTION

When people are doing something together, each person has a different impression of the common experience, even if only slightly different. If these impressions are held inside each individual, the rest of the group never learns from these unique perspectives. This technical note is about a simple technique that helps people share these impressions in a manner that will benefit the individuals and the project on which they are working.

Such communication between people should be natural, but it is not. It's very easy for people to go along working together and not know what each is doing. Even rarer is to know how your co-workers are feeling about their work or what their impressions of the total project effort are.

The technique presented here is called processing, and it provides a mechanism for sharing knowledge, feelings and impressions. If the technique is used regularly, each individual gains an expanded understanding of the common effort. This expanded understanding affects their work, the decisions they make and their relations to each other because they will all have more knowledge as a resource.

As the knowledge becomes common to all, each individual can begin to work in closer harmony with the common project effort. Even if individuals or factions decide to go counter to the will of the group, at least they will be doing so out of a decision, not out of ignorance. As people go along in their work they begin to develop a set of behavior patterns. Later it is very difficult to break these patterns. Processing can supply knowledge early before these behaviors begin so that the individual can change based on feedback from the rest of the group.

The knowledge that comes out of the group process can be used as a training device, as a type of formative evaluation or as a management tool. The technique provides information, and that information is the subject of the training, the results of the evaluation and the force of the management

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I would like to acknowledge the contributions of the following people to the development of the ideas presented in this technical note: Bonnie Cain, Steve Frantz, Karen Kalijian, John Pontius, Maman Soeherman, and Sean Tate.

tool. All three uses of the technique will be presented here, but the use of processing in a large-scale NFE project in Indonesia was the motivation for writing this note. While this technique was useful in many ways, as a management tool it proved to be very important in the success of the consultant team. Because we felt that it contributed so much to the project, we decided to share it with others so that they could benefit from our experience.

What is Processing?

Processing is a means by which a group of people can come together and share their experience of a common set of events. The people involved each speak in turn in a manner that answers one or a set of questions, the same questions for each person. The process is simple. When you and your family or friends get together, you say, "How did your day go?", and each of you tells your story of what went on in your day. Processing is the same, only with a little more structure to it.

Processing looks like this: A group of people, say five, come together and sit around a table. They have all been working that day in a training program, but the program is large and no one individual saw everything that went on. One member of the group poses a question--for example, What happened in the training program today? Each person, in turn, then answers the question by telling his or her experience of the day. Sometimes one of the group might ask a question about a specific statement that has been made, but mostly only one person at a time talks. By the end of the session each person has talked.

So what has happened? Before the session each person had different knowledge, impressions, feelings and opinions about the day's activities. After the session, each person's knowledge and impressions were expanded by what others had said. And each person's feelings and opinions had been affected and changed by what was heard from the rest of the group. The next day each person has more knowledge, and that knowledge is shared. The group is probably closer to consensus, too, and so there should be a better integration of the day's activities.

The word "processing" might have come from the term "food processing". In that form of processing, raw food is subjected to a "process" (i.e. a

specific technique of preparation) and comes out as a standard product. With the processing we are examing here, human beings take raw experience and subject it to a process (a specific technique of presenting information), which results in a standard product (information shared in a common format).

How Will Processing Be Explained Here?

First, a short history of the development of the technique will be given to provide a little background. Then several case studies of the use of processing will be described. After that a set of guidelines on how to develop your own processing mechanism will be presented.

The first case study involves the training of people in the use of a participatory methodology for developing educational materials. In this case the processing focused on the sharing of feelings and attitudes among the trainees. The second case study is about formative evaluation of a training program. This informal assessment helped to improve the training design. The third case study concerns management of a team of consultants on a large NFE project. There, a sharing of information helped to improve the effectiveness of the consultants. Finally, two other case studies of more formalized processing activities are presented. In these case studies, organizational structure and tradition add long-term stability to the processing.

The Troy Project: Training

The Troy project produced a photonovella* titled A Working Neighborhood: What Does It Take? The photonovella is concerned with community action for rodent control and is set in Troy, a small city across the Hudson River from Albany, New York. Three people from the New York State Health Department wanted to be trained in how to work with a community to produce educational materials, and they asked two consultants from the Center for International Educational to assist them.

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*A photonovella is a photo-illustrated story book that has been used for both commerical and educational purposes.

The photonovella that resulted was designed by members of the community and involved two community organizations. The community had a high unemployment rate and a low income level, and there was some racial tension between the large white and small black population. The community organizations were government or church sponsored and had done some community organization and education in the past. The final product combined issues of racism and unemployment with the health issue of trash that was accumulating in vacant lots.

The photonovella contains a story about a black and a white family that live across a vacant lot from each other. They express and try to resolve the problems of racism and unemployment and finally come together with the rest of the neighborhood to clean up some of the vacant lots. The community members, the health department people and the consultants worked as a group to design and produce the photonovella. The Health Department people acted as facilitators of this project while being trained by the two consultants.

As a way to help in the training of the three Health Department people, the consultants and the three trainees processed each day's work together in the following manner. At the end of each day, they would get together and each person would speak to these two questions:

1. When did you feel uncomfortable and why?
2. When did you observe someone else being uncomfortable and why were they feeling that way?

The first question allowed each participant to talk about the times when he or she wanted to say or do something but restrained himself or herself to allow members of the community group to speak or act. The second question directed each participant's attention toward the feelings of the community members. If the community people were comfortable and enjoying themselves, the work was probably progressing well. But if they were uncomfortable, there might be a problem that should be considered. This daily processing helped mold the behavior of the trainees and kept them from dominating the design of the photonovella.

The more mechanical aspects of the photonovella design process were easily picked up as a group. How to begin writing the story, how to outline the design, how to make the storyboard and so forth were taught by the

consultants to the Health Department people and the community members together in one group.* But the facilitator role was much more difficult to teach. There was a natural tendency on the part of the Health Department people to want to take over and design the material. These processing sessions focused on that one problem: the problem of giving up control and facilitating community input into the final product.

Using the questions about feelings allowed the trainees to focus on their own desire to control and the community members' reactions to being ignored or involved. The trainees were able to change their own behavior by analyzing their experience.

During an evaluation of the project, the trainees mentioned that the processing sessions were very good training for them. They said they had never been involved in such a process before and enjoyed it. They said also that the use of the processing sessions made them feel that they were participating rather than being trained, and they felt more comfortable because they knew what the consultants and the other trainees were feeling and thinking.

A lot of other information was presented at these sessions, but the trainees expressed a preference for having the same questions every day. They said that this helped them to stay aware of what they were trying to do throughout the day's work, and it also helped them to feel comfortable during the processing sessions. They knew what they wanted to say, and they felt familiar with the process.

West Java Field Worker Training: Formative Evaluation

This training program was a tryout of a three day segment of a larger inservice training program for 1800 field workers in the PENMAS** Nonformal

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*see The Participatory Process: Producing Photo-Literature by Bonnie Cain and John Comings (Center for International Education, 1977) for a systematic presentation of a participatory approach to producing a photonovella; Tech Note #13, Fotonovela (available in Spanish and English), describes the development and use of the fotonovela as a tool for literacy and community consciousness raising in Ecuador.

**PENMAS is the Directorate for Community Education section of the Ministry of Education and is charged with the responsibility for nonformal education activities in Indonesia.

Education Project. The goals of the training segment were to acquaint the trainees with different types of learning materials and their use and to train them in the making of simple handmade and mimeographed materials. The training design was to be used by six different training teams with different levels of experience and skill. The design had to be simple, but the project wanted to add a few improved training methods to move the staff away from using only stand-up lectures. Brainstorming, small group discussion, demonstration and hands-on experience were the methods chosen to supplement presentations.

The four trainers used a processing session at the end of each day to help in the formative evaluation of the training. The suggestions and information that came from these processing sessions were then used to improve the training design.

In these sessions two questions were used:

1. What worked well in today's training session?
2. How could these sessions have been improved?

The first question focused attention on the successful parts of the training. Too often evaluations focus only on the unsuccessful aspects of an activity. By using this question, the trainers became aware of the good parts of the day's training and maintained them in the final design, and the methods that worked best were used more often.

The second question, rather than focusing on mistakes or problems, focused on ways to improve the training. This is a less threatening way of dealing with improving the training design since it doesn't place blame or analyze mistakes. Instead, it places the attention of the participants on the positive and less personal activity of improvement. Also, many of the ideas for improvement were not in reaction to a poor training session but were ideas that came to the trainers while the training was in progress.

The trainers rated these sessions as very useful, and the processing sessions were included in the final design of the training. One example of the benefit of the sessions came on the first day. The group had run their first brainstorming session, and had decided that this technique should be included and used more often in the final design. As an attempt at improvement the trainers decided to see if having one of the trainees run the brainstorming would improve participation. It did, and this was added to the final design.

A Consultant Team: Management

In 1978 the Center for International Education (CIE) began a four year involvement in a nonformal education project in Indonesia. The project was very large, covering seven provinces with a population of almost 100 million people. From one end of the project to the other was 2000 miles, and there were around 3000 government workers involved. The CIE consultant team in Indonesia for the first two years numbered nine people. The consultants were responsible for different areas of work (materials development, evaluation, training, etc.), worked with different counterparts and had offices in different places. It was very difficult for any consultant to know what others were doing, feeling and experiencing.

The consultant team came up with the following mechanism for processing their experience. Each Friday the team would come together for lunch in Jakarta. Whoever happened to be in town at the time would attend the lunch. During the lunch each person would answer these questions:

1. What have you done this last week?
2. What is the major task you are going to try to accomplish next week?

The first questions gave everyone information on what was going on and brought everyone up to the same information level. The second question allowed each consultant to know what the others were trying to accomplish. If one consultant had any information or could offer any assistance to the other, this second question provided the opportunity to volunteer that help.

The staff came to value these sessions highly. The sessions created a common understanding of what the consultant team was trying to do: an understanding that the consultants felt did not come from reading one another's reports. In addition, feelings and emotions were more easily expressed and understood in conversation than in writing. The sessions were also helpful for morale and for building a feeling of being a team.

The consultants said that the processing sessions helped to quickly mold them into a team and gave them a feeling of group support. While working during the week, they were aware of the major tasks the other consultants were trying to accomplish. If they came across a piece of information that might be useful or if there was some other help they could give to that consultant, they gave it. The sessions also reduced conflicts resulting from two people trying to do the same task independently.

The processing sessions were kept focused on the work, and the consultants said that this helped them to keep a serious commitment to their job. If the processing sessions had focused on complaints and personalities, they would probably have lowered morale instead of raising it. Keeping the sessions focused on the work helped to maintain a good feeling about what the team was doing. The questions helped in this matter since they kept the conversation focused on work activities.

The consultants also felt that having a quiet place where people could pay attention was useful. We had tried several places that were too noisy and public. When we found a quiet private place for the sessions, they proceeded much better. When all of the consultants were able to attend, the sessions were too large. One suggestion to deal with this was to limit the time each person spoke, but usually people limited themselves naturally. Still, when there were more than 10 people the sessions seemed too long.

These sessions were led on an ad hoc basis, and the leadership role moved from one to another of the consultants. Most of the participants felt that a leader who was trained to run such sessions would have been helpful, but the sessions proceeded without major problems. This may have been due to previous experience of the participants in similar sessions.

Having the formal sessions tended to affect the informal discussions of the consultants. When they came together after work or at lunch, they usually would fall into the same format of discussing the job. The job-related conversation, therefore, kept to a task-oriented focus. The formal sessions helped the consultants to keep away from the gossip, complaints and discussion of personalities that usually accompany after-work conversation.

On the Indonesia project, processing was also used to help solve some language problems. All of the consultants worked hard at learning the language, but with only an 18 month or 2 year contract and full-time work, complete comprehension was difficult to achieve. So whenever the consultants were in a meeting that was held in Bahasa Indonesian, they would get together afterwards and share what each had understood in the meeting. In this way the consultants could fill in the parts of the meeting that were not understood by one of the others.

This technique might also be of use to people who are in training programs run in the English language (or another international language) when

their command of English is not complete. After a training session the trainees could get together and tell each other what they learned. In that way the trainees with a stong command of the language could help the weaker ones. This might happen anyway on an informal basis, but formalizing the process assures that it will happen.

OTHER EXAMPLES OF GROUP PROCESS

The Center Meeting:

The Center for International Education usually has about ten faculty and forty graduate students in residence at any one time, and there is a network of doctoral candidates and Center graduates spread around the World. The Center itself is run on an open, participatory and, oftentimes, confusing basis. As a way to coordinate, in a general fashion, the many diverse activities and people, the Center has a weekly meeting.

The Center meeting is always on Tuesday at 10 am. People who are visiting the Center try to schedule their trips at this time, and Center members try to arrange their weekly schedules to keep this time free. All Center members, staff and guests are invited, and the meetings take place with people loosely arranged around a large table in the Center's meeting room. There is an appointed chairperson who has responsibility for chairing the meeting--usually a graduate student. Anytime before the meeting, this person can be contacted to put something on the agenda. The chairperson also solicits additional agenda items just before the meeting begins.

When the meeting does begin, the chairperson brings up each agenda item and allows the person who is responsible to speak. Questions are always welcomed. Once the agenda items are finished, the floor is open to anyone who wishes to speak. Agenda items can be an introduction of a visitor to the Center, an announcement of a job possibility, a report of the activities of one of the Center's projects, a request for help on research or anything else that seems appropriate. Usually, during the second part of the meeting, someone gives a presentation for an hour. This can be a visitor telling about a project, a Center member talking about his or her dissertation research or anything else that might be of help or interest to the Center membership.

The Center meeting, to an outsider, appears to be confused and rambling, and it is. But it is a mechanism that fills in the gaps in knowledge of each person about Center people and activities. Lots of information would never be transmitted to the full membership without this meeting. Everyone knows when and where the meeting takes place. If some Center members can't attend a meeting then they must take the responsibility for getting the information from someone who did. The responsibility of sharing information rests with each person. If an individual presents the information at the Center meeting, then that person has fulfilled his responsibility to share information.

This sharing gives everyone an opportunity to state their opinions and gives each person a feeling of participation. The regular aspect of the Tuesday 10 am meetings helps to coordinate the far-flung network, and the open nature of the meetings supports participation.

Musyawarah:

Musyawarah is an Indonesian and Malaysian word that defines a cultural practice for reaching a consensus. Musyawarah looks like this: one person presents a policy, a decision or plan of action to a group. The group begins to argue taking many different positions, usually with great energy. Every possible position is presented and argued out, but without anger. After some time the group seems to magically come to a consensus, and the musyawarah is over, quite often back at the same position that was presented first. What actually happened depends on the situation and the membership of the group.

In some cases the decision being argued is a fait accompli. So why the discussion? This discussion allows the decision maker to listen to his or her decision be argued out. He may see a weakness in his decision and alter or completely change the plan. He can also use what he has heard to argue for his position to higher-ups. The people who will have to implement the policy are the people who argued it out, and they now know what the policy is about, can defend it and have agreed to it. Occasionally the group rejects the decision, butthis is not the usual case. Usually a few changes are made based on the discussion. The musyawarah is also a way for people to get

used to a new idea. All the arguing informs the participants, and the participants can also come up with ways of making the policy work.

PENMAS, the directorate for NFE in Indonesia, uses musyawarah annually on a national level for their World Bank project. The national decision makers present the overall policy of the directorate to the provincial staff of the six provinces in the project in a national meeting. The provincial staffs then break down into task groups (for example, the evaluation staff from all of the six provinces in one room, the materials development staff in another and so forth) and begin to argue out different ways of doing each of the tasks outlined in the policy. All possible sides are taken and argued out. Since this group is all of the same status level, the arguments are quite energetic but without anger. The staff then comes up with reasonable alternatives for each activity, and these are presented back to the national level staff for final approval. In this manner, the policy is presented, the outline of a plan to implement the policy is made, and all of the provincial staff learn about the policy and participate in the development of the plan. Most importantly, through the process of discussion the staff has agreed to the policy and has come to a consensus on how to implement it.

The Center Meeting and the Musayawarah are somewhat different from the other mentioned cases in that they involve larger groups and are not structured around a series of specific questions which direct discussion. The results reflect both the strengths and the weaknesses of large group meetings. Considerable sharing of general information takes place but there is not likely to be time for individual members to make detailed comments about their own position on a common topic. Discussion will be more diffuse, participation will be uneven, and the degree to which sharing takes place will be much more limited. Large meetings have their place, and can meet a number of important goals. The reader may wish to compare the difference between large meetings and smaller structured processing sessions by thinking of examples from their own experience. The Musyawarah example provides an indication of how both sets of goals might be met by breaking into smaller groups. However, to produce effective processing in the smaller groups, the guidelines suggested in the next section would have to be given careful consideration.

GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR PROCESSING

The following guidelines are not the result of empirical study, but come from the experience of the three case studies. Still, they form a framework on which you can build your own model through experience.

The Sessions:

If possible the sessions should take place on a regular basis. This helps the participants to build a habit of attending the sessions. The most important aspect of the processing sessions is that they happen and that the information is shared. Once they are going they can be improved, but if the participants are attending on an irregular basis, the sessions will remain ineffective. Making the sessions enjoyable, therefore, is also important. They should be relaxed, informal and some food or coffee will help.

The sessions should happen as soon as possible after the experience that is being processed. Using the food processing analogy, the product will be better if the raw materials are fresh. The number of participants, if possible, should be kept small -- five to ten seems to be ideal. This way everyone can speak without having the sessions run too long.

The place where the sessions are held should be quiet enough for people to be heard easily, and there should be few distractions. Taking the sessions out of the office risks these distractions, but going away from the office will make the sessions more informal and probably more enjoyable. An environment in which people can be heard and pay attention is what is needed. If the sessions are done during lunch time, wait until the meal is over. Paying attention while eating can be difficult.

The Questions:

The central focus around which the processing will take place is the question that each participant answers. One or two questions seem to work best, and each person should answer the same questions. The questions should be limited and simple. These processing sessions cannot cover everything, and they will be more effective when they focus the attention of the participants regularly on one or two concepts. That way there is a standardization

of the process, and each person can keep the questions in mind as they are going about their work. If the question is too general or if there are too many questions, the participants may find it difficult to keep their attention focused on the important issues.

To choose the question, you must first know what you want to accomplish. Brainstorm alone or in a group a list of the most important information, feelings, observations, or whatever that you want each person to share with the group. Then look again at the list and try to pick out the ones that are most important. Once you have limited that list, formulate a question whose answer includes the things that remain on your list. The question can always be changed or improved later. After a few sessions, it usually becomes unnecessary. By then, each person has a habit of speaking to that question.

Rules:

The rules for the processing sessions should be set by the needs of the group, but the following are some suggestions that worked well in the case studies:

1. There should be a leader who is responsible for keeping people on the subject of the sessions. This person can also begin the the sessions. Enforce the time limit or other rules that are adopted and summarize what has been said at the end of the session.
2. Each person should have their time to talk. Usually going in order around a room or table is best. Then each person knows when he or she is going to speak, and each person has the floor at some time.
3. A time limit should be placed on each person's answer so that everyone has an equal time to speak. Simply take the amount of time available and divide it by the number of participants, and then add some time for a general discussion at the end in case there is a need for it.
4. The question will define what is to be talked about, but another good rule is to define what will not be talked about. Complaints, attacks on personalities and gossip are examples of what you may

want to rule out. These subjects are a strong distraction, and having a rule excluding them can be useful.

5. All the regular rules that make a meeting productive, like coming on time and remaining quiet while others are speaking should also be observed, but not at the risk of making the sessions too formal.

Leadership:

The role of the leader can be very important in these sessions. Someone who is able to listen and not dominate the sessions can help them to go smoothly, and that smooth running will make the sessions more productive and more enjoyable. The leader should take the responsibility of opening the sessions by stating the question and reviewing the rules and then asking the first person to speak. The leader should enforce the rules and move the speaking role from one participant to another without breaking up the flow of the meeting. It may take some time to learn to do this smoothly, but some statement that focuses on the next person scheduled to speak should work. For example, "I think we are going to run out of time so let's move on to Mr. X", usually works well.

At the end of the last person's talk, the leader can open the session up to free discussion and then can summarize and reemphasize the important points that were stated during the session. Leadership can be passed from one person to another or kept by the same person, but having someone in charge of each session is important.

Goals:

The processing sessions can only be productive to a level that the participants are ready to achieve. When first using this technique, a group may want to settle for a simple exchange of information. Later the sessions may move to analysis of events, feelings and emotions. Once the group has spent some time together the sessions can be used for feedback and conflict resolution, but beginning with a simple exchange of experience can be of great value to a project. This sounds simplistic and can be overlooked as a valuable goal, but most working groups never take time to share in a simple exchange of experience. The more complicated processes of conflict resolution,

analysis and feedback, therefore, are quite often built on a base of ignorance. So, whatever the sessions develop into, they should begin simply and should never lose their information-sharing aspect.

SUMMARY

These simple guidelines should enable the reader to try processing to improve communications in their own nonformal education work setting. Whether used for training, formative evaluation, or simple team-building for more effective management, processing can be of value. Do not be put off by the seeming simplicity of the method: the results can be substantial and well worth the relatively modest effort required to put the technique to use. The details of implementation can and should be altered to meet the characteristics of your situation, but the basic criteria set out in the guidelines should be kept in mind. When run effectively, processing by a group working together reflects the ideals of responsible participation which underlie the basic principles of nonformal education.

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