



# Talking to our communities

Dennis Sleigh

Recently, I was doing some work with a few colleagues who are pursuing their Masters degrees, and they were asked to develop a metaphor for curriculum. They came up with some very interesting ideas – curriculum is a pizza, curriculum is a fruit salad, curriculum is an Olympic Games, and so on. We had some fun (well, I know I did) exploring these ideas so I decided to apply it to some other aspects of my work as an educational leader. One area that came to mind was communication within the school community, whether by principals or teachers.

I thought that the following five metaphors might provide us with a range that that would help us to assess the true nature of our communication with our community. The nature of metaphor is that is an open-ended expression, and you might read into each of mine a different message to the one that I am proposing; but that is not important. I ask only that you see if there is some applicability of these metaphors to the way you communicate, and whether you can learn a lesson – positive or negative – from the process.

## Communication as a university tutorial

We've all sat through boring university lectures and wondered why we are enrolled in a course that is less appetising than a pineapple and

## *The success of the communicator often depends on the person's enthusiasm and relevance*

peanut butter sandwich.

I hope we have also left the lecture and sat down with a tutor who presented the same material but in a way that engrossed us. If you have had this experience, you will recognise that it is not what we say that matters, but how we say it. A tenured lecturer might think his insights into the topic are enthralling, but a part-time tutor, dependant on his stipend to pay his rent, knows that his success depends on engaging with his audience, and drawing from them the knowledge that will get them through the course. The success of the communicator often depends on the person's enthusiasm and relevance.

I've heard school principals bore their audiences on speech night, and I've heard others enthrall the captive group. Don't think that because we have a position of authority, we are assured of a positive reception. Our hearers might be polite, but they will not be convinced unless we really have something to say and say it well.

Let us recall our favourite tutors and see what sense of excitement they garnered in their

groups; let us aim for the same feeling in our community through our written and spoken communications.

## Communication as a crime thriller

It's not unusual to hear people argue strongly for their preferred crime shows: one might like the Danish *The Eagle*, another might opt for Morse's controlled mayhem in Oxford, while a third might be thrilled by an Australian police sergeant, Tom Croydon in a rerun of *Blue Heelers*. Whatever our tastes, we probably justify them by referring to the great story lines, the witty dialogue, or the level of action in each episode. In each case, we are praising (or condemning) the *communication of the message* by the producer and the actors.

It is often said that teachers (and this should include administrators) are actors, so it should surprise no-one if our words and actions are carefully vetted by our audience, the school community, with many a critical comment passed on what people see. I am pleased that they do not expect Gold Logie performance every week, but I think we make a serious error if we think we can pour out the same stuff, week after week. I think it would be safe to say, in developing the metaphor of a crime thriller, that our audience wants to have some constancy and some variety each week. Without a doubt, consistency is fundamental –



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no-one likes to see a school bobbing about like a ping pong in a washing machine – but we also like the idea that a school will be a responsive organism within the community, reflecting the current preoccupations of the community itself, whether that means reporting on pupil progress after NAPLAN, supporting the local footy team in the grand finals, or recognising the third place won by the school in the regional eisteddfod. Balanced change is a sign of life; no-one should be allowed to suspect that a school is dying. Communicating with the community is one way to convey an appropriate message about a vital institution.

## Communication as a family meal

Using metaphors is a risky business because the comparisons might be read differently by different members of the audience. This really struck me as I started to develop this section of the article: comparing a school's communication program with a family meal. Throwing around some of my main ideas with a small group of friends, I quickly realised that each of us had a totally different vision of a family meal. For one person it was an occasion where the entire family sat together and talked over the events of the past week – the time that had elapsed since their last family meal. For another, it evoked a picture of several people sharing a table and little else, as they consumed their various favourite foods and continued to do what they had been doing when the meal was called – one read, two others chatted about a film to be seen on TV that night, and another was engrossed in some Facebook messages on her android. Indeed, none of us had a view that matched my own version, and my friends suggested I was living in a dream world.

I took the hint and looked for a clear signal from this confusion: no matter where we are coming from, as communicators we must be very sensitive to the background, knowledge and attitudes of our audience. If you are writing to the parents in a community where sport is revered, don't bother explaining to them that your school is pulling out of all local sports competitions because the standard of singing in the school needs serious work! Similarly, if you live in an insular community, don't try to tell them they must become more involved in solving the food crisis in Central Africa. Instead, if you feel you must embark on such noble crusades, look at ways – over time – by which you can bring about attitude change or increased awareness.

Communication is a complex process and you can hope to bring about change only if you are prepared to follow logical and well-timed strategies. Whatever we do, we must realise one person's effective communication is another's boring diatribe. We need to study our community, learning from feedback, and decide just what sort of communication is most appropriate for our current audience.

## Our audience wants to have some constancy and some variety each week

### Communication as a religious ceremony

I'm sad to note that today fewer people are attending church regularly, and maybe there is a warning here: maybe the church services were not as appealing as church authorities thought. However, there is something to learn from church services – again given the caveat that this phrase “religious service” will mean different things to different people. For one it might be the sombre and measured actions of a conservative group of elderly worshippers; for another it might be the joy and involvement of a Hillside happening. When we try to share our views with other people, we must recognise the existence of different groups of listeners and as far as possible we should try to match our message with our meeting.

Religious ceremonies are an interesting phenomenon: they usually offer a standard program, but they vary it by presenting new hymns or current prayer themes. Again, our communication should offer some stability, some change. Just as none of us would like to show up week after week and hear exactly the same sermon, so none of us should think we can get away with the same formula in our newsletter each week, or our graduation address each year.

If sport is the highlight of this week's newsletter, use next week to satisfy the non-sporting parents who want to hear about academic programs or recent excursions. I'm a great believer in a standard format in newsletters because this helps the reader to know where to place their attention. However, while you might always start with the Principal's News, and end with the Calendar of Coming Events, respect your readers by offering some significant variation within the sections each week.

### Communication as a garbage dump

This section was originally planned as *communication as a whirlpool* but recently as part of my duties as a newly elected Shire Councillor, I visited our local tip and I started to see some useful parallels, usable in any discussion about metaphors. Besides, I had never actually seen a whirlpool, so to discuss that topic was risky.

Now I should make it clear that I have often visited our local tip, whether to compensate for having forgotten to put out my garbage bin or to get rid of piles of garden refuse or even some unwanted white goods that had been replaced. However, this recent trip was different. I was there to acquaint myself with the total complex, including our odourless sewerage treatment plant. As I drove past the lawn clipping section which would eventually produce useful compost

for gardeners, or past the houseful refuse section where I marvelled at the things that our throw-away society deems unworthy of keeping, or past the DrumMuster collection site where farmers safely dispose of their used chemical drums, I was impressed by the range of services offered here. There was the usual range of recycled bottles and cans (though nothing yet for plastics) plus facilities for the safe disposal of asbestos and it was clear that a lot of thought had gone into the complex.

The parallel with school communication came all too quickly. I skipped over the obvious barb – there is nothing but rubbish in this newsletter – and started to think of the huge amount of detail in newsletters. Some, of course, are not unlike the traditional tip – items everywhere, difficult to retrieve and not much use for the user. Others have a far more modern face with lots of fonts and styles, perhaps displaying multiple authors, and even colourful photos. Finally, there are those that are written with the reader in mind.

No-one wants to visit every section of a garbage complex every week; perhaps not everyone really wants read every word in the newsletter. (The same can be said of other school communications such as speech nights, parent-teacher meetings, and even concerts, but the choice is less available there for those who wish to skip the unwanted bits!) The task of the reader, then, should be made easier by ensuring that the feel-good message from the Principal is not caught up with the detailed results of last week's cricket match and the date of the coming street stall.

School communications are not rubbish – so why tip them all together?

### A concluding thought

It is essential that get our message across to the stakeholders – a dreadful word, but how else can we sum up parents, carers, students, teachers, sponsors, local community and system authorities? Sharing the message should not be something that is left until the day of the communication itself. Think ahead; consider the audience; work out who is going to contribute; ensure that the end product is carefully scrutinised before the parents see or hear it, and try to get across all the thoughts that need to be expressed so that we can win further supporters for the marvellous work of education – and in the meantime, keep doing all the other things educators do to lead education in their community. **ET**



Dennis Sleight, a retired principal, now acts as a leadership consultant. He has been awarded Fellowships by both ACE and ACEL and is a successful writer, with four books (two co-authored) and over 250 articles to his credit. Contact him at [dwsleight@tpg.com.au](mailto:dwsleight@tpg.com.au).