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PHILIPPI VILLAGE

LEARNING BRIEF: EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

This learning brief was produced by The Learning Trust in partnership with the After School Game Changer, a priority project of the Western Cape Government.

After School programmes face numerous communication challenges in their work. These range from informing learners about their programmes and their benefits, to reporting back to donors in a way that communicates impact but also attracts investment in the programme.

Very often, practitioners form assumptions about how best to communicate with their stakeholders, and this may result in missing the mark on key messaging. With the rise of technology and social media, it is also important to continuously be asking ourselves if we are using appropriate platforms for communicating with different audiences on the basis of their interests and access points.

Moreover, development workers are increasingly frustrated by the process of reporting to donors about the long-term impact of their work and progress in reaching their goals. There appears to be much focus on communicating outcomes in the form of facts and figures, rather than on telling stories that better connect with a reader on a personal level.

Arising out of the third Community of Practice of 2018, this learning brief focuses on ideas and practical tools for effective communication within a range of stake-holders within the After School space.

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A YOUTH AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT: QUESTIONING ASSUMPTIONS

An evidence-based understanding of the resources that learners have access to, as well as the language they respond to, is important in determining what kinds of programmes will appeal to them, and how best to communicate with them about these offerings. As such, identifying and challenging our assumptions can help us to communicate more effectively. One way to do this is to base our practice on evidence.

Findings from a research report by Instant Grass International on Youth Audience Engagement in the Western Cape indicate that learners in rural towns might have better access to resources than those in townships. This is consistent with statistics about poverty in South Africa, which suggest that the poorest people in the country live in townships, including urban townships. This idea challenges our assumptions about rural areas being much poorer than urban ones.

The Youth Audience Engagement study also found that we should question our ideas about what motivates young people to participate in After School programmes, and which media is most effective in reaching them. Some of the findings from the study were surprising. While some older learners may have access to internet and use social media, many don't and the cost of data makes this an unreliable channel of communication.

In general, young people are more likely to respond to calls for participation based on a sense of trust and reliability. Here are some tips to help you market your After School programme and reach your target audience:

- Ask teachers to speak to learners about your programme
- Advertise in a community newspaper
- Avoid using large logos or pictures of celebrities in your advert
- Rather include a brief story of a local hero in your marketing
- Highlight the outcomes for participants, including:
  - Ongoing mentorship
  - Tangible skills development
  - Provision of basic needs such as meals and transport
- Use social media such as Whatsapp to organise groups of participants

Programme partners and colleagues can also communicate more effectively if we challenge our assumptions about stakeholders' interests. For example, both donors and beneficiaries may be more responsive to stories about participants than to statistics that don't paint a complete picture of the impact of a particular programme.

B TELLING STORIES

Telling stories of real people or using metaphors can help contexualise statistics and make them come alive, thus better communicating the impact of an After School programme.

The story of a successful participant (a "Local Hero"), for example, can be an effective way of communicating the advantages of a programme to new members. This local hero is someone with whom young people can identify. Perhaps this person participated in and graduated from the same After School programme, or perhaps they overcame similar challenges. The local hero shares learners' struggles and when the hero overcomes these struggles, it gives a learner hope for their own future.

Furthermore, young people respond more positively to the story of a local hero than to a celebrity as an icon for a programme. Messaging that clearly communicates positive outcomes for learners' futures as a result of their participation, is more likely to attract their attention because it matches their ambitions and hopes for their future. Telling such a story can also be done more creatively using video.

C VIDEO STORIES

For non-profit practitioners and fundraisers, a powerful way of sharing programme stories is through video. With the right budget allocation, it could be worth getting a professional filmmaker to make a documentary about an organisation's work, to be used for marketing or recruitment purposes. However, getting a filmmaker can be out of reach for many small organisations with limited resources. With the simplest of technology, organisations are now able to produce their own video content to market their programmes. Here are some tips on planning and shooting a short documentary in-house:

PLANNING THE STORY

Do the preparation and planning of the story as though you were going to tell a hired company to make the video for you. This means that the purpose of your After School programme must be very clearly outlined. Expect it to take a couple of months to make the video, unless it is something very short for social media. Below are three elements that require careful consideration in producing a video story, regardless of its length, quality or budget.

i PURPOSE

- What is most inspiring about the beneficiaries and members of your programme?
- Who is going to watch the video? (Audience)
- What do you want them to feel (Response), and what do you want them to do (Action)?

ii PEOPLE

- You need a character who will be the main focus of the story. This should be a real person who has come through your programme.
- There are a lot of different people who are affected by your work. You have to select someone whose story will touch the audience. To start with, take a single person's story. It can be supported by other voices.
- What makes a strong character?
  - DESIRE:
    They want something for themselves and their life.
    It should be connected to the purpose of your programme.
  - BACKSTORY:
    Why do they want the thing that they desire? What brought them to the point of requiring your intervention?
  - UNIQUENESS:
    What makes this person stand out that would help the audience connect to them emotionally?

iii PLOT

- The character's main desire should be introduced at the start of the story.
- The character should ideally try to get what they desire and fail at first. This builds up suspense and draws the audience into their story of ultimate success.
- After failing a few times, there is some change in them or their circumstances that resolves the question from the beginning of the story. This point of resolution should be whe they became involved in your programme.

SHOOTING THE VIDEO

With the above elements considered, you are now ready to go! In general, be aware that you film where you can get indirect or reflected light on the person you are interviewing. This means that the sun should not shine directly on the face of the subject. If you are outside, go near a grey wall that reflects the light onto the subject.

HERE ARE SOME SPECIFIC TIPS IF YOU ARE FILMING USING A SMARTPHONE:

- **Hold it horizontally.**
- **Put it on a phone tripod to keep it from wobbling.**
- **Use an external microphone to interview your character. If you can't afford to buy a separate microphone, you can use the microphone piece of any handsfree set.**
- **Bring the microphone close to the subject so that their voice is clear.**

BEFORE YOU FILM, ENSURE THAT YOU HAVE A LIST OF QUESTIONS READY TO ASK YOUR SUBJECT TO MAKE SURE THAT YOU GET ALL OF THE STORY YOU NEED. HERE ARE SOME INTERVIEW TIPS:

- **Focus on highlighting the person's desire and uniqueness with your questions.**
- **If you can, let one person operate the camera and another do the interview.**
- **Never say "let's start"! People will think that they have to act when you ask them to be in a documentary. Don't make them perform. Connect from the start by getting a conversation going, and keep the camera rolling while you talk.**

ONCE SATISFIED THAT YOU HAVE ALL THE FOOTAGE YOU NEED, IT'S TIME TO EDIT INTO A COHERENT STORY.

- **When editing, try to keep the video as short as you possibly can. You can use free software to edit your documentary.**
- **Search for special production music that is good for videos.**
- **Show it to colleagues/friends for feedback.**

You're now all set to post your video to your organisation's website or social media pages. Videos are also a good way to break the monotony of a donor or annual report if you can insert a link into the report or embed the actual video.

D CONCLUSION: CREATIVE WAYS TO TELL THE 'AFTER SCHOOL' STORY

It is important that we in the After School sector reflect upon the quality of our interactions with donors and beneficiaries to ensure correct messaging around our work. Thus, we need to challenge our assumptions about effective means of communication and the various platforms available to us, as well as to base our communication practice on research findings. Moreover, storytelling poses a creative means of spreading the message and impact of the sector in ways that we may not have previously explored, including videos. With the exemplars and models shared herein, we hope to spread creative and effective ways to communicate with our two main stakeholders, programme beneficiaries and donors, with the ultimate aim of bringing awareness to the impact of After School.

RESOURCES AND LINKS

- The charts ***Choosing a character*** and ***Defining goals*** are annexed to this brief to help you tell your video stories better.
- You can do a short online course on making a video for a non-profit organisation at **www.stillmotion.com**.
- A cheap option for a phone tripod is the **Joby Gorillapod.**
- You can purchase production music online at **www.universalproductionmusic.com**.