

Learning about the role of Culture in Research Policy Intermediary work

Can being a ‘cultural investigator’ add key insights to our understanding of how intermediary work might reach decision makers?

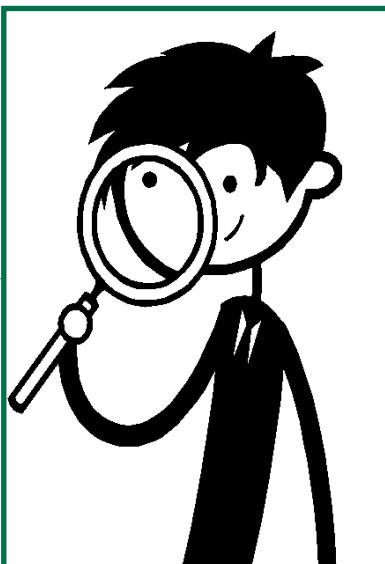
This paper was prompted by work by the author with new Masters students attending the IDS in 2010. These mature students from a diversity of backgrounds often already had links to the policy environment and therefore had some experience of the cross cultural nature of Research to Policy communication. This paper links the learning from that Tertiary Teaching/Learning Environment and applies it to the work of Research Communication and Knowledge Intermediaries.

INTRODUCTION

Writing about the research policy environment and how to use knowledge to influence policy Fred Carden (2009:50) commented:

‘There are no universal “best practices” for influencing policy with research. Every circumstance is different. Every situation presents its own complications of need and choice, danger and advantage for researchers and for policymakers. For researchers, influencing policy begins by forming some understanding of these complications, and understanding of how they interact’.

It is interesting to note that Carden made several references to the “culture of research” and “organisational culture” but no direct reference to Culture with a big ‘C’ in the context of cross-cultural communication. Our ‘Culture/s’ have a major impact on our values and resulting behaviours whether communicating face to face or using Information and Communication Technology tools.



In each Practice Paper published by the Impact and Learning Team, we share our experience and learning. We are presenting ideas that we are exploring and that others in the intermediary sector might like to explore.

Our experiences contribute to the body of knowledge, but rarely if ever contain incontestable insights. This paper should not be read in isolation, however, and should be seen as complementary to other work conducted on related issues of capacity development, knowledge management, and policy influence.

The knowledge and information intermediary sector comprises those who seek to improve flows of knowledge between actors in decision making and change processes in order to generate better development outcomes. Intermediaries act in a range of ways: enabling access to information; helping people to make sense of it; facilitating connections that enable knowledge to be shared between stakeholders. It is a practice sector which cuts across other sectors.

The author worked with the Impact and Learning Team (ILT) from June 2010–January 2011. Prior to this she had introduced the idea of being a ‘cultural investigator’ to Australian Aid (AusAID) international students attending courses at Curtin University, Australia and the University of Western Australia in courses offered each semester 2005–2010 entitled ‘Managing Cross Cultural Transitions’ on arrival and ‘Managing Cross Cultural Transitions and change’ on departure (Hogan in press). At these tertiary institutions we brought in an awareness of culture not only in the Induction (before any Study Skills programmes), but also into the Departure process. Indeed research indicates that managing cultural transitions on returning home, transferring knowledge gained to different cultural contexts and instituting change can pose far more difficulties than the arrival in a new country (Hogan 1996; Hogan 2009).

At IDS, it was agreed, to develop a Pilot Programme with the new intake of students, entitled, ‘Enabling culturally diverse teams to be more effective: at IDS & in your Development Work’ and to review Lessons Learned. From October to November, 2010, four pilot workshops were facilitated for new students from five Masters Programmes to:

- enhance participation in class and in multicultural student discussion groups
- serve as a foundation to support cross cultural communication in group work for assignments
- encourage students to become ‘cultural investigators’ and ‘cultural advisers’ at IDS and in their future work.



Cultural investigator metaphor

The metaphor of a ‘cultural investigator’ was used to advertise the workshops and to create an environment where it is ‘safe’ to ask questions about each other’s cultures. An investigator does not pretend to know everything and the role is to be observant, curious and questioning rather than forming opinions without evidence.

Everyday English language is filled with metaphors that we may not always notice. Often these are culturally based eg the metaphor of the ‘cultural iceberg’ used in the cross cultural communication literature to illustrate that:

- values are below the water line & are 7/8 of what we ‘don’t see’ in a culture
- behaviours that result from values are seen ie above the water line & occupy 1/8 of what we see in a culture.

However, icebergs do not necessarily mean much to students from monsoon & equatorial lands. The facilitator invited students to select their own metaphors, to work in silence first, then to write values & behaviours on post it

notes & to compare with a student from another culture & to compare these with someone from a different culture. One group drew monkeys, other crocodiles and elephants in pools of water. The aim of this exercise was to show that it is often better to invite people from other lands to choose their own metaphors. See ‘Metaphors we live by’ (Lakoff & Johnson 1980).

Why is it important to be a cultural investigator in development work?

Students in the workshops were asked to discuss why they thought it was important to be a cultural investigator in development work. The ideas they generated included the need to:

- know how to approach and adapt to different situations and communities
- show interest and politeness to learn about the culture of others

- build trust and relationships in order for people to share ideas
- know when to act and when not to act
- understand surface 'behaviours' as well as the more hidden 'values' underneath

Regarding behaviour change students discussed the need to know what cultural values/behaviours may help and/or hinder change strategies (see social marketing (McKenzie-Mohr D. & Smith 1999; Epstein 1999).

Further discussion highlighted the need to find informed 'cultural advisers' and to have more than one to cross-check information and to prevent jealousy.

As illustrated from these points participants already knew consciously or subconsciously the need to learn about cultures in development contexts. Yet, the cultural context is often omitted in development plans and documents.

Definitions and descriptions of culture

A pre workshop questionnaire was sent to students one week prior to the workshop. They were asked to name their culture/s (as they would describe themselves to others) and find terms to illustrate their cultural values in their own words.

In describing culture they mentioned: 'Culture is set of values/beliefs', 'traditions'; language/s' 'different dress codes' 'do's and don'ts of behaviour';

'varieties of religion and spirituality'; 'what is considered beautiful'; 'music, song, poetry and dance'; 'not restricted by geography because of migrations'; 'changing', 'some people are from blended cultures' either from having parents from different cultural backgrounds or living in different places for long periods of time'. Many students described themselves as from 'blended cultures' illustrating the complexity of the idea of 'cultural identity'.



In describing their named culture, students used the following terms to describe their cultural values:

- Trustworthy, keep your word
- Time punctuality, order, wait in queues
- Hard working, work ethic, efficiency, diligence, reliability, do things quickly, completion of tasks,
- Respect, especially elders & parents
- Relationships, put others first, family & friends, sacrifice, do what is good for all, inclusivity
- Socialise over a pint: alcohol as a way to develop friendships
- Harmony, tolerance, acceptance, patience
- Non-direct communication; subtle ways of refusing &/or disagreeing
- 'Silence is gold'
- Independence, self reliance, self help, strength

- Self criticism, modesty
- Mobility
- Passion, share feelings, 'alegria' ie happiness & fun
- Hospitality, friendly, celebrate festivals, food
- Religion, reliance on God
- Transparency
- Solidarity, flexibility
- Community work
- Materialism, money status assets, smart clothing
- Democratic principles, freedom, justice
- Pride in our history
- Respect nature & 'Tao' of nature
- Education, wise people are encouraged
- Leadership linked to being articulate & popular
- Compassion
- Samurai Spirit

It was interesting to observe comments like "democratic principles", "freedom", "justice" being noted from students where these values are still being fought for, yet they may now be taken for granted in cultures where these are part of the cultural norms. Some admitted later that they had written 'desired values' eg 'tolerance of other cultures' as opposed to those values currently in general use.

There was useful discussion during the workshop on different behaviours, interpretations and potential misunderstandings of what is meant by 'respect' & different uses of basic terms like "please", "thank you", "sorry", and "excuse me".

Students Started to act as Cultural Advisers

Some students quickly started acting as 'cultural advisers' in & outside the workshop as illustrated by the following stories.

Two Indian students indicated they wanted to speak at the same time. The younger male student got the facilitator's attention first and was invited to speak first, then the elder. The younger student who had been invited to speak deferred to the older student saying, "It would be impossible for me to speak before him". This story illustrates the many dynamics impacting on students in class which the facilitator may not be aware of and the very strong rules being adhered to by participants from very hierarchical societies.

The facilitator found one evaluation sheet written in red pen plus an explanation: "Sorry, I didn't bring a blue pen! In India writing with red pen is the domain of tutors & considered unacademic if done by a student" (Student's own words).

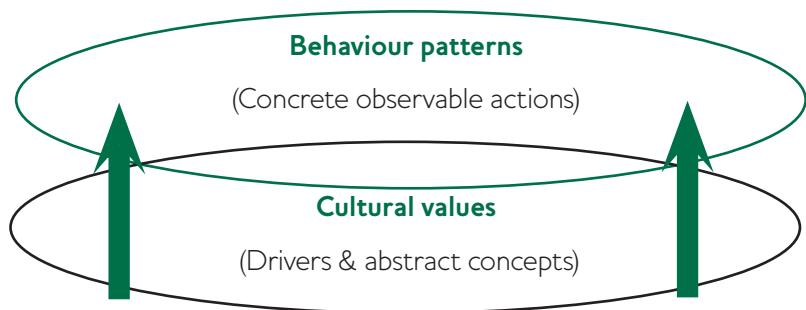
Theories and Processes Used

Students were introduced to the research by Adler (1997) & DiStefano & Maznevski (2000) who concluded that:

- culturally diverse teams tend to perform either better or worse than homogeneous teams
- more culturally diverse teams perform worse than better unless they discuss their differences openly.

Students were introduced to scholars in the area of 'Cross Cultural Communication' that have advanced many different classifications or 'cultural dimensions' or 'cultural values' or 'drivers' that underpin our behaviours (Abdullah & Pedersen 2003; Hall & Hall 1990; Hofstede 1980; Hofstede 1991; Trompenaars 1993; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner 2000; Abdullah 2001; Hofstede 2001; Hogan 2007). Very few students were familiar with the work of these authors; in some classes, none indicated any prior knowledge of their names.

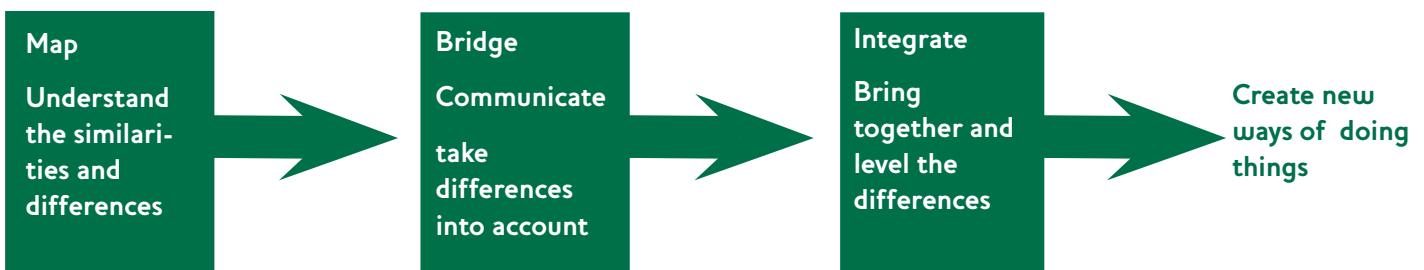
Figure 1: Cultural values and behaviour patterns



The cultural values concepts were introduced by using a 'values continuum' line up to prompt discussion & show students where they were the same & different. Students who were from blended cultures described how they were able to 'code switch' between different cultures. On large cards values such as "direct communication (ie low context) and indirect communication (ie high context) were displayed for discussion (Hall & Hall 1990) (see full list of cultural values in Annex 1). The metaphors of 'Bridging' and 'Integrating' were introduced to enhance communication. See Figure 1 below.

Figure 2: Mapping, Bridging and Integrating Model

(Annex to Hogan 2007).



Awareness is not Enough

Changing cultural behaviours is harder than it appears. In one workshop, one Japanese student walked swiftly to the door as soon as the workshop ended. The facilitator followed her & found her in tears down the corridor. They went into a meeting room & the student sobbed for while:

Chris: What's wrong?

Student: I tried to be direct & tell them (my small group). Last Sunday night we agreed to meet. They were really late. I was late too. But then when they arrived all they did was chat about everything.. We got no work done. I kept quiet, though I was so frustrated. I have so much to do & it takes me far longer than them to read the articles, I'm so tired.

So today in our group, I decided to be more direct. It was very hard for me. I was nervous to tell them what I was thinking... I felt so bad. So when they were all talking I stopped them & said look "You are wasting my time".

They stopped...they looked really shocked. I didn't mean to hurt their feelings. I didn't mean it to come out that way, but I don't have the right words... I meant to say something like..."You are wasting our time, uummmm we need to talk about the work" but it came out all wrong. I never want to face them again. I just can't I wait to change classes.

The student was really upset, was suffering from sleep deprivation over the past four nights & was very hungry. She wept, talked for an hour about the difficulties she was facing. Culturally, the student had lost face & felt she had grossly insulted her group members. Next day, the facilitator talked with the Convenor who supported the student who did stay with the group and with the class.

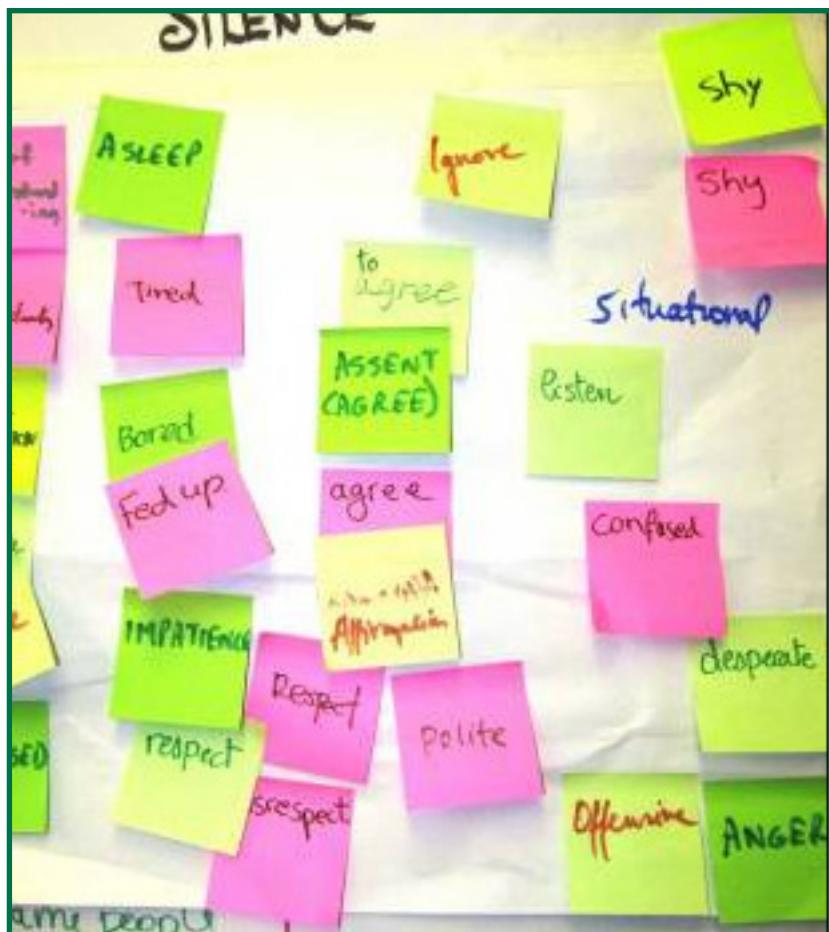
Clearly from this example the other students had not been able to read/understand the ‘indirect communication’ & body language of this Japanese student (or if they did they chose not to respond). Likewise the Japanese student experienced difficulty in changing her behaviour ‘appropriately’ which was understandable given the cultural & linguistic difficulties, her stress & tiredness levels.

Applying this Learning to Research Communication

So how does the discussion above relate to the work of intermediaries? For many years IDS has sought to be an knowledge intermediaries by taking its own and other people’s research and creating briefs for policy makers. These briefs are created at a distance and in a Northern setting, making assumptions about what policy makers would and/or might respond to. After reflection, IDS is currently working (within the Mobilising Knowledge for Development Programme Phase 2 funded by DFID UK) with processes of co-construction to strengthen the work of intermediaries in the South.

It could be asserted that if intermediary research and/or products are more connected to the local cultural context then they will be more likely to be read and accepted by policy makers.

Culture though, as identified above, is not regional, nor is it even national. Ethnic groups within a single nation may have their own cultural understandings and values which may differ from the dominant culture. So even where intermediary work is localised, there is still room for cultural misunderstandings and challenges for meaningful cross cultural communication.



Silence is not the Absence of Communication

Consider the use of silence. Imagine a face to face meeting between a researcher and policy maker, or intermediary and policy maker. Imagine you enter the room and there is silence. How should we interpret this silence? Is communication absent? No, it is impossible not to communicate something.

In the last workshops students were asked to write their interpretations of ‘silence’ on post its. Many students commented on the useful discussion that ensued around the many meanings of silence and the importance of not assuming that silence means a person isn’t thinking or hasn’t anything to contribute. They were more aware of linguistic issues related to ‘turn taking’ and strategies to support and encourage quieter group members.

We must be careful not to jump to conclusions if someone is silent and students realised that people stay silent for many different & sometimes opposite reasons:

Understand and thinking.....don’t understand and trying to understand

Feeling bored.....feeling interested and waiting for more explanation

Some students were taught to ‘speak out, think aloud’, ‘anything is fine’ whilst others were taught to ‘speak quietly to show respect’; ‘stay quiet unless they have something important to say’ and ‘only speak after older and/or more senior group members have had their say’.

Students described local sayings they had been taught as children:

- ‘switch on your brain before opening your mouth’
- ‘look before you leap’
- ‘count to 10 before you speak’
- ‘it’s more important to listen than to talk’ ie ‘listening is gold, speaking is silver’
- ‘think twice before speaking’.

Sometimes people are feeling fed up, tired, bored, angry, shy or impatient to finish. In some cultures where communication is “indirect” you are meant to ‘read’ what silence means from the body language, but it may be hard if you do not know what to look for. So you may need to ask what people are thinking. In England we say:

‘I’ll give you a penny for your thoughts’

For some silence is ‘golden’, space to think, a place of reflection essential to the internalising of the research data. To others silence is embarrassing, disrespectful, or even a mark of anger. For culturally and linguistically diverse students, silence is a welcomed opportunity to process/translate and make meaning out of what is being said.

This discussion on the meanings of silence illustrates the potential for misunderstanding, and the need for research communicators and intermediaries to reflect on the culture of the policy maker with whom they are trying to communicate.

Some Intermediary Guidelines for Looking Below the Surface

The following ideas were generated by students at the workshops as suggested ‘Guidelines for working in multicultural groups’. Our practice with intermediary work suggests they have some resonance with face to face intermediary work, whether one on one meetings, workshops, or conferences. The following ideas are particularly relevant where cross cultural communication is happening (such as an international workshop) or a multi cultural team is bringing together intermediary work. This is list of ideas only and space constraints unfortunately do not allow detailed explanation.

Relationships

- Make time for informal interactions together outside class for coffee/tea to build relationships and trust (and have fun). It is time well invested
- Select the ‘place’ eg coffee shop for ‘building relationships’; choose library or office space for ‘task’ discussions.

Respect

- The behaviours associated with ‘respect’ vary from one culture to another. So if in doubt perhaps ask ‘how do you show respect in your culture?’
- In most cultures to show respect is not to speak whilst someone else is speaking.
- If you are using an international language eg English to speak and it is not the native tongue of others present then it is very insensitive if native speakers do not give full attention when others are searching for words to express themselves.

Time and punctuality

- Establish what ‘time’ you are keeping eg are you meeting on ‘English time’ ie at the time agreed. What time are you going to start ie on time, 5, 10 15 minutes after. What do you define as late & impolite? Set limits on ‘waiting time’. Agree on use of mobiles to alert others if you are late.

Giving and receiving feedback

- Most cultures respond to giving each other positive feedback ie ‘give face to others’.

Language in discussion groups (workshops)

- Use simple words and avoid jargon
- Have someone in the group with the role of ‘word watcher’ to listen for difficult words, slang words and ask the speaker to explain them (write meanings on flip charts)

- Speak more slowly
- Avoid colloquialisms
- Make sure everyone in the group understands the purpose of the discussion before starting
- Check understanding, ask someone to re-phrase in his/her own words
- Use synonyms ie similar words if someone doesn't understand
- Watch body language (remember it is harder to read the body language of someone from a different culture, don't make assumptions, ask)
- Communicate in different ways: drawings, actions, speech, words written down. Clearly written ideas on flip charts help English as a second language speakers to read a summary of what has been said; A data projector has the advantage of storing minutes electronically for distribution later
- Have a hand signal to slow a 'speedy speaker' down
- Remember that participants from cultures where 'indirect communication' is the norm may find it hard, embarrassing or even impossible to say 'please slow down' or 'let's focus on the task' or 'I don't understand' directly in front of the group. If they try to be direct, the words may not be exact if he/she is nervous so listen with empathy and try to find out what is concerning them
- If you are having a 'work' discussion, say 'Focus' if you go off the topic. Or everyone have a card with this word to hold up at any time
- Avoid generalisations and stereotypes (these can be both positive and negative but they help us to make sense of masses of data). If you hear one, discuss with the group.
- It may help if those participants who are more skilled at English (or the international language of use) offer to summarise key points at the end of a discussion.

Strategies to equalise participation & help 'turn taking'

- Entering into a conversation ie 'turn taking' can be very hard if your first language is not the one being used by the group (as native speakers often 'jump in' very quickly)
- It is useful to build in silence and/or writing processes to give everyone a chance to process an idea before starting a discussion
- Allow 'think time' or one minute silence for everyone to think separately first and focus attention
- Writing on post its/scraps of paper. Ask everyone to write down ideas on a piece of paper first to help reflection. Then show your ideas in turn to the group
- Let a person finish who is speaking before immediately rushing in with your next point. Summarise 'so what I think you are saying is...' and allow the person to clarify if needed
- Take turns to speak in a set order eg the 'round robin' process to equalise participation (eg one idea per person, in turn, clockwise around a circle)
- Invite quieter members to speak to encourage participation
- If you cannot get to consensus, allow a person to disagree. Ask 'Can you live with that decision? Or ask him/her what changes could be suggested to make the agreement OK'. Do not force consensus
- Evaluate your meeting at the end: has everyone shared ideas and everyone listened?

Humour

- It is great to use humour. Also check that others understand. The English way of 'playing' on words may be hard to understand for some, so try to be sensitive & compassionate with each other.

Mapping Different Cultural Viewpoints (MBI Model)

The following suggestions may be useful to help members of a multicultural team map (describe) and understand each others viewpoints better. It is useful to map cultural values (see Annex to Hogan 2007 and figure 1 to 2). This gives everyone an idea of similarities and differences within a team.

- Ask 'How is concept xxx perceived in your culture or in cultures you have worked in?'
- Ask 'Do you think the cultural background of this author has impacted on his/her writing? If 'yes' how?'
- "Is term 'xxx' directly translatable into your language/culture? If not, is there a similar but different term? How do you see this?"
- Remember 'Whose knowledge and reality counts?' 'What biases are there?' (Chambers 2008)

Building bridges: trust, safety and integrating into ground rules

- Spend some time to get to know one another informally (find out strengths, areas where you would like help/support etc)
- Work out some ground rules together to help discussion across cultures
- Ensure that the ground rules are maintained (ie everyone take responsibility for reminding each other, especially if the same person speaks first, or dominates).

Process bridges for hearing different opinions without giving offence

- Listen and honour personal opinions. 'Others may see things differently...for example in ...' or 'Some research states (ie don't use 'I disagree' directly, depersonalise your disagreement)
- Focus on the issues of a discussion, not the person. Eg: 'There may be other ways of looking at this issue' rather than 'You cannot say that'
- Use the PMI process to discuss ideas from all angles ie pluses, minuses, interesting points and invite everyone to focus on the positives, everyone to focus on the minuses etc
- Dialogue may be a 'process bridge' and enable exploration of 'different opinions' in a less confrontational way for participants from cultures where 'indirect communication' is the norm and direct disagreement and debate is deemed impolite. 'Dialogue' refers to 'a conversation in which people who have different beliefs and perspectives seek to develop mutual understanding. While doing so, they typically experience a softening of stereotypes and develop more trusting relationships. They often gain fresh perspectives on the costs of the conflict and begin to see new possibilities for interaction and action...' (Herzig & Chasin 2006:3). Useful openers include 'Please share something about your life experience that you think may have shaped your general perspectives about [the issue] or your responses to [events]'.

Conclusions

There is more work to be done on cultural influences on research communication and intermediary work.

Intermediaries need to become at a minimum 'cultural detectives', ie to become aware of the possibilities of culture affecting the communication as emphasised by UNESCO on its home page:

'Culture is a determining factor for the relevance, failure and success of development interventions. Efficient programming needs to take into account that cultural diversity is not only a reality, but also an engine for development and part of an international commitment.'

In conclusion, we need to be cultural investigators in development work in order to explore the situations we find ourselves in, to examine the complications, and where possible to respond with cultural sensitivity to prevent and/or overcome cultural miscommunication.

References and Further Reading

References for IDS Practice Paper In-Briefs are available via this link:

www.ids.ac.uk/research-teams/impact-and-learning-team/publications/bibliographical-resources

We will update the page as we become aware of new relevant publications.

Learning about the role of Culture in Research Policy Intermediary work

About the Impact and Learning Team (ILT)

What makes development research accessible, relevant or appropriate for people outside the research community? Does development research get its due in policymaking and practice? What would be value for money in research communication?

The Impact and Learning Team at IDS are interested in how communication of research brings about change - in particular, what happens when people and technology mediate between researchers and decision makers. We use the term 'intermediary' to describe people and technology acting in this way. We think they play a critical role in making knowledge accessible, relevant and responsive to demand.

The work we are doing in the Impact and Learning Team (ILT) is exploring and testing this assumption using action research. We support people to think about the difference they want to make as well as how they are going to go about it. We draw insights and approaches from IDS's history of research, and the fields of marketing, strategic planning and evaluation, and capacity development.

This Practice Paper is an output from our work.

Full list of papers in this set

Batchelor, S. (2011) 'Learning about analysing Networks to Support Development Work?' *IDS Practice Paper In Brief 1*, Brighton: IDS

Batchelor, S., Gregson, J and Crooks. (2011) 'Learning about an Alternative Approach to Strategic Discussions,' *IDS Practice Paper In Brief 2*, Brighton: IDS

Ishmael Perkins, N. and Okail, N. (2011) 'The Large Conference Re-Imagined and Re-visited,' *IDS Practice Paper In Brief 3*, Brighton: IDS

Evangelia, B. (2011) 'Learning About New Technologies and the Changing Evidence Base for Social Science Research and Decision Making in International Development,' *IDS Practice Paper In Brief 4*, Brighton: IDS

Hogan, C. (2011) 'Learning about the Role of Culture in Research Policy Intermediary Work,' *IDS Practice Paper In Brief 5*, Brighton: IDS

Batchelor, S. and Hogan, C. (2011) 'Learning about "Learning Styles" in Getting Research into Policy Use and Practice?,' *IDS Practice Paper In Brief 6*, Brighton: IDS

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Credits

This Practice Paper In Brief was written by Christine Hogan (Capacity Support Coordinator, IDS June 2010-January 2011. Now Adjunct Professor, Curtin University, Sustainability Policy Institute, Australia)

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