

DESIGNING A PARTICIPATORY MEDIA-ASSISTED LEARNING SYSTEM FOR SMALL LOWLAND RICE FARMERS

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ABSTRACT

With the results of the baseline study as the basis for designing a learning system, a user-oriented media-assisted learning system was evolved. It consisted of a staggered farmers' class with a lecture by an agronomist, dramatized audio tapes and discussion, informal talks between the agronomist and farmers, and periodic farm visits.

Although participatory mechanisms in the planning, development of materials, utilization, and evaluation of the learning system were explored, such approach was only possible at the planning and utilization stages because of the farmers' low functional literacy level.

Based on participant observation, the dramatized audio tapes motivated people to gather for a farmers' class; sustained the attendance level of subsequent farmers' classes; held the attention of the rural audience; combined entertainment and learning; and reached remote areas which are not reached by Ministry of Agriculture and Food extension personnel.

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INTRODUCTION

The move to decentralize planning of development programs and recently, the search for methodologies to

make people truly participate in these programs suggest that communication strategies should be designed along the concepts of decentralization and people's participation. In other words;

the system by which the people are to be reached, encouraged to learn new ideas and ways of doing things, and motivated to behave and participate in development; has to be primarily designed or determined by them. For the communication system; it would include the media, the message, and the manner in which the media are utilized and what messages are to be presented and how.

In its essential form, a rural development project can be treated as a communication system in which the basic process is teaching-learning and the basic purpose is to enable all involved in the project, especially the intended beneficiaries, to manage and utilize resources better. There has been a growing consciousness of the need to utilize mediated communication to enhance the teaching-learning process. However, the basic flaw in using the communication media, particularly the mass media, to support these community projects is that its use is limited to the delivery of the messages with little regard to the relevance of the message to the users' needs and their desultory attempts to find out how the users are being affected by the information.

Criticisms on the use of communication media to motivate people have invariably underscored the lack of understanding of three things: the users' needs, the users' culture, and the proper application of the communication media. In other words, development administrators and their communication support specialists are operating on nothing else but much enthusiasm and a large measure of blind faith on the power of the media.

Therefore in designing a learning system based on mediated communication, it is important to start with an examination and understanding of the context under which communication is to operate.

This study attempted to evolve and implement a model of a user-oriented media-assisted learning system for farmers with the communication and learning environment of farmers as an important consideration. Specifically, this study sought to describe the communication and learning environment of farmers in a rural community, and determine an appropriate media-assisted learning system which would meet the occupational needs of small farmers.

METHODS

The learning system was implemented principally in barangay Hacienda Maria, San Isidro, Leyte where the baseline study was undertaken and a media-assisted learning system was tried out.

The use of participant observation is required to conceptualize a learning system for farmers and to implement and evaluate this system. Thus, the researcher resided in the experimental site practically throughout the entire period of study. Direct observations, key informant interviewing, and structured interviews were conducted at the initial phase of the study to ascertain the communication and learning environment in Hacienda Maria where the learning system was implemented. The goal of this brief immersion was to evolve a participatory media-assisted learning system which would ac-

count the individual characteristics of learners and the structural characteristics of the learning environment.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Significant inputs in the design of the learning system were the baseline survey results, key informant interviews, and participant observation. These were used to determine the circumstances of the Hacienda Maria farmers and of the community which were basically as follows: (a) farmers — their socio-economic condition was barely at the subsistence level, their foremost occupational problems were related to crop production, average length of schooling was 3.87 years, they worked in the field practically the whole day at peak planting and harvesting periods, farm families were early risers, their source of farm information was the San Isidro Rural Systems Development Project (SIRSDP) technician, and they listened to radio news and drama; and (b) community — not covered by Ministry of Agriculture and Food (MAF) extension personnel, has an elementary school and a multi-purpose hall for community activities, without indigenous communication media, houses clustered around a few dug wells, without recreational facilities, rice was the primary lowland crop, and without irrigation system.

With these findings, the use of big media was ruled out in favor of smaller, more flexible media such as the audio tape drama, the agronomist's lecture, and charts. Likewise, the

schedule of the learning activities had to be adjusted to the farmers' availability.

Aside from the results of the baseline study; the experiences of other educational media projects, notably the Communication Technology for Rural Education project, also guided the learning system that was evolved. The learning system consisted of the following (Fig. 1):

1. A farmers' class on lowland rice production. Aided by large charts on Manila paper, an agronomist presented a lecture on the recommended cultural practices in lowland rice production. A dramatized audio tape about 8-15 minutes long was played in between the lecture and discussion. Written in Cebuano and voiced by SIRSDP field staff, the drama reflected the actual situations and characters in the community with the real-life agronomist providing the recommended cultural practices.

2. Regular farm visits by an agronomist.

3. Informal talks between the agronomist and small groups of farmers.

An important feature of the learning system was the staggered schedule of the farmers' class. Instead of a regular weekly schedule, the classes were paced with the schedule of actual farm operations, i.e. the first farmers' class which dealt on land preparation and seed selection was held just before land preparation time. This scheduling was intended to enhance recall of lessons learned and provided farmers an opportunity to try the recommendation or advice right on his own field.

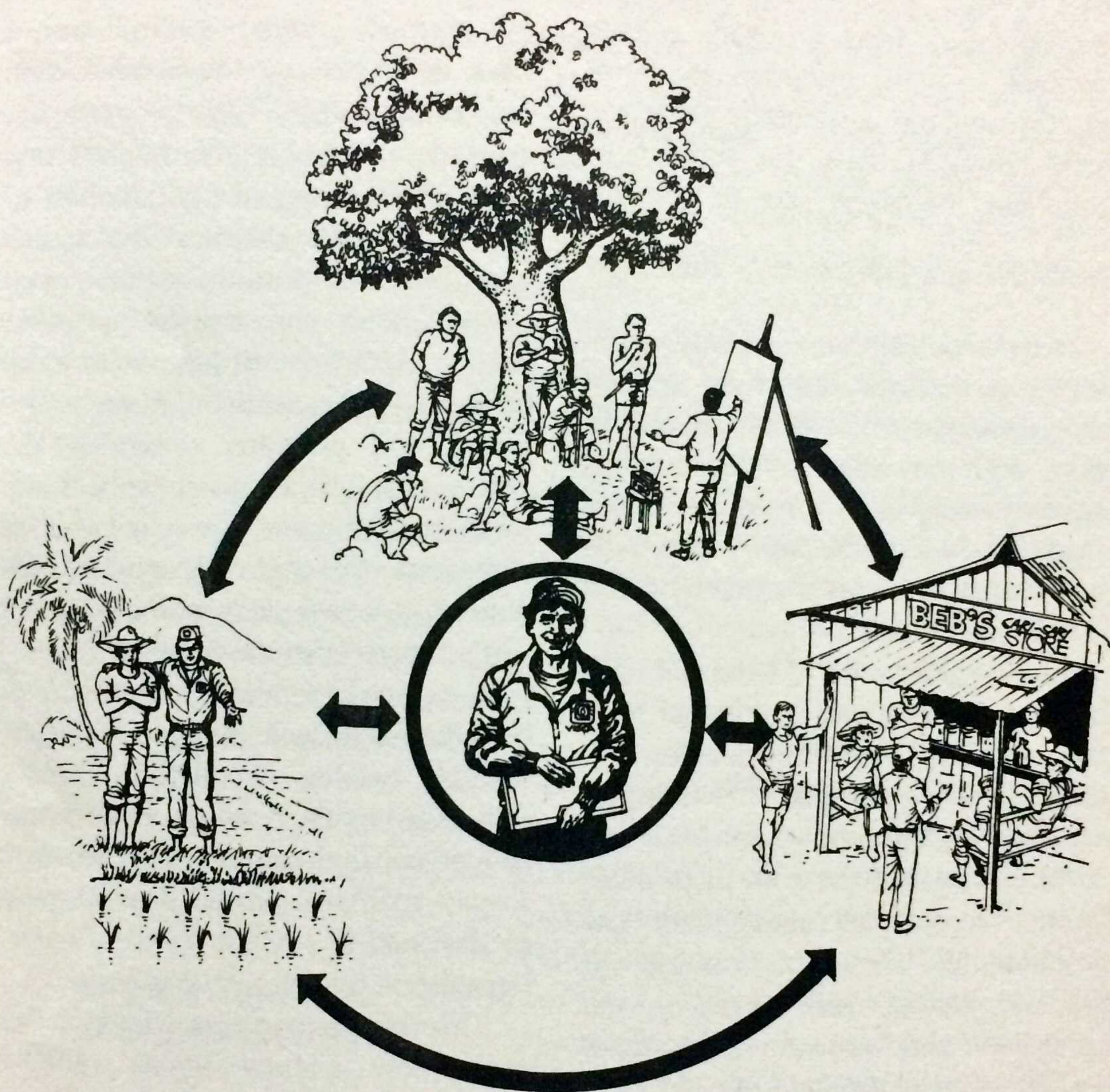


Figure 1. Media Assisted Learning System Model

Between the first class (land preparation and seed selection) and the succeeding class (planting), the agronomist conducted informal talks with farmers and regular farm visits to clarify doubts, answer questions, and trouble-shoot field problems of the farmers. In many instances, the farmers fetched the agronomist from the staff house at dawn for some farm problems perceived to be urgent.

Attempts at a Participatory Approach

At the outset, the plan was to follow a participatory approach in planning, development of materials, utilization, and evaluation of the learning system. However, it turned out in the field that the participatory approach was possible only at the planning and utilization stages.

Planning. A series of informal talks or conversations was conducted with the Hacienda Maria farmers through the SIRSDP agronomist who is highly esteemed by the farmers for his credibility and commitment. In these talks, farmers complained about their low productivity which contributed to their increasing indebtedness to the Land Bank and to private money lenders. Thus, the collective suggestion was that the learning activities focus first on rice production since rice is their primary crop. This exercise helped identify an important lesson in needs ascertainment efforts, i.e. rural adults can articulate their broad information needs if the facilitator is someone who is credible and has established sufficient rapport with them.

Because of the farmers' lack of capital, the lessons emphasized on

low-input and low-risk rice technology. Hence, inorganic fertilizer application was not encouraged because it is costly.

Lesson Development and Production of Materials. After determining the farmers' needs, specific lessons were developed by the SIRSDP crop production team. Efforts were also exerted to involve the farmers and their wives during the production of the audio tape dramas. The scripts were based on the lessons developed earlier. After the scripts had been written, farmers and their wives to be involved in the production were contacted and provided copies of the typewritten script. Seven farmers and three rural women were included as characters in the four audio tape dramas. A convenient taping schedule was arranged with the farmers.

A day before the scheduled taping, one farmer begged off from the production because he did not like his role as a "masiao" (illegal off-fronton jai-alai betting) gambler who yearned to win to make money. The role was so designed to provide a catchy opening episode for the first drama.

This reluctance to participate in the production sparked similar refusals from the rest because they either were too shy to read a script, knew their limitations in oral reading or feared being laughed at by their friends and neighbors.

CONCLUSION

If a short, highly localized drama on development topics reflects true-to-

life situations and real characters in the community, it can arouse more interest and make people identify with it. Moreover, combining entertainment and education through humorous situations and musical numbers motivates rural adults to attend subsequent learning sessions.

Ascertaining the total circumstances of the farmer and the community as a first step in designing a learning system considerably contributes to the system's effectiveness since the baseline study enables the educational media specialist to determine the people's needs and problems, and community resources.

Participant observation results revealed that the dramatized audio tapes served important functions in a rural community: they motivated people to gather for a farmers' class, sustained the attendance level of subsequent farmers' classes, held the attention of the audience during the class, combined entertainment and education, and reached remote areas not covered by extension personnel.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

While the role of radio in development efforts has been extensively documented, data on the time farmers spend listening to radio suggests that their short listening time may diminish radio's effectiveness as a learning medium for them. Moreover, very few farmers reportedly bring their radio sets to the farm thus, the popular notion that the farmer listens to the

radio while plowing may be just a colorful myth.

In terms of holding listeners' attention and driving home the lesson, smaller groups of three to four farmers listening together to a short audio tape drama tend to be a more effective utilization scheme than a large listening group of 20 or more farmers. However, the lessons in the drama should be reinforced by a technician or field staff in informal talks, demonstration, or farm visits.

For farmers or other groups, a staggered utilization schedule paced with actual field activities helps ensure interest in and greater retention of materials learned. The interval between the previous utilization schedule and the next gives the learners an opportunity to practice and observe the results of what they have learned.

When limited resources do not warrant the deployment of a full-time field staff to remote communities, a low-cost learning system which relies heavily on audio tapes can be evolved. Serving as a learning resource in many communities with no access to field workers, this locally specific system consists of a portable cassette recorder-player and clearly labeled audio tapes on specific topics which agricultural colleges and research centers could explore for their outreach programs. The use of low-cost cassette players would enhance the cost-effectiveness of the system. A farmer-leader, farmer's wife or rural youth could be trained to supervise the lending out of tapes and serve as liaison with the resource agency. A

staff member could reinforce this system by maintaining interpersonal contact with the community on a regular basis, i.e. to bring the audio tapes, obtain people's feedback, find out their information needs, provide clarification, and answer questions.

By training a local person and having him attend to the utilization aspect of the learning system, the system might eventually evolve into a self-reliant and substantially participatory effort where local people choose the content and help develop their own materials.

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