Teaching and practice of Environmental Communication in Brazil: notes from a field under construction in University

Myrian Del Vecchio de Lima – PPGMade e PPGCom/UFPR (Postgraduate Program in Environment and Development – Federal University of Paraná). myriandel@gmail.com

Eloísa Beling Loose – PPGMade/UFPR (Postgraduate Program in Environment and Development – Federal University of Paraná). eloisa.loose@gmail.com

Aparecida de Fátima Nogarolli – PPGCom/UFPR (Master Degree Program in Communication – Federal University of Paraná) actis@actiscomunicacao.com

Abstract

Cox (2010) considers that the causes of contemporary environmental crisis should be the communication focus. So, people can have information and knowledge to be aware and acting on environmental issues, rather than just watching and commenting on the effects of conflict man/nature or raise awareness for the images of environmental disasters. As professionals working in the teaching of environmental communication in Brazil, we aim for the theory to become the practice, especially in the field of higher education, in the Social Communication course of a Brazilian public university — UFPR. There are few initiatives of insertion of environmental discussion in the Communication undergraduate program in Brazil and, consequently, in postgraduate schools. Our experience in the classroom, through an optional discipline, which had the goal to clarify the nature and society conflicts and show how communicators can be important social actors on this scenario, allows us to understand the weaknesses and lack of knowledge on the subject. We presents in this paper one technique used to motivate students that is performed with the help of big size LEGO blocks. We understand the Environmental Communication as something belonging to communicators who embrace epistemological Environmental field relevant. Thus, “training” in communication field and media would be important, as well as an understanding of the environmental perspective (not just considering the environment as the theme, but taking its assumptions — interdisciplinarity, complexity, integrating rationality and ethics of man with nature — as a way to observe the reality).
Introduction

We present in this paper reflections on a communication practice that sensitizes students and motivate them for the environmental action in the Brazilian university context, but which can also be expanded to other areas and sectors of society. Based on our knowledge and our experience as specialized communication researchers committed to the environment, we prepared a scenario of how those studies are developed in Brazil, especially through a practice performed with large LEGO blocks known as “This is with me” (Nogarolli, 2008) which aims to call people to incorporate pro-environmental actions in their routines. We understand the environmental communication as something appropriate to communicators who take possession of the epistemological postulates of the environmental field, such as interdisciplinarity, complexity and a rationality aligned to the ethics and concern with the environment, and which also try to empower the citizens to the full exercising of their citizenship (Del Vecchio de Lima et al. 2013).

Cox (2010) considers that the contemporary environmental crisis must be the focus of the communication. This way, for people to be active in their routines it is necessary that they have information and knowledge about how to act towards the society environmental problems. The access to information is a fundamental right and the first step for people to know how to act in the current context that causes much degradation and loss of quality of life. For one to acquire consciousness and make decisions that make a difference and transform attitudes, the qualified communication on the environmental themes is crucial. In Brazil, especially under the point of view of journalism, these ideas are starting to gain force as a theoretical field (for example, Girardi et al, 2011), but the practical actions are more difficult to be found.

Be it due to the difficulty of acceptance of the market or the lack of specific education at the universities, the teaching of environmental education in Brazil is still incipient. Bueno (2007) affirms that the majority of communication, journalism and environment research in Brazil had been finished after 2002. The academic development of the area is recent, what can be observed by the reduced number of Brazilian investigators who devote themselves to the subject. In 2007, Bueno verified that there were 10 research groups in the area registered in the CNPq (government organ of support to research), number that has probably not changed significantly, since we always find the same researchers in scientific meetings in the area).

Bueno (2007) says that the number of post-graduation papers is still small if compared to other areas and that this is connected to the fact that only a few communication/journalism courses deal with the environment as their object of practice or study. When there are disciplines about the environment in those courses, they are usually optional – not mandatory. The first known discipline dealing specifically with this subject was the result of the individual effort of Prof. Ilza Girardi, from Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, in 2004 (Girardi, 2004). Other professors concerned with the subject tried to open space for the environmental communication in university courses, such as André Trigueiro at Pontifícia Universidade Católica of Rio de Janeiro and Myrian Del Vecchio de Lima, at Universidade Federal do Paraná. Even with the new National Curricular Guidelines for the journalism courses, adopted in 2014, which show the need to include environmental issues in the curriculum of those courses in Brazil, it is known that the effort is limited in terms of encouraging and motivating the future communicators to a new perspective, more adequate to the theoretical postulates of the environmental communication.
The gaps in this area of the Brazilian higher education are reflected in the manner in which the environmental issues are treated by the Brazilian media in general: with little depth and without the necessary connections for an actual understanding of the Brazilian environmental problems. The market does not encourage the professionals: the secondary space that the professional interested in this interface receives in the means of communication does not stimulate the communication students. Our experience in the classroom, in an optional subject at the Universidade Federal do Paraná (UFPR), points at the lack of knowledge and connection among the environmental subjects among the students, including those who are ending their courses.

However, before we start dealing with the issue of the Communication and Environment interface at UFPR, it is necessary to understand how the interdisciplinary social-environmental studies started in Brazil and how they were formed in that university.

According to Leff (1995), in Latin America and the Caribbean the research and educational institutes of different countries have contributed to the global discussions and debates on the environmental issues, performed since 1972, and that have increased in the academic circles, among environmental groups, as well as in the means of communication, with successive events. In Brazil, the discussion about these issues started in the 1980s, and was organized during the I National Workshop on University and the Environment, in Brasília (1986), event that was considered as the “starting point” for a collective reflection that continued during the following years. Among the main results of this workshop, the necessity of preparing new theoretical concepts, the development of interdisciplinary approaches, and the creation of post-graduation programs on Environment and Development were emphasized.

At the Universidade Federal do Paraná those discussions started initially in the area of the Interdisciplinary Nucleus of Environment and Development (Nimad), created in 1990, involving professors of different sectors of the university who adopted a proposition of social solutions economically adapted to the environmental problems. In this context, the Ph.D.Degree in Environment and Development (Made) was created in August, 1993. The program had teacher coming from 18 UFPR departments, characterizing the interdisciplinary character of the course. The group advanced its collective reflections when it started a cooperation with professors of French institutions; with the environment net of the United Nations Program for the Environment (Pnuma); with important contacts with Mexico, Colombia, Uruguay and Cuba. In March, 1994, the university received, as an acknowledgement for its innovating character and the quality of the recently created course, the Unesco Professorship for the Sustainable Development. Nowadays the program, with almost 200 theses presented, represents new forms of production, transmission and application of interdisciplinary knowledge in the environmental area, even though it answers, permanently, to the challenges of its innovating character, which are expressed, mainly, by these points: a) interdisciplinary view of the environment; b) understanding of the environment from the dichotomy nature-society and of a scenery of complexity; c) multidisciplinary evaluation; d) new manners of orientation through interdisciplinary committees.

However, one asks: how does this Ph.D.program has cooperated, informally, with the development of practices and contents on the environment in the Communication course of the Universidade Federal do Paraná, in its bachelor’s and master’s programs? And how can it build interfaces with the communication area, specifically? It is verified that this relationship has happened since the participation of a journalist/professor of the Social Communication/Journalism of the UFPR who, simultaneously, works as counselor and researcher of the Environment and Development Ph.D. program. With a profile directed to the
practices of divulging and scientific journalism, this professional started to gather knowledge, ask questions and prepare research projects related to the social-environmental problems as well as the ones of Communication about the Environment, directed to the bachelor and post-graduation students in Communication of the UFPR, besides receiving, as an advisor, students of both courses interested to build the research interface between Communication and Environment, which generates multipliers interested in understanding the theories and practices of the area.

Lima and Yano (2008) register that the first of the activities was the offer of the bi-annual subject Environmental Journalism, with 30 weekly hours, in 2005. The content of the discipline had as its objective provide the students with a vision of the environment marked by interactions, conflicts and interdisciplinary practices resulting from the interface Society-Nature, much more than just exercise the preparation of journalistic subjects on environmental themes. Three main themes have been selected by the students for a more intensive discussion: urban solid waste – management, operation, collection and final disposal; metropolization and periferization of the urban environment; and lack of water in the world.

The same authors emphasize that, in 2007 and 2008, the discipline Media and Environment was offered, contextualizing to the journalism and Public Relation and Publicity and Advertising, the interface issues between the media and social-environmental problems. As the medias represent for the society the current environmental issues, its role in this context was approached as well as how society can make appropriate “readings” of the environmental coverage of the means, using reports, ads and campaigns in the environmental area. The discipline had the frequent participation of researchers of the Ph.D. program on Environment and Development (Made), for the preparation of interviews and debates with the students. The global climate changes was an important theme during that year. The Made researchers also started to answer, by telephone or by e-mail, the innumerous interviews on the theme made by journalism students to the course site and to university radio and television programs. The participation of Ph.D.’s students was also stimulated in debates and interviews on the lack of water and urban environment issues. In the following years, as a result of the work, course papers were prepared, such as monographs on journalism and environment, analysis and production of magazines with environmental subjects and research on journalistic contents published in newspapers and sites, besides papers on the scientific initiation on urban solid residues and sources of information. In the blog “Um Olhar sobre Curitiba” (2010, 2011, 2012, 2013 and 2014) of the mandatory discipline Journalistic Writing, the publishing of Environment became fixed, with weekly productions on the themes of the area.

In 2012, 2013 and 2014, the students of the master’s and Ph.D. programs on Environment and Communication started to assume as a teaching practice, or as eventual collaborators, the optative discipline “Communication and Environment” in the bachelor’s course on Communication of the UFPR. The menu of the discipline includes the topics: Environment: basic concepts on the interdisciplinary point of view. Media and environment: newspaper, radio, television, publicity campaigns. The educational and social role of the means of social communication and of the new communication technologies. Environment and advertising: environmental marketing. Environmental Journalism. Public Relations and sustainable actions. The coverage of the environmental themes by the media. The forms of environmental communication directed to the sustainable development in the areas of different actors and social institutions (ONGs, companies, public and government institutions). The sources of information in environmental communication.
Still in the area of the Ph.D. program in Environment and Development, in 2014, six students developed (and some are still developing) papers in research in communication on social-environmental risks; discourses and communicative practices in spaces of social-environmental vulnerability or of experiences in urban agriculture; experiences and projects of social-environmental educommunication in public schools; journalism and climate changes; and theoretical approaches on the communication and environment interface. Two years before, in 2012, the Interfaces Group – Communication, Education and Environment was created, reuniting students of the bachelor, master and Ph.D. programs of the Environment and Development, and Social Communication of the UFPR, besides researchers formed by these two courses, who concentrated on the issues of the studied binomial, based on readings, preparation of articles for events and publication in magazines, and currently, preparation of a research project in this interface.

This way, we agree with Bueno (2007) when he affirms that the introduction of environmental communication in the bachelor’s program will bring two promising and inevitable consequences: the emergence of more competent professionals for the practice of environmental communication and journalism, and conditions for the incentive for new post-graduation research in this area. Guanaes (2012) also says that it is necessary for the universities to seek new values to promote the sustainability. For him, “transforming the professional future of a university student implies in looking for ample forms of sensitization and awareness that must integrate cultural and social events stimulating the participation of this student in the process” (Guanaes, 2012:365). It is thinking about this that the practice of “This is with me” becomes a manner of environmental communication and, at the same time, a way to call on the communicators to prepare themselves to the dissemination and qualification of the environmental information.

The practice of “This is with me”

“An organizing imaginary that is capable of moving passion”. This affirmation by Toro (1997, p.11) has been stimulating a continuing practice of mobilizing through the experience of the “This is with Me: we are Builders of Solutions”, with which we have been working since 1999 (NOGAROLLI, 2008)¹. It must be noted that the inspiration came from an article written by the journalist Luis Nassif, of Folha de São Paulo, in 1998, whose title “This is not with Me”, which contextualized the behavior of the Brazilian people not responsible for their acts, always leaving the necessary actions of improvement and responsibility to others or the government. The reflection about the article allowed the process of personal mobilization that brought about the desire of transforming the affirmation into something positive, capable of provoking changes. This way, the concept created as a counterpoint to the negative started a communicative practice in 1999, with an Awareness speech that had as its first theme the consumption and decision of purchasing, and after that, the process of selective collection and the relationship with the waste collectors – environmental agents who work in Brazil performing a collection that is parallel with the one performed by the public sectors.

¹ “This is with Me” is a methodology created by Aparecida de Fátima Nogarolli and is performed in three steps – Sensibilization, Constructors of Solutions and Space Attitude, with the help of big size LEGO blocks.
This approach started initially in the consumption relationships, reinforcing the awareness process that the consumption actions are not neutral and impact the whole production chain. The study of the awareness process was added to this experience through the mediation with giant LEGOs, to help the integration and favoring of the relationships, reinforcing the role of the person who, acknowledging his responsibility for his actions, can establish a creative process of change in his area of work. The experience of the “This is with Me”, as a practice of environmental communication shared in different places, has allowed the observation that a determinate objective is necessary for this meeting moment of the person with his cause, to build a possible meaning as the object of intervention. The mobilization comes to stimulate the participation in the collective, in the issues that need everyone in the search for solutions. This is the summoning and empowering of each person to act proactively in the environmental issues that the practice wants to reach – in this text, we look for the sensitizing and mobilization of the university students who, starting the communication profession, should make an effort in their communicative practices for a transformation of rationalities.

The “This is with Me” is a methodology developed for the mobilization of young people and adults who, becoming aware of their actions, acknowledge their power for the intervention and construction of a better world, of better life alternatives, of more favorable conditions in the places for coexistence through routine actions. It is a creative and dialogical approach that helps the awareness in the action and sharing of learning.

The proposal is to create an interaction process, mediated by giant brick size LEGOs, in an initial awareness activity. This activity happens with blindfolded people who are not allowed to talk. The mediation with the LEGOs, objects known as a playing and creating material, allows the ludic identification of the adult. The limitations imposed to the task force the change of the mental model of seeing and speaking, that are worked differently. The objective is to provide an experience that we are, in many circumstances, blindfolded and prevented from acting creatively in the search for solutions, as people who do not acknowledge their power when they remain silent.

After the awareness phase, workshops called Solution Builders are offered for the designing of transforming practices from the economical, social and environmental point of view. This phase is determining for the knowledge building process and the development of a reflexive and critical person. This activity moment happens through creative processes. The third phase is the Attitude Space, chosen as the place of the action, bringing the reality possible and essential to keep the continuity of the intervention and change.

The activity happened at UFPR, in the bachelor courses in Biology and Pedagogy, in 2002; in the Environmental Education subject, in 2003, the same activity was performed in a class of the master’s in Education program. In 2008, in the Workshop on Sustainable Development, with the participation of students and professionals of areas such as architecture, law, tourism, biology, communication, design, education, in a partnership with the Pontificia Universidade Católica do Paraná; and in 2014, in a Workshop of the Research Meeting on Communication (Enpecom), offered by the Master’s in Communication program, also at UFPR.

The practice presented here has as its objective, in its methodological path, look for the autonomy process of the person facing the responsibility of his actions because he grows in subjectivity when he organizes the world of the object, as Stoltz et al (2007) says, emphasizing the Piaget principle that insists on the central role of the action in the cognitive development. It is possible to perceive the emergence of the internal process that favors the determination, the moving to a place, cause or project. It is at this moment that the experience happens. Finally,
the essential question of the methodology of this practice is to permit that people in the process of reflexive action, who are being provoked until the moment of making an environmental choice have a moment of insight and awareness that provide another phase of doing and understanding, in a continuous new meaning of the why mobilize himself.

Reflections: Environmental Communication and citizenship

It is important to remember that citizenship classes do nor form citizens. The practice of “This is With Me” has as its objective to make people aware of the actions that are directed to the sustainability of life. When this practice is brought to the university teaching, one tries to develop or motivate the students to the exercise of their environmental citizenship and, besides, make them convocation agents through their practices and products. The communicators (journalists, publicists and public relations) act in areas of ample visibility and may provoke awareness processes in scales higher than those possible for citizens who cannot reach that space. It is for this reason that the practice described can occur anywhere, working from the individual towards the collective, but receives more strength and legitimacy when incorporated by professionals that use the media apparatus.

The interaction of the Communication students with the Environment and Development ones, in different levels of teaching (bachelor’s and post-graduation) is fundamental to build the productive interface between the two fields, so that the problems, crises, conflicts and social-environmental solutions be divulged and discussed with quality, in a contextualized manager, with precision and clarity, but without simplifications.

We conclude how important it is, based on the practice described, the presence of mobilization projects in areas of public visibility so that their causes can be addressed to an ample number of people. The mobilization for answers to the environmental problems needs to reach the different sectors, but we believe that the convocation of the future communicators, still at the university, is a way to potentialize the expansion of the objectives linked to the environmental communication and to the commitment of the citizens to the environment that surrounds them.
References


