ESC 2013 – ***Boundary Spanning***

International Collaboration for Engaging Rural Community Development in Phrao, Northern Thailand

TC, Rhetoric, & Community Engagement

- Technical Communication (TC) is the study of information design for technology and information users.
- Rhetoric is the study of how power structures (including economic, political, cultural, social) influence information design.
- TC/rhet, then, is concerned with the tailoring and dissemination of strategic information between people and institutions which are fundamentally socially, culturally, economically, and politically interested.

Engagement Scholarship & TC/rhet

- My interest: how TC/rhet can inform academic-nonprofit-NGO partnerships and development initiatives in culturally diverse communities
- In that context, my questions:
  - How do we define and measure “development”?
  - How can we tailor information and programs that are culturally sensitive and sustainable?

An Iterative Engagement:

Work and research with Warm Heart Foundation in Phrao district, Thailand

- http://youtu.be/xU6-OrHoI2w

Revisiting Questions

- How do we define and measure "development"?
  - Develop for the community, operationalize for the funders

"I should be clear. Yes, community member's interpretation of their own wellbeing, their subjective identification of problems and solutions is critical to development. But, you can't be so wishy-washy that you don't appreciate your own wisdom and skill set. After all, what are we doing here if we don't contribute our own knowledge and approaches? Some postmodernists, some purist relativists who practice development shouldn't be doing what they're doing. Just because poor communities don't understand that burning trash is bad for the environment and bad for them doesn't mean we shouldn't teach them that. We have good ideas too, but some people think everything Western is oppressive and coldly quantifiable. I've been doing this kind of work for twenty-five years, and there is nothing wrong with projects whose results can be 'measured,' just as there is not nothing wrong with projects that are more difficult to quantify and report. As long as the community is moving forward, as per the members' interpretation, it's a good thing" (D.M. Shafer, personal communication, August, 2011).

Revisiting Questions cont.

- How can we tailor information and programs that are culturally sensitive and sustainable?
  - Deep understanding of local culture requiring extensive prior research, liaisons on the ground, and significant time spent in the developing culture program design
  - Design and implement to *eliminate your value*

"I thought I had a pretty good idea of what Warm Heart was going to look like until I got on the ground and started talking to the locals. Everything went up in the air—what we thought the projects were going to be, out the door. What we thought the organization was going to look like, structurally, out the door. What I thought my job was going to be like, totally out the door. I like to think that we've hued pretty close to our original core principles of being small, community-based, of being grassroots. I just didn't understand at the time how much of an influence our community was going to have on us" (D.M. Shafer, personal communication, August, 2011).

Takeaways

1) Engagement scholarship should be:

#iterative – study, practice, study again

#mutually beneficial – communities have data, universities have analytical resources, trade benefits both

#equitable – the public pays many of our salaries

#generative – networking opportunities; Currently working on 2 new projects with Warm Heart

2) TC/rhet might be valuable heuristic for understanding, studying, and practicing engagement scholarship: concerned with the tailoring and dissemination of strategic information between people and institutions which are fundamentally socially, culturally, economically, and politically interested

Questions?
Comments?

Contact me:

http://achasemitchell.com

iamchasemitchell@gmail.com

(423) 817- 9976

Warm Heart: http://warmheartworldwide.org