

Frequently communication within agricultural research and development (R&D) is based on debate, as is often the case in the rangelands of western New South Wales (NSW), Australia. To improve the effectiveness of the communication between pastoralists, advisors and researchers, to work together towards ecologically and socially sustainable management systems, communication in a dialogue format, based on relationship building and participatory methods, was proposed and tested. This article introduces the idea of dialogue as different from debate. It describes how dialogue is used in the rangelands of western NSW, followed by a discussion of the lessons learned from using dialogue as a participatory R&D methodology.



Dialogue instead of debate

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Western NSW is a semi-arid rangeland area primarily used for merino wool production, with beef cattle as a secondary enterprise. Management decisions are arranged around key activities such as shearing, lamb marling and selling of sheep (Kersten & Ison, 1994). The average annual rainfall is around 250 mm, without a rainy season, and a high variability (raining from 48 to 880 mm per year). Average daily temperatures range from 6°C in July, to 32°C in January. The main vegetation types are chenopod shrublands and semi-arid woodlands. Main plant species are bluebushes (*Maireana spp.*), saltbushes (*Atriplex spp.*) and Mulga (*Acacia aneura*), intermingled with perennial and annual grasses and annual herbage. Simplified, the bushes provide stable or maintenance fodder, while the grasses and herbs provide maintenance fodder.

Dialogue, not debate

Since the beginning of grazing in western NSW, debates have existed about the condition of the rangeland vegetation. In about 100 years, several investigations by Royal Commissions and numerous research studies have been carried out to investigate rangeland conditions and to improve vegetation management. The debate still exists, whereby generally, researchers claim that the rangelands are degraded, while pastoralists claim that the rangelands are improving, due to their improved management (see eg. Palmer 1991 and Pickard 1993). To change this debate mode of communication between pastoralists, advisors and researchers, a discussion in the form of dialogue was proposed.

Dialogue is different from debate (see Table 1) in that it seeks to share understandings about learning together, instead of people having to defend themselves. Dialogue is a way of communication that can emerge from a well designed process of listening, showing respect for people's understandings and experiences and relationship building.

Creating opportunities for dialogue

The research process leading to 'dialogue-meetings' consisted of several steps, which are visualised in Figure 2. This process served two goals: (i) to build relationships between the participants in the process and the researcher, and (ii) to document the main issues in vegetation management as articulated by pastoralists and researchers/advisors by means of semi-structured interviews, matrix ranking and participant observation. This compilation of information was returned in the form of booklets and a tape in order to inform the participants, to provide them with opportunities to make comments and amendments (interpretative cycles), and to show respect and value for their understandings. This way opportunities were created, through relationship building, for participants to be involved in different stages of the research, and to learn together about vegetation management.

From these interviews, it was learned that two main discourses existed about vegetation management: those of pastoralists and those of researchers/advisors, between whom hardly any communication, in a non-threatening way for either sides, existed. Therefore, the notion of dialogue, as elucidated by Roth et al. (1992), was explored and adjusted for the case of vegetation management in western NSW. Two mee-

tings were organised to bring pastoralists and researchers together in dialogue.

Dialogue meetings in western NSW

At the first meeting, pastoralists who participated in the interviews and researchers/advisors from the local government departments were invited. At the second meeting, pastoralists from a range-care group (Campbell 1994) and researchers from the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organization (CSIRO) were invited. Only few of the participants of the second meeting had been involved in the preceding interviews.

The programme consisted of three parts:

1. introduction by means of diagramming working situations
2. ranking rangeland plants (or alternative industries) and
3. paddock use (or issues for research and development).

This meant that the complexity increased during the day, from a personal level, via subject level, to a systems level. The programme and the exercises were at all times open to suggestions and changes. Participants changed the programme and the way exercises were executed to serve better their learning, taking responsibility for the discussions. Before the second meeting even the theme 'vegetation management' was changed into 'alternative industries', since participating pastoralists felt this served better their present learning. With 'alternative industries' they meant diversification of the activities on their property by developing other enterprises such as eco-tourism or kangaroo harvesting. Most properties are primarily wood-growing enterprises. For the researchers, this was a disappointment as their ecological research served a better understanding of vegetation

management, not the market research pastoralists wished for potential new products.

The introduction exercise in which participants, individually, in pairs or in a group, could articulate the issues influencing their daily working situation, served to build relationships between the participants as well as helping them to relieve their feelings before discussing more sensitive issues. The ranking (Chambers 1988) of plants and or alternative industries was also a relatively safe exercise, which led to a discussion of vegetation management and decision making on the farm level. The discussion on paddock use, at the first meeting, moved into dialogue on integrated property management, whereby different points of view were explained and discussed. In particular, an attempt was made to articulate the issue of the 'experience of pastoralists' as a basis for decision making. At the second meeting, the discussion on issues for research and development on alternative industries, was more frustrating and skipped from debate into dialogue and vice versa. It was frustrating because the interests and reality of the pastoralists and the disciplines of the researchers did not match (market research on new industries versus ecological research).

Dialogue for participatory R&D

The similarities and differences between the two meetings made it clear that dialogue

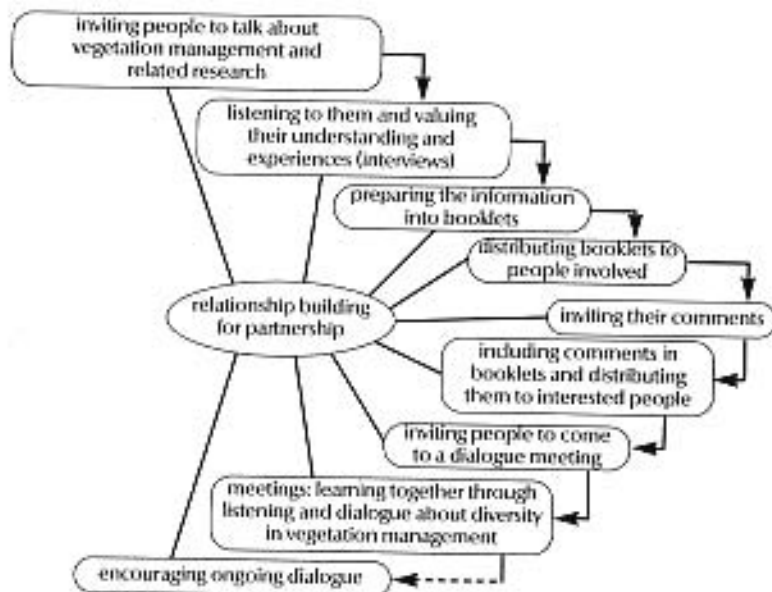


Figure 1: A summary of the research steps

is an emergent property, emerging out of a carefully designed process. Issues such as relationship building before and during the meeting, respect of participants for others' understandings, acceptance of multiple existing realities and creating a non-threatening environment, were crucial for dialogue to emerge. If not, debate will be the main mode of communication, adding to the frustrations already existing between the participants in the process.

Debate between actors in R&D does not lead to participatory R&D: participants are not valued for their understandings, but have to defend their understandings. This

does not create opportunities to learn together. Debate as the main mode of communication will restrict participation of local people in R&D. Dialogue, on the other hand, could enhance local participation, as people will be valued and respected. Learning becomes a possibility for both farmers and researchers/advisors.

The dialogue continues

The meetings created opportunities to continue working together as pastoralists and researchers/advisors in a less formal format. During the evaluating phone calls no concrete mention was made of a continuation, but they mentioned: "we know each other by first name", and "I can call them 'researchers' too". A couple of months later, a number of pastoralists were involved in kangaroo research, an issue discussed in depth at the second meeting as a potential industry.

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Table 1. Key distinctions between debate and dialogue (after Roth et al. 1992)

Debate	Dialogue
Participants tend to represent a group with a specific opinion;	Participants speak as individuals about their own unique experiences and uncertainties;
The atmosphere is threatening, attacks and interruptions are expected;	The atmosphere is one of safety; and promotes respectful exchange;
Differences within the group are set aside or denied;	Differences between individual participants are revealed;
Participants listen to refute other ideas, questions are often rhetorical challenges or disguised statements;	Participants listen to understand, and gain insight into the understandings of others;
Statements are predictable and offer little new information;	New information surfaces;
Success requires simple impassionate statements;	Success requires exploration of the complexities of the issue being discussed;
It operates within the constraints of the dominant public discourse, which defines the problem and the options for resolution; it assumes that fundamental needs and values are already clearly understood.	Participants are encouraged to question the dominant public discourse, to express fundamental needs that may or may not be reflected in the discourse, and to explore various options for problem definition and resolution.