In writing about *The Paths of Life*, a radio serial about six young people who make a living on the land in a small rural community in Mexico, Eloisa Diez emphasises the importance of “starting your walk with listeners well before the stage of content creation”; and of working to close the gap between teacher and student, producer and listener (Chapter 14). Alongside the intrinsic value of the communication skills gained by the children involved, she says, is the function of drama in self-identification, self-reflection and learning overall.
It always happens. There comes a time when living processes turn into schemes and formulas, becoming formalised in a way that provides us with greater certainty. It happens within the realm of communication as well. For instance, I have always been troubled by the rigidity of that fictitious line dividing and linking sender and receiver, which leads me to ask:

Is it possible to open the exclusive and sacrosanct space wherein educational materials are produced by the same groups for which they are intended?

How do we move from the dichotomy of the producer-listener towards a more creative process, one of dialogue, of collective, constructivist learning? How do we break up the isolated comfort of educational producers?

Does the process of learning begin at the time of listening? Why not invite the audience into the adventure of creating messages and producing content to illustrate them?

The first answer to these questions is to start your walk with your listeners well before the stage of content creation. On the walk, you can converse in the stories of the community, ones that talk about dreams and fears and of the life experiences of the community’s world. In this way, communication becomes a space of identification, self-recognition and learning.

Other answers are suggested by the experience of _Los Caminos de la Vida_ (The Paths of Life), a community radio serial done with Betania Benítez Rodríguez for Veracruzana University Radio. _The Paths of Life_ is the fifth radio serial of a project that started in 2004 with the aim of finding new ways of making radio based on the social construction of knowledge, which combines expert knowledge with the know-how and social commitment of the people themselves.
Developing *The Paths of Life*

*The Paths of Life* was produced in a rural community in Cofre de Perote. It tells the story of six young people living in Matlalapa, a community of 400 inhabitants, who make a living by cultivating maize and raising cattle. Like the four radio serials that preceded it, *The Paths of Life* is the outcome of an 18-month process that began with a theatre and radio workshop for the children in the community. The workshop focused on developing children’s creativity and imagination through games in which a story is constructed in the image of the community. The main actors in the serial were the children from the workshop, supported by their parents, neighbours and professional actors.

Parallel to the workshop, efforts were made to get to know the dreams, life experiences, worries, fears and joys of the community. Over a period of eight months, programme facilitators visited people’s houses with their recorders, informing them about the project and listening by the fireplace to the stories of people like Doña Lucia, Don Sergio and Doña Cruz. The trust and desire to be part of the project were created in the process.
Diagnostic interviews and other methods of consultation allowed the team to build a matrix database in which two elements emerged:

- One was the topics to be covered in the series, namely the economic crisis in the countryside and the resulting migration (rural, urban and international), family disintegration, school dropouts and underage pregnancy.
- The other was a better understanding of people’s feelings about topics and issues and the way they describe and name them. The consultation provided the cadence of the serial plot and fragments of real stories which, interwoven together, gave way to new stories of how things might be. Based on the community’s history, legends, problems and dreams, the tale of understanding and learning was written to fit the target audience. Scripts were nourished by focus group discussions that helped the writers design programme aesthetics, introduce contrasting arguments and add new elements.

Once the scripts were finished, rehearsals and recording started. A house in the community became a recording studio and, over a few days, children, youth and adults lent their voices to the characters. The children who took part in theatre and radio workshops read the scripts and adults improvised based on written outlines of proposed dialogues. The pieces of the audio puzzle were finally put together at the editing stage.
Excerpt from *The Paths of Life* (Chapter 1, Scene 6)

THE SOUND OF FOOTSTEPS THROUGH WATER

Fernando: Damn, What can I do now? With 35 pesos I’m not going to build it, *hijole* [common Mexican expression, similar to “gosh”]. But if I don’t do that work, what am I going to bring to my family? No, the best thing is to go to the United States. Who will loan me the money to leave? It’s too much.

FERNANDO ARRIVES AT HIS HOME AND OPENS THE DOOR

Fernando: Good evening, Mom.

Mother: How’d it go?

Fernando: It was ok. And the girls?

Mother: Well, Mari is up there taking care of the yearling calf and Lupe went out to look for firewood.

Fernando: Oh, Ma, I got some work today. Here …

COINS FALL ON THE TABLE

Mother: Oh, Son, something is good. You’ll see, God is going to help us.

Fernando: [DOUBTFUL] Hey, Ma. Hmm … I want to tell you something … Hmm … What would you think if I tried to go to work on the other side? Here, I just feel like I’m not putting it all together.

Mother: Oh, Son, but that’s too expensive, where are we going to get the money? Besides, you know what they always show on the TV. People leave but then they are found drowned. No, God forbid.

Fernando: Oh, Mom. But I’m not going through the river. Besides, do you see Doña Lupe’s son? He went and he came back, and put up a bakery.

Mother: Yes, Son, but, what about the money? Tell me, where are we going to get so much money?

Fernando: Leave it to me. I’m going to take care of that.
Distributing the programme serials

Programmes are distributed in the same regions as they are produced, which has enabled different actors — from libraries to elementary and middle schools, health centres to city councils — to work as multipliers, promoting listenership, facilitating, sharing feedback and reinforcing key messages. When the serial is finished, it is presented to the community and each participant and the local authorities receive copies. In this way, community actors become distributors of their local productions. Local identities are the protagonists of the stories, always keeping in mind the social problems faced by the people of rural communities.

*The Paths of Life* came alive in 18 episodes, approximately 15 minutes each. Its predecessors include *Los Tesoros del Conejo* (The Treasures of the Rabbit), a 12-part series of eight- to ten-minute episodes; and *Manantial de Sueños* (Spring of Dreams), a nine-episode series of 12 minutes each. Each series and the experience of its making are different as each is done with a particular community and target listenership in mind and each story defines its primary audience (e.g., children, adolescents, other youth, and their allied audience — teachers, adults and other authorities).

Different productions have followed the same distribution scheme, with each of the five radio series being available for distribution free of charge. Working from Veracruzana University Radio, alliances have been established with university and community radio broadcasters from other parts of Mexico and Latin America. The result is that *The Paths of Life* has been broadcast by more than 20 radio stations in urban and rural areas of the region.

Expression and identity

The aim of the radio serials is to demonstrate and promote creative and transformative activities. Playful methods, guided by a desire for knowledge and expression and a desire to get to know and share one’s own world, are the essential conditions that make it possible to construct the tales about the interests, the needs and experiences of the audience itself.

After participating in radio production, parents, teachers, health promoters and researchers working in these communities have all agreed that children and youth show more personal confidence and have, as a result of the programme, visibly improved their reading and writing skills, their oral and written expression, and their levels of creativity and initiative as work team. Adult community members have more desire to actively participate in programme events and actual production. There is a strong feeling of ownership of the project as evidenced by the ease with which the majority can share key messages.
Parents, teachers, health promoters and researchers have all agreed that children and youth involved in *The Paths of Life* radio production show more personal confidence and have, as a result of the programme, visibly improved their reading and writing skills, their oral and written expression, and their levels of creativity and initiative.
Dramatic formats on radio enable communication practices that allow for self-identification within learning contexts. They also provide a means of expression for concerned social groups. Developing capacity for expression among individuals and groups (e.g., to narrate their own stories of being) is a necessary step in asserting identity. Supporting learners in their efforts to construct their own stories related to the topics and subjects of non-formal education — stories about the community and its desires and customs — helps us question and reinvent the relationship between sender and receiver, teacher and student, producer and listener.

Eloisa Diez was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in 1975 and has lived in Xalapa, Mexico, for the last nine years. She is a communicator and audiovisual producer and has worked in puppet theatre, coordinating theatre groups as well as a network of child reporters in rural communities. She does sound design for theatre and visual arts and has worked for over 20 years in community radio and educational projects. Email: eloisadiez@yahoo.com.ar

Veracruzana University Radio broadcasts 20 hours a day on the AM band with 10,000 watts of power. The station is an extension service of the university, promoting local culture and citizen participation through awareness-raising, education and social networking among listeners and the wider community.

For further reference, see:

- Audio transcripts of Caminos de la Vida (The Paths of Life) – www.archive.org/details/RadionovelaComunitarialosCaminosDeLaVidaParte1