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COMMUNICATIONAL POTENTIAL FOR PROFESSIONAL MEETINGS

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Abstract: *The main functions of a professional meeting (which is a form of getting professional information and improving knowledge and skills) are a prompt exchange of information on new research results and technological innovations, and enabling direct mutual contacts. The typology and other conceptual characteristics of professional meetings, as well as their communicational potential were defined according to the communication patterns from the communication theory (Bordewijk & van Kaam, 1982; McQuail, 1994). The communicational potential of a meeting is being realized through the dissemination of information and the specific situation in the course of the meeting. At analyzing the examples of the physical culture meetings held in our country in the period 1991-1995 we observed systematically the elements and characteristics of the dissemination of information and of the specific communicational situation during their realization. The obtained results suggest that the realized communicational potential was often below the level inherent to this form of getting professional information and/or improving knowledge and skills. Therefore, it could be stated that the organizers were not trained enough to prepare meetings adequately, that is to maintain the proper communicational potential.*

Key words: *professional meeting/ communicational potential/ physical culture*

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the elements of academic affirmation of a profession is the quality of its professional meetings (1, 3, 6). Having participated in numerous professional meetings, we noticed that our colleagues often had very different (and even contradictory) opinions concerning their successfulness. This indicates that there is a lack of objective criteria for evaluating professional meetings and that they are rarely analyzed in a professional manner.

In this paper we shall set forth certain findings of our research into the characteristics

of professional meetings (started almost three years ago), primarily a model of description, and then the most important results of the analysis of the communicational potential of recent professional meetings in our country (in which we took part):

- A symposium on COMMUNICATION IN PHYSICAL EDUCATION AND SPORT, Niš, 92-94 (FIS92, FIS93, FIS94)
- Scientific meetings within the Day of the Faculty of Physical Culture, Belgrade (BNS92, BNS93, BNS94),
- A Scientific Meeting at the Faculty of Physical Culture, Novi Sad 1994 (NNS94),
- A Summer School of Physical Education Pedagogues in Serbia (LES94)
- The Yugoslav Summer School of Physical Education Pedagogues, 95 (JuLES95)

2. APPROACH AND METHODS

The functions of a professional meeting in the process of getting professional information and improving knowledge and skills are the following: a) enabling direct contacts among specialists in certain fields and/or for discussing certain subject matters; b) prompt exchange and/or attaining new information and knowledge concerning science and/or technology, c) public verification and evaluation of new research results, technological innovations, etc. d) bringing certain problems into the focus of concern.

Communicating (selection, transfer and interpretation of messages) is at the basis of any meeting. It is known from the communication theory that numerous factors stimulate or restrict communication (4). We marked these factors as the communicational potential of a meeting - the common feature inherent to this form. Then we defined and named a series of parametres (2, 7) for describing a professional meeting through which its communicational potential could be recognized - i.e., we created a theoretical model of description of a meeting and its potential.

The model is defined by three groups of parametres. They are expressed through 119 variables (which are given on the scheme without their modalities to reduce the volume) on the form applied for observing each meeting.

1) The conceptual characteristics of a meeting include four parametres: typology, subject matter, participants, and commercial aspects.

2) The dissemination of information at and from a meeting includes three parametres: a period for scheduling a meeting, the forms of initial, current, final and additional information, and the characteristics of the proceedings.

3) The communicational situation at a meeting itself is described by 11 parametres: performance, sessions, accompanying events, social events, thematic consistence, identification of the participants, activation of the participants, leaders of the sessions, keeping to the timetable, technical conditions (2)

The communicational potential is revealed through conceptual characteristics of a meeting, and realized through the dissemination of information at/from a meeting and the communicational situation at that meeting.

3. TYPOLOGY OF A MEETING - TYPE

Since professional meetings are communicational in nature, we consider directing the information flow at a meeting as the most important element for its defining. We named this feature the TYPE of a meeting (a variable for a typology parametre). Directing the information flow is well described by communication patterns (alloction, consultation, conversation, registration) from the theory of communication, worked out by McQuail on the basis of the Bordewijk and van Kaam's information flow scheme.

The alloction pattern designates an information flow directed from one (central) source to the recipients (a directive one). The consultation pattern designates a selective use of the (central) source by the recipients. Conversation designates individual reciprocal exchange of information. Registration is a pattern showing the collecting of information at one centre according to the subject matter previously set. According to communication patterns we set six "clear" types (mono types) of professional meetings (2): a seminar, a tribune, a panel, a round table, a consultation, and a symposium, applied in the process of getting professional information and improving knowledge and skills. When a mono type meeting (intended for improving professional knowledge and skills, and getting information) is combined with meetings for exchanging business information, solving current problems, etc., we get one denoted as a mix type meeting. This is, for example, a congress, a summer school (which may include a symposium, a round table, a seminar, an annual assembly of the members, meetings of professional bodies of certain associations, etc.). Such a meeting should be defined and analyzed by its constituent parts.

A seminar was defined as the TYPE of meeting where alloction is the primary pattern - information flow is directed from the lecturer (source) to the listeners (recipients). This is a type characteristic for improving knowledge in profession, i.e., for transfer and adoption of (specialized) knowledge.

A tribune is the TYPE of meeting where the alloction pattern is accompanied by the consultation pattern, information flow is directed from the lecturer to the listeners, including their questions. This type of meeting is intended for both getting information and improving knowledge and skills. The consultation pattern is a characteristic of *a panel discussion* (the listeners ask questions and selected specialists answer them). At *a round table* the conversation pattern is dominant (participants exchange information on certain subject, often polemizing) and it can sometimes be accompanied by the consultation pattern (if there are listeners to ask questions). A panel and a round table are intended for getting information. In the process of improving professional knowledge and skills they can only be applied complementary in the course of instruction, as a sort of practice for holding discussions, because questions are usually not put by those who know little about the problem.

A consultation is usually organized when there is a certain problem to be solved - in the first place, experts are asked to prepare studies on the topic, and then the studies are being discussed. A consultation can be open or closed. A consultation is a TYPE where three patterns are combined: conversation (the dominant one), and consultation and registration. Strictly speaking, a consultation is a type of meeting that is more in the domain of the process of making decisions than of getting information. Nevertheless, the function of such a meeting is informative, at least for some participants (especially if it is an open one) and that is why it is classified here.

A symposium is defined as a TYPE of meeting with dominant patterns of conversation and registration because its aims are public verification and exchanging new research results, and it is a part of the information process.

This means that a TYPE of a meeting (and, consequently, its name) cannot be defined arbitrarily but in accordance with the characteristics stated here, that is with the organizers' needs and aims.

A Scheme of the Observed Parameters and Variables for the observation of a professional meeting

Identification variables (modalities stated) from the 1st group of parameters

1.1 Typology

Va Type: mono type: seminar, tribune, panel, round table, consultation, symposium
mix type: summer school, congress

Vb Category of a meeting: professional, scientific

1.2 Subject

Vc Thematic frame: monothematic, polythematic, interdisciplinary

Communicational potential variables

1st group CONCEPTUAL CHARACTERISTICS OF MEETINGS

1.1 Typology

V1-V3 The frequency, level and importance of a meeting

V4-V5 The occurrence of the categorisation of speeches and the way of speaking

1.2 Subject

V6 The importance of a topic

1.3 Participants

Organizing participants (those who prepare a meeting)

Organizing role: organizer, patron, donator, sponsor, realizer, operator, programme creator, reviewer, publications' editor, session leader

V7-V17 The occurrence of each role and a summary evaluation

Organizational bodies: honorary, organizing, technical (administrative) for public relations, programme, reviewing

V18-V23 The occurrence of organizational bodies and their titles

V24-V29 The number of associates to organizational bodies

V30-V35 The structure of associates to organizational bodies

1.4 A Commercial Aspect

V36 The type of the admission fee

2nd group DISSEMINATION OF INFORMATION

2.1 A Period For Scheduling A Meeting

V37 A span of time in which a meeting is scheduled

2.2 Forms Of Informing

Initial invitations: by means of mass media, specialized periodicals (a calendar of meetings), professional periodicals, institutional invitation, personal invitation.

Current informing: participants' application forms, confirmation of registering the forms, application forms for speeches, confirmation of accepting a speech, confirmation of coming to a meeting, tourist brochures, a programme and a timetable of a meeting, abstracts

Final information: a programme of a meeting, a timetable, abstracts, offprints, speeches, proceedings, a list of participants, a list of participants' addresses.

Subsequent information: a certificate, an address list, proceedings, reviews in periodicals.

V38-V61 The occurrence of each form

V62-V65 The occurrence of initial, current, final and subsequent forms

V66 A summary evaluation of the forms of informing

2.3. Proceedings

V67 Publishing the proceedings from a meeting
Information elements of the outfit of the proceedings: an index of authors, a thematic index

Classification elements, authors' addresses, participants' addresses

V8-V72 The occurrence of each element in the outfit of the proceedings

V73 A summary evaluation of the outfit of the proceedings

V74 Dissemination of the proceedings

3rd group THE COMMUNICATIONAL SITUATION IN THE COURSE OF A MEETING

3.1 Realization Of A Meeting

V75 The duration of a meeting in days (blocs)

V76 The time of holding a meeting

V77 The place of holding a meeting

V78 The schedule of a meeting: sessions, accompanying events, and social events

3.2 Sessions

V79-V80 The types and timetables of sessions

3.3 Accompanying Events:

The exhibition of publications, the exhibition of equipment, the demonstration of equipment, special discussions, the appearance of sponsors

V81-V86 The occurrence of each event and a summary evaluation

3.4 Contact Forms

Coffee breaks, cocktails, dinners, excursions, concerts, etc., the opening ceremony

V87-V93 The occurrence of each form and a summary evaluation

3.5. The Thematic Consistence Of A Meeting

V94 The concordance of the speeches with the subject matter of a meeting

V95 The concordance of the speeches with the topics of sections

V96 A thematic grouping of the speeches in sessions

3.6 Identification Of The Participants

The occurrence of badges/ cards

3.7 Activation Of The Participants

V98-V100 The number, status and affirmation of the authors

V101-V102 The number and structure (according to a profession) of the audience

V103-V104 The total number of reporters and the occurrence of mass media

3.8 Speeches And Discussions

V105-V106 The total number of speeches and their number in categories (invited speeches, communications, posters)

V107 Performing speeches

V108 Holding discussions

3.9 The Leader Of A Session

V109-V111 The type, level and competence of leaders

3.10 Keeping To The Timetable

V112 Exceeding the time scheduled for a speech

V113 Non-appearance of speakers

V114 Extending or shortening the scheduled duration of a session

3.11 Technical Conditions

V115 The characteristics of facilities

V116 The occurrence of equipment

4. THE RESULTS

The results obtained are not encouraging; they show that advantageous situations, created by holding meetings, have not been exploited adequately later on. It must be said that we do not state them in order to criticize the organizers of certain meetings, but to give some useful guidelines on organizing future ones.

The only element showing the fulfilment of the communicational potential (CP further on) of the held meetings was publishing the speeches (all the FIS and BNS meetings, the proceedings promised from NNS and JuLES95), although no proceedings from the held meetings were published independently, but as papers within the existing publications run by the organizers. This was done with some omissions, too: the editor's role vaguely defined, the absence of indexes, classification elements, data on the authors, etc. and often restricted dissemination of the publications.

A positive tendency shown is the increase in the number of speeches by a team of authors (about 50% of the speeches) compared with their usual incidence in our country (below 30%).

The majority of other observed parametres and their variables indicate that the communicational potential in the realization of the observed meetings was reduced.

The TYPE of a meeting was often undefined, it was not clear what a "scientific meeting" meant (if that was a symposium), and when it was defined (as Symposium FIS)

it was not realized with consistency (the names of the reviewers were not given, for example). The CP was reduced by poorly defined differences between scientific and professional meetings (a summer school being an outstanding example). Too widely given subject matter with no specification, which was too often the case at the observed meetings, had the same effect.

According to the structure of the organizing participants, the domination of the exhibitors from the institution which organized a meeting and according to the status of the leaders of sessions, the held meetings were rather on a local than regional level, while according to the criteria of the Ministry of Science and Technology of Serbia (5), none of them would have been of international, or even of national importance. The absence of categorisation of the speeches (with the exception of LES94) did not stimulate the CP. Posters were not shown at all (except a humble try at BNS93)

The reviewers were not appointed and stated (except at BNS93) which indicates that reviews were not written at all, which is a serious omission and the most notable reduction in the CP.

The meetings did not lack mentioning honorary, organizing and programme bodies, but the roles of the organizing participants were rarely differentiated clearly enough to secure the realization of the adequate CP. This also resulted with disturbances in the dissemination of information, especially current, i.e., negligent and superficial preparations for a meeting.

Periods for scheduling individual meetings were impermissibly short. A period shorter than a year decreases the CP, reducing, in the first place, the number of participants - listeners, because initial information could not be widely disseminated. This proved to be true (At the observed meetings there were no timely announcements in periodicals). It was therefore hardly possible to make a calendar of home professional meetings for the field of physical culture which prevented co-ordination and planning.

When current information on holding a meeting is concerned, most often there was no confirmation either of accepting a speech or of coming to a meeting (the later could cause a financial loss due to reservations for accommodation). Which also lacked was the distribution of written programmes, schedules and abstracts; a serious omission observed was that the organizers did not give detailed instructions on preparing a speech for printing (the volume, title page). The final and subsequent information lacked participants' addresses which reduced the CP to a great extent. There was also a lack in the surveys of the meetings in periodicals (an adequate report was published only of one of the observed meetings), which proved that they have been rather neglected in our profession.

Concerning the communicational situation at a meeting, four parameters indicated the most prominent reduction in the CP: a) a thematic inconsistency of a meeting occurred: due to a high percentage of deviation from the given subject matter of a meeting by a great number of speakers (ranging from 15%, through 30 - 40%, to as high as 80%); due to too widely defined topics at sections (most frequently fields of physical culture, although the topics of the speeches are often not so wide; due to the lack of thematic grouping of the speeches within a session. b) Sessions were lead without moderators, and so called presidors were frequently not previously acquainted with the speeches at "their" sessions. c) The number of speeches was often inadequate to the time available at a meeting (the time for a speech is sometimes restricted to less than a minute!?) so that

speeches were uttered hastily or withdrawn, and the discussion was omitted. It is senseless to have a speech shorter than 10 minutes, and using posters is better (2). The incidence of reading a paper instead of giving a speech (which is much more convenient 2,7) was high (40%), and the use of visual devices insufficient (below 50% of the works). Discussions were most frequently held at the end of sessions instead of after each speech (7).

Other reasons of the decrease in the CP were: ignoring the schedules, the lack of accompanying events (e.g., exhibitions, printed material, demonstrations etc.), too short coffee breaks, and rare other contact forms (e.g. there were no excursions at all due to high prices and shortage of money), holding sessions in suitable, but not specialized rooms (2).

The number and structure of the recipients could not have been analyzed at all because the addresses of the participants in the observed meetings were not available (not printed in any of the papers).

The influence of two parameters on the CP is disputable. The authors - exhibitors at BNS meetings were also analysed according to their affirmation in the domains of the given subject matters and it was found that 35 - 50% of the authors had not been concerned with them before. On the one hand that means that the meetings have initiated interest for certain topics, which is one of the functions of professional meetings. On the other hand, the research results stated by such authors were questionable since they had not been engaged in the researches relevant to the subject matter.

As for the admission fee (which was usually a minor sum), it seems logical that the CP should be the greatest at the meetings without it, but we are inclined to the opinion that the CP is the greatest at the meetings with high admission fees and which attract a great number of participants. This is a sort of confirmation that such a meeting offers the opportunity to hear, see and meet important people. In this regard, our field is still beyond the effect of the knowledge market.

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KOMUNIKACIONI POTENCIJAL NAUČNIH SKUPOVA

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Osnovne funkcije stručnog skupa, kao forme stručnog informisanja i/ili usavršavanja, su da omogućiti promptnu razmenu informacija o novim naučnim rezultatima i tehnološkim inovacijama

kao i direktan kontakt između stručnjaka. Na osnovu komunikacionih obrazaca iz teorije komunikacija (Bordewijk & van Kaam, 1982; McQuail, 1994) definiše se tipologija i druge konceptualne karakteristike stručnih skupova kao i njihov komunikacioni potencijal. Komunikacioni potencijal realizuje se putem diseminacije informacija i kroz karakterističnu komunikacionu situaciju tokom skupa. Na primerima stručnih skupova iz oblasti fizičke kulture, održanih u zemlji u periodu 1991/95, sistematski su opservirani elementi i karakteristike u diseminaciji informacija i komunikacionoj situaciji tokom realizacije tih skupova. Dobijeni rezultati pokazuju da je realizovani komunikacioni potencijal skupova često ispod nivoa koji je inherentan ovoj formi stručnog informisanja i/ili usavršavanja. Može se pretpostaviti da organizatori nisu dovoljno obučeni da tokom pripreme i realizacije skupa postignu adekvatni komunikacioni potencijal.