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Using Community Radio for Non-Formal Education

KNOWLEDGE SERIES

The opportunities to use community radio for non-formal education can only be limited by the educator's imagination

In many areas of the world radio is still the only medium through which educators can reach a mass audience, simultaneously and at relatively low cost; although television and video may have overshadowed radio, it was never eclipsed.



So what is it about local and community radio that makes it such a useful and potentially powerful medium for non-formal education? What are its limitations, and how can these be overcome? I'll be suggesting some possible answers to these questions, but before I do, it may be useful to put them in context.

ORIGINS

The use of radio for non-formal education started with the advent of radio broadcasting in the 1920s and '30s. Together with information and entertainment, education – both formal and non-formal – was regarded as one of the three main services that the new medium would, and should, offer its audience.

In the decades following the Second World War, educational radio spread from the industrialised nations of Europe and North America to the developing countries, mainly through colonial broadcasting services. As most of these countries achieved independence in the 1960s they continued to use radio for non-formal education, especially in the areas of agriculture and health.

However, the 1970s brought an increasing emphasis on the educational potential of television and video. The new technology offered sound, visual images, movement and colour, but was also much more expensive; many societies and individuals, particularly in the rural areas of poorer countries, did not have access to it. In many areas of the world radio is still the only medium through which educators can reach a mass audience, simultaneously and at relatively low cost; although television and video may have overshadowed radio, it was never eclipsed.

The 1970s also brought three major developments that allowed radio to extend the range and scope of its activities, especially at the local and community level:

- The development of FM (frequency modulated) radio transmission
- The consequent growth of local and community radio stations
- The increasing availability of relatively low-cost, portable, AM/FM radio receivers
- The increasing minituration of radio transmitting stations.

Even so, the substantial opportunities for non-formal education offered by these developments were not fully realised over the next 30 years. Although this was partly due to the increasing commercialisation of broadcasting during the period, there remains a tendency among educators to focus on newer media — initially television and video, and more recently teleconferencing, the Internet and the World Wide Web — at the

expense of older technologies, which can often achieve similar goals very effectively and usually at a fraction of the cost.

Nevertheless, local and community radio continues to make a significant contribution to non-formal education:

- In Kenya, the Mediae Trust has recently been supporting the use of radio drama/soap opera, transmitted by a local radio station, as part of a health education campaign in the Meru region
- In the Oshakati area of northern Namibia, local radio is part of a non-formal education project entitled "Cattle is our livelihood," to improve cattle keeping practices among local farmers
- In the Apac community of northern Uganda, a portable solar or battery powered "suitcase radio station" broadcasts programmes of local and timely interest, in an initiative co-sponsored by the Government of Uganda and The Commonwealth of Learning (www.col.org/clippings).

STRENGTHS

As a medium for non-formal education, local and community radio is:

- **Attractive:** most people enjoy listening to radio, particularly if it is well produced and presented. It's generally regarded as a personal, friendly and reliable medium
- **Available:** local and community radio services are common throughout the world. Where they are not available, it is relatively easy and not prohibitively expensive to set them up
- **Accessible:** most people, even in the poorest rural areas, have access to radio receivers and a source of power. Since educational radio relies mainly on the spoken word, it can speak to people directly and in their own language – even to those without the benefit of literacy
- **Affordable:** educational radio programmes are relatively cheap to produce and to transmit. The costs are dramatically less than those for television or video, and usually lower than print or face-to-face teaching and learning costs.

Local radio stations usually have close ties with the local community; at their best, they are a well-informed, trusted and valued part of the local social structure. They can ask their listeners to tell them what they want and need in terms of non-formal education and training, and can help articulate and promote these views locally. Local radio stations also often have good access to organisations and individuals with the



Limitations

LIMITATIONS

Broadly, the limitations of local and community radio for non-formal education are:

- **Technical** – related to the effective transmission and reception of radio signals within a local community
- **Institutional** – related to the nature and purposes of radio stations within their local communities
- **Educational** – related to radio as a medium for non-formal education
- **Economical** – related to the training, equipment, start-up and ongoing or associated costs of radio stations, programming and staff.

Technically, the successful use of local radio for non-formal education depends on a clearly audible radio signal being able to reach all parts of the community that the radio station serves. Listeners within the community also need suitable radio receivers and adequate sources of power to receive the signal clearly. They must know where to find the signal on the radio dial and how to tune in the radio set to get a clear signal.

Depending on the siting and strength of the transmitter in relation to the local topography and population distribution, a clear signal may not reach all parts of the local community. A community situated in a hilly region or dispersed over a very wide area, for example, may have difficulty receiving radio transmissions.

Similarly, not all members of the target audience for a non-formal education project may have access to suitable radio receivers or sources of power. Their radio sets may be of poor quality; the electricity supply may be unreliable, or there may be a shortage of good quality battery cells. Some members of the potential audience may have difficulty tuning in to the correct frequency.

There may also be institutional issues that limit the effectiveness of local radio for non-formal education. Local radio stations – particularly if they are operating on a commercial basis – may give a low priority to educational broadcasting. They may see themselves as competing for audiences with their commercial rivals, and may feel that educational programmes do not fit the station's image or draw a sufficient audience to attract advertising revenue.

Such stations may be unwilling to broadcast educational materials, or may want to charge high commercial rates that would add substantially to costs. They might agree to broadcast the programmes as part of their public service obligation, but may be reluctant to give the programmes good transmission slots. The educational programmes may only be broadcast very late in the evening or early in the morning – hours that many (if not most) of the target audience would find unsuitable. The stations may also lack the human and material resources to produce high quality educational programmes.

Educationally, radio's exclusive reliance on sound (mainly the human voice) means it can't communicate visual images except in the imagination of the listener, which is not always adequate for educational purposes. Using radio on its own is very difficult when dealing with subjects that have a strong visual component, such as subject matter involving spatial relationships (carpentry), complex dynamic processes (machine operation) and the demonstration of practical skills (cooking).

Radio gives students very little control over when and how they are going to learn. Radio programmes are usually broadcast at fixed times, which as we suggested earlier might not always be convenient to listeners. Even if

knowledge, skills and experience to respond effectively to local needs. They can enter into partnerships to plan, design and develop non-formal educational projects, and to implement and evaluate them.

In partnership with others, local and community radio producers can present information and instruction in these ways:

- *Radio talks* can present information and ideas in a carefully structured way
- *Interviews* allow the lively and spontaneous communication of ideas and opinions from individuals with relevant experience and expertise
- *Panel discussions* offer opportunities to explore different viewpoints on subjects about which there are legitimate differences of opinion
- *Documentaries and features* can take listeners to places and situations they may not otherwise experience
- *Radio drama*, scripted or improvised, can explore culturally sensitive issues in an entertaining, involving and challenging way
- *Music and song* can convey educational messages memorably and attractively
- *Magazine programmes* can combine all of these approaches to examine a series of topics linked by a common educational theme.

Using these techniques, radio can provide local news and up-to-date information; it can motivate non-formal education students, and offer tutorial support and resource material to stimulate reflection, discussion and practical learning activities. If necessary it can provide direct teaching and instruction, using the best locally available educational talent.

Local radio can also involve local people in its programming, providing a platform for local ideas and opinions and responding quickly and effectively to listener comments, questions and suggestions – where necessary, even calling local authorities and officials to account through regular "feedback" programmes.

Despite its old-fashioned, low-tech feel, local and community radio has a good deal to offer in the field of non-formal education. However, it's important that you are aware of its limitations and how to compensate for them if you're planning to use radio for non-formal education at the community level.





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the programmes are repeated, finding a convenient time will not always be possible. Programmes can be recorded onto audiocassette for later use, but not all students will have access to this facility.

More importantly, students can't control the pace of the medium. They can't speed it up when the material is familiar, or slow it down when it's more difficult. Its producers determine the pace of the programme, and it's difficult to get it right for all listeners. Students can't stop the programme when they want to think about what they've just heard, or when they want to ask a question or make a comment. Radio is a one-way medium. At best, it offers only limited opportunities for interaction; at worst, it can lead to passivity on the listener's part.

Finally, using radio for non-formal education requires particular focus and attention skills from its listeners. Since the advent of television, radio has increasingly been reduced to a background medium that provides an accompaniment to other activities; it may be heard, but is not necessarily listened to. Many people, especially those who have grown up with "music radio," may find it difficult to concentrate for any length of time on programmes that rely mainly on the spoken word – the basic currency of most non-formal education broadcasting.

overcoming OVERCOMING THE LIMITATIONS

On the technical side, new advances in solar and wind-up power are helping overcome issues such as unreliable electricity supply, or the limited availability and expense of conventional batteries needed to power radio transmitters and receivers. But radio also has a few educational limitations. How can we maximise its educational strengths and minimise its weaknesses?

At one level, the answers are relatively simple and straightforward:

- If radio lacks a visual dimension, it needs to be accompanied by printed visual support materials
- If transmission times are inconvenient, listeners should be encouraged and enabled to record them off the air and listen to the cassettes when it suits them
- If radio offers too little interaction, the programmes should be regarded primarily as stimulus material. Listeners should be encouraged to form discussion groups around the programmes, to listen, discuss, decide, and act
- If listeners lack the skills to use radio effectively, programmes should be designed to develop those skills.

In the real world of non-formal education, the answers are rather more difficult and complicated. We begin to encounter some technical and institutional issues:

- What form should the visual support material take – booklets, handouts, charts or posters? Who will produce them? How will they be distributed? What will it cost?
- Can the project obtain reasonable transmission times? If not, will the listeners be able to record them off the air? Will cassettes need to be produced and distributed centrally, by whom and at what cost?
- Who will organise the listening groups? Will the learners be willing and able to attend them? Will they need tutors or

facilitators? How will tutors or groups be recruited, trained, supported and supervised?

- Who will plan, design, produce and present the programmes? How many will there be? How often will they be broadcast? What form will they take?

Other considerations are:

- Will outside funding be required? Where will it come from?
- What would be a reasonable timeframe for planning, preparing and implementing the project?
- How will the project be monitored and evaluated? Should you be thinking about preparing a follow-up?

SETTING UP A COMMUNITY RADIO PROGRAMME

The specifics of each project depend on the type of project you are involved in, and on your own local circumstances; there's no magic formula for success, but any community radio programme should have the following general characteristics:

- *Skills for effectiveness:* effective, radio-led non-formal education needs people skilled in both radio production and in education. As these are rarely found in one organisation, it makes sense to work in partnership – sharing ideas, expertise and costs.
- *Fruitful partnerships:* if suitable organisations are unavailable or not interested, radio stations can involve local educators. Educational organisations can also consider setting up their own local educational radio station, but remember – running a radio station needs long-term commitment and ongoing management.
- *Collaborative planning:* partner organisations and the radio station should work closely together, especially at the planning stage when defining the target audience, deciding the aims and objectives of the project and its general approach.
- *Developing programmes:* radio stations should keep in constant touch with partner organisations during the actual process of designing, developing and producing the radio programmes. Partner organisations should especially be consulted on the content and educational structure of the programme or series.
- *Developing support materials:* the non-formal education partner organisations should focus on preparing and producing print support materials (booklets, handouts, posters), to add a visual dimension to the radio programmes.
- *Listening groups:* partner organisations or the learners themselves can use existing local associations or social clubs to set up a network of listening groups. This offers participants an opportunity to discuss the programmes, apply what they are learning to their own situation, and take part in group-based learning activities and skills development.

community radio

SOME USEFUL BOOKS

- Adam, G. and Harford, N. (1998) *Health on Air*, London: Health Unlimited
A handbook for health education broadcasters.
- de Fossard, E. (1997) *How to write a radio serial drama for social development: a scriptwriter's manual*, John Hopkins University, School of Public Health, Centre for Communication Programs.
- Warr, D. (1992) *Distance Teaching in the Village: a case study of basic functional education for rural development*, Allama Iqbal Open University, Pakistan. Cambridge: International Extension College.
A detailed case study of a village-based non-formal distance education programme, using audiocassettes, visual materials and study group meetings.

VIDEO RESOURCES

- UNESCO Education Sector – Video Catalogue
www.unesco.org/education/catalogues/sitevideo
- Creative Associates International (USA), 1990. *Distance Education: Bringing More, Reaching More*, English, 17', VHS/PAL/NTSC. UNESCO Education Sector – Video Catalogue, Distance Education [Code: 0086].
Examples of Colombia's Accion Cultural Popular programme and Dominican Republic's radio assisted community basic education project.
www.unesco.org/education/catalogues/sitevideo/themes/distance.htm
- Education Development Centre (USA), 1990. *Science on Air: Interactive Radio Instruction in Papua New Guinea*, English, 26', VHS/PAL. UNESCO Education Sector – Video Catalogue, Distance Education [Code: 0096].
The "Radio Science Project" in Papua New Guinea provides science teachers with methodological support.
www.unesco.org/education/catalogues/sitevideo/themes/distance.htm

SOME USEFUL WEB LINKS

- Commonwealth of Learning, The (2000): "The Suitcase Station: Have Radio, Will Travel," *COL Clippings*.
www.col.org/clippings
- International Council For Open and Distance Education (ICDE).
A UNESCO-affiliated, global NGO with information and resources for distance education and open learning.
www.icde.org
- International Extension College (IEC), U.K.
Open and distance learning specialists, especially for educational initiatives in developing countries.
www.iec.ac.uk
- McGinnis, W. K. (1986) "Educational radio in its third decade: Redefining the concept of educational broadcasting in terms of new expectations and financial restraint." *Australian Journal of Educational Technology*, 2(2), 57-62.
www.asu.murdoch.edu.au/aset/ajet/ajet2/su86p57.html
- Nwaerandu, N.G., and Thompson, G. (1987) "The Use of Educational Radio in Developing Countries: Lessons from the Past." *Journal of Distance Education* 2(2): 43-54.
www-itsweb4.worldbank.org/disted/Technology/broadcast/rad-01.html
- Romero-Gwynn, E. and Marshall, M.K. (1990) "Radio: Untapped Teaching Tool." *Journal of Extension*, Vol. 28, No. 1.
www.joe.org/joe/1990spring
- Thomas, J. (2001) *Audio for Distance Education and Open Learning: a practical guide for planners and producers*. Vancouver: The Commonwealth of Learning, International Extension College, U.K.
www.col.org/audiohandbook
- World Bank Global Distance Education: *Technology - Broadcast and Computer-based (Radio)*
www-itsweb4.worldbank.org/disted/Technology/broadcast/broad_radio.html

USING COMMUNITY RADIO FOR NON-FORMAL EDUCATION

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The Knowledge Series is a topical, start-up guide to distance education practice and delivery. New titles are published each year.

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