

Using Radio in Innovative ways to support ODL Learners in Namibia: Opportunities, Challenges and Achievements

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Abstract

This paper sets out to report on a project initiated by the Namibian Ministry of Education in 2004 to enhance education radio broadcasting in the country. The project is primarily aimed at developing local capacity to write, record and produce education radio programmes. This is a collaborative effort between publicly-funded ODL institutions and some Ministries involved in continuing education with the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) as the external capacity building partner.

The rationale for the project stems from the realisation that most of the resource materials currently provided to ODL students are print-based. The contention is that radio, although widely regarded as a second generation technology, could still be used effectively to supplement printed texts in the Namibian context and in endeavours to address the many diverse challenges facing the education and training sector in the country. Chander and Sharma (2003) confirm, for example, that radio offers a number of advantages, including the following: it is a viable medium which has proven educational worth in terms of both pedagogical importance and geographical reach; high quality educational programming can be delivered to highly diversified audiences located across broad geographical areas at low unit production cost; radio programmes can benefit weaker students when used as supplementary tool; and it can bring previously unavailable resources to students.

It is against the background of the above that this paper highlights opportunities, challenges and achievements pertaining to the education radio project in Namibia. The paper speaks directly to the PCF4 sub-themes of innovation and collaboration.

INTRODUCTION

This paper sets out to report on a project that was initiated in 2004 by the Ministry of Education in Namibia to enhance education radio broadcasting in the country. The project is primarily aimed at developing local capacity to write, record and broadcast education radio programmes. This is a collaborative effort between publicly-funded Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institutions in the country and a few government Ministries involved in continuing education.

The paper aims to achieve the following:

- review relevant literature in order to highlight some experiences, particularly on the African continent, in the use of radio for educational purposes;
- summarise the advantages and limitations of radio as a medium of instruction; and
- provide an overview of key issues related to the implementation of the education radio initiative in Namibia.

The intention is, finally, to accentuate some of the strategies that are being employed to address the key challenges in the implementation process in Namibia.

USE OF RADIO FOR EDUCATIONAL PURPOSES: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) and the Asian Development Bank (1999, p.12) contend in their report on the use and integration of media in ODL that radio is the most accessible of all the media and that most people can be reached through radio, in even the poorest countries, at relatively low cost. This assessment clearly signals why radio has such enormous potential in the context of educational delivery. It is encouraging to note from a perusal of relevant literature that radio is being used extensively as an educational medium in developing countries and that radio has been employed in a variety of instructional design contexts, including areas such as rural development, teaching of Mathematics, public health, literacy

training, management courses in Agriculture, in support of correspondence courses, family planning, civics education and primary education (Vyas, Sharma and Kumar 2002; Nwaerandu and Thompson 1987). Africa, it is evident from the literature, has wide experience in the use of radio for educational purposes and Interactive Radio Instruction (IRI) appears to be one of the more popular applications in recent years. Murphy, Anzalone, Bosch and Moulton (2002 p.5) postulate that IRI "typically constitute the entire curriculum in a subject at that grade level and are not intended as a supplement to instruction, as is the case with other applications of educational radio". IRI has been used with success in the delivery of primary education in countries such as Guinea, Lesotho, Zambia and South Africa with the countries employing different models, but interactivity is usually achieved between the teacher and the learner in the classroom and a simulated interaction with the radio teacher (Murphy et al 2002).

It is evident from the above that radio is used in a variety of contexts to serve a wide range of educational purposes. COL and the Asian Development Bank (1999, p. 12) aptly describe educational radio as the broadcasting of programmes that aim to teach directly and indirectly and the use of these programmes in both formal and non-formal learning, whether in classrooms, factories, community centres or at home. This statement underscores, amongst others, the fact that radio is being used in ODL delivery. But what are some of the existing practices as far as ODL is concerned?

Literacy Innovation (1997 p.1) provides a historical perspective in this regard with the claim that innovative methods were pioneered for the use of radio in distance education as early as the 1970s to stimulate "instructional conversation" and to encourage more active learning. However, radio is usually employed in the context of ODL to supplement or complement print-based materials. Mwaerandu and Thompson (1987 p.2) support this view, but indicate that apart from printed materials radio is sometimes supported with local discussions and by regional study centres. This confirms that radio can be used effectively in the context of ODL if it is part of a mix of media and technology and perhaps even more conventional strategies for delivery purposes.

It can be concluded, based on this very brief analysis, that radio is being used in a variety of contexts to serve a wide range of educational purposes, including the provision of support to ODL students. Educational radio, in particular, enables governments and institutions to improve access to educational opportunities as well the quality of such provision. However, it is evident that there is no single best way to use radio and that almost anything is possible with a little bit of creativity and innovation.

ADVANTAGES AND LIMITATIONS OF EDUCATIONAL RADIO

Radio offers a number of advantages, but this medium has certain limitations as well which should be considered when instructional planning is done. Following are some of the most important advantages of radio (also read educational radio) as reflected in the body of relevant literature:

- radio appears to be the most accessible medium (both in terms of geographical reach and the prevalence of radios per capita across Africa);
- the cost of radios as well as unit production costs are relatively low;
- it can be used to fulfill certain teaching functions, i.e. to motivate learners and increase interest in specific topics and it has proven its worth as far as pedagogical importance is concerned;
- it can be used in combination with other media such as print, face-to-face teaching, etc.;
- it transcends literacy barriers and yet is credible, because it addresses the single listener personally;
- it can be used in interactive contexts;
- high quality educational programming can be delivered to highly diversified audiences located across broad geographical areas;
- radio programmes can benefit weaker students when used as a supplementary tool;
- it can bring previously unavailable resources to students; and
- it is popular (Van Zyl 2004; Chander and Sharma 2003; Murphy et al 2002; Vyas, Sharma and Kumar 2002; COL and Asian Development Bank, 1999).

It is critical, in spite of the above advantages, to remain cognisant of the limitations of radio which were once again extracted from the body of relevant literature as follows:

- access to household radios can be limited and ownership is usually a problem even if radios are readily available;
- it is still difficult for people in rural areas to purchase radios and to get them repaired while the cost of batteries is inhibitive in places without electricity;
- reception can be poor in some areas and it is sometimes necessary to broadcast on more than one station in order to achieve national coverage;
- facilities for recording and broadcasting programmes are not readily available or of the desired standard and there is normally competition for studio facilities or broadcast slots;
- broadcast schedules (time-slots) tend to be inconvenient;
- most broadcasters charge for airtime these days regardless of the fact that it is for educational purposes;
- students have no control over the pace and time of broadcasts and the lack of visuals can be problematic;
- there is normally a lack of skilled professionals who can produce high quality educational radio programmes;
- educational radio is essentially a one-way medium with no or limited interactivity; and
- favourable policies from regulatory authorities responsible for broadcasting and telecommunications are non-existent in most developing countries (Van Zyl 2004; Murphy et al 2002; COL and Asian Development Bank 1999).

Van Zyl (2004, p.2) provides a useful synopsis of the impact of the above factors on the educational worth of radio when he concludes in his article that the "power of radio is influenced by such diverse contextual issues as electricity, elders, intention and end-user motivation". He reasons, furthermore, that a complete shift in mindset is required and that the broadcast of radio programmes should be considered as the start of a complex communication process and not the only solution. This is important in the context of educational provision where radio should clearly be used as part of a broader delivery strategy to enhance its effectiveness.

THE NAMIBIAN EXPERIENCE

The following will be done in this section of the paper: (i) the broader context within which the education radio project was conceived, is provided and the project is positioned within this contextual framework; and (ii) achievements and key challenges in the implementation process are highlighted.

Positioning the Education Radio Initiative

Namibia's Vision 2030 sets out a broad framework for long-term development in Namibia. The Vision aspires to transform Namibia into a high income knowledge economy (KE) with a quality of life for all citizens that is comparable to that of the developed world (Government of the Republic of Namibia 2004). These aspirations are operationalised through National Development Plans (NDPs), with NDP 2 being the first of those plans. It is recognised that the actualisation of the Vision will require substantial improvements in the contribution of all sectors of the economy (Government of the Republic of Namibia 2004).

The Education and Training Sector Improvement Programme (ETSIP) is the education and training sector's response to this national call to transform the sector to better contribute to the attainment of Vision 2030 and the attainment of goals in NDP 2 (Ministry of Education 2005). The Ministry of Education (2005 p.7) acknowledges, furthermore, that ETSIP draws on several studies in recent years and that it is a comprehensive response to key weaknesses of the education system and that these weaknesses "pertain to poor quality and ineffectiveness which translates into low learning outcomes as manifested in high failure rates and low productivity; high levels of wastage in terms of school dropouts; repetition; and low throughput".

The strategic plan for the ETSIP clarifies policy priorities, systems to be developed/improved, strategic objectives to be attained and the indicators and targets for monitoring sector achievements over the next five years in the following areas:

- Sub-programme 1: Pre-Primary Education
- Sub-programme 2: General Education (Grades 1 - 12)
- Sub-programme 3: Vocational Education and Training
- Sub-programme 4: Tertiary Education and Training
- Sub-programme 5: Knowledge and Innovation

- Sub-programme 6: Information, Culture and Lifelong Learning (Ministry of Education 2005).

The education radio initiative emerged in the very early stages of the above process and forms part of sub-programme 6, particularly the strategic objective dealing with expanding access to quality information and lifelong learning programmes (Ministry of Education 2006).

Overall, the radio initiative is aimed at enhancing education radio broadcasting in the country and the Namibian College of Open Learning (NAMCOL) has been assigned to manage this project on behalf of the Ministry of Education and other partners. A forum, known as the Education Radio Project Team (ERPT) has been created to oversee implementation of the project and membership is currently drawn from the following participating Ministries and educational institutions: Ministry of Education (Directorate Adult Basic Education and the National Institute for Educational Development); Ministry of Youth, National Service, Sport and Culture; Ministry of Agriculture, Water and Forestry; Ministry of Health and Social Services; University of Namibia (Centre for External Studies and Department of Non-Formal Education); Polytechnic of Namibia - Centre for Open and Lifelong Learning; the Namibian Open Learning Network Trust (NOLNet); NAMCOL and the Namibian Broadcasting Corporation (NBC). The objectives of the partner Ministries and institutions vary, i.e. most Ministries intend to use radio for information-sharing purposes and to pursue diverse community development agendas while educational institutions plan to use radio to supplement print-based study materials.

A research experiment which was recently conducted by Keulder (2006) to determine the state of political knowledge amongst Namibian students has re-confirmed earlier beliefs that radio offers enormous opportunities to the education and training sector in Namibia. The study has found, inter alia, that radio is the media type that most Namibians have access to and that "two-in-every-three respondents" listen to radio every day with the average student spending between five to seven hours listening to radio each day (Keulder 2006). It is important to recognise, though, that most students regard radio as a source of information (news, phone-in programmes) and entertainment (music) and not necessarily as an educational resource. However, it is my contention that a real opportunity exists to capture these listeners through innovative, interesting and lively education radio programmes.

Achievements

The following achievements have been recorded to date:

- A Memorandum of Understanding was signed in August 2004 between the Ministry of Education and NAMCOL to institutionalise the management of this project. NAMCOL is required, inter alia, to submit annual work plans and execute these while there is an explicit undertaking on the part of the Ministry to provide financial resources to ensure successful implementation of this initiative.
- A process of wide consultation took place in 2004/2005 to establish the interest and assess the needs of potential partner Ministries and educational institutions. This process culminated in the development of a detailed discussion document that outlines the background, rationale and modalities for implementation of the project. The discussion document was circulated to all participating Ministries and educational institutions at the beginning of 2005 for their inputs and acceptance.
- Following this, a forum known as the Education Radio Project Team (ERPT), was created with representatives from all participating Ministries and educational institutions. Members of the ERPT are involved in project implementation, but they are also required to keep the management teams of their respective institutions informed about developments related to the project. The ERPT meets bi-monthly.
- A state-of-the art recording studio has been constructed on NAMCOL's campus and digital recording equipment have been acquired for the studio. The facility is available for use by all the partners and additional equipment has recently been acquired to facilitate the recording of music. Three members of NAMCOL's staff have been trained on use of the studio equipment.
- A core group of staff members (24 in total) from participating Ministries and educational institutions received intensive training (both theoretical and practical) in the production of educational radio programmes. This included two one-week interventions in 2005 and a one-week refresher course in 2006. The training was generously sponsored by COL. These members are now busy scripting and recording a series of pilot programmes which

will be broadcast and evaluated later this year before the project is taken to scale in 2007.

- NAMCOL, NIED, Polytechnic-COLL and UNAM-CES have conducted needs assessment studies among their students to determine, amongst others, how often students listen to radio, when they are able to listen, the radio stations they listen to, and the programmes they like. The findings will be used in discussions with the national broadcaster (NBC) when decisions are to be made about the duration of programmes, appropriate time-slots, etc. Also, a formal Memorandum of Understanding has been drafted between NOLNet (on behalf of all participating institutions) and the NBC to ensure commitment from the national broadcaster. It is envisioned that programmes will be broadcast free of charge as part of this arrangement and that institutions will provide pre-packaged programmes to the NBC for this purpose. In addition, the involvement of community radio stations is being pursued and agreements, modelled on the one of the NBC, will be signed in due time with all of them.
- A Project Coordinator will be appointed during the course of August on a one-year contract (renewable) to take responsibility for the day-to-day running of the project. Funding is also available to recruit additional part-time staff as and when the need arises.

Significant Challenges and Strategies to Overcome Some of the Challenges

Following are some of the more significant challenges which have emerged in the implementation process with an outline of corresponding strategies to help overcome these:

- The policy environment is not yet favourable enough for this kind of undertaking, hence the decision to sign an agreement with the NBC. However, this is a protracted process and all the needs and expectations of partner Ministries and educational institutions might not be adequately addressed through this arrangement. There is an apparent need for a dedicated education radio channel in the long term, but this aspect must be negotiated separately with the Namibia Communications Commission. However, it seems that there are no additional frequencies available which would make any efforts futile at this stage.
- It is evident from the needs assessment studies which were conducted that access to radios is still problematic in rural areas, i.e. most students have access to radios, but they do not own the receivers. Attempts to solicit sponsorships to acquire wind-up radios have so far been unsuccessful.
- The country does not have a critical mass of skilled people who can produce high quality education radio programmes on a grand scale. This challenge is being addressed through ongoing capacity building interventions and consolidation of newly acquired skills. It is a challenge, though, to synchronise the training schedules to ensure attendance by staff from all partner institutions. The challenge is compounded, furthermore, by the fact that this activity is not yet fully integrated into the work plans of staff at the various Ministries and educational institutions. As a result, this is not a priority for the people involved and this creates enormous problems in terms of keeping to the actual recording schedules. Some institutions have already attended to this concern and it is anticipated that others will follow suit. There might be a need to second staff to this project if the challenge persists, but this is not regarded as a viable option at the moment.
- There is a question about the sustainability of this project in future. This has been partially addressed through the inclusion of the project in ETSIP. The intention is, furthermore, to solicit corporate sponsorships for specific programmes while the recording studio will provide professional recording services (at a fee) to local musicians and other interested parties/organisations.

CONCLUSION

This concludes the paper on the education radio initiative in Namibia. It is anticipated that this project will go from strength to strength over the next few years and that all Namibians will ultimately benefit from it. The fact that so many Ministries and institutions are involved is already a sign of the support that this initiative enjoys. The challenge that remains is to produce interesting, lively and high quality radio programmes that will capture the interest of ODL students and the public at large. This is only possible with sheer determination and a lot of innovation and creativity. Finally, I would like to concur with Van Zyl (2004, p.2) that radio works and that things will improve if people can just get the message - the medium is the message!

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