

Broadcasting, Skills Development and Good Governance: Encouraging Online Learning Communities in Media Organisations

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Preferred Duration: 45 minutes

Format: Seminar with 20-30 minute presentation (PowerPoint) followed by discussion

(NB: I have indicated in the text where some of the slides will appear. The presentation will rely on slides from courses that are underway between now and July.)

INTRODUCTION: TRAINING – THE MEDIA CONTEXT

This short presentation aims to share with you the experience of trying to deliver media skills training around the Commonwealth using distance learning techniques. We'll look at some of the drivers for this kind of approach, and some of the shortcomings.

Some of the problems we've had to overcome have ranged from the technical (which sometimes seems ironic for media organisations), to the cultural. We've also found some linguistic challenges. For example, when is it alright to use the phrase "Hit me up" on a message board posting? I'll return to that shortly.

Since 2005 we've been mainly developing training courses for staff in national broadcasting organisations; the kind of broadcasters who were modelled on the BBC's concept of public service broadcasting.

But like the BBC, these organisations have had to change out of all recognition in the past few years. The challenges of online media, technical developments such as the introduction of digital editing (rather than using tape and editing with scissors), the introduction of staff performance monitoring – these have all had a profound effect on the skills needed by the broadcasters and their managers. Commercial pressures bring other challenges for hard-pressed production offices.

The Commonwealth Broadcasting Association, with whom I've worked most over the last three years, has many member stations who you would recognise as traditional public service radio and TV broadcasters. But grafted onto those activities we now have the new media of web services delivered by computer or mobile device.

One of the most surprising things is how some of these new ways of interacting with one another are quite familiar to many trainees in their private lives, but seem to cause big headaches for the organisations they work for.

MEETING TRAINEE NEEDS – THE TRADITIONAL MODEL

Training for these organisations is not new, of course. For many decades organisations like the BBC, the Commonwealth Broadcasting Association and the Thomson Foundation in Cardiff (to name just 3 from the UK) have been sending trainers to countries all around the world. They are often staff whose day to day job is hands-on broadcasting.

(Slide: trainer with trainees in workshop)

They turn up for a week, and work with a dozen or so people from the local station, facilitating a mixture of theory and practical exercises. Often there is a focus for the end of the course, like a TV skills course in Barbados that wanted to produce an election coverage trailer by the end of the week, and used that as a training exercise.

I myself once spent two weeks in Bulgaria in the early 90s, helping set up a new FM radio station, working with the staff, and introducing them to the concept of balanced reporting and public service radio.

This can be a very effective way of working. But it has its drawbacks.

Firstly, getting the trainer there can be expensive. Time is money, and having someone in country for a week or two has to be funded somehow.

Secondly, to make the training cost-effective, the trainees have to be available for as much of the time as possible. This turns the event into a week-long seminar, which eats into the trainees' time. Broadcasting is all about deadlines and pressure to come up with the next item. Taking staff out of that activity even for a day is often resisted by managers. Trainees can end up being asked to work as normal AND attend a training course. This just makes for distracted – and exhausted – attendees.

Thirdly, follow-up advice or refresher training are difficult to arrange. They tend to be the first thing to be dropped from a training proposal, as they're often seen as a 'nice to have'.

(I'm deliberately focussing on the short-comings here. Clearly there are many positives. A good training course can result in life-changing experience for an eager trainee. And for the trainer getting to live and work with a small group of people for a week is great fun!)

GETTING ONLINE

With the growth of online connectivity in developing countries over the last decade, the opportunity has presented itself to offer a different training model.

We started working with the Commonwealth Broadcasting Association in 2005, drawing on my own experience as a BBC media skills trainer and my earlier work with learners of English around the world who were using the internet to improve their language skills. (I used to head up the BBC World Service production department, BBC English).

The aim was to try to duplicate the advantages of face to face training, while adding new elements to help people learn and practise their skills.

We started with a radio skills course: Distance Learning Certificate: Radio Journalism and Production.

(Slide: Radio Skill course)

We realised that we could make the most of some positive aspects of online learning:

Some Advantages

Convenience

For the trainees, they can study when they like. There is no need to travel to the training course, and everything fits around their work. This might remove the issue of people not being released by their manager to attend a day-long seminar.

Access to contacts

Online you can interact with a larger number of people than in a classroom. And people can come from all around the world.

International expertise on tap

Trainees can draw on tutors (and fellow trainees) who have international expertise and experience. These (expensive) experts might be happy to devote a short period of time online when they may not be able to spare a whole week or ten days out of their busy schedule.

To me, one of the most important aspects of moving to online courses was the ability for people to interact with each other. To that end we incorporated an asynchronous discussion forum into the course pages. We also ensured there was a 'Meet the Trainees' page and 'Meet the Tutors' page.

Initially 'meeting the trainees' involved just a flag and a job title. Since the pilot scheme we've been able to extend this to include photos.

All the while we were conscious of the need to provide a simple web based learning environment while ensuring that anyone on a slow dial-up connection would not be disadvantaged. Photos are therefore very small, and each page is a clear and uncluttered as possible.

Some Disadvantages

We weren't so naïve as to think that there weren't shortcomings to an online delivery. Let's look at a few problem areas:

It's impersonal.

Working online can be lonely, and it's much less personal than learning in the same room as others.

Web skills needed

Not everyone is familiar with web conventions. Some trainees are still not comfortable with keyboard and mouse although this is now rarer than it was two years ago.

Fluency in writing needed

Some trainees are not used to writing clearly in English. Some have English as a second, third or fourth language, even in Commonwealth countries.

Flaky internet connections

Getting online can be tricky and expensive in some parts of the world.

Self-discipline

Drop out rates for self-managed learning are often quoted as high. (The figure of 80% drop out is commonly used. Does anyone have a reference for this?)

To keep this down to a minimum, we required all trainees to be nominated and supported by their manager, and we insisted on a one week deadline for each module assignment.

Course Format

We tried to address these shortcomings by structuring the course and limiting the number of trainees. It became a guided self-managed learning experience.

We involved 15 trainees from all around the Commonwealth, nominated by their managers. The tutor introduced a new topic online every Monday morning for 13 weeks.

(Slides: course content)

Each participant had to email an assignment back to the tutor within the week for marking and feedback. This was intended to encourage the learners to plan their time, while giving a steady stream of deadlines to hit. Broadcasters like deadlines!

Trainees could also communicate directly with each other and the tutor via an online discussion forum.

LEARNING FROM THE PILOT

So what did we learn?

1) Radio journalists like to analyse their work practices, and they are generally good communicators.

However, the discussion forum worked best if trainees were given a specific task to go and share things with their fellow participants. The role of the tutor and administrator of the course in keeping up momentum of the discussion forum were vital.

2) There were a few technical issues

For example anyone in Papua New Guinea could not access the discussion forum at first and we had to change some of the forum code. Some trainees couldn't access the web at all on some occasions because of local power cuts. That remains an issue, although it's improved a lot in the last two years.

3) People like to print things off.

We had originally planned on having printable versions of the modules, but assumed people would study mostly online, as the course pages are relatively short. In fact it became evident that many people like the printable version and use it as a safeguard against losing their web access while reading the module.

4) Task descriptions need to be very carefully worded.

Precisely worded instructions resulted in more useful responses. Partly because of the level of English of some of the participants, and partly because some trainees believed that the more you wrote the cleverer you were. We soon learnt to set word limits on each task.

All of these points have been taken forward into the later courses. We also revamped the layout to make it cleaner, added a database for the trainees, including the ability to easily add photos.

Feedback showed that trainees liked the weekly contact with the tutor, but preferred new modules to go up on a Friday morning. This was because many used the weekend to do their work, and Friday coincides most closely with both the Islamic and Christian weekends.

CURRENT COURSES

Over the last two years we've extended the number of courses in our portfolio. They now include:

- Introduction to website production
- Intermediate level website development
- TV best practice
- Radio Journalism & Production
- Digital Technology for Engineers
- Introduction to change management for broadcasters

A typical course runs for 12 weeks. Typical sizes are around 20 trainees. Later courses have had more than one tutor, depending on the subject.

We added Trust and Confidentiality page to ensure that people realised the importance of respecting the views of others. This was introduced for the change management course, and we've adopted it as a matter of course for all the others.

FURTHER LEARNING

Support for Tutors

The introduction of more courses has resulted in the need for more tutors. Some have adapted to online learning quickly. For others it's been difficult to come to terms with the lack of immediate feedback they get in the classroom.

We set up a tutors' guide which outlines the best way to approach writing a module, and reminds them of their responsibilities once the course is up and running. For example, we emphasise that trainees soon become demoralised if they don't receive swift feedback for their assignments - even if the immediate response is a holding comment (E.g. "Thanks for your work, which has arrived safely. I'll get back with comments within two days.")

(Slide: Tutors' Guide)

Other tips in the guide include the importance of writing in short sentences (and paragraphs), and the use of boxes to highlight tips or definitions.

Learning Styles and Job Roles

As more courses have come online we've also noticed that different job roles seem to lead to different approaches to learning and writing assignments.

Journalists like swift, short and snappy tasks which they can pull together from talking to others.

When we introduced a change management course last year we found that many of the trainees were Human Resource specialists or training administrators (with some journalists). They wrote at much greater length but were much less happy posting to the discussion forum, as they considered the subjects of staff management to be too sensitive.

We are considering encouraging more interaction on future change management courses by pairing up trainees.

We are expecting a different approach again from trainees on the recently launched Digital Technology courses. (The first of these courses will have been completed by mid-July 2008)

Linguistic Features

As mentioned, many trainees have English as a second language.

(Slide: Example of poor English from Forum)

On the plus side...it's wonderful for a linguist like me to come across new expressions which have been developed for online communication.

My favourite examples include:

(Slide: Favourite examples)

"Lo David! How'zit? Keep a cool head. We all gonna pass. Wont let you down."
Mmoni, Botswana, Radio course 2008

"Hit me up...this is a topic i would like to get the views of everyone."
Oneil, St Vincent Website Prod Level 1 2007

NEXT STEPS

Training like this is essential to good management of broadcasting organisations. Professional journalism will lead to better governance as politicians and other public servants realise they can be held to account.

Our intention is to continue to adapt courses so that they fit the needs of developing country broadcasters. Part of that need is to develop capacity building so that local trainers can improve skills and help drive professional development.

Plans for later this year include a 'training for trainers' course as well as more craft skills courses of the type I've mentioned earlier.

CONCLUSIONS

Most gratifying is the feedback from the trainees. We make a questionnaire part of the last task, and find some useful comments coming back. For example:

(Slide: Feedback comments)

This means we know we're on the right track.

Furthermore, the word is getting around. Our last radio skills course for 20 trainees was oversubscribed 5 times. Some of the applicants were just not suitable (usually in the wrong roles to meet criteria) but most were suitable.

We need to continually update the course content in light of broadcasting developments, particularly the website production skills courses.

But we have also needed to change our perception of people's ability to engage online. In 2005 we were clearly dealing with people who had never done a course online before and weren't sure how the discussion forum worked.

This is now rare and we're finding that some people are asking for chat rooms as well.

There's a great thirst for learning out there, and people want to communicate with their peers. We need to tap into that enthusiasm and ensure we're using all methods at our disposal to help their learning experiences.

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