

ELearning Course Supports African Broadcasters to Develop Radio Scripts on Smallholder Farmer Innovation

Blythe McKay, Farm Radio International, bmckay@farmradio.org

Scriptwriting Competition and eLearning Course on Smallholder Farmer Innovation

Farm Radio International carried out a scriptwriting competition in 2009/2010 focused on the theme of smallholder farmer innovation. This was the third scriptwriting competition that Farm Radio International has coordinated. The first competition focused on the MDGs, while the second competition focused on climate change adaptation strategies for smallholder farmers

The overall goal of the scriptwriting competition on smallholder farmer innovation was to contribute to the information available on smallholder farmer innovation in sub-Saharan Africa. Specific objectives included; (1) strengthening the capacity of organizations and individuals that work with radio to develop scripts and radio programs that celebrate smallholder farmer innovation, and (2) increased information on smallholder farmer innovation broadcast in French, English and local languages.

In order to build the skills of competition participants in researching and writing good story-based scripts about farmer innovation, Farm Radio International received funds from COL to develop, implement and evaluate a two-month eLearning course. This was the first time that Farm Radio International offered eLearning as part of its scriptwriting competition.

Farm Radio International collaborated with DynaMind Ltd, a qualified designer of open and distance learning courses, to develop the course using Moodle technology. According to the Moodle website (2010), "Moodle is a Course Management System (CMS), also known as a Learning Management System (LMS) or a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). It is a free web application that educators can use to create effective online learning sites."

Farm Radio International produced the content for the course and DynaMind Ltd designed the Moodle site. The eLearning course on smallholder farmer innovation consisted of several modules which were as follows:

- Introductory week to introduce participants to the topic of smallholder farmer innovation
- Module 1 (2 weeks) – finding a story on smallholder farmer innovation
- Module 2 (2 weeks) – choosing a format for the radio piece and script and conducting interviews
- Module 3 (1 week) – putting the radio piece and script together
- Module 4 (2 weeks) writing for the ear and finalizing the script

DynaMind Ltd coordinated the eLearning course's three African facilitators, who provided direction, assistance, motivation and feedback to the participants.

The course was designed to promote individual as well as group learning. In the module on finding a story, participants were required to submit an assignment which was then reviewed by producers with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. The reviewers informed participants whether the story idea they had selected was well-chosen and articulated. For the module on choosing a format and interviewing, participants worked in teams to accomplish a task.

Effectiveness of eLearning Course

Over 230 people across Africa registered for the training course, the majority of whom worked for radio stations. Of these, 126 participated to some extent in the course, while 47 successfully completed the course. Fifty-one percent of active participants (64 of 126) submitted a script for the competition. An analysis of the active participants in the online training course revealed that:

- 73 participants were from West Africa
- 30 participants were from East Africa
- 11 participants were from Central Africa
- 12 participants were from Southern Africa
- 85 participants took the English course
- 41 participants took the French course
- 83 participants were from Commonwealth countries
- 61 participants were from the five countries where Farm Radio International's African Farm Radio Research Initiative (AFRRI) is being implemented, with funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation

Participants found the online course very useful; all participants said they would recommend it to other broadcasters. In particular, participants really appreciated the quizzes, and the story idea and focus statement activities. They found the course resources useful, and appreciated the support they received from facilitators and the feedback they received from the CBC producers. Many participants indicated that they appreciated being able to interact with other participants as well as the sense of team spirit that was created. Several times, a participant posted a message indicating they were having a problem with an aspect of the course and other participants responded with positive feedback within hours, without waiting for the facilitator to assist. Many participants also commented that it did not matter whether they won a prize for the script because they felt that the training was beneficial to them and their communities, and this was reward enough.

Challenges with the online course included: participants having difficulty understanding farmer innovation, non-participation by many of the people who signed up initially, shortage of and delivery issues with CD-ROMs, Internet connection problems by participants, and the quality of facilitation offered by facilitators.

A survey of participants in the online training course was completed by 57 people (39 participants from the English course and 18 participants from the French course).

The survey revealed that:

- 1) 62.5% had never taken an online training course before
- 2) The majority of participants found it easy to navigate their way around the course page and the different components of the course
- 3) The majority of participants found the on-line course instructions clear and easy to follow
- 4) The majority of participants found the visual design (graphics, layout, colour choices, fonts, page structure...) appealing throughout
- 5) The majority of participants found the support and feedback they received from the facilitators extremely helpful
- 6) 24 of 55 respondents who answered a question about the most useful course activity found that quizzes were the most useful activity. A different 24 respondents found that the story idea/focus statement activity was the most useful activity
- 7) 15 of 49 respondents who answered a question about the most difficult part of the course identified understanding the meaning of farmer innovation as the most difficult; 14 respondents found that finding a story for their script was the most difficult thing
- 8) Many participants appreciated the interactions they had with other participants, although several expressed frustration that they sometimes had difficulty accessing the internet, which affected their ability to interact. Others also expressed frustration that several participants were not active in the group assignment

- 9) The majority of the participants found the course resources extremely helpful. Several participants wished that they could have received a CD-ROM version of the course (Farm Radio International was able to send 50 English and 50 French CD-ROMs of the course to participants who requested it, but did not have the budget to produce and distribute more)
- 10) 21 of 56 respondents indicated the course was excellent, 28 that it was very good, and 7 that it was good
- 11) All participants Everyone indicated that they would recommend this course to other broadcasters

Farm Radio International hired a consultant to determine whether participation in the online course helped improve the quality of the competition entries. The consultant reviewed 30 scripts entered in the competition. These scripts were randomly selected from three categories (10 from each category):

- Participants who did not participate in the on-line training
- Participants who participated in some of the on-line training but did not submit a focus statement and as a result did not receive feedback on their progress
- Participants who participated in the on-line training and who submitted a focus statement and received feedback

Out of the 82 entries to the competition, 18 came from people who did not participate in the on-line training, 20 came from participants in the on-line training who did not submit a focus statement, and 44 came from participants in the on-line training who submitted a focus statement.

The evaluator used the Farmer Innovation Script Competition Evaluation Sheet that Farm Radio International developed for the judging panel in order to rate the scripts.

The external evaluation (2009) determined that participation in the on-line training course had a positive impact on the quality of the scripts entered in the competition. In addition, it indicated that when course participants were actively engaged (i.e., when they had contributed a focus statement and received feedback), they submitted higher quality scripts, compared to the scripts received from those who were not actively engaged.

The results also revealed that participating in the eLearning course increased the chances of winning, since 14 of the 15 winners were active participants in the course.

Scriptwriting Competition and eLearning Course on Healthy Communities

Farm Radio International is carrying out a radio scriptwriting competition on healthy communities in 2010-2011. Radio practitioners from across sub-Saharan Africa will be encouraged to find stories about initiatives that have contributed to the health of their community. The competition will take a holistic view of health and includes but is not limited to script entries in the following categories:

- Healthy environment: community solutions for environmental health, including sustainable land use, transportation, water, sanitation and waste management, and healthy home conditions (for example, reducing air pollution from cooking, and separating livestock and human living spaces);
- Agriculture and health: e.g., agricultural practices that help farmers contribute to a healthy community, such as controlled use of pesticides, and minimizing the impact of fertilizers on drinking water;
- Maternal health and family planning: e.g., community initiatives that promote maternal health and family planning;
- Access to information and health services: e.g., health literacy, community health education and services on topics such as sexually transmitted diseases – for example, knowledge about HIV and care for people living with HIV and AIDS;
- Healthy living: e.g., healthy eating practices, treating addictions, addressing mental health issues;
- Equality and social justice: e.g., opportunities for women to make informed decisions about their health, promoting equal opportunities for marginalized groups;

- Community peace and safety: e.g., initiatives that enable people to live in peace; projects that help people resolve conflict; preventing work-related accidents.

To help radio practitioners develop their scripts, they will have the opportunity to participate in a 10-week facilitated online training course which begins in mid-August 2010. This course will deepen their understanding of healthy communities. It will also guide them through the process of creating a radio script that tells the story of a person or persons that are either benefiting from or implementing an initiative that is contributing to the health of their community. This online course will be offered in English and in French and will be facilitated by five African facilitators.

In order to ensure that these facilitators are prepared to work with radio practitioners from across the continent, many of whom have never participated in online training, Farm Radio International offered a three-and-a-half-week online e-facilitators training course in both French and English in May 2010. The five most successful participants have been selected to be e-facilitators of the 10-week online training course that begins in mid-August – two for the French course and three for the English course. All five are women – from Cameroon, Nigeria, South Africa, Kenya and Zimbabwe.

In order to ensure that participants understand the theme of healthy communities, Farm Radio International has provided case studies and further information in the eLearning course.

In order to address internet connection challenges faced by participants, the eLearning course on healthy communities has been extended to 10 weeks and the number of CD-ROMS produced and distributed increased. The CD-ROM version of the eLearning course was completed two months before the course to allow for the very slow postal system in some countries.

Nearly 300 participants have signed up for the eLearning course on healthy communities. This signifies enormous interest amongst radio practitioners across Africa in eLearning opportunities.

Conclusion

The eLearning course on smallholder farmer innovation can be seen as a success since participants found the online course very useful, and all participants said they would recommend it to other broadcasters. Other indicators of success were that the participation in the on-line training course had a positive impact on the quality of the scripts entered in the competition, and participating in the eLearning course increased the chances of winning.

As a result of the success demonstrated by the eLearning course on smallholder farmer innovation and the high level of interest in Farm Radio International's current scriptwriting competition and eLearning course on healthy communities it is evident that scriptwriting competitions accompanied by eLearning courses are a useful approach in strengthening the capacity of organizations and individuals that work with radio to develop scripts and radio programs of relevance to smallholder farmers and rural communities.

References

- Moodle (2010). *Welcome to the Moodle Community!* Retrieved August 10, 2010 from <http://moodle.org/>.
- Pittet, J. (2009). *An Evaluation of Whether Participation in the On-line Training Course Improved Quality of Scripts Entered in the Farmer Innovation Scriptwriting Competition*. Unpublished Evaluation Report on the Smallholder Farmer Innovation eLearning course