

MID-TERM REVIEW OF THE AFRICAN STORYBOOK PROJECT

MAY 2015

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1 Overview

The report of the midterm review of ASP is divided into 5 sections. Sections 1-3 provide the background to the mid-term review, the review questions, the methods used and the data collected. The last two sections focus on the findings. Section 4 offers a review of the project in relation to the ASP focus areas and affirms proof of concept. Section 5 answers the review questions and in doing so examines current practices, makes suggestions for possible improvements and addresses issues pertaining to sustainability and scalability.

2 Background

The purpose of the review is to guide project conceptualisation and strategy in the final two years of its present cycle and to lay the groundwork for the final project evaluation in 2016. The focus and methods used in the review were informed by the vision of that underpins the project: the creation of a sustainable African community for producing, sharing and using local language stories for early reading. Early reading requires resources and the effective use of these resources for teaching children *how to read* as well as inspiring them to *want to read* for both information and enjoyment. The review recognizes that this is a pilot project based on strategies to achieve the vision. The strategies include the development and versioning of stories in local languages, an enabling website for story production and consumption that is openly licensed, the establishment of pilot sites, relationship with partners and efforts to support systemic implementation. This is a large-scale project with an ever-growing number of partners, and geographically dispersed pilot sites in three different countries, Kenya, Uganda and South Africa.

3 Review methods

The review was guided by 6 research questions dealing with the approach to story production; the use of the stories; the importance, or not, of non-site partners; the project assumptions; sustainability; the effectiveness of management and the quality of project documentation. In order to answer these questions a vast amount of data was collected and analysed. Data included project documentation, the website, discussions with the Head office team, site visits, semi-structured interviews, observations of project implementation

in classrooms and libraries, site visit to one teacher training institution. The data set includes field notes, interview notes, photographs, and videos of the stories being used with children.

4 Findings on outputs and project achievements

The website is key to the project. By the end of the first year of the project there were 271 unique stories on the site and 969 translations of these stories in local languages. At the launch of the website two thirds of the stories were in English but by April 2015 the number of stories originating in an African language had grown to 173, with many of the stories in English translated into one or more local languages. Most of the story creation and versioning has been done by the pilot sites. The numbers of registered users, unique visitors and page views of longer than three minutes constitutes a remarkable achievement. What is on the web is not an accurate indication of what has been produced as many stories are still in process. Story production continues to climb and the quality of the stories is improving.

What has been accomplished has been evaluated against the findings of the baseline study. On every measure there are remarkable gains. Where schools had no access to reading material, particularly in local languages, children are now able to read stories projected magically onto their classroom walls; where teachers were inclined to favour enliteration in English, doubts about the value of mother tongue literacy have largely been dispelled. While traditional, choral rote responses to reading persist, more effective practices have been introduced so that children now interact with texts more meaningfully and they are being given some reading instruction. Although the supply of electricity and connectivity has not improved much since the baseline study, all the pilot sites have found ways of making the projection and use of ASP stories possible. Teachers' ability to use the technology has advanced significantly (although not evenly) and they are proud of how far they have come. The review shows gains in the level of teamwork amongst the teachers, increased autonomy and greater learner centeredness. The more the teachers support one another the greater the gains. The more there is a sense of community within the school and out to the local community, the more excited the teachers become. Where teachers still have doubts about the feasibility of mother tongue literacy and where they see project work as an imposition, the gains are less. In all the sites the children are enthusiastic about the stories and they enjoy the use of technology. Not all sites are equally effective, which is to be expected. What matters is that the project is able to learn from these differences.

5. Findings in relation to the research questions

Each research question is addressed under a separate heading.

Stories

While the findings in relation to story production are extremely positive, questions are raised as to why production in South Africa is less than in the other two countries. The fact that most stories are created offline rather than online and then vetted by someone before they are published suggests that quality is dependent on intermediaries and that not all sites are sufficiently comfortable with the technology. That sites are not able to publish online without support, raises questions about sustainability. The review recognizes the complexity of producing stories in a multiplicity of languages many of which have no agreed forms and is impressed with the work of informal and formal language boards in helping to assure the linguistic quality of the stories produced. That teachers are more comfortable in working

with non-fiction, information curriculum related stories or stories with a moral, points to a utilitarian orientation to literacy. This raises questions about the value of narrative fiction and the pleasure principle in relation to literacy in African communities. Is it a form of cultural imposition to invite communities to see the importance of such stories in literacy education, or is it about providing access to the possibility of literacy as also a space for imagination and creativity? Effecting such change in communities that have no access to modern quality literature for children is difficult. Such stories also require a more imaginative image bank. Images that contribute to telling the story are more specific and less likely to be useful across a range of stories. This raises questions about the current conception of the image bank.

The effective use of stories

How teachers and librarians use stories is variable and there is much that can be gained by helping people who use the website to learn from one another. Current project conceptions of professional development to establish more effective methods of using stories are not sustainable. The review suggests making increased use of teacher training institutions and the creation of resources that model or explain good practices for inclusion on the website. Examples of good and weak practices in the data are provided with explanatory commentary.

The value of different partners

An analysis of the current approach to partner development is reviewed and the current categorization of partners as 1) advocacy partners 2) systemic implementation partners 3) technical partners and 4) literacy development partners, is examined. The review argues that there is an urgent need to prioritize. The views of the key players were canvassed during the review and two important priorities identified. Partners' value should be assessed in relation to their ability to contribute to government legitimation of ASP and the improved use of the ASP resources. The review provides an assessment of all the partners interviewed in terms of the value they add to the ASP. This leads to the conclusion that the project needs to focus on partners that have the power to legitimate ASP stories for the education system; partners who are well connected to the legitimating authorities and who can provide access to them; partners that officially train teachers and librarians for the system; and implementation partners, such as the pilot sites, with whom ASP can continue to learn about implementation.

Project assumptions

Four project assumptions relating to language, effective use, partners and OER strategy are discussed. The project assumption that enliteration in mother tongue is supported as the preferred route to acquiring literacy but the review recommends practices that support biliteracy and multilingualism.

It questions the separation of languages for the teaching of literacy. It recognizes some of the challenges to the use of mother tongue in classrooms with learners who do not share a mother tongue and to the use of local languages and or varieties not recognized by school authorities. Because effective use of stories in classrooms requires ongoing professional development and support to effect teacher change, ASP needs to have a long-term strategy that is sustainable. Because technological competence is new to teachers, because teachers

recognize the importance of these skills in the modern world, and because the project has provided extensive support, teachers have been able to grow in their ability to use the technology and to help one another.

Pedagogical competence, on the other hand, requires teachers to give up old habits. The new is layered on the old and is much harder to develop. Teachers need a deep understanding of new practices otherwise what results is form not substance - teachers following recipes that they cannot adapt to what the learners say or do.

The assumptions in relation to partners are not dealt with again in this section but assumptions in relation to OER strategy are dealt with extensively. It is the openness, flexibility and cost effectiveness of OER that distinguishes OER from other literacy initiatives invested in mother tongue literacy. Teamwork, sharing and openness to different viewpoints and versions were apparent in many, but not all, of the sites that we visited. We found the teachers at the sites refreshingly open to the suggestions that we made for improving their lessons and their stories. We attribute this trust to the shared understanding that everyone in ASP is working together to find better ways of teaching children. This openness is also apparent in teacher's willingness to include members of the community in story creation and to take stories out to their communities. Some suggestions pertaining to the way ASP licenses its stories are raised for consideration, as are concerns about likely attitudes of governments to OER materials.

6 Project scope, current strategies and sustainability

This section draws the threads of the review together to address the overarching question of appropriate strategies. The review expresses confidence in the project's achievements in creating the necessary enabling environment for creating an African community for sharing and using local language stories for early reading. The early pilot phase has been a resounding success and some suggestions have been made for improving story-telling use and for prioritizing partner development that may help to improve the project further and to strengthen its sustainability. An analysis of the sustainability in the present pilot sites enables ASP to recognize strengths and threats in the different sites in order to address them. For example, sustainability can be related to whether sites have used their subsidy judiciously or not and the reasons underpinning their decisions. Three sites are compared to show that the type of school or library and material capital are not the overriding determinants of success. A strong sense of community within the school/library and embeddedness in the local community are more important. In addition, community militates against the threat to sustainability created by knowledge vesting in individuals who may leave the project or move.

The evidence suggests that ASP 'take up' and sustainability is strongest in contexts where there is a close relationship between the moral order of school and community, where there is social integration. A common language or dialect is an important element of the solidarity of the community. For scalability, then, as a second step following the pilot, there might be merit in ASP seeking to work with partners in the 'easier' schools which are mostly likely to be rural, monolingual, and closely integrated into their communities. In addition, ASP could consider community libraries as a local resource for ASP that is able to bring community members, teachers and children into the process of creating stories in the local language.

They could also be sites where good literacy pedagogies are practiced and in this way serve as a site of development for literacy teachers. Much larger scale development would depend on the partnerships that ASP is able to develop with the educational authorities in the different countries.

7 Project documentation and management

The report concludes that the success of the pilot phase of the project is directly related to management policies and practices that can only be described as exemplary. The project planning, tracking, adaption to emerging circumstances and selection of personnel is carefully thought through and implemented. We found evidence of this in the documentation to which we had ready access, in the planning of this mid-term review, and in the arrangements for carrying it out. But the really hard evidence of effective management came from visits to the pilot sites. Participants at pilot sites value the project and have high regard for its management, which this review endorses