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EDUCATIONAL TECHNOLOGY

The role of consortia in educational broadcasting

John Martin
Station Manager, 2SER-FM

The voices radiate from the antenna, perched atop the vertical campus of the NSW Institute of Technology in the heart of Sydney. From her home in the western suburbs a Business Studies student is on the phone, taking issue over a remark just made by the course lecturer, who in turn is speaking from a studio on the campus of the University of New England, in Armidale. Next on the talk-back console is a passing listener - a cabbie who pulled up at a phone booth to have a say in the discussion of entrepreneurial skills. Then it's over to a question from a listener in the Hunter Valley, following the program through the relay broadcast over the University of Newcastle's radio station.

It's Monday night on 2SER-FM, 'Talking to New England' - one of the many experiments in educational broadcasting being carried out by educational public radio stations around Australia. Public radio is about twelve years old, and with close to 70 stations throughout the country, presenting a glorious daily output of community and specialist programs, available to the vast majority of Australians. Twelve of these stations are either operated by an educational institution, or have taken education as an important part of their brief. They are also amongst the oldest and better funded parts of the public radio sector. In context however, that may simply mean that there is one full time paid staff member as against none at all.

It follows quite naturally then, that most of these broadcasters use the term "educational broadcasting" in the broadest possible sense. It remains a rare occasion where programming planning receives a second thought in the midst of immediate housekeeping concerns. Moreover, in the present financial climate in the education sector, it is understood that no relief will materialise overnight. Nevertheless the recent achievements of educational

radio, the successful experiments, and the remarkably strong, interactive links which have been forged with target audiences have created a generally optimistic view of the future amongst educational broadcasters.

In reaching beyond the classroom walls, radio is showing its potential to give education a wider and more penetrating relevancy and appreciation within the community. Perhaps most importantly, radio has amply demonstrated its ability to circumvent the traditional limits of the educational structure in favouring access to some.

For the educational broadcasters new strategies need to be found to build on the recognition of such achievements. From the initial establishment and experimental phase the transition has to be made to that of consolidation and production of programs of sustained quality. Two methods being used are designed to maximise the scarce resources by, at one level, pooling production time and talent, and at the same time attempting to broaden the level and extent of participation by educational institutions in broadcasting.

Shareholding

The University of Adelaide was the first to hold an educational public broadcasting licence. It was quickly followed, in the mid-seventies, by another twelve institutions taking up licences to broadcast. The history of other specialist broadcasting, such as the fine music and the ethnic stations, as well as that of many community stations, will show protracted and widely supported efforts to get 'on air'. Almost without exception, the opposite applied with educational stations, where it was more a case of accepting an invitation to apply for a licence, rather than having to work for one. Therefore, educational radio in Australia has been very much a case ad hoc development. It also largely explains the key problems currently facing educational public radio:

- their direct funding remains at subsistence level for basic operational activities, and
- a lack of integration into the structure and policies of their parent institutions.

Several educational stations have undergone a process of review, and the conclusions drawn have been remarkably similar. In each case there is much praise for the achievements made despite the paucity of resources. In virtually the same breath there are recommendations for greatly increased funding to start to realise the vast potential of the stations.

The response of Sydney's educational station 2SER-FM has been to invite wider shareholding in the consortium of ownership currently comprising Macquarie University and the NSW Institute of Technology. By securing

major ongoing participation by other tertiary education institutions and similar organisations, the station expects to be in a much stronger position to become an effective educational broadcaster. It would achieve a significantly wider academic programming input and the finances to provide appropriate radio resources to use the medium to most advantage.

While trying to strengthen the educational aspect of their activities in these ways, stations have also been keen to make the most of their current programming output by cooperative production projects, and exchanging the best of their products.

Open Mind

In 1985 four stations formed the first *Open Mind* programming project. Sydney's 2SER-FM, 5UV at the University of Adelaide, 2NUR-FM at the University of Newcastle and 6NR at the Western Australian Institute of Technology, allocated a producer each to co-produce four hours of quality programming per week. The Public Broadcasting Foundation assisted the stations with a grant to cover a weekly telephone conference and a weekly overnight exchange of tapes by overnight courier. This year, two further stations joined the production group - 6UVS-FM at the University of Western Australia and 3CCC-FM in Harcourt, Victoria. Most stations compile a half hour program each week, with two programs each from 2SER and 5UV. Programs are built around themes such as education, the arts, women, science, Australian society, and rural affairs.

While each station is responsible for particular programs, there is maximum co-production by the exchange of program material between the stations. The weekly telephone conferences of producers enable overall coordination of the series, planning of future programs, interchange of material and some constructive self criticism between producers.

The success of the project, now ending its second year, is seen from a number of program awards it has collected, and by the fact that *Open Mind* programs are now carried by sixteen radio stations. Considerable economies are achieved, as all stations now broadcast a range and standard of programs which would be quite beyond any individual participant's production capacity. It also provides producers with the opportunity to explore national issues, or to involve within a discussion or debate, people from educational institutions around the country.

The undoubted success of the *Open Mind* model of co-production between like-minded stations has been taken up by an increasing number of networked programs within public broadcasting. They include a weekly media program, environmental series, womens programming, fine music

performances and a trades unions program. They are, however networked programs - and in many instances put together and funded from outside public radio stations themselves, without the co-production element crucial to the *Open Mind* model.

Consequently, a public radio station can now obtain (at very modest cost) about ten hours a week of good quality programming from Australian sources. At least this comes from associated groups, if not from other stations. In the case of smaller, regional stations, this may well create some dangers in diminishing the vital local aspect of all programming. To the larger stations the benefits of working in consort are considerable, particularly where the co-production model is used.

The past twelve years have shown the potential value of educational radio. It can help popularise education, provide information and encouragement, and in some cases, be part of an integrated delivery system for instruction. All these applications however, are highly labour intensive, and must be developed in conjunction with other parts of the education system.

To gain necessary economies, the stations are maximising cooperation and exchange, while maintaining editorial control and production input. They seek to explore the economies, where offered, of large numbers of educational institutions. Using the advantages of radio, they can facilitate development in distance and continuing education, and implement policies to improve equity and participation in tertiary education.

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