EDUTECH

Bollywood Karaoke and Same Language Subtitling to Promote Literacy

SUBMITTED BY **MICHAEL TRUCANO** ON FRI, 01/31/2014

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While I have not seen any research evidence to support this particular contention, I have been in a number of presentations over the years about the 'Finnish success in education' in which the fact that Finnish children watch cartoons with subtitles is mentioned as a contributing factor to their literacy development. Even if there are no peer-reviewed journal articles about the impact of this practice in *Finland* (if anyone knows of any, please do feel free to send them along!) or many other places (subtitling on television has of course been a common practice in many countries of the world for quite some time), there is some pretty compelling evidence from a little initiative in *India* that has been reaching big audiences for over a decade that this sort of thing can make a small but meaningful difference in the lives of many illiterate and low literate people. *Sometimes innovation is the result of doing something 'old' in a 'new' place (often with a slight twist).*

Back in November, **PlanetRead** was awarded the first-ever 'International Prize' as part of the new U.S. Library of Congress Literacy Awards [disclosure: I am a member of the advisory board for these awards] in recognition of its pioneering work in the practice of Same Language Subtitling (SLS), "the idea of subtitling the lyrics of existing film songs (or music videos) on TV, in the 'same' language that they are sung in. Call it Karaoke on Bollywood for mass reading! A deceptively simple innovation, SLS is already delivering regular and inescapable reading practice to 150 million weak-readers in India."

One notable characteristic of each of the three inaugural winners of the Library of Congress Literacy Awards is that they largely work outside of traditional 'educational' institutions as part of their efforts to promote reading. In the case of *Reach Out and Read*, this means connecting with parents and young children in pediatric exam rooms. *826 National* supports store front writing and tutoring centers in local communities. *PlanetRead* focuses its outreach on a place where, like or not, many people spend a lot of their free time: watching television. Brij Kothari, the founder of PlanetRead, joked during the awards ceremonies at the Library of Congress, *some people might say that TV is the enemy of reading, to which we reply: embrace the enemy!*

Kothari notes that many of those folks who are not considered 'illiterate' in official statistics are in fact not actually that literate either, as they can not read something meaningful. Drawing on official figures from India (for specific citations, please watch the speech, view the related PowerPoint file and/or the browse research section of the PlanetRead web site), he notes that, after five years of school, 53% of Indian students are unable to read. This means that there are actually three types of people: the 273m people in India who are illiterate, and two sub-groups of people who are officially considered literate: the 311m who can read 30+ words a minute, together with 467m 'weak readers'. It is estimated that there are currently 750m TV viewers (in 150m households) across India. Given these figures, it is clear that many of the people who watch TV in India are weak readers. Same Language

Subtitling, where "what you hear is what you read", is one mechanism to provide approximately 200m weak readers with reading practice for about 30 minutes a week. The cost of giving this sort of reading practice to one person for his or her entire life is estimated by PlanetRead is about US$1. Research by PlanetRead has done things like eye-tracking of viewers who watch normal or subtitled TV (the eyes of people who watch subtitled TV tend to focus to a much greater extent on the area of the screen where the subtitles), investigated the extent to which SLS-exposed youth and adults read newspapers, and has looked at the ability of people exposed to SLS to write five words (or to write one's address). The results are intriguing, and quite promising. (PlanetRead includes links to a number of research articles on its web site, including a briefing note from the 'What Works' Clearinghouse of the U.S Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences.)

As Professor Kothari explained in his acceptance speech on behalf of PlanetRead at the Library of Congress, "this is a solution that will travel, that can travel, because every culture around the world today watches some form of songs in their own language." It is simple to do. It is low cost. It also, he maintains, has a good synergy with the missions of public broadcasters.

Is SLS *the* answer to our literacy challenges? No, of course not. Same Language Subtitling alone can not help overcome the myriad daunting challenges around the world that inhibit the development of functional literacy skills. *But it can help.* It can reach a lot of people. *It is cheap.* And, for many donors and foundations around the world looking to make a meaningful impact *at scale* as a result of their grants and loans and charitable developmental assistance in various parts of the world: It is probably worth a serious look. It is not *the* solution. *But it might be part of one.*

ANNOUNCEMENT: The nomination period for the 2014 U.S. Library of Congress Literacy Awards are now open, and include a special US$50,000 International Prize to be awarded to an organization or national entity based in a country outside the United States that has made a significant and measurable contribution to increasing literacy levels. The deadline for nominations is 31 March 2014. More information, including the nominations forms, is available on the Library of Congress web site.

Side note: Over the course of a decade or so, the World Bank's infoDev program, where I worked for a number of years, made small grants to scores of groups in developing countries around the world which sought to use information and communication technologies in innovative ways in pursuit of a variety of developmental objectives. PlanetRead received one of these grants (by way of full disclosure, I'll note that, while I have been involved with all of these funding groups in various ways, I was not involved in the specific decisions to award this initial infoDev grant to PlanetRead, nor the small World Bank Development Marketplace grant nor a larger grant as part of USAID's All Children Reading competition that PlanetRead subsequently received).

In retrospect, one component of these infoDev grants that appears rather noteworthy was their requirement that grantees support multi-year data collection and analysis of impact related to their efforts. Some of the groups receiving these grants did great things, some failed. The mandate for multi-year monitoring and evaluation (which infoDev explicitly funded, as part of its grants) of the activities of the organizations that received these grant monies (mostly small NGOs just getting started) removed an acute dilemma facing many NGOs who are perpetually starved for funds. When the choice is between funding a longitudinal study over multiple years of the impact of your work and covering your operating expenses *now*, for most leaders of such groups, it should not be too surprising that *now* wins. When you don't know where your funds are going to come from six to nine months from now, does it make sense to budget for multi-year evaluations of your programs? That said, if you don't have multi-year evaluations demonstrating the impact of your programs, it can be quite difficult to secure larger monies of the sort necessary to 'scale up' your programs should they be deemed, according to some criteria, to be 'successful'. There is perhaps a model here for donor groups, aid agencies, charitable organizations and foundations who are wishing to catalyze 'innovative' practices and

activities that can be sustained and expanded over time ....

To the many regular readers of the EduTech blog for whom the calendar is now turning:
Happy Chinese (and Korean, and Vietnamese, and Mongolian ...) New Year!

You may also be interested in the following EduTech blog posts:
 [-] ICTs and Literacy (the old fashioned kind)
 [-] 10 principles to consider when introducing ICTs into remote, low-income educational environments
 [-] Interactive Radio Instruction: A Successful Permanent Pilot Project?

Note: The image used at the top of this blog post of a multigenerational group about to practice their Bollywood karaoke ("I'd like to teach the world to read, in perfect harmony ...") is (c) PlanetRead. It comes via Wikimedia Commons and is used according to the terms of its Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license.

Comments

fyi There was a small but

SUBMITTED BY MICHAEL TRUCANO ON MON, 02/03/2014 - 09:57

fyi There was a small but important typo in the blog post as originally published: the reference should have been to "the 273m people in India who are illiterate", not "literate". The mistake was probably apparent in context, but it has now been corrected. My apologies about this.

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