

As the crow flies

by Christina Merl¹

Multimedia professional Kuben David sees huge opportunities for e-learning formats in emerging markets. With RDN, the Operations Director of Creapolis South Africa, a South African Dutch joint venture, talks about the major challenges faced when implementing e-learning programmes in emerging markets.

Kuben, how did you come to set up Creapolis South Africa?

I served a 9 week internship in a Dutch company in the framework of a governmental project management exchange programme. This is how I got in touch with Creapolis Media and TPG Academy. We decided to set up a joint venture and implement e-learning programmes for training and skills development in South Africa. Creapolis South Africa is a multi-media company that produces innovative online tools for education, training and communication and is to be officially launched in the first quarter of 2010, which is when our e-learning programmes will start off as well.

So the governmental exchange programme brought you together?

Yes, participants of such exchange programmes are expected to gain practical managerial skills and knowledge abroad that they then can 'plough back' into their home country. Personally, I think that these exchange programmes provide lifetime opportunities to people in emerging nations. Not only do they provide a platform for professional and academic development



Kuben David and his two mentors during the exchange program in the Netherlands.

but also for personal development, which is of equal importance. They connect people from different cultures and ethnic groups. This is how we learn to appreciate people with different cultural backgrounds. I think that people from South Africa, such as myself, can benefit in terms of acquiring cross-cultural and professional know-how. From a professional point of view, valuable skills can be gained that can help to push the economic development in participants' home countries.

How did your time in the Netherlands shape you and change your points of view?

My time in the Netherlands was a life-changing experience. I have grown so much as a person. I have become much stronger, wiser, and more confident. On a professional level, I have gained international business experience. I was always a little rough around the edges when conducting business and my mentors Fred van der Zwaard (Creapolis Media) and Jaap van der Deijl (TPG Academy) helped me to better understand European culture and business behaviour. I will treasure this experience for a lifetime. Further, the exchange programme helped me to connect with

¹ Christina Merl has a background in translation science and Communities of Practice and works as a freelance journalist and community communications facilitator from Vienna, Austria.
© Christina Merl (www.talkshop.cc)

people all over Europe. I have learned that there are people all over who are genuine and sincere, ready to help those who are at a disadvantage.

What are the main challenges back in your home country?

A major challenge is to try to transform a linear culture into a non-linear culture in terms of information, communication and technology (ICT) as well as with regard to training and education. I think that this is due to the lack of a thorough understanding of the benefits of e-learning and the effectiveness of e-learning as a training and educational tool. Further, we lack experts in the field of e-learning in Africa, who could be decision-makers and advance the concept of e-learning within society. Other challenges include the slow pace of decision-making when it comes to implementing pilot projects.

Where do you see the potential of e-learning in South Africa?

I think the potential of e-learning lies in both, school education and skills development. We'll need to consider e-learning and blended learning as an innovative training tool that helps to transfer knowledge and skills to learners in a most effective way. E-learning can further be used as an innovative training and teaching methodology in schools. For example, difficult subjects such as mathematics could be taught through an interactive learning platform and thus make learning more fun. As we know, learners' retention rates of information are higher when the learning is fun. After all, potentially strong future leaders can be trained by means of e-learning and blended learning methods in schools. Currently, South Africa is trying to bridge the skills gap for 2.7 million unemployed and unemployable people. Creapolis South Africa was recently invited to the South African Parliament to present highly interactive e-learning systems. Our goal is to offer high quality skills development training by means of an exciting mixture of face-to-face and online learning. Unemployed and unemployable people need to acquire both theoretical and practical knowledge in different



Students at the Jeppe High Prep School in Johannesburg.

domains, such as welding or road construction. Our ultimate goal is to produce a better skilled labour force in South Africa.

Again, what are the main challenges here?

A major challenge is to gain support from various parallel running governmental initiatives and organizations. Within South Africa, many governmental departments have a similar if not the same vision – to initiate e-learning training and education programmes for their staff. The challenge is to provide workable solutions to all of them. In order to achieve this goal, we aim to fuse my South Africa experience with Dutch expertise and innovative training ideas. What's more, Creapolis South Africa plans to work with local talent. This is how we create opportunities for gifted individuals, both men and women, from disadvantaged backgrounds. In cooperation with the South African government we plan to set up training center facilities in Cape Town and eventually in all major cities of South Africa. These African Training Center Facilities (ATCF) shall consist of classrooms, computer labs, staff rooms, a content development department, an administrative office and lunch/dining room. There, face to face trainings and e-learning courses will be provided to unemployed and unemployable South Africans as well as internships and job services. We also think of providing recreation facilities and accommodation for students and trainees. In addition, we aim to set up the ATCF Fund, which is meant to support

high quality training centers by means of public and private funding. And then, ATCF also stands for “As The Crow Flies”, which indicates the shortest way from point A to point B, and we think this is a nice poetic reference to the effectiveness of e-learning.

How can bad Internet access in rural areas be overcome?

I think we need to initiate partnerships between telecommunication companies and relevant ministries in South Africa, such as the Department of Communications, that are trying to bridge the digital divide in rural South Africa. As a matter of fact, the majority of people from disadvantaged rural communities have access to cellular phones rather than landlines. So, if telecommunication companies agree to assist the effort of creating Internet access in rural areas that will be a huge advantage. The Creapolis South Africa team firmly believes that infrastructure problems in rural areas can be tackled once the resources from all parties mentioned can be brought together. One idea is to launch a mobile digital training service through Internet access by satellite.

What if there exists a language barrier between trainers and students?

E-learning training systems can cater for the language barrier. I am talking about e-learning systems that make use of multimedia elements, including video, animation, sound, graphics, and text. For example, the use of video in e-learning can easily be tailored to specific target groups and thus meet the challenges of vernacular languages. Most of our training programmes will be developed in at least 3 to 4 languages, including English, Zulu, Xhosa, Afrikaans, Tswana. This can be effective support for the trainer when faced with language challenges in the training environment.

Which course content is needed most in South Africa?

Maths and science are subjects that are desperately needed in schools. The average failure rate in these subjects is fairly high. I believe that e-learning can make these topics more fun and at the same time create awareness and attraction. Actually, I think that many pupils do have a ‘psychological’ fear of maths. Adopting mathematics to an interactive e-learning platform, however, can show that maths can be fun, just like

history or geography. As far as skills training for unemployed and unemployable people is concerned, we will soon start a blended learning pilot project for welding internships. Participants of this pilot project will be provided both face to face and online training to acquire relevant theoretical and practical know-how. Videos will be provided as additional support. Video is expected to also work well for less literate people. We plan to carefully evaluate this pilot effort so as to further improve the quality of the trainings. In addition to welding, other relevant skills development courses will be created, such as road construction and pothole repair courses.

Do unemployed and unemployable people in South Africa have access to computers and computer skills?

The level of education of unemployed and unemployable people varies. In most cases, a fair percentage of these people has not completed their schooling. In other cases, some people may have completed high school but did not have the chance to pursue their education any further. Therefore, they have problems to find a job. Currently, there are nebulous initiatives that are set-up by government departments and governmental agencies to provide training for the unemployed and the unemployable, but I personally feel that these initiatives and processes are far too slow. There are opportunities to access computers and the Internet but then again, there are limitations. There are not enough computer labs set-up in towns and poorer suburbs. I think that the limitations outweigh the demand and that this is purely a result of bureaucracy and red tape. There are basic programmes available that provide basic computer literacy skills. But once again I feel that these programmes are initiated at a snail’s pace. I think that much more could be done and that many more such programmes should be initiated. As said before, Creapolis South Africa wants to promote the development of fully equipped computer training centres (ATCF) so as to assist in meeting the demand for more computer skills training for the unemployed and the unemployable.

How can you evaluate the learning process?

E-learning is a highly non-linear interactive concept. This means that the trainer/educator can see what

students are doing, how they are performing and also when their tasks are submitted. The learning process will be evaluated within a timeframe of a few hours, depending on the type of assessment conducted and the subject that is tested. The evaluation will have to be concise and precise. Depending on the course material and the number of students the educator should be in a position to provide instant feedback if the course is basic. However, there are also methods to conduct a combination of both physical and online evaluations. The baseline assessments for a course could be a physical feedback session since the purpose of a baseline assessment is to determine learners' existing knowledge on a subject matter. Following face to face assessment, the formative assessment could be through online interaction. In any case, we'll adopt an outcomes-based learning approach to evaluate coursework.

Do you think that learners can improve their living standards with the help of e-learning courses?

Absolutely. I think that e-learning courses will be an extremely effective method of learning, coupled with an outcomes-based approach. A combination of e-learning and an outcomes-based education method will definitely equip learners with skills that will prepare them for the work environments. Currently, the skills sector in South Africa demands trained labour who can be slotted into a job and perform well. Ultimately, being employable will contribute towards a better living standard for individuals and their families.

Can you tell a little bit about the Moby School project in Tanzania? What is the purpose? Who is the target group?

Moby School, as the name suggests, is a concept to develop mobile schools and training facilities in Tanzania. Mobile training facilities will be equipped with proper ICT infrastructure, including computer facilities and Internet access. Just as ICT training challenges exist in rural areas in South Africa, they do in Tanzania. There is a lack of proper ICT infrastructure that provides access to the Internet and to computer facilities. Therefore, the MobySchool will be mobile and travel through the rural areas of Tanzania to provide sufficient training and education to young Tanzanians and others in those communities who have a dire interest to learn. Further, MobySchool will take ICT

training and skills to educators in rural areas. Apart from that, e-learning via the MobySchool concept can offer life skills training to the broader rural communities, such as hygiene, language skills, HIV education to name but a few.

Contact details:

Kuben David (Creapolis South Africa): kuben@creapolis.com; www.creapolis.com.za

Fred van der Zwaard (Creapolis Media, Netherlands):

Fred@creapolis.com