

**KEY COMPETENCIES: SKILLS FOR LIFE CONFERENCE
LONDON - JULY 12th 2007**

WENDY JONES – BBC

Learning on the licence fee: new approaches to skills for life.

Thank you.

I often feel something of an interloper at any gathering like this. Many of you are involved very directly in education or training and have very clear connections to the skills for life agenda - through the formal education sector, or employment, or government or academia. And you might well wonder why someone from a broadcasting organisation should be here. Broadcasting you may think of primarily as a source of news and entertainment.

In a way, you'd be right. The BBC is not a formal educator as such. We don't provide education courses, we don't track the progress of individuals, we don't award them qualifications, we aren't bound by government targets for skills quotas or educational achievement. And BBC programme-makers tend not to use phrases like 'key competencies' and 'educational outcomes'.

However, we do have a very specific commitment to support learning and more broadly to help build knowledge and understanding. It's part of what we're funded by the licence fee to do. It's been there since the beginning of the BBC in the 1920s – when our mission was first defined as being 'to inform, educate and entertain'. And it's still there today – a key part of our public service obligations.

But the way we now approach this support for learning is quite different from how we used to do it in the past. In previous times, we provided what was very clearly educational broadcasting, lectures on the air if you like. By today's standards, these early broadcasts appear very didactic – you were talked to in a rather formal way - on subjects like The British Government – the experience was clearly meant to be good for you. You listened, maybe even took notes, sent away for the booklets.

This was very effective in its own fashion – and broadcasting did open up the idea of mass adult education in a unique new way. But there were two shortcomings.

First, it was a passive experience for the audience - very much lecture rather than tutorial. How much real learning took place was hard to say. And secondly, in a sense it preached to the converted. You probably didn't switch on an educational programme unless you were really sure that's what you wanted. In other words, these tended to be niche programmes for a small if

dedicated band of followers. They didn't really get over the hurdle of how you make people want to learn in the first place.

Today we see our job as motivating people, even inspiring them, to want to learn – and then providing the resources that support that learning. We're moving away from the idea of educational broadcasting slots. After 30 years, our long-term partner the Open University has stopped broadcasting televised lectures for its students. It prefers to use the internet for that purpose – but it still works with the BBC to produce programmes which are broadcast as part of our mainstream output and which you might not guess were meant to be 'educational' until you spot the OU logo at the end.

What has really changed here is the technology. The new media actually alter everything. They allow for interactivity, iteration, progression – they're flexible, they're under the control of the learner, and not available only when the broadcasters determine.

Over ten years, Online has grown to become a core part of the BBC's output. We aim to bring to it the same production values, the same programme-making creativity and innovation as we do to television and radio. But the nature of online lends itself to learning and to the acquisition of skills in a way that analogue broadcasting cannot.

One of the earliest and still most popular uses of the BBC online service was for school students studying for exams. BBC Bitesize pioneered multi-media interactive revision material and is now used by around three-quarters of teenagers taking exams.

And we also support adult learners through online. Six years ago we introduced Skillswise, which offers a bank of content in literacy and numeracy. It is now the most widely used online skills site in colleges around the country, although it can also be used by learners without intermediaries. Similarly WebWise, starting around the same time and building on the success of TV series like Computers Don't Bite, offered help with basic web literacy.

We also began to transfer more of our language learning resources to the web. Go there now – bbc.co.uk/languages - and you'll see that we concentrate on the European big four – French, German, Spanish and Italian – but as well we provide for some of the lesser taught languages, including Greek, Mandarin, Urdu and Japanese. We currently have more than half a million unique users. BBC Languages support formal classes at college – but at least half of those who visit the site do so informally at home.

But the web itself is changing. It's getting faster. Half the adult population in the UK now has access to a broadband connection at home - for children the proportion is even higher. And that means there's more that can be done with the medium. To start with, we can make use of better quality video.

WebWise has already spawned Computer Tutor, a highly interactive video-based guide to using a computer. And – back to languages – we’ve introduced the first of a new generation of broadband language services – Ma France.

We launched this with something of a fanfare last year – there was an accompanying television series called Excuse My French that followed the efforts of a trio of celebrities to learn French. The aim was to hook viewers in through the medium of entertainment and then encourage them – some at least – to visit the broadband online site.

The ability to speak a foreign language may be regarded as a key competency by most Europeans, but of course it’s still something which most Brits see as a specialist and rather exotic skill. But we’re doing our bit. And we’re now developing a similar service in Spanish, due for launch in the coming months.

The combination of capturing people’s interests through television entertainment and then leading them onto interactive learning via digital media is a device we’re using elsewhere. But it’s not something we can overuse. The editors of popular drama series are very wary of people with a cause knocking at their doors trying to infiltrate ideas into scripts, and TV commissioners on mainstream channels can be very resistant to anything that looks like educational broadcasting.

But it can sometimes work well with a big theme. It was the starting point for our current literacy campaign – RaW (an acronym for Read and Write). This started off nearly two years ago now, targeting people of working age with intermediate reading and writing skills - that is people at Level 1 or Entry Level 3 – or as we sometimes put it, people with a reading age of between 9 and 14. The usual estimate is that there are 12 million people in this group in the UK – people whose personal lives may be restricted because of their poor literacy - whether that means they have difficulty filling in a form or helping their children with homework - and people whose value to the economy is certainly limited.

We’ve taken an unashamedly populist approach, starting off with a couple of literacy-themed entertainment shows and with storylines in TV soaps, popular dramas like EastEnders. Since then RaW has popped up in features and discussions and trails on a range of TV and radio programmes, often working its way into distinctly non-educational areas like sport and music. And we’ve produced RaW CD-Roms built around material from various BBC shows.

All of this is complemented by a vast range of activity in the community, achieved through working with partners. And that’s absolutely crucial - the BBC simply couldn’t do this without the support of other organisations.

There are now 6,000 venues throughout the UK which operate as RaW centres - many in public libraries, but others in workplaces, pubs, Surestart centres for young parents, football clubs, prisons even. These are very clearly not educational establishments. But they all run RaW events – things like quizzes, bookclubs, story workshops; they offer RaW literature, and encourage use of the RaW website. (For prisons, and other places where use of the internet is restricted, we're creating a special CD-Rom.) We also work with the national LearnDirect service – they support us by offering a free telephone counselling service related to RaW.

All in all, we reckon we've reached over a million people so far – and by 'reached', I don't just mean getting people to watch programmes but actually involving them actively in the events or learning online. We don't know statistically how far everyone takes their interest or what difference it has made to their lives – though there is probably interesting research to be done there. But there is clear anecdotal evidence.

Looking ahead we want to develop a more permanent broadband offering – which is there not as a resource for teachers but to serve individual learners and to be the base resource for any further broadcast lifeskills campaigns. This will build upon some of our existing resources – things like Skillswise and Computer Tutor - and will offer support for what we see as the generic key skills - reading, writing, numeracy, computer literacy and communications skills – the most basic skills that people need to function in modern society – the foundation for further learning.

As I've said, it's the interactivity offered by the new media that is key for learning. The advent of higher speed broadband allows not only higher quality video for example, but also a more sophisticated level of interactivity. One aspect of this is 'user – or learner - generated content' whereby learners can create their own work and reflect on other people's contributions – communicating with each other, rather than just with the website.

It may feel as if we're in the territory of the young here – the land of MySpace, and YouTube. The BBC has made its own contribution here through a community project called BBC Blast which helps teenagers develop skills in areas like music, digital film-making and writing. Blast's online aspect provides a carefully moderated area - resourced with BBC content - where young people can express themselves creatively, post up their own work and gain confidence in the skills they're developing. This is now an important aspect of our overall approach to learning for children and teenagers.

But it's interesting to see how far this can be developed for adults too. It's already an aspect of the RaW website – which features stories written by learners themselves.

One other notable example is People's War – a site composed entirely of user generated content. Linking the project to various broadcast programmes

commemorating the Second World War, we invited people who had lived through that war to contribute their memories - and we worked with partners in local communities to support them in doing this. We ended up with 40,000 personal stories, an educational archive of social history which is now permanently stored with the British Library.

Not only is this user generated content, it is also *learner* generated. For this was certainly learning. The contributors were by definition people in their 70s, 80s or 90s, and for many of them this was their first brush with the internet. They were learning a new skill, or at least having their eyes opened to the possibility of a new skill.

And that I think sums up the BBC's approach to skills for life, and what we – perhaps uniquely – can offer. It's about hooking people in through entertainment and through the appeal of the BBC brand - education by stealth if you like. It's about new technology allowing proper interactivity. It's about providing unthreatening spaces – virtual or real - and encouraging people to try something new. It's about using our resources, our content, our channels of communication to help people fulfil their potential.

What we offer does of course make just one small contribution to a very large and complex challenge, and I certainly wouldn't overestimate that contribution. But I hope you'll agree it is a contribution that has some value.

Thank you.

For further details of the BBC's learning activities, see

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/learning/>

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/raw/>

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/languages/>