### Issues – Workshop Notes

#### Issue 1: What types of stories will be part of the African Storybook Project?

The introductory session raised the debate on how the project should think about digital African stories for early reading.

*What is an* ***African*** *story?*

The African Storybook Project will do two things – ask for and publish stories that African children can relate to so that early reading becomes reading for meaning. Even if the stories have not actually originated in Africa, children need to recognise themselves and their contexts in the stories.

It will also respond to the strong desire to preserve indigenous languages, stimulate writing in them, and thus generate a respect for language and culture that comes from having written material.

What is a *story* ***for* *early reading****?*

A story could be defined as anything that children can use to become literate – fiction, non-fiction, poetry, rhymes, songs, riddles. As Judith Baker pointed out, children **have to see the story, not just hear it.** They have to learn at an early age to match sounds to text, that there are symbols that are meaningful, that relate to what you hear orally, that strike the emotions, make you think, and increase your logical world. The earlier this happens the better, because it takes time to ‘wire the brain’ for reading.

But is the ASP wanting stories that can be used for children to be read to and with, or stories for learning to read themselves? Or both? They are two very different things.

Children reading is the central objective – everything else may be lovely, but is peripheral. If African children don’t learn to read at above the 30% level that they are currently reading at, there will never be equality. African children have to learn to read at the level required in the 21st century. So the children must learn to read **themselves.**

Surely these are not mutually exclusive?

Even if we limit ourselves to stories that children read, I would want to engage with those children in their reading in a range of different ways. There is nothing to stop teachers reading a children’s book with the child. Teachers need to be models of reading for children to follow.

*What about* ***oral stories****, storytelling in a variety of forms? Or do we concentrate on the written?*

Written language is different from spoken language – the child won’t see exactly what they hear. The example of this was the version of *One hot Saturday afternoon* from the point of view of [two cows](http://www.saide.org.za/resources/newsletters/Vol_18_no.6_2012/Content/OneHotSaturday-TheCows.mp3) (characterised as township Sotho speaking teenagers). The ‘playscript’ isn’t the same as the story or the audio recording. It is a different thing.

But it is possible to present the oral in written form in ways that retain the integrity of the oral. If you work with children and respect the words they use to tell their own stories, you can create powerful written stories based on the oral. For example, [*My mother’s necklace*](http://www.saide.org.za/resources/newsletters/Vol_18_no.6_2012/Content/MyMothersNecklace.mp3)(read by Glynis Clacherty).

*Stories* ***in what languages****?*

We will focus story acquisition on stories in the main languages of the pilot countries, to ensure that there is a representative collection of stories in the languages that are local to the people with whom we are encouraging use. However, the website translation and versioning tools will also encourage people to version/translate and upload in other languages where there will not be a community associated with the project.

People may visit the site and may expect to find stories on the site in scarce or small local dialects which we are not focussing on. Or may expect to full range of children’s literature for African children, rather than stories for early reading. For this reason, we need to be very clear and concise as to what we are doing on the platform so as not to raise expectations.

*What is an* ***open, free*** *story?*

The stories on the site will have a Creative Commons license – negotiated with the authors/originators of the work. This means they will be free (no charge) as well as free to use, copy, distribute, but also to adapt, version, translate.

With authors, we should consider a **hybrid model**. For example, they could donate one story to be available as a PDF, and agree to allow free versioning/translating of it. Or they could give us the rights to translate the story with or without using the original illustrations, but would retain the rights to the story in the original language. In this way, we do not take away the livelihood of authors, but at the same time, this frees up some of their material for more general use.

We need to be careful about the copyright and licensing of stories we find. Attention needs to be given to how we will overcome issues of copyright where other people may upload stories which are copyrighted and the risks this exposes ASP to.

#### Issue 2: Translation and versioning

The point of the session on translation and versioning was to consider existing stories that have already come into the ASP, and explore how they could be translated and versioned. The discussion was also helped by the experience of the Molteno Institute – whose [Vula Bula series](http://www.molteno.co.za/our-programmes) is an attempt to break from the usual practice of translation in the production of early reading books.

*Is translation advisable?*

Molteno’s view is that in the production of readers for early reading, translation doesn’t really work: you have to start and end with the language in which you are aiming to teach children to read. The majority of readers in African languages are direct translations of English books. The effect of this is difficult phonics, long words, lengthy sentences and paragraphs for sentences which in English are simple and appropriate.

So there is a need to generate original readers in the African language. Readers are developed by finding high frequency words in the African language, combining these with phonically regular core content words, and then generating stories based on this vocabulary. Unless children are taught to decode properly from having enough readers at their level of reading, they cannot become literate. Once they can decode fluently, they can access more difficult books.

*Shouldn’t versioning be the aim, rather than translating?*

Another view is that the answer lies in versioning not translating. This was the view of the young people who did the versioning of stories used for the workshop. ‘You decide the angle you want to take for the story related to your local context, and then the language flows from this’. This was done with the Xhosa weatherman version of *One Hot Saturday Afternoon*, and the version of the story from the point of view of two Sotho cows. The argument here is that the language people use is the language that young people and their teachers will understand and often it’s much simpler. For example, the word for ‘tsamaya’ in Sesotho contains a digraph and could be difficult for an early reader, but the Scamto version ‘Vaya’ is much easier to read, and very generally known, certainly in the Johannesburg context for which the version is intended.

What we want is not just a story that can be read easily, but a story that has context, that resonates, that is more than just the words.

*What are the challenges for translation?*

There were two views. The one was that in African languages there is no standardisation, and anyone wanting to write and publish is bombarded with different versions. Teachers, especially, are very critical of published books. They don’t look at the quality of the book, but pick out the spelling or word they disagree with. Teachers will need to embrace different versions. It is not possible to arrive at agreement because each group speaks a different dialect and language is changing all the time.

The other view was that linguists, particularly descriptive linguists could resolve the problems. Perhaps the notion of linguistic communities such as the [Puku Foundation](http://puku.co.za/) is hoping to develop around African language story publishing could assist in mediating these debates.

The important point however, is that the African Storybook doesn’t really have to make decisions about dialect and language variety. It will be receiving stories more than it will be creating them, and cannot hope to be knowledgeable about each of the languages in which the stories are written. The important thing is that the stories will be written in language close to the people writing the story (not like Ngugi, who wrote a long novel in a version of Kikuyu which no one could read because it was completely outdated). Another important point is that one of the primary attributes of the ASP is the versioning capability. If a teacher does not like a particular word or phrase, she can change it.

In other words, the ASP should not be purist about language, but should ensure that the context and language is described when the stories are uploaded.

#### Issue 3: Teachers and parents as vital role players in children learning to read:

*Can we stop at presenting the stories, or do we need to engage with how the stories are mediated with the children?*

Perhaps we need to look at the impact use of the ASP on teachers’ engagement with reading and their ability to be a role-model of reading for their learners? We should perhaps monitor the effect that the availability of numerous stories on a website has on teachers’ ability to select and read and use ‘story’ – teachers creating their own ‘libraries’ on the site and learning to write for their own learners.

There is a problem that teachers are often distanced from their children’s reading [in some places, reading was used as a punishment for bad behaviour!] The teacher has vital role to play as a model of reading for pleasure. People can only develop into lifelong readers if there is **enjoyment** associated with the activity of reading.

The kind of books we publish on the website should start to **get teachers to think differently** about how they engage children with reading. They need to be stories, not just for practicing sounds. They might need to be phonetically appropriate, but they must be stories.

**Comprehension is critical**. Knowing the right questions to ask children about what they are reading is very important. Often teachers think children can read simply because they decode efficiently. They don’t necessarily check comprehension, whether they can understand what they have read at a deeper level and answer the Why? How? What did you think? type of questions. If we want to get kids thinking inferentially, we have to ask inferential questions as well as literal ones.

Although the ASP is not a teacher development project, it will work with teacher development partners, tracking how they use the stories in their work with teachers. Perhaps we should consider, in addition, some guidance on the website, though: ‘this is a book you can read with your child’ ‘this is a book your child can read on his own’.   
  
There was a strong feeling from participants, though, that because teachers and parents are key, there needs to be a teacher development section on the website, with material on how to read with children.

#### Issue 4: How do we provide illustrations for contributed stories in a cost effective but high quality way?

The major point in inviting Jemma Kahn to present the Japanese art of storytelling was to consider how we can learn from the great skill and experience of the Japanese in using illustration in storytelling and in literacy development.

Essentially the preparation for a Kamishibai performance involves taking an existing story, deciding on the essence of the storyline, creating an illustration for each discrete part of the story, and then developing the text to go with the story. It is therefore, in essence, a versioning exercise. Also, because of the dependence on the visual, it also lends itself to treatment in different languages.

The technique has been used in Lilli Pretorius’s project in Atteridgeville where an expert foundation phase teacher works over a long period of time as a mentor to foundation phase teachers in an underperforming school in Atteridgeville. The experience was memorable, but perhaps this was because of the excellence of the teacher. She was able to ask the right questions of the children, and point out the small details of the art work that they may have missed. Paula Gains of Molteno noted that Kamishibai is wonderful for concentration and listening comprehension.

The performance raised the following questions:

*Does the success of the method depend on the skill of the teacher, or is the method replicable?*

Jemma’s view was that it’s a popular art and anyone can do it. That’s what it’s built for. Also, the artwork doesn’t have to be complex. The illustrations can be very simple and they still work.

*Does the success of the genre depend on the live performance elements, and the excitement about the equipment? Or can it be translated into digital form?*

It is possible that the method could be described on the website for people to replicate, rather than creating a digital version of the method. There could be a series of illustrations for teachers to cut out and paste on board, and use according to the Kamishibai method.

Or the movement of illustrations as the story unfolds could be replicated on a tablet.

However, it might be that the method needs to be demonstrated, rather than described. It could be used at a partner development workshop for the ASP, to stimulate the writing of stories.

*But how would this contribute to children reading? Isn’t it in essence an oral form?*

Perhaps children could be involved in the performance – and read the text at the back of the illustrations.

Or perhaps the best use of the method is as a strategy to fast track the versioning and publishing of stories in a variety of languages.

#### Issue 4: What is involved in putting child-created stories on a website?

The main point of inviting Glynis Clacherty to present her work on child-created stories was to consider how we might link in to existing projects that work with children ( such as the Sophiatown Community Psychological Services for whom Glynis regularly works), and publish their stories as authentic African children’s ‘voices’.

As the language experience approach has shown, child- created stories are powerful ways to engage children in learning to read, particularly where there are few resources. But once you move beyond the classroom into public spaces, there are ethical issues.

What emerged from Glynis Clacherty’s presentation and discussion that followed were two important issues.

* Working with children to help them create their own stories requires skill and sensitivity. The child’s voice and words need to be elicited and honoured, while at the same time suggesting what might give the story more impact. Reading is not just the words. It’s the person, it’s the whole experience. When Glynis works with children, she keep the story as close to their versions as possible. This points to the need for co-creation and co-publishing. Child ownership critical.
* From the point of view of publishing children’s work, it was felt that if the names used in the stories are changed, and children are asked for permission to upload their stories after a full explanation of how the stories will be used, this would be fine. However, in addition, on occasions the adult might decide that, to protect the child, certain stories should not be published.

#### Issue 5: How do we deal with the tension between curation and experimentation?

At one level, curation (or moderation) is a sine qua non. ASP has to build in a process for ensuring basic suitability of material that is uploaded. There will also need to be very clear and stringent processes for moderating content in place as well as a Complaints Desk so as to avoid the uploading of offensive content.

But beyond this, issues of quality are tricky. We wish to stimulate experimentation and give writers/versioners the motivation that comes from seeing their work ‘go up’ immediately. But at the same time, the initiative will be judged on the quality (both verbal and visual) of the stories. Some people could view sub-standard content and decide not to return to the platform based on their initial experience.

One way to resolve this is to have a curated section and a sandpit section. The ‘sandpit’ section would be those stories which have not been changed extensively, and may have been created using informal art or simple techniques. This could also be a space where collaboration in story creation could be encouraged. The curated section could be fully published stories with high quality illustrations and edited text. However, we would need to consider criteria for what was regarded as ‘high quality’, which stories had the look and feel and content that was attractive and usable for our target audience.

Another approach could be to have a rating system for stories, so that the users themselves decide. Or to monitor the number of times a story was downloaded and use this as an indicator of suitability for the platform.

Another could be to have stories up for a short period of time, before further ‘shaping’: before such content was ready for permanent publishing.

Consideration could also be given to publishing an unfinished story and allowing children the opportunity to illustrate the story. This would provide space for the community to curate the story.

In summary, quality assurance must be built into how the website is managed, with debates about what gets put up and how it gets put up. Through this teachers and parents will engage and understand the different language issues.

#### Issue 6: High tech or low tech?

The important principle for story acquisition is to consider the resources that African children currently get to help them to learn to read, and to aim to exceed this quality and variety through the use of technology. For example, although the use of Flash formats for stories makes for a better digital reading experience, it demands Java software and a higher bandwidth. PDF stories might therefore be better.

However, technology provides solutions to problems that have hitherto not had solutions. For example, a tablet can have hundreds of stories on it – and can’t be eaten by cockroaches in the remote areas of Turkana in Kenya where no book survives for long, even if stored in a metal chest. If a teacher in such an area had a single tablet with a data projector to use to project the stories for her class, she would be able to have enough stories for reading practice.

In addition, technology is penetrating fast. If print stories are wanted, we need to remember that copy machines exist even in the most remote places (eg Sudan), and teachers could use these resources to make copies of books for their children.

There are numerous apps that can be used for creating books (Storybird, Little Bird Tales, Story Jumper, Umsinsi.com, Booktrailer, Youblisher, Starfall.com) as Fiona Beal from [Schoolnet](http://www.schoolnet.org.za/) made us aware, and these should be referred to as and when appropriate for the target audience. Material created through these means could be uploaded onto the website. Or else their tools could be customised for our own use. But we have to be careful that we have the primary target audience and their needs in mind as we engage with technology.