

How to Write a Novel in 4000 Easy Steps

After more than four thousand emails (enough to fill the pages of an average-sized novel), many SKYPE communications, numerous videoconferences and two face-to-face workshops, the *CG On-line Learning Resources* portal is now up and running.

Eighteen months of global communications and collaborative efforts have resulted in a portal that will allow the CGIAR training and education community to collaborate more closely and share information and resources on a multitude of topics. All users will now have quick and easy access to the latest advances in instructional technology; CGIAR training and education policies; and learning opportunities and calendars.

Eventually, CGIAR partners and beneficiaries will also be able to take advantage of the resources available through this portal.

Collaboration

The collaborative effort that made all of this possible was enormous. Since the Online Learning Resources (OLR) Project began in April 2004, communications between Project Coordinator Jan Beniest and his team have spanned the globe and involved people at 11 CGIAR Centers, an international learning foundation, and associates from an organization that promotes open and distance learning for development.

For the most part, the various players collaborated as a 'virtual community', but this has not been without its challenges, mainly because most of the people involved have other full-time

responsibilities within the CGIAR. In addition, the community is constantly changing as people move in and out of training at the different Centers. Indeed, only five out of the 15 Centers had the same representation at both of the OLR workshops held this year.

The community's main 'social' interaction in recent months was the workshop it conducted with ARIADNE, its strategic partner, in Leuven, Belgium, in November 2005. This face-to-face event helped cement stronger ties among the members attending and also provided a platform for getting instant feedback on the Project's work.

"Most People seemed to appreciate the tools we presented and found them easy to use," said Jan. "At the end of the workshop we got pledges for uploading resources and using the learning management system, MOODLE, to embark on some (blended) distance learning events."

The OLR Project is just one of fourteen activities under the CGIAR ICT-KM Program, all of which rely heavily on inter-Center teamwork. Jan, the Principal Training Scientist and Training Unit Manager at ICRAF, spearheads the Project's main coordinating team with Thomas Zschocke, Head of CIP's Training Department. Staff from CIP, IRRI and ICRAF involved in this main team also received input from eight other Centers at different levels of intensity. Jan is also quick to acknowledge the invaluable assistance he received from three associates from the



Commonwealth of Learning. Dedicated interns Sheila Rao, Courtney Paisley and Kerri Jackes have been working at ICRAF for the last 10 months.

Challenges

The end result that we see today belies the challenges that the Project faced, especially during the initial stages when it was focusing on the development of a repository of CGIAR electronic training resources.

Even in the developed world, the various fields that the Project has had to tackle (learning objects, metadata, e-learning, etc) are all fairly recent developments. So it was hardly surprising that most Centers were not up-to-date regarding such resources and practices. At least this was the situation early last year.

Of course, as a result of the OLR Project, the Centers are now more aware of the gains accruing to them through online learning activities.

CG On-line Learning Resources will also address the problem of duplication of learning resources across the CGIAR System.

"We all seem to work on a series of similar training topics: biometrics, soil and plant analysis, genetic resources, natural resources management, training and education technology," explained Jan. "And we often work with the same national partners in several countries and regions in training and education. At one stage, there were three Centers offering a

similar type of course (research design) in different parts of Africa. It should be obvious that we can do a much better job if we pool our resources."

The Project Coordinator is already looking to the future. "Working closer together to create synergy and avoid duplication is certainly worth noting, and my feeling is that 'capacity building' might become the next System-wide Program," he said. "The OLR Project can certainly be seen as a first step in such a direction."



Jan Beniest (ICRAF, Nairobi) videoconferencing with Erik Duval and Stefaan Ternier of ARIADNE, Belgium

Motivation

Jan and his team work hard to juggle the commitments of their nine-to-five jobs and the demands of the Project. Of course, some might wonder what it is that makes the OLR team give of their own time so freely when they could be at home spending more time with family and friends.

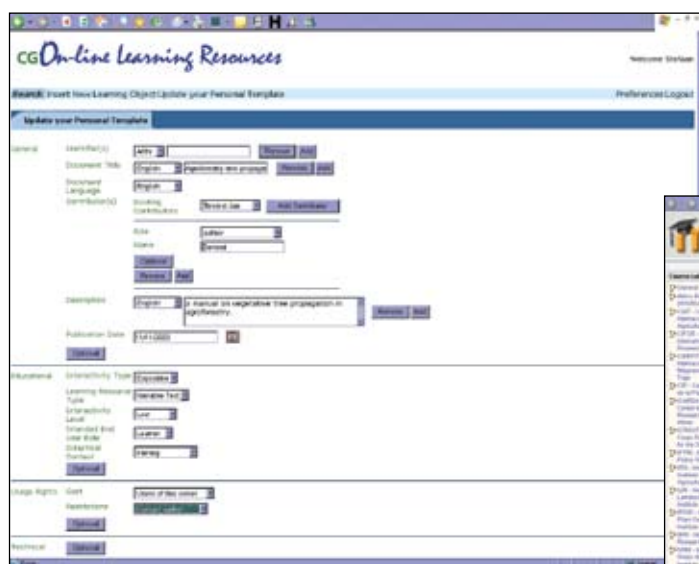
"We are motivated by those times when we are able to present the tools we are working on to some of our partners in those developing countries where national institutions do not recognize the value of such aids for training and teaching," explained Jan.

Indeed, a lecturer of agroforestry at a national university in Kenya recently remarked: "It's really great to have a single source for the learning materials from all the CGIAR Centers. This will certainly enhance the quality of teaching and learning at our national education institutions."

The Next Chapter

Looking ahead, more active and organized collaboration is needed if the Centers are to avoid duplication of efforts and create synergy when addressing similar audiences, especially in areas that are of interest to Centers and national institutions.

Looks like Jan and his team are going to be writing some more emails.



All CGIAR Centers are active in training, education and learning and can greatly benefit from closer collaboration in several learning areas as well as in the development and dissemination of CGIAR learning resources. The Online Learning Resources Project aims to make such resources (being global public goods) more easily accessible to all intended users following internationally recognized standards and procedures. This Project also aims to create a CGIAR training community of practice that works closely together for the benefit of an international learning community interested in agriculture and natural resources management.