Educating Kids Across Africa Through a Local Cartoon Show

We write what’s on our minds.

Thomas Ehrlich and Ernestine Fu Contributor ©

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Ubongo started early last year with a television show focused on teaching math through animated stories and catchy songs in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. The organization estimates that the show is watched in one of four households with televisions in Tanzania. Across Tanzania, Kenya, and Rwanda, the show has 1.2 million weekly viewers. Teachers and schools have asked Ubongo to bring the show to their classrooms.

"Enthusiasm for learning can support the work teachers do everyday," Stacey Wong knows that the show alone won’t solve Tanzania’s education crisis, "The Ubongo team has to be creative and inspire an enthusiasm for learning." Wong is a recent Stanford University graduate who is working for the organization this summer.

We questioned three members of the Ubongo Kids team: co-founder and CEO Nisha Ligon, Doreen Kessy, and Stacey Wong to learn more.

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How much can a television show change education in Africa? "The Ubongo team knows that the show alone won’t solve Tanzania’s education crisis," Stacey Wong said. "But the show can teach fundamental concepts and inspire an enthusiasm for learning. That can support the work teachers do everyday."

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At the beginning of each season, we bring together teachers and education experts to design the curriculum for the next 13 episodes. After selecting show topics—like division, telling time, or calculating area—we see how we can improve it. We critique all the little details like, “Do Kibena’s arms move in a natural-looking way?” “Should the mushrooms be solid or polka-dotted?” “Does the melody of the song work well once the lyrics are translated into English?”

After the first draft of an episode is created, we all meet and view it on a screen, to

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who love Ubongo Kids, friends, and others as voice actors.

writes the melodies for the songs. We also work with kids from the community what the characters should be doing on screen, and our music production team write the script in Kiswahili and translate to English. Our animators “storyboard” calculating area – the entire team brainstorm an outline for the show. We then, next 13 episodes. After selecting show topics – like division, telling time, or

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Who are the main cartoon characters of Ubongo Kids? Do you have a favorite?

Mama Ndége, the big green bird. Photo credit: Ubongo.
Ligon, Kessy, Wong: Research from shows like “Sesame Street” and “Teletubbies” shows that kids respond strongly to familiar animal characters. Our main cartoon characters are Mama Ndege (the big green bird), Ngedere (the professorial monkey), Da Chura (the dancing frog), and Uncle T (the rapping giraffe). We also have Kibena, Kiduchu, and Baraka – three children who learn with the animals.

Ehrlich, Fu: How do you figure out the education component of these videos? Specifically, what education content to focus on and how to present that content effectively?

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Ligon, Kessy, Wong: Research from shows like "Sesame Street" and "Teletubbies" shows that kids respond strongly to familiar animal characters. When the show first started, we held writing sessions with local kids and their parents test new prototypes. Photo credit: Ubongo.
We understand viewers can interact live with the show via text messaging. How does that work?

Ligon, Kessy, Wong: We partnered with EduMe to create interactive text-message quizzes, which are delivered by Tigo, a telecom company in Tanzania. Anyone with even the most basic phone can participate. Answers are simple: text back “Yes,” “No,” “A,” or “4.” Based on the child’s response, the system sends feedback and follows up questions. It’s “gamified” so that each time they get a question right, kids receive a free phone call from Mama Ndege, who congratulates them and then plays them a song! We also have a leaderboard on the TV show, which features the users who answered most questions, had best accuracy, and the best newcomer.

Primary school teachers, who gave us input on the topics we should teach and helped us set learning objectives. As the organization is growing, we’re now also conducting more structured user testing to develop our content in a more goal-oriented way.
One of our winners was an 8-year-old boy from Mbezi Kimara, an outlying district of Dar es Salaam. After seeing his name on the leaderboard on TV, he was so eager to meet Mama Ndege in person. He took a 2-hour bus ride to our office! All of the numbers were worn off his phone keyboard, because he had texted back so many answers. He was very happy to meet Cleng’a, the voice of Mama Ndege. He called our office every day after that, asking to speak to Mama Ndege again.

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Ligon, Kessy, Wong: We started in Tanzania, because it's where we're from and there was such a great need for entertainment, but we've always planned on making content that can reach kids across Africa. With Ubongo Kids in Kiswahili, we launched in Tanzania on national TV. After 6 months, we partnered with Star Times (a Pan-African broadcaster) to bring Ubongo Kids Kiswahili to TV across the region, in Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, and Burundi. That's about as far as Swahili can go, so we did a Kickstarter campaign to raise funds to translate Ubongo Kids to English. The English version is now broadcasting on large national TV stations in Rwanda and Kenya, and we'll be launching soon in Uganda and Ghana.

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We are the co-authors of Civic Work, Civic Lessons: Two Generations Reflect on Public Service. Tom Ehrlich’s public service has been primarily in the Federal Government. Our vision is to bring interactive edutainment to countries across Africa on whatever technologies kids can access: television, mobile, Internet, radio, books and more. So we are currently developing a collection of ebooks, audio books, as well as an android application. We are also in development of new series for different age groups and topics. Our dream is to inspire a love of learning across the African continent. We want to transform learning for the 450 million kids in Africa by bringing them fun new ways to learn. Ubongo aims to provide ultra-low cost entertainment, which can have a lasting impact on generations to come, and which can open the door for the future of digital learning.

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Ehrlich, Fu: Where do you see the show and organization going? What are some of the other educational materials you’re looking to create?