Trialling a web-based 'discussion-support' tool in the Australian sugar industry: Stakeholder responses are encouraging ...

Neil Cliffe[1], Roger Stone[1], Jeff Coutts[2], Shahbaz Mushtaq[1], Kathryn Reardon-Smith[1]

1 Australian Centre for Sustainable Catchments, University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba Q4350 Australia Email: neil.cliffe@usq.edu.au; roger.stone@usq.edu.au; shahbaz.mushtaq@usq.edu.au; kathryn.reardon-smith@usq.edu.au
2 Coutts J&R, PO Box 2681 Toowoomba Q4350 Australia www.couttsjr.com.au Email: jeff@couttsjr.com.au

Abstract

Well designed participatory learning processes focussing on stakeholder discussions can lead to significant learning, skill development and decision-making outcomes. This research trials and evaluates a discussion support tool (Second Life machinima) that could be used in a range of situations, without technical experts physically present in a discussion. The prototype machinima discussion focuses on managing climate risk in the Australian sugar industry. Web-based simulated discussion approaches may provide an alternative information delivery method in an extension environment where funding and policy support is declining and access to high speed internet is increasing globally.

Seventeen semi-structured interviews were conducted with canefarmers (7), extension officers (6) and Canegrowers organisation representatives (4). Data collected evaluated the machinima, identified climate information delivery needs and collected demographic information. Comments were coded thematically and interviewees rated the value of the tool in 'supporting canefarmers to take some action, small or large, in relation to the information presented'.

First impressions of the machinima were positive except for two interviewees who would have preferred the use of real people rather than animated characters. Most interviewees identified readily with the characters and settings depicted in the machinima, and related the animation to a canefarmer shed meeting. Key messages identified were consistent with the informational objectives of the script developed for the machinima. Mean ratings for the value of the tool varied between stakeholder groups: Farmers 6.9; Extension Officers 7.2; Canegrowers organisation 6.4 (1–low value to 10–high value).

The machinima message could be improved by targeting farmers who have a higher level of understanding of climate and production risk rather than those with a limited understanding. Improving the machinima graphics would significantly improve the visual appeal for viewers.

Key learnings include:

Comments across stakeholder groups indicate that machinima could be useful to support discussion of climate risk as well as other industry issues.

Developing scripts appropriate to the target topics for discussion is critical in ensuring audience engagement with the machinima.

Developing a seamless link between current climate forecasts and discussions about specific decisions remains a technical challenge.

Keywords: *Participatory learning; Climate risk; Machinima*