



## Crossing boundaries and creating new spaces through an integrated academic literacies project

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This paper reports on a study based on a project involving a collaborative partnership between an academic literacy lecturer, an information literacy expert, an e-learning instructional designer and an HIV/AIDS expert. The rationale for forming a partnership was to include library information literacy and e-learning into an academic development (AD) course which is offered to students from the Faculty of Health Sciences at a Higher Education Institution in South Africa. The subject material used was based on HIV/AIDS topics that students had to debate within an online discussion forum. The aim of the study was to ascertain whether an integrated approach enhances the learning experiences of students and to evaluate the role of the different collaborating partners, as well as to assess the logistics of working together in a partnership with stakeholders from different sectors of the university community.

Keywords: academic literacies, library information literacy, elearning, information literacy

### Context of the study

Previously the AD course did not include any e-learning experience which is a paradigm shift from face-to-face teaching and learning. Many research studies (both local and international) have shown the positive impact of e-learning in educational contexts. For example, Cunningham (2000) reported that students felt the use of e-learning was non-threatening and challenging, that it benefited their writing, and that their grades had improved as a result of its use. Furthermore, during their university studies students are given assignments that they have to research and it is often assumed that students know how to access information in the library. However, from the quality of students' assignments it is clearly apparent that many students lack basic library information literacy skills. In light of this, and the fact that information literacy is a vital necessity for today's modern information-intensive world, there is the need to integrate it into the curriculum. In addition, given the serious nature of the HIV/AIDS pandemic in Sub-Saharan Africa, the University's HIV/AIDS Centre was included as a collaborating partner and HIV/AIDS topics were used for online discussions.

This project lies within the framework of multiliteracies, a term coined by the New London Group (1996). Being multiliterate incorporates the ability to interpret symbols and images, and in using multimedia such as e-learning and the internet, through which construction of meaning, learning and interacting with others

can occur. Through online discussions students gain exposure to different understandings and ways of thinking, hence learning to embrace multiculturalism and show respect for diversity. In keeping with the sociocultural perspective and recognizing that learning does not occur in isolation, Lave and Wenger's (1991) work on 'communities of practice' was drawn on to guide the researchers.

## **The research process**

The project was implemented to approximately 220 students from the disciplines of Physiotherapy, Psychology, Occupational Therapy and Sports, Recreation and Exercise Science. Each research team member had a clearly defined role with an independent evaluation tool to assess her section of the project. After receiving an outline of the intervention students had to go online and discuss topics that were provided by the HIV/AIDS expert in consultation with the other team members. Each student group had a topic related to the specific discipline. The students' first online session involved a training session by the e-learning team. Their first task was to post a message [referred to as Message 1] on their particular topic.

Students' online postings were used by team members to structure their lessons. After the completion of Message 1 students had two library sessions: the first was on how to access the different sources available in the library. In the second session, students were presented with a variety of texts from the library and were shown how to locate relevant information for referencing. Thereafter, students were required to conduct research on their respective topics before the next online session thus enabling them to debate their topic from an informed position. In the next online session, students had to read all the posted messages within their groups and reply (Message 2) to one chosen message taking into account the research conducted on the topic, their discussion with the HIV/AIDS facilitator, and their lesson on writing norms and conventions given by the AD Lecturer. Team members then compared Messages 1 and 2 to determine if any learning had taken place, and individually evaluated the Project.

## **Discussion**

The study revealed that prior school and home literacy practices play a role in the ease or difficulty students have in using the library and e-learning resources provided in higher education institutions. This was clearly evident with many of the students involved in this research who despite the library intervention and e-learning training still found it difficult to cope with accessing information from the library and the technological requirements of the online tasks. While these students also completed a semester course in computer literacy prior to the intervention, this was clearly not adequate, especially for students coming from homes with no access to information and communication technology (ICT) and/or disadvantaged schooling backgrounds. Thus, these students felt inadequate, excluded and as being denied membership to the broader university community. On a positive note, during the e-learning sessions students readily assisted one another in attaining computer literacy. To this end Lave and Wenger's (1991) notion of COP is clearly relevant where the "new-comers" or novices are assisted by the "old-timers" or more experienced participants. Lave and Wenger (1991) argue that people construct their identities in relation to the communities in which they participate, and move along a continuum of learning, from legitimate peripheral participation to full participation. They describe the relationship between novices and experts as an apprenticeship.

An analysis of Message 1 postings showed that many participants used language very informally, almost seeming "to write as they speak". Little attention was paid to punctuation, spelling, and construction of paragraphs or layout. Some students made use of symbols, contractions and emoticons as a form of expression or to emphasize meaning. After the AD lecture on formal and informal language usage, the discourse used by students in Message 2 postings shifted to become more formal. However, students expressed their dissatisfaction with having to write using formal academic register as they felt that it restricted their freedom and reduced their enjoyment of the task. It is evident that students perceive the Net as a place/tool to say and write without any restrictions.

It must be noted that only two on-line sessions are not sufficient to determine the impact on learning. However, it was noticeable that students were able to transfer what they learnt in the online classroom on

formal language usage to a textual assignment later in the semester. From the team members observations it was apparent that most students enjoyed the independence of the task and appeared to be self-directed. To this end, great excitement and enthusiasm was evident when the online task was explained to students. The fact that students were able to apply the writing conventions learnt during the online sessions to the new task (i.e. the textual assignment) indicates that technology can assist the learning process.

Generally, in higher education institutions the library, e-learning unit and HIV/AIDs unit are merely seen as “resources” or “support sectors” of the institution to draw on if and when needed, with each sector working in isolation of each other. In keeping with the changing conceptions of academic literacies, this research brought together participants from different sectors of the institution, to work as collaborating partners thus moving from working in silos where literacy is usually seen in terms of a set of ‘skills’, towards an integrated shared space. Finally, to sustain the relationship between the team members it is essential that the role of the different sectors within the institution be revisited so as to create a common platform designed to enhance teaching and learning.

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