

Information Literacy as a part of an outreach community program for pre-University Learners in South Africa: a case study.

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Abstract: This paper is a case study which will explore the process of working in an academic enrichment curriculum as part of an outreach community program for talented pre-University learners. The program supplements the formal school subjects such as mathematics, science, language, in addition the exposing learners to computer science, forensic science, molecular literacy, information literacy and social research. It will outline the context of the course we offer with the other disciplines. It will discuss the challenges we faced, the lessons learnt, and our aspirations for the future.

The overall aim of the program is “to increase the academic, social and psychological preparation of academically talented learners from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds for admission to and success (retention) at South African selective universities.”

Keywords: Information Literacy, pre-university learners, outreach community program, talented learners, library training, South Africa, case study

1. Introduction

The leap from school to University in terms of expectations and academic adeptness is a challenge to most school leavers. It is even more so if you have come from a disadvantaged background where your school and community has also been under resourced.

The University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) is aware of the challenges faced by first year University Students and the gap which exists socially, economically academically, and psychologically between the final year of school and the first year of university. Wits decided to step into this void to see what they could do in some measure to address this challenge. This heralded the inception of the Targeting Talent Program (TTP) a University of the Witwatersrand initiative

that has been successfully been running since 2007. According to Richards (2013), the Program Director, the aim of the project is to “increase the academic, social and psychological preparation of academically talented learners from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds for admission to and success (retention) at South African selective universities”. Initially the program focused only on Black South Africans, but within the past two years, it has opened up to include children from all race groups provided they match the selection criteria. The cohort was initially 200 learners but the numbers have increased annually and we are currently looking at hosting a cohort of 736 learners in June 2013.

The Wits Library has been involved since the inception of the project, and it is responsible for the Information Literacy component of the program that is taught during the June/July school vacation contact sessions which are run as a part of the program each year. The South African school curriculum is based on a twelve year program with the twelfth year Grade 12 being the final year of schooling. The program itself extends over the three final academic years for school learners (Grade 10, Grade 11 and Grade 12). Initially from 2007 -2009 we dealt with one cohort which began the project with us in Grade 10 and continued with the project until Grade 12. As our project has become more known in the academic circles and with various donor groups, we now have all three levels of learners attending sessions during the residential contact sessions simultaneously.

The learners involved in this project are sourced from not only the Gauteng province where the University of the Witwatersrand is situated, but also the neighboring provinces of Limpopo and Mpumalanga and recently from the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu Natal as well.

2. Selection Criteria for Learner participation

To be included in the program, the learners are required to attain a minimum 65 percent in Mathematics, Science and English at Grade 9 level. They are identified as potential first generation university attendees (i.e. the first person in the family to attend a university.) One of the prerequisites is that they have to be nominated by their High School teacher and/or principal based on the selection criteria given to the identified schools by the program. The learners are required to complete a biographical questionnaire and write a motivation essay. It is a requirement that they come from an educationally and financially disadvantaged background. The program screens and selects the learners that will participate in the program. If chosen, the learners undertake to give up their school vacations for a three year period during which they are required to attend contact sessions in an academic enrichment program which is held on the University of the Witwatersrand premises during the June/July vacation. They are also introduced to personal development skills; and the University assists teachers with educator development and a mathematics and science supplementation curriculum in the TTP schools. The learners are expected to at the very least, maintain their grade

average at school; however it is anticipated that there will be a continued improvement in the learner's school academic performance as a result of the assistance given during the residential academic enrichment program. If their grades do not increase, research will investigate as to the reason why. The university tracks the academic performance of the selected learners during their Grade 10, 11 and 12 years of schooling, and also follows their progress at University and their chosen career path. The research of this project is ongoing.

One of the outcomes of the residential contact course is that the learners are required to identify a community project that they will implement on their return to their community. This is to encourage the premise that acknowledges a "pay it forward" philosophy. Hyde (2000) They have benefited from their interactions with the university, now they need to pass on information or skills to their community, it is not a case of being given a grant, and that is where it rests. It is envisaged that the benefits of the TTP program will be wide spread and long lasting not only to the individual, but also to the community that they have come from.

3. Information Literacy in the context of the academic sessions

The academic courses offered during the residential contact sessions do not follow the school curriculum, but rather enhance the school curriculum. It is not to be viewed as a cram college to pass the final school exams. Subjects such as computer science, forensic science, molecular literacy, information literacy and social research are taught alongside the critical subjects such as mathematics, science and language.

The day starts at about 04:30 when the Residence Assistances wake the learners up to prepare for the day. Breakfast is served at 06:30 and lessons commence at 08:10 and continue until 20:50 in the evening. There is no break during weekends, and sessions are also held on Saturday and Sunday. During the course of the week there are educational excursions arranged for the various classes and there are also sessions for career guidance.

Although information Literacy is viewed as important, the sessions are mostly held in the late afternoon, early evening, as the pure academic sessions are given priority and taught when the learners are fresh and attentive in class.

4. The Information Literacy challenge

Information Literacy is viewed as a fundamental component of the academic curriculum as it is here where the skills for finding, evaluating, organizing and using information are taught. We have based our understanding of Information Literacy as identified by the Association of College and Research Libraries in their "Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education, Standards, Performance Indicators, and Outcomes". Approved; by ACRL Board, January 18, 2000.

The lessons cover a variety of topics it includes tours to our Engineering and Built environment Libraries, the Science, and Geo Maths Libraries and our main undergraduate library Wartenweiler which caters for the Arts faculty. It depends on the grade of learners we are dealing with as to which of the Wits libraries are show cased. It is difficult to physically show the learners all our library facilities as they consists of two central libraries and 12 branch libraries and are based on our campuses that spread across more than 400 hectares of land. University of the Witwatersrand (2000-2013)

Although we would like to be able to show off all our libraries this is not possible due to the physical ground that has to be covered as well at the time that we have been allocated for our lessons. Our contact lessons are only 80minutes long per session.

Time and time keeping is a huge challenge during these contact sessions. With the sessions being tightly monitored and the distances that the learners are required to walk between classes, sometimes the learners arrive late for sessions. This means that we have to adjust our timings accordingly so that they do not run late for their next session. Another challenge is that of keeping the students awake especially for the late afternoon lectures when their energy levels and concentration levels have dropped quite considerably. This is further aggravated when the lighting is dimmed in the classrooms to accommodate PowerPoint presentation visibility. It is almost an automatic response that eyes close and heads begin to droop, to combat this from occurring the sessions need to be lively and as interactive as possible.

As far as possible, numbers permitting, the Information Literacy Sessions are held in the Wartenweiler Library in the Electronic Classroom. Not all the learners come from schools that have a library or even from communities that have a public library that they can access, so it is an experience that we feel are important to give them. The experience is to be aware of what an academic library is likely to look like, as well as the personal behaviour that is expected in a typical University Library.

As the numbers of the TTP cohort are increasing, we have to be selective as to the numbers of learners in the library at any one time, as our computing facilities are limited and cannot accommodate large numbers, so in some sessions where it is a multimedia session or mainly a PowerPoint and group session, we have had to resort to using the large academic lecture theatres.

During university vacation periods, the libraries close their physical libraries at 17:00 and close during the weekend. This necessitates the hiring of security staff to be available to keep the facility open and to monitor the environment whilst the sessions are in progress.

In the first year of contact, we have a session dedicated to using and finding items from the shelves in the library and the concept of borrowing and returning

items to the library. The very concept of “a library” is introduced into some of their vocabularies for the first time. It is important to educate the learner that just because they have taken the book out from the library, does not necessarily mean that they now have “permission” to create their own personal library. The book is on loan for a limited period, and needs to be returned to the library so that someone else can have access to that information as well.

Just as some of the schools do not have libraries in their schools, neither do they have access to computers, so the challenge to introduce materials that are available electronically needed to be preceded by a brief introduction to computers and their functionality and the terminology associated with computers. This section of the teaching component is now taken over completely by the computer science brief. However that being said, there are learners who have been exposed to computers previously, and this does give rise to challenges in the classroom as not everyone’s abilities are the same. This does give rise to challenges when it comes to the practical exercises in the classroom. Some of the students do not yet have the eye hand co-ordination to be able to work the computer keyboard or operate a computer mouse.

Certain library associated words are explained such as author, book, journal or periodical, copyright, plagiarism, photocopying, printing, borrowing, lending, fines, information sources, evaluation, sources, catalogue, citing and bibliographic references to name just a few.

Although the library staff are not formally trained educators, we are aware that there are different styles of individual learning preferences and that it is important to vary the style in which the program is delivered, to try and cater to the needs of most of the learners if we are to capture the learners interest and facilitate their Information Literacy learning experience. As is suggested by Burkhardt, MacDonald and Rathemacher (ix: 2010) “some students prefer verbal presentations, others respond better to visuals, and still others excel only when they can try something themselves (hands-on). No one method can reach every student. An instructor who wants students to succeed must try to incorporate as many learning methods as possible into his or her teaching sessions or must vary his or her presentation so that all students will have success in some part of the learning experience.”

We make use of PowerPoint presentations to explore new concepts, we allow students hands-on opportunities to find examples of what has been covered in the lesson by setting exercises that they need to complete by searching for and finding relevant information in the library catalogues as well as using specific databases. The concept of fun and rewards are unashamedly used in the classroom with students vying with each other to secure a box of Smarties (chocolate candies) or stationery. We encourage group and team work as well as have opportunities for individual work. Where we have noticed groups of

learners with less computing abilities than their TTP peers, we have grouped them in pairs so that one can mentor and teach the other.

In our sessions we cover the following information literacy areas:

Grade 10:

Introduction to the library.
What is the library?
Tour of the library
Finding tools and types of information
Copyright and Plagiarism
Questions Definitions and Vocabulary

Grade 11

Introduction to Wits Libraries
Topic analysis, information sources and services.
Identification of keywords and synonyms.
UK vs. USA spelling
Constructing a search strategy.
Searching, refining, downloading and printing.
Multimedia sources, viewing and evaluating.
Copyright and Plagiarism

Grade 12

Evaluating and fair use of study materials.
Journal articles
Acknowledgement of sources
What librarians can do for you?
e-Wits catalogue
eBooks
EBSCO host
Why can't I just Google?
Copyright and Plagiarism

One of the unforeseen challenges we have had to deal with is that University maintenance is usually scheduled for University vacation time. Sometimes this necessitates the shutdown of electrical supplies. This has an impact on teaching especially if it is at night, and if you are reliant on computers and PowerPoint instruction. We have experienced these challenges for the past three years and have had to make sure that we have a Plan B or Plan C in place just in case. There are some areas in the university that have backup power facilities, but the library is not one of those facilities. During daylight periods we have resorted to teaching on the Library Lawns with the use of flipcharts and having question and answer sessions for those sessions. The critical hands-on sessions are then

repeated the next session we meet with the learners of that particular group. There is a lot of planning and co-ordinating that goes into each session and it is critical that we are able to think on our feet. We have had situations of medical emergencies but the broader TTP team is trained and expected to deal with those situations when they arise, it is not an Information Literacy team function but one in which we need to know who to contact and for what purpose.

When we have found lecture theatres with electricity we have been able to use those sessions for multi-media and YouTube viewing. Race (2010) suggests that video has a valuable role in helping to show learners things that they are not able to do on their own. We have found this to be true on several occasions and can verify that it has enhanced and enriched the learning experience of our learners.

4. Conclusions

We continually monitor ourselves and our teaching methods by surveying our learners and getting the library team to do its own SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) analysis at the end of each program. We have addressed most of the challenges presented to us, so that they are not an issue for the next cohort however the one huge challenge we have not been able to address is getting the learners to understand the relevance and importance of Libraries and Information Literacy to their group in relation to their final school exams and present immediate needs. Their focus is primarily on passing their matric exam and what can facilitate their immediate success. The matric exam is the final school leaving exam which will determine what their future path will be – whether they will attend university, an artisan vocational college, or directly into the job market. Until libraries become an integral part of their lives and their future studies, this will continue to be a challenge. Perhaps this is why in times of political unrest; the libraries are burnt down as a message to show their displeasure to government instead of protecting the very knowledge and liberation which they seek. We had the opportunity of discussing this situation with one of the cohorts we were teaching as sadly a community library had been the target of mob action. It was only when we shared with the learners what they libraries truly meant to their communities did they begin to view it differently. It is hoped that in future the learners may consider alternative methods of showing government their dissatisfaction and will be library advocates instead, and possibly protect the knowledge and learning activities that libraries support by virtue of their existence within the communities they serve.

Access to knowledge is an opportunity for personal growth and lifelong learning which is to be supported as far as possible. The knowledge gained through appropriate use of information is a resource that cannot be taken away from you.

In a survey carried out with the cohort in 2010, it was ascertained that in the group questioned, 99% of the learners had access to cell phones, so although

they may not have access to computers, the majority of the learners had access to technology in some format. Facebook, Twitter and What's up are used as a means of social connected opportunities, and the power of the information opportunities and the legitimacy of that information have not been fully explored by our learners. It is an on-going challenge to be able to convince learners that not everything you read may necessarily be true or without bias. There is an element of discernment which is needed when accessing information.

What we have noticed is the way the learners that have been exposed to the TTP program are like shining stars when we meet up with them as first year students in our university. They are enthusiastic, clued up and really at home in the University environment. It is a pleasure to have them in the classroom and to know that in some way we have been a contributing factor in their success.

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