Implementation of a Multimodal Academic Literacy Resource at a South African University:
A Critical Autoethnographic Reflection

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ABSTRACT

As a lecturer at a higher education institution in South Africa, the author is conscious of an emphasis placed on multimodal resources as part of the globally experienced shift to teach remotely due to the COVID-19 epidemic. In this autoethnographic study, she critically reflects on her experience in planning and executing the implementation of a custom-made multimodal resource called WIReD. WIReD is an acronym for writing, information literacy and reading development. She situates academic literacy and WIReD within the theoretical framework of multiliteracies, and thereafter provides background in terms of the study context and gives a brief description of WIReD. The methodology section includes the data used, a brief discussion on validity, reliability, and the reflexive process. The data analysis led to two broad categories of implementation inhibitors, namely inadequate resources and collaboration. These hindrances highlight broader issues with regard to institutional management, lecturers, and the needs of students in the South African higher education context.

KEYWORDS

Academic Literacy, Autoethnography, Downloadable, Electronic Resource, Higher Education, Implementation of Resource, Innovation in Literacy Education, Multimodality, Reflection, South African Resource

INTRODUCTION

In 2018 I embarked on a research endeavour, envisioning that I would scientifically prove that a multimodal academic literacy resource called WIReD, had a positive influence on students' academic literacy development at my university. I approached this endeavour with rigour and enthusiasm, planning a qualitative design with student focus group interviews and questionnaires. I even set up a team of willing colleagues to help with the gathering and transcription of data. Twelve groups of students were invited, refreshments were provided and I eagerly anticipated the rich sets of data. Unfortunately, this was not to be. While my qualitative design was well planned, the implementation of WIReD did not go smoothly. My colleagues and I ended up distributing refreshments to groups of befuddled students, who commented that they could not access the resource.

The purpose of this paper is to reflect on the attempts to implement a multimodal resource at a South African university. Specific research questions that guided this study were: (a) What were the hindrances in the implementation of WIReD? and (b) What cultural issues do these hindrances expose in terms of designing and implementing multimodal resources at South African institutions of higher learning?

The method used in this study is that of autoethnography. Belbase et al. (2008) state that this method is a "lens" with which to view actions, in this case, the decisions on the implementation process and my experiences thereof as an insider (p. 94). I was the main decision-making figure in the design and implementation process, and so my personal experience is the main source of data. As Kim and Lee (2021) clarify, the autoethnographic researcher "is investigated as a subject and an object of research, in pursuit of wider applicability" (p. 4). The self is always interrelated with others in social and cultural settings, and the autoethnographic method enabled me to use my unique insider-position to make cultural interpretations (Wall, 2008). Chang (2008) describes culture as "inherently group-oriented" with human interactions at the centre (p. 18). In the context of this study, I view my culture as the academic environment of a South African higher education institution with three main role players: the institutional management, including line managers; the academics or lecturers within a faculty; the students as the clients of the institution. This culture and the interaction between these three role players are influenced by the South African Department of Higher Education's policies and rules for such a state-funded institution. The specific institution has its own corporate identity and for the purpose of this paper, the institution's dream, purpose and values provide insight into the nature of the culture to which the institution aspires. The institution describes its dream as being an internationally recognised university in Africa, distinguished for engaged scholarship, social responsiveness and an ethic of care. Its purpose is to excel in innovative learning and teaching and cutting-edge research, thereby benefitting society through knowledge and the values include the fostering of engaged and caring staff and students. The constitutional values of human dignity, equality and freedom are also paramount with freedom of research listed together with a number of other aspects such as responsibility and transparency.

As a senior lecturer and in line with the dream and purpose of my institution, I aspire to partake in innovative learning and teaching for the benefit of our students. The creation of WIReD is my contribution to innovative learning and teaching in the academic literacy subject field. I can associate with the values of my employer and view myself as a "caring" employee, colleague and lecturer, as I am invested in the professional relationships between myself and my line managers, colleagues and students. It is because of this investment that I view the struggle to implement WIReD important enough to research. Furthermore, the values of freedom of scientific research, responsibility and transparency, motivated me to give a human face to "behind the scenes" challenges I experienced in the implementation of a multimodal resource. I aim to present my deeper understanding of the wider cultural implications when a lecturer has to implement a new multimodal resource at a South African institute of higher learning. There is currently an emphasis on multimodal resources as part of the globally experienced higher education shift to teach remotely due to the Covid-19 epidemic (Adnan & Anwar, 2020; Gardner, 2020), and so such insights might be of value to other academics in a similar position at this point in time.

I approach this autoethnographic study in a conservative manner, by not focussing on its obviously subjective bias, but rather on issues that would increase its legitimacy. Duncan (2004) identified a number of key issues that should be addressed. Among others, it is vital to ensure a scholarly account. The point of departure of such an account, is to ground it in a theoretical framework as every study needs "a generalized pattern … to think about a subject" (Rosenblatt, 1994, p.1057). Therefore, academic literacy and WIReD are situated in the multiliteracies theoretical framework in section two.

Objectivity is also a generally accepted characteristic of a scholarly account. In an autoethnographic study, personal experiences are reflected on, analysed and interpreted and so it can be argued that this method is too subjective to be viewed as a scholarly account (Ploder & Stadlbauer, 2016). To

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