

Chapter 4.2

Creating Waves Across Geographical and Disciplinary Divides Through Online Creative Collaboration (OCC)

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ABSTRACT

Creative Waves: Visualising Issues in Pharmacy (VIP) was a global online project run over 14 weeks during 2007. The project linked over 200 students, educators, mentors and community representatives in a completely online learning environment addressing health promotion. Uniquely, the VIP project brought together the two disciplines of pharmacy and graphic design to collaborate in identifying, researching and designing public health campaigns

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to tackle significant health issues affecting the people living in the remote Kenyan village of Winam. In this chapter the authors describe the VIP project itself, the Omnium® Software technical platform that facilitated the online collaborations as well as quantitative and qualitative data describing the student experiences and engagement in the project. Many of the lessons learnt during the VIP project are illustrations of the literature surrounding online learning environments; we provide a summary of the key findings from VIP to benefit developers of future online collaborations.

INTRODUCTION

Creative Waves: Visualising Issues in Pharmacy (VIP) was a project designed and developed as a joint venture between the School of Pharmacy at The University of Auckland (UoA) and the Omnium Research Group based at the College of Fine Arts (COFA) at the University of New South Wales (UNSW). VIP was formally supported by the International Pharmaceutical Federation (FIP) and their student body, the International Pharmaceutical Students' Federation (IPSF), the International Council of Graphic Design Associations (ICOGRADA) and their student network, the ICOGRADA Education Network (IEN). The project was further supported by Universitas 21, the network for international higher education providers, of which both UoA and UNSW are member institutions.

The primary aim of the VIP project was to deliver new and innovative health awareness campaigns for use in Winam, a rural community on the shores of Lake Victoria in the Kisumu district of Western Kenya. This area of Kenya has significant health and social welfare problems. It is an area of high unemployment, with low incomes and comparatively low adult literacy rates. In terms of the health of the local community, there is a high prevalence of tropical illnesses such as malaria as well as HIV/AIDS. There is also a growing problem with chronic diseases such as diabetes and heart disease in African nations although, for now, communicable (infectious) diseases still dominate the mortality statistics in less urbanised settings like Winam (Baingana & Ros, 2006).

Secondary aims of the VIP project were to examine the interaction of higher education students from diverse geographical locations, educational backgrounds and professional disciplines as part of an online learning community. An important sub-text to the project was to raise global awareness about health problems and access to healthcare in developing countries and the role that online volunteers can play.

By bringing together pharmacy and design students in a unique pairing of passion for health improvement and design expertise, the VIP project targeted six specific health issues relevant to the region. These were: adherence to medicines (medical instructions), chronic diseases, tuberculosis, sexually transmitted infections (including HIV/AIDS), malaria and immunisation. The final design outcomes were customised health promotion materials for the local community and included four striking football uniforms with a 'Stop HIV' message in the local language of Luo; a collection of educational malaria cards in the form of a children's game designed for use in schools; and various stickers with health messages for use in health centers, hospitals and public places (Figure 1). In addition to these design outcomes, an assortment of rich and valuable resources, links and lectures were supplied by mentors, coordinators and students for the VIP project. These resources were available as open source materials and hold great potential as future reference materials.

This chapter will review the VIP curriculum design, using constructivism and a collaborative learning approach to engage participants in the largely voluntary project and discuss how interactive communication technologies (Omnium® Software) facilitated sustained dialogue, negotiation and visual collaboration through a variety of interactive features, including both synchronous and asynchronous discussion. We will also describe the outcomes of the VIP project and evaluate the value of the lessons learnt from this unique project for multidisciplinary virtual learning and document the results of the pharmacy student questionnaires and qualitative feedback, highlighting what VIP has meant to the participants. Finally, we will discuss the significance of teamwork and collaboration within and across disciplines and assess the limitations and difficulties of online learning environments against the potential of technological innovations to transcend the boundaries of time, language, culture and disciplines and encourage new approaches to higher education.

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