

## **Project title: Enhancing Digital Literacies Support of Early Career Academics to teach online**

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### **Introduction**

COVID 19 imposed new expectations to rapidly shift to online teaching across the universities. Yet this shift occurred at a time when teacher digital literacy is still an indisputable challenge in higher education owing to several challenges ranging from variable capacity to effectively use digital tools for teaching, unreliable access to electricity and networks (Sánchez-Cruzado, Santiago Campión, & Sánchez-Compañá, 2021); Digital literacy comprises of a set of skills that people must possess in order to deal with the current digital environment such as handling software and hardware technology, interpret information from digital devices and media in diverse contexts such academic, career and daily life (Yustika and Iswati, 2020). Digital literacies best achieved with practical teaching component (Kaeophanuek, Na-Songkhla, and Nilsook, 2018:296).

Prior 2019, Fort Hare University had planned to implement three-year long project to develop digital literacy capacity for all staff, particularly academics and this was funded by the University Capacity Development Programme. This was because university SWOT analysis identified limited infusion of technology in teaching and learning hence so this was an intervention aimed at enhancing the quality of teaching and learning. All staff regardless of years of experience were allowed to enroll for short courses on elearning offered by external providers or attend workshops and seminars internally organized or taught by academic developers. Normally one or more academic developers facilitated a training session on selected topics. A cascading model was used because trained academic developers supported academics with the hope that they will use the knowledge in teaching students online. Even after training there was provision for individual consultation. It is through engagements in these online seminars and conducting consultations with a few early career academics that I also discovered that there were some gaps in the implementation.

Early career academics are staff with academic or research role or both and have less than five years' experience on the job. Such individuals are usually still coming into terms with the demands of the profession (Gale, 2011). Research shows that they experience challenges in familiarizing with sites for support, grapple with issues of identify, forging relationships and managing the expectations required in the workplace, using effective teaching approaches particularly classroom management dynamics, workload demands and unrealistic expectations (Shrunk et al.,2018). COVID 19 exacerbated the challenge because it demanded new working patterns which were isolating, time consuming and stressful, this was an extra burden for early career academics, particularly with regards to developing digital literacies required for them to teach online.

I initially learnt some of the struggles of early career academics through individual consultation sessions. Their concerns centered on the structure of the workshops, the timing, the resources and socially unjust. Considering social justice to mean spaces where the needs of all is considered, misrecognition was one form of injustice in the current practice. Mixing staff of varied professional experiences naturally created social hierarchies these impeded opportunity for early to freely raise learning concerns in front of their seniors. The fact that the topic for discussion was predetermined did not necessarily imply that the needs of early career academics were fully considered. Also given that training sessions were only one hour long and mainly structures to cover as much of the basic skills as possible while catering for a large group at

once, there was insufficient time to do guided practice, which was critical for the development of both confidence and capacity to teach. In some cases, trainers could not provide definite answers to questions relating to practical application of digital literacies. This meant that the traditional expert apprentice model of professional development was flawed and there was need for a different approach that would enable mutual learning while achieving the same goals.

## **AIM**

The project specifically sought the digital literacy support needs of early career academics and employed a community of practice approach in enhancing support to teach online

## **Literature Review**

Community of practice refers to “groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder, 2002:4). Key characteristics include: 1) it is voluntary and organic based on members’ shared concerns, 2) comprise of collaboratively determined the set of activities aimed at addressing solve their daily learning challenges, 3) activities can be modified based on changing needs of the members hence such a bottom up approach is employed. 4) Inclusive in that members to express their concerns without fear of prejudice. A community was formed due to several frequent interactions enabled professional growth as well as the development of mutuality. Mutuality meant that each member had an opportunity to contribute to discussions and debates as well as learn from others. Also, the fact that the activities were centred on common area of interest facilitated collaboration. Members engaged in productive conversations on the digital tools that would facilitate share resources such as websites with clearer explanations and develop using mock classes to learn practical ways of developing the requisite competencies (Wenger, 1998). Ongoing interaction enables change in professional practice among early career academics because of increased learning, mutual trust, and positive relationships (Shirrell, Hopkins, & Spillane, 2019). The design of this project was guided by the Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge Framework by Koehler and Mishra (2006) which emphasis that the development of competencies should involve an interplay of technological skills development, pedagogical knowledge and disciplinary content knowledge. It was important that the senior academics who had practical teaching experience to also provide insights on the pedagogical aspects. This ties with the view that professional learning on digital literacies is engaging when it is integrated into specific subjects and studied within an authentic practice (Kaeophanuek, Na-Songkhla, and Nilsook, 2018:296). This meant that onsite practice and modelling was essential in the project as it enabled both theoretical and pedagogical change in the use of digital tools in teaching practices.

## **Processes / Methods**

### ***Recruitment of participants through a survey questionnaire***

Even though I got some insights of the struggles of early career academics through engaging in faculty teaching and learning committee meetings and individual consultation, I decided to employ a digital literacy support needs analysis survey to staff based in social sciences and humanities disciplines. The reason for administering the survey was to ensure that the target sample of early career academics I needed to be part of my TAU project would voluntarily sign up to participate in the project. The questionnaire therefore solicited information on years of experience, discipline, preferred approaches

to being supported on digital literacies. The questionnaire also requested participants if they were willing to be part of a team of staff engaging in continuous digital learning meetings. The questionnaire assisted me in differentiating those who were interested in the COP based on willingness to learn specific topics from those who participated because it was a mandate for all staff to learn to teach online. The responses generated responses from 6 early career academics, three experienced staff who were mainly holding leadership roles.

### ***Implementation of the Digital Literacy through a Communities of Practice***

Our community of practice comprised of the core team myself, another academic developer and a senior staff member who were responsible for coordinating activities relating to enhancing digital literacy capacities. All the members of the team were practicing academics. Active members were early career academics who voluntarily indicated interest in improving digital literacy competencies. The members agreed to meet for a session for an hour and a half hour every month for three months in what was dubbed "Online discussion series". The session included varied activities that such as online group discussions, debates, videos and mock demonstrations on the application of specific digital literacy tools which were problematic. Variation of activities was aimed at ensuring there was opportunity to provide relevance through linking theory and practice. In my view this increased excitement and continued engagement in the discussions. We engaged in consistent interactions on Wednesdays and members present had a choice of the main topic for discussion in order to allow flexibility to address most urgent issues being experienced and this meant the discussions were of immediate relevance to members who had attended a particular sessions in line with principles of a communities of practice (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002). We sometimes shared recordings of sections of particular discussions, particularly excerpts' on demonstration or you tube videos and there was a shared space to retrieve resources by anyone who may have missed a session.

The design structure of the COP was inclusive in that it had flexibility to change discussion topic depending on the needs of members in attendance thus enabled each individual concern to be addressed. Ensuring needs are addressed is a key component of effective professional development (Bates & Morgan, 2015). There was mutuality because anyone in the team could lead the practical session to showcase how to apply specific digital concepts, tools or models in their learning as well as in their teaching practice. This also augured well with socially just professional development which provided opportunities for everyone to grow, to be recognized for their ideas and experiences. Such an approach offset the challenges of isolation, in favor of mutual support for early career academics. This mutual learning provided a flat structure that enabled co-learning. This also meant that all knowledge participants brought to the learning space was respected and accepted in the mutual sharing of knowledge and practice. These features were important in dismantling social hierarchies. Discussion sessions became platforms for learning, encouragement, building trust as well as enhancing the repertoire of competencies in using digital technologies for teaching and learning. In fact, the monthly meetings enabled all the constructs of teaching with ICT advocated by Koehler and Mishra's TPACK model. I presented the project to the departmental meeting and some of the early career academics indicated that the project was beneficial in addressing the needs of early career academics who are part time, mainly because they are sometimes appointed in the middle of the year when staff induction would have been carried out. The departmental members recommended that the project be extended to other faculties with wider involvement of other academic developers.

#### **4. Achievements**

The consistent attendance to sessions amid challenges of internet, power and data provision challenges at the peak of COVID 19 signaled commitment and personal motivation to participate in the project and I consider this to be a success. There was vibrant and active participation on the following topics 1) how to design and administer discussion forum, 2) how to use electronic portfolios to showcase practical application of disciplinary learning 3) how to design assessments online and how to engage from September 2021 to February 2022. I am of the view that the project activities succeeded because the change in the structure of sessions as they allowed mock classes, practical demonstrations as part of shared learning so as to link both theory practice. Also, the co-learning aspect fostered group agency, trust and collegiality which was critical at the time COVID 19 in order to offset isolation. Mutual sharing of experiences, resources and expertise enhanced learning and collegiality.

#### **Challenges**

Shifting from the conventional workshop to a communities of practice processes was initially challenging because of differing beliefs on professional development, which even made some members to drop off initially and rejoined latter. Those who believed in the apprentice model found latter time, particularly when some time was spent debating on one issue. As time went on there was a notable shift in the perspective particularly when I also indicated that we needed to embrace collaborate because some of the digital literacy imperatives were new to all of us. Another challenge was erratic power supply and unstable internet necessitating shifting times for sessions planned. I am of the view that blended mode may be the ideal way of effectively implementing a communities of practice approach as it increases opportunities for interaction and cohesion. The project is still at the implementation stage, hence the initially planned final project as evidence of project outcomes cannot be provided at this stage.

#### **Plans Beyond TAU**

The project will be rolled out to other faculties besides education given the interest garnered from other early career academics who were not part of the group. In order to evaluate the project success, all participants will be requested to do a self-reflective report which will be shared in the teaching and learning colloquium.

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