

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

Kristien Andrianatos, North-West University, South Africa

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9607-4578>

## 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.

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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

increase the degree of objectivity within this autoethnographic study, I will position myself as author both in the first and the third person, based on the Flottum 2004 classification as cited by Grossman (2019). As the argumentative author, I make use of active sentence structures and the first person to communicate my decisions, experiences and the search for understanding. When dealing with the theoretical framework, research method and textual guiding elements, I make use of passive sentence structures and where needed I refer to myself in the third person, as I am of the opinion that these elements can thus be communicated in a more objective manner.

The description of the study boundaries is another key issue of this conservative autoethnographic approach (Duncan, 2004). Section three provides background on the context in which the multimodal resource was developed and the rationale for the development. In order for the reader to comprehend the implementation challenges, it is also necessary to describe WIREd briefly. The final three sections of this paper include the data analysis, the data interpretation and the conclusion.

### **The Multiliteracies Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework of multiliteracies was developed by the New London Group (1996), as a result of their shared concerns for “the growing disparities in education opportunities and outcomes for the minoritised populations with whom they worked” (Cope, et al., 2018, p.5). I agree with Song (2017) and Marzal (2020), that the work of Cope, Kalantzis (2000, 2009) and the New London Group (1996), is seminal in terms of a framework for multiliteracies and so I considered no other frameworks. The gist of the New London Group’s teaching and learning argument was that the teaching and learning of literacy should change because the world was becoming culturally and linguistically diverse and because the communication environment was changing (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Cope & Kalantzis, 2009). The conception that these researchers have of literacy and multiliteracies, is succinctly summarised as not being about skills and competence. “The logic of multiliteracies is one that recognizes that meaning making is an active, transformative process, and a pedagogy based on that recognition is more likely to open up viable life courses for a world of change and diversity” (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009, p.175). Song (2017) comments specifically on the pluralization of the word “literacies” as “a deliberate move to broaden the concept of literacy to include multiple semiotic systems and reaffirm different pathways to learning” (p. 66).

In the South African higher education context, we are familiar with the terms “change” and “diversity”. Breetzke and Hedding (2019) list rapid massification, mergers and growing internationalisation as some of the changes that have been documented since the commencement of democracy in 1994. Moreover, in 2013 the Department of Higher Education communicated that all institutions must “expand online and blended learning” approaches (DHET, 2013, p.51). Thus, the multiliteracies framework is suitable for the South African context as blended learning is prescribed and it provides for a changing world in which students need to play an “active, transformative role” in their meaning making of the world around them (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009, p.166).

The multiliteracies theoretical framework is not only applicable to the South African context, but also specifically to academic literacy as a subject field. The South African applied linguist, Albert Weideman (2003), conceptualised a definition of academic literacy on which the outcomes of the academic literacy programmes at my university were constructed. He defines academic literacy as comprising the activities of accessing, processing and producing information (Weideman, 2003, p.xi). Marzal (2020) offers a similar perspective, describing the aim of academic literacy as to equip students with the “methodological ability” to convert “information into knowledge through the scientific method” (p. 6). In his study, this author sought to find “order in the universe of literacies and multiliteracies” (Marzal, 2020, p.13), and he proposes a taxonomy to indicate how different literacies are related to each other. In his taxonomy, “multiliteracies” is the overarching category, with a subcategory being “multimodal literacies” (Marzal, 2020, p.8). Academic literacy is organised under this subcategory. The position of academic literacy in this taxonomy indicates that the principles of the multiliteracies theory can be applied to academic literacy. From the faculty’s perspective,

academic literacy should instil an open-mindedness in students, as well as foster their academic abilities through their subject-specific writing (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009). In the South African context, creating academic output that meets all the criteria is of extreme importance.

Tewari and Ilesanmi (2020) report that less than 15% of the youth in South Africa gain access to higher education institutions and less than 50% of these students complete their study programmes. Academic literacy abilities such as adapting to the academic environment, searching for academic information effectively, understanding academic texts, analysing and processing information successfully and strategically, as well as producing an academic text responsibly and appropriately, have been proven to be essential for students' academic success (Sayani et al., 2017). WIREd was designed to aid students with their academic literacy development so that they could function effectively in the academic environment, and would thus contribute to the goal of "access with success" (DHET, 2018).

It is noteworthy that the New London Group (1996) placed emphasis on two dimensions of multiliteracies; namely, the multilingual dimension and the multimodal dimension. The focus of this paper is the dimension of multimodality, an established field of research (Cope and Kalantzis, 2009). According to Jewitt (2014), the basic assumption of multimodality is that people communicate by means of many different representations and that these representations can stand in relationship with each other. Within the field of social semiotics, these forms of representations are defined as modes of meaning making (Jewitt, 2014; Kress, 2003). The development of information and communication technology (ICT) enable image, sound and movement to be used in new ways for the purpose of communication. This has led to a move away from the dominance of the printed document to the medium of the screen (New London Group, 2000; Kress, 2003). There are different modes of meaning making which can be integrated on an ICT platform such as: text; visual representation (still or moving images); audio representation (speech, sound and music); and the spacing and layout of different images and features (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009).

The different modes of meaning making have different communicative potentials through their properties and possible uses (Kress, 2003). The designer of the message chooses the mode or modes for communication based on his/her judgement of the best mode for the aspects of the message and the audience. ICT makes such choices easy as it involves a similar effort to insert sound, image and/or writing onto a screen. Additionally, Cope and Kalantzis (2009) state that different modes also have parallel aspects in their representation. Again, ICT enables the designer of the message to make different modes of the same message available, so that the user can shift between modes. Kress (2014, p.158) defines this shifting as a type of "synaesthesia", "the transduction of meaning from one semiotic mode to another semiotic mode." The value of creating a learning experience that promotes "synaesthesia" lies in the fact that learning can happen in different ways and that it opens up the possibility that learners can switch according to their preference between modes with parallel representations (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009). This can be beneficial to learning for a number of reasons, such as, for example, enhancing memory (Lunke & Meier, 2018).

In addition to the educational benefits of a synaesthetic learning experience, made possible by engaging multiple modes of meaning making, it seems that the current generation of students prefers multimodal environments on ICT platforms. Fieldhouse and Nicholas (2008) state that millennials or digital natives, as this generation of students is known, "prefer graphics, animations, audio and video to text" (p. 60). Neumann (2016) emphasises that this generation prefers visuals to text and that they have a high expectation of what technology can do. As these "digital natives" were born during or after the time that ICT became part of people's everyday lives, it is assumed that they "possess knowledge and skills that allow them to handle ICT tools in a 'natural' way" (Sorgo et al., 2017, p.750). While some researchers are sceptical about the digital native concept (Magrino & Sorrell, 2013; Jones & Czerniewicz, 2010), it seems to be a generally accepted view that the present generation makes use of ICT in ways that their predecessors did not and that this can be harnessed in the education environment. In fact, Oliver (2018) is convinced that using ICT is "imperative" in the South African teaching and learning context (p. 2).

The use of ICT within higher education, leads to the strategy of blended learning. Blended learning can be defined as the integration of face-to-face learning experiences with learning experiences within an ICT environment (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). According to Singh (2003) “[b]lended learning combines multiple delivery media that are designed to complement each other and promote learning ... behaviour” (p. 53). Seen from a multiliteracies perspective in the context of higher education, blended learning can thus be viewed as a type of course design which incorporates different modes of meaning making (made possible by technology) with traditional instructional methods. Higher education institutions in South Africa face an increasing need to incorporate blended learning in an effort to accommodate “changing times” (Swartz et al., 2018, p. 52). WIReD opened up the possibility for the academic literacy subject group to move towards blended learning.

## BACKGROUND

This section includes the teaching context and WIReD’s rationale as well as a brief description of this resource.

### Creating WIReD: Context and Rationale

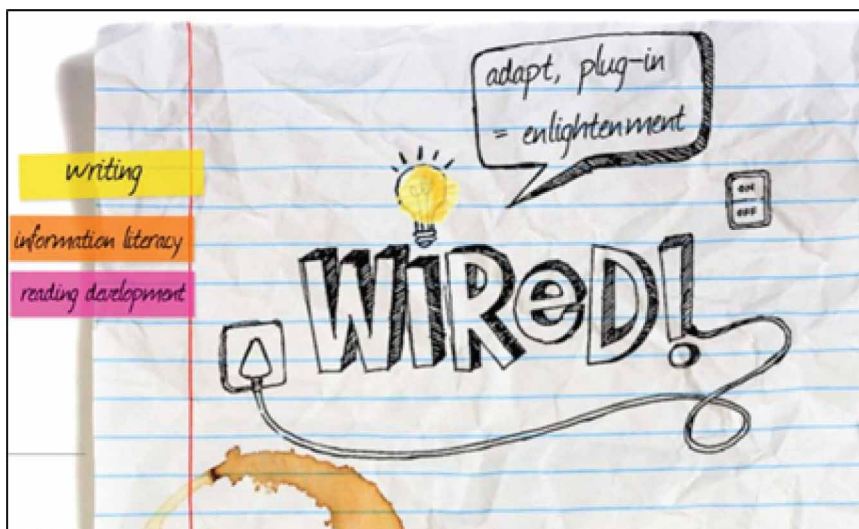
I am a senior lecturer in the academic literacy subject group at a university in South Africa. We are responsible for an elementary and an advanced academic literacy first year course at the university, presented in two of the official languages that the university currently uses as languages of teaching and learning, namely Afrikaans and English. The academic literacy courses are compulsory for contact (full-time) as well as distance-learning students, and therefore the subject group deals with a large number of students. In 2019, myself and 16 colleagues had the task to teach roughly four thousand contact students per semester<sup>1</sup>, including hundreds of distance-learning students. In the academic literacy context, “teaching” implies that we provide enough teaching-and-learning opportunities so that students acquire and develop the necessary academic literacy abilities.

In line with the 2013 instruction of the Department of Higher education (DHET, 2013), the competitive strategy and strategic agenda of the university includes the promotion of teaching and learning innovations as well as the effective use of teaching and learning technology. In keeping with this agenda, I was the team leader of a small group of three lecturers within the subject group to pursue the use of technology to complement teaching and learning within the academic literacy context. At the university, The Centre of Teaching and Learning (CTL) is responsible for aiding faculty members with the development of ICT resources. An instructional designer and graphic designer from CTL formed part of the team and we conceptualised and developed a multimodal academic literacy resource on an ICT platform and named it WIReD. This is an acronym for **Writing, Information literacy and Reading Development**. The acronym was chosen as a name since the team felt that the metaphor of “being wired” and “tapping into” the academic environment, encapsulated one of the purposes of the academic literacy courses. Figure 1 is a screenshot of the welcome screen which illustrates how the metaphor was used for look-and-feel purposes of WIReD.

### A Brief Description of WIReD

WIReD is a multimodal, downloadable academic literacy resource which provides students with information, numerous activities and feedback aimed at improving their academic literacy abilities. It was designed with Articulate Storyline 2 software because of its suitability to the development of custom interactive courses ([www.articulate.com](http://www.articulate.com)). Furthermore, its editing features enabled various modes of meaning making on screen such as written language (text), visual representation (still and moving images), audio (music and sounds) and the spatial mode of screen layout. These modes of

Figure 1. WIReD welcome screen



meaning align with the second dimension of multimodality according to the multiliteracies theoretical framework as the software enables image, sound and movement to be used for the purpose of academic literacy development. Apart from reading material in the form of three peer-reviewed journal articles, all resources in WIReD were custom made.

WIReD is downloadable and separate from the learning management system (LMS) of the university. In order to implement WIReD, it needs to be exported from Articulate Storyline 2 in a Shareable Content Object Reference Model (SCORM) format. According to Robson et al. (2018: p.2), SCORM “defines methods for developing and packaging training content for delivery in learning management systems (LMS)”. However, the version of the SCORM player used in the university’s LMS is dependent on specific versions of SCORM. After development, WIReD needed a version which was not available. Therefore, it could not be integrated into the LMS. To enable such integration, a specially developed SCORM player would be necessary, or, alternatively, an integrated SCORM player tool from the SCORM Cloud might be used. Both of these options had cost implications for the university and due to budget constraints, WIReD was published as a stand-alone resource via links which students needed to download.

The decision to make WIReD downloadable as opposed to online, was based on the high price of data in South Africa. According to Mothobi et al. (2018) “data prices remain unaffordable to the majority of (South African) people” (p. 1). However, all students have access to Wifi on the campus of the university. With a Wifi internet connection, or 750MB of data, WIReD can be downloaded and thereafter the student can work through WIReD offline. When WIReD is downloaded, it becomes a multimodal repository of information and activities which a student can revisit as the need arises. While working off-line has the benefit of exposure to content and activities without incurring any costs, the drawback is that data of students’ activities and assessment cannot be captured. As we have a number of assessments that students complete outside of WIReD, this was not an issue. In 2015 we considered it more important to have a resource in place which students could complete repeatedly to aid the development of their academic literacy abilities. WIReD consists of four units which are based on the outcomes of the academic literacy courses. See Appendix A for Table 1 which provides the titles of the units and an abridged summary of their subsections.

## RESEARCH METHOD

The method of this study was a realist form of autoethnographic representation. According to Pensoneau-Conway et al. (2017, p. 85), this form of autoethnography uses personal experience to “describe and understand challenges” such as the unsuccessful implementation of WIREd. According to Chang (2008), this method is not only about the self, but “searching for understanding of others (culture) through the self” (p. 125). Critical reflexivity is used to interpret behaviours and answer the research questions as suggested by Armstrong (2008) and Trahar (2009).

### Data

The researcher made use of multiple sources of evidence to inform her experience of and reflection on the struggle to implement WIREd. According to Duncan (2004) and Ellis et al. (2010), such multiple data sources make the autoethnographic narrative more justifiable. The empirical method of fieldwork was employed to gather data during the time period of April 2018 to November 2019. Throughout the process the researcher was conscious of her “ethical engagement” (Pensoneau-Conway et al., 2017, p.25). The consent of the designers, colleagues and students was required before their feedback was used for research purposes. Names were removed from student correspondence and there were no negative consequences for students or colleagues who did not want to discuss WIREd. This research also formed part of a larger academic literacy project which involved redesigning the academic literacy curriculum, for which ethical clearance was obtained at the institution.

The multiple data sources used in this study included student emails, emails from the graphic designer and the instructional designer, emails from the information technology (IT) office, minutes of meetings between the researcher, the graphic designer and the instructional designer, reflective diary entries, notes made of informal conversations between the researcher and students as well as the researcher and her colleagues, and artefacts such as computer screen images. The researcher consciously reflected on her experiences of the implementation. Data were sorted and analysed according to the phase of implementation. All these data sources were labelled, dated and stored electronically in a project file. After the analysis, the findings were subjected to an anonymous review process, and, based on the feedback, the data was interpreted to uncover the wider cultural implications of the study.

As autoethnography is often criticised as being too self-involved (Pensoneau-Conway et al., 2017), the legitimacy of this particular study might be justified by addressing its usefulness, construct validity and reliability (Duncan, 2004). The study might be useful to other academics in South African institutions of higher learning who plan to design and implement multimodal resources in their courses. As the researcher had not foreseen the hindrances that emerged in the implementation process, this study could help academics anticipate future scenarios in similar contexts.

Construct validity can be described as establishing the correct measures that match the concepts, and reliability in maintaining a chain of evidence (Yin, 2018). Ellis et al. (2010) apply these descriptions to the autoethnography method by referring to the narrator’s credibility and the availability of factual evidence. In reflecting on the concept of the struggle to implement WIREd, multiple sources of evidence, such as notes of conversations and emails, informed the researcher’s critical reflection. All data were saved and organised in such a way that it could be easily traced. In this way the researcher strove for construct validity and reliability in her study.

As stated in the beginning of the paper, the initial intent of the researcher was to examine whether WIREd had a positive influence on the development of students’ academic literacy abilities. When it was not possible to answer this research question because of the difficulties encountered in the implementation of WIREd, the researcher figuratively retraced her steps to the implementation process and sorted all data that had to do with the implementation into two groups. The first group of data involved the limited implementation and the second group of data concerned the extended implementation.

In the following section the data are analysed to uncover the hindrances in the implementation of WIREd. Thereafter, the data interpretation section is presented where the wider cultural implications of the hindrances for the institution, lecturers and students are explored.

## DATA ANALYSIS

WIREd's development process spanned three years from 2015 to 2017. By 2018 I was the only team member left, as one member was promoted and the other member relocated. While the instructional designer made some recommendations in terms of the implementation, I was responsible for the final decisions amidst my other teaching responsibilities. This made me nervous as I had no prior experience with the implementation of multimodal ICT resources. So, I was relying on the recommendations of the instructional designer and my teaching intuition. This should have been a warning light, as Kim (2015) noted that academics and instructional designers often have different perceptions about the delivery of online learning, which implies the implementation of multimodal resources. The instructional designer explained that he would send me the links, which I could communicate to the students. Then they "simply" had to click and download and access WIREd. At the time I did not give this much thought as it seemed very simple. On 26 February 2018 I noted in my journal:

*At last WIREd is ready and working!!! Can't wait to get feedback from the students!!*

### 2018: Limited Implementation

In April 2018, my colleagues were invited to take part in the limited implementation of WIREd and five of the 19 lecturers volunteered to make WIREd available to their students. During class, each lecturer showed the introductory video and invited the students to take part. A total of 235 students completed the consent forms indicating that they wanted to work through WIREd. I was very excited as I considered this to be a large number of participants. The three WIREd links were then sent out to the email addresses of the students. They had six weeks to complete the four units. I asked the help of three colleagues to design an online survey so that I could gain insight into the students' perceptions of the content, instructional design and usefulness of WIREd. This survey was sent out to the 235 students at the end of the six weeks. In support of the survey, four of the five lecturers arranged three focus groups each of between eight and twelve students from which we planned to get feedback. It was a very busy time for me, as I had to organise an assistant to personally call all the participants, arrange the venues, and was responsible for the refreshments. Multiple WIREd to-do lists are in my journal for May and June. I did not mind the extra responsibilities, as I wanted WIREd to succeed. I was hopeful at this stage that the students and my colleagues would be positive about WIREd, and I was also eager about the research possibilities that the use of this multimodal resource offered. I even filed a list of possible research questions in the project folder on 15 May 2018.

While many students telephonically confirmed their willingness to take part in the focus group discussions, I was disappointed when only a few of them attended the focus groups on the specified dates and times. At the end of the semester myself and three colleagues managed to conduct two interviews, seven mini focus groups (two to four participants) and three focus groups (five to eight participants). I include the focus group interview questions in Table 2 in Appendix B. A further disillusionment was that only 23 of the 235 students completed the survey. As the focus of this study is the struggle to implement WIREd, the survey responses were not used as data in this study.

From the general interviews and focus groups interviews it seemed that most of the participants did not download and complete WIREd. It is noteworthy that many of the students who arrived for the focus group discussions seemed to be confused about the purpose of the focus group and what they were supposed to "do" with WIREd. The general response seemed to be that they either did not receive the email with the link or that they did not know how the link "worked". At this stage I felt

very frustrated and even angry with the students. I could not fathom how anyone could not know how to click on a link and follow the download instructions. I vividly remember a focus group of 8 participants where not a single student downloaded the resource. I marched the group to the nearest computer facility, and showed them how they were supposed to download the units from the links sent via email. In the computer room I realised that they wanted to have access, but they needed more assistance than the instruction “click and download” provided. Many of the students thanked me for demonstrating the downloading process to them. I felt ashamed for being frustrated with them.

There were a few students who reported that they downloaded WIREd. My colleagues and I were sceptical about whether the interviewees completed all the activities as they were unable to discuss aspects of WIREd in detail. Furthermore, the students who took part in the limited implementation did not report any problems within WIREd, and I viewed this as additional proof that the students did not have access to WIREd, as I had myself identified a few errors in the version by that time. At the end of May 2018, I noted in my journal that the collection of data should be repeated at the end of another semester when students have been more informed and the links were made available in a more effective way.

## 2019: The Extended Implementation

In January 2019 the second version of WIREd was published and 149 distance students and 3 973 contact students who were enrolled in the elementary course had access to the three links of WIREd. As WIREd was designed to provide additional opportunities to complete activities, and as it seemed from the limited implementation that students did not seem motivated to do so, I decided to follow a different approach in the extended implementation. I received permission to link WIREd to assessments that formed part of the students’ participation mark, <sup>2</sup> thus using the resource as a blended learning strategy. As it seemed that sending the links to students via email was problematic, I placed information about WIREd, as well as the links of the units, within the Learning Management System (LMS). It is important to note that only the links were placed in the LMS and that WIREd could not be integrated into the LMS due to SCORM issues discussed in section 3. All students who are registered for the academic literacy courses have access to the academic literacy course sites within the LMS. Bearing in mind the confusion of the group of students who took part in the limited implementation, I placed information about WIREd and its implementation under the following hyperlinked headings: *Introduction to WIREd*; *Getting started*; *Installing WIREd*; *WIREd Unit 1 & 2*; *WIREd Unit 3*; *WIREd Unit 4*. Figure 2 indicates how these headings are viewed on-screen.

The introductory video was embedded in the “welcome screen” of the menu. When students clicked on *Getting started*, they were recommended to use a Wi-Fi connection to download WIREd on their personal computer or laptop. Clicking on *Installing WIREd* opened another menu and the

Figure 2. WIREd menu screen on the LMS course sites



Figure 3. Step-by-step installation guide



options are *Installation guide*, *Problems* and *WIREd contact details*. The following step-by-step information sheet (Figure 3) opens at the *Installation guide* heading.

The *Problems* option in the menu navigates to information about an on-campus computer facility with consultants available from 8:00 to 17:00, five days a week, where first year students can take their personal devices and receive assistance. These consultants are responsible for helping students with an information and computer literacy component, but they were willing to help students download WIREd as well. The *WIREd contact details* option, provided students with a dedicated e-mail address, set up by the information technology (IT) support office and linked to my email account. Clicking on *WIREd Unit 1 & 2*, *WIREd Unit 3*, or *WIREd Unit 4*, provided access to the links and further information about the downloading process.

While lecturers were invited to take part in the limited implementation, all the lectures were involved in the extended implementation. In an email I asked lecturers to 1) discuss WIREd during class by presenting the introductory video by means of the data projector in the lecturing venues; 2) show students how to navigate to the WIREd menu on the administrative site on the LMS, also via the data projector; and 3) explain to students that they were required to complete all four units by a set date after which they had to complete four short tests on the LMS course site (one on each unit). I felt optimistic that the demonstration by lecturers in the classes, the explanation on the LMS as well as the tests would assist students to download WIREd and motivate them to work through the units.

I am aware of my colleagues' wariness to take on additional responsibilities as they have large classes each semester. That is why I did not expect them to help students with any WIREd-related enquiries, as the LMS course site provided the dedicated email address as well as the location of the computer facility with the available consultants. Towards the end of the first semester in 2019, all 4 122 registered academic literacy students were invited to complete the 2018 WIREd survey.

During the months of July to September I anticipated a lot of WIREd-related emails from students. When I received only four emails during this time, I was anxious that there was a problem.

I realised in late September that the dedicated WIREd email address was faulty. This made me feel very incompetent. My colleagues forwarded a total of 37 WIREd-related student emails, as students were reaching out to them due to the fact that their emails could not get through to the WIREd email address. It was apparent in 36 of these emails, that these students were either confused about what WIREd was or that they had problems downloading WIREd. The following two emails are provided as examples:

*Student 1: The reason I didn't do Wired is that I thought the only 4 questions under 'Tests & quizzes' where the ones we should only do. I didn't understand what was meant by upload the app itself and do Wired.*

*Student 2: I was not able to download WIRED. The instructions on how to download WIRED was not clear and thus made it very difficult to download, I could not find the right link to download WIRED either.*

The email of student 1 possibly indicates that either he/she did not attend the class in which the lecturer explained WIREd, or that the lecturer's explanation might not have been sufficient. The email of student 2 is of particular concern as I strove to provide clear instructions about WIREd and how to download the resource (cf. figures 2 and 3). While the problem identified in the comment of student 2 probably cannot be generalised, it is an indication that students within this specific context might need more or simpler information about downloading WIREd. I read about similar challenges in a Turkish study on why students do not complete online courses. Aydin and Yazici (2020) link the interface design with implementation. Ease of use and simplicity were aspects that their students asked for. It seemed that our students needed more than detailed instructions on the LMS to enable them to download and use the resource.

Another drawback of this implementation process was the inability of students to download WIREd on a university computer in the many computer facilities on campus in 2019. When I tested the "downloadability" of WIREd on these computers towards the end of 2018, I was successful. As there are students who do not have their own devices, I was hopeful that these facilities could provide these students with the opportunity to work through WIREd. Unfortunately, it seemed that in 2019, all the computers in the facilities across campus were set up in such a manner that blocked all external downloads. While this seems reasonable, given what students might download, it is a pity that the downloading of WIREd was also obstructed. When I discovered this situation in mid-September, I felt very discouraged. Due to time constraints, I struggled to follow up the matter with the IT office in time for students to complete WIREd by the end of October, when classes were drawing to a close.

## **2020: WIREd Dismantled**

Towards the end of 2019 I communicated the implementation challenges I experienced with WIREd to CTL. The plan was that we would attend to these challenges in 2020. However, with the onset of the COVID pandemic in South Africa towards the end of March 2020, all resources of CTL were pooled to assist the university with the shift to online learning across all faculties. It was only later in the year that WIREd received attention. CTL made the decision to dismantle WIREd and repackage selected content into the LMS as shorter learning events that students could work through. These learning events could then be incorporated into the pages of the academic literacy modules on the LMS. This decision was based on two factors. Firstly, the Articulate Storyline software was not continuously updated and as I understood, without these updates, WIREd could no longer function. Secondly, CTL was of the opinion that implementation challenges would be avoided if the content were repackaged in the LMS.

On the one hand I feel a sense of loss in the dismantlement, as some of the content in the units will not be used. On the other hand, the repackaging within the LMS does offer a number of benefits.

This is also the route recommended by Cavus and Alhih (2014) for multimodal content delivery. At the time of writing the repackaging was still in progress.

## **Hindrances in the Implementation of WIReD**

Upon reflecting on the limited and extended implementation, two hindrances came to light. Firstly, inadequate resources; and, secondly, inadequate collaboration between institutional role players.

### *Inadequate Resources*

I managed the implementation of WIReD in 2018 and 2019 as an add-on to my existing responsibilities as an academic literacy lecturer. Although I feel passionate about the value of multimodal innovations such as WIReD, I underestimated the time and effort involved in getting WIReD “off the ground”. This realisation is similar to findings of Mabuan (2018), who reflects on the time constraints of developing an online course while teaching full-time in higher education. WIReD’s implementation unearthed unexpected challenges, one of which is the misalignment of what I considered to be straight forward steps to implement WIReD and my students’ apparent inability to complete those steps.

Due to time constraints, challenges such as the faulty email and the download-limitation of the computers in the university’s facilities, were not dealt with as effectively as I would have wanted. Employing an assistant could have been helpful.

### *Inadequate Institutional Collaboration*

Collaboration with the instructional design support office, especially with specialists on the LMS interface is needed to ensure that all implementation obstacles are removed that hinder students’ access to WIReD. Examples of these obstacles are the log-in page where students need to register as well as the download-options screen that follows (cf. step 4 & 5, Figure 3). Furthermore, the support should be continuous, in other words, the support officer for WIReD and I should have regular meetings where we use the resource to see if it is still functional and to observe newly emerged problems that students might have. We should have for example tested the email address that failed.

In terms of supporting students during the implementation phase, the collaboration with the computer facility and its consultants seems to have been a step in the right direction. In fact, Whealan-George and Casey (2020) list collaboration opportunities as one of the benefits of multimodal resource development. However, I would have preferred to have more knowledge about the face-to-face support provided by the consultants, as this would have informed the type of support that our students need. Collaboration with the IT support office at the university is also important to overcome the no-download barrier for students who are dependent on the computer facilities at the institution; and earlier problems with the dedicated email address that did not work.

## **DATA INTERPRETATION**

Within the culture of a South African higher education institution, the struggle to implement WIReD highlights broader institutional management issues, aspects concerning lecturers and the needs of students.

My institution aspires to excel in innovative learning and teaching to benefit society. This is not a farfetched ideal as my experience is an example of the support lecturers receive at one institution in the design and implementation of the multimodal resource. Even though the implementation did not go as planned, the fact that WIReD was conceptualised, designed and is now being repackaged, is an indication that South African institutions are cognisant of the importance of a multiliteracies framework in higher education. Time and money are scarce resources in any higher education institution, and the institutional management is responsible to allocate sufficient resources if they want to excel in innovative learning and teaching. While a number of years have passed since the

conception of WIREd, the journey provided myself and the CTL colleagues involved with valuable experiences which we can use in future multimodal endeavours.

The problem of inadequate collaboration is an indication that the different departments within institutions often function in isolated corners, unaware of other needs that may exist. Kennelly and McCormack (2015) state that collaboration in universities rarely happens spontaneously and needs to be actively promoted. In my experience, colleagues are not necessarily unwilling to collaborate, they seem to be oblivious of the need of collaboration. For example, in the context of this study, the IT department was not aware of the help students might need to download a resource onto a computer in the computer facility. When I contacted them, they were helpful, but it was too late in the semester to rectify the matter. I agree with Ali (2014) that faculty members like myself need specific training before ICT resources can be developed and implemented successfully. Such training should include the identification of all role-players in the design and implementation of these resources.

In the data analyses, I referred to the different emotions I experienced throughout the limited and extended implementation. As a faculty member who spends the majority of her time teaching in class, I found the design and implementation process unnerving. I was not surprised, therefore, by the fact that during the time of WIREd's design and implementation, only one of my other 16 colleagues was actively involved in multimodal resource creation. This is an indication of the apprehension many South African lecturers feel regarding multimodal resources and blended learning. A number of recent South African studies found that lecturers were positive about the use of multimodal resources and blended learning, and were willing to undergo training, but very few of them designed and implemented these resources in their courses (Mashitoa, 2020; Cruywagen & Potgieter, 2020; Pedro & Van der Merwe, 2020). Similar findings were reported in a Malaysian study by Rasheed et al. (2020), as well as in a Brazilian study (Da Rosa, 2016). Time constraints, lack of infrastructure, technological operation challenges and lack of self-confidence were the main reasons for non-engagement. From my own experience, I concur that lecturers generally avoid situations which may affect their self-confidence. Herbst (2020) provides an explanation for this avoidance, as he connects self-confidence to competence in the work environment. There seems to be a culture of rather avoiding multimodality than risking failure redolent of incompetence. In my opinion this culture is holding South African lecturers behind in terms of what Sadiki and Steyn (2020, p.152) refer to as the "learning curve" of working with ICT resources.

During the implementation process I felt overwhelmed and isolated. These feelings could have been avoided had I been part of a multiliteracies community of practice. According to Stevens (2006, p.10), a community of practice can be defined as a "group of practitioners which form spontaneously ... for the purpose of sharing information and developing expertise...". I am unaware of multiliteracy, multimodal or blended learning communities of practice at my institution, and due to my lack of exposure, I am also unsure if there are such communities of practice at other institutions in South Africa. This indicates the broader issue of isolation experienced by an academic entering the field of multiliteracy and blended learning, and the need for new communities of practice, or that existing communities make themselves known on an accessible platform.

South African students have varied levels of computer literacy when they enter higher education institutions (Mashile et al., 2020; Sadiki & Stey, 2020; Cruywagen & Potgieter, 2020). Lecturers need to be aware of the needs of their students so that they can provide the right support; for example, the students in the limited implementation of this study were unable to open a link from an email and needed a demonstration. What I experienced in this study was confirmed by Mashile et al. (2020). These researchers conducted a study on South African student experiences with ICT resources. Students commented that they needed more instructor support and that they experienced problems in terms of access to technology. Even though the current student generation seems to prefer a synaesthetic learning experience (cf. section 2), lecturers cannot assume that if students can operate WhatsApp and Instagram, they will be competent users of multimodal resources in the higher education context.

## **CONCLUSION**

The limited and extended implementation of WIReD in 2018 and 2019 made this resource available to a large number of students. Unfortunately, this was not the same as ensuring that all students have access to it. Robinson and Wizer (2016) suggests that faculty embarking on the process of multimodal resource design should carefully consider a number of factors, one of which is the advance planning of the delivery method and implementation. I agree with their recommendation as I could have been better prepared in terms of the need for additional resources and collaboration between different role players.

As a lecturer at a South African university, I am also part of the broader culture of an academic institution. While Delamont (2007) does not consider “the experience of an academic interesting enough to deserve privileged attention in scientific papers” (p. 7), this autoethnography enabled me to reflect on the struggle to implement a multimodal resource and in the process understand the broader issues connected to institutional management, lecturers and the students. I hope that my reflection will assist and motivate academics to take on the challenge of designing and implementing much needed multimodal resources in South African higher education institutions.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> In South Africa, the university year typically consists of two semesters. The first spans from January to June and the second from July to December.
- <sup>2</sup> The participation mark refers to a continuous assessment, comprising the total percentage calculated by combining all the marks for assignments done during the semester. The final mark for a course is a combination of the participation mark and the mark achieved in the exam at the end of a semester.

## APPENDIX A

Table 1. An abridged summary of WIREd's structure and contents

| Title                                   | Subsections                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|-----------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Unit 1<br>Academic acculturation        | <i>New academic environment</i> – transition from school to higher education                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|                                         | <i>Academic communication guidelines</i> – how to address a lecturer, composing a proper email to a lecturer, guidelines for group work                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|                                         | <i>New academic responsibilities</i> – understand what you read, learning & teaching styles, time management, note taking in class, listening skills in class                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|                                         | <i>New academic language</i> – English language exercises on sentence structure and grammar, introduction to formal academic register                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| Unit 2<br>Find and evaluate information | <i>Where and how to search for information</i> – tutorial searches on academic databases                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|                                         | <i>Evaluate information</i> – students use set principles to evaluate sources to determine their suitability in the academic environment                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|                                         | <i>Introduction to referencing</i> – keeping track of bibliographic details                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| Unit 3<br>Processing information        | <i>Process of completing a written assignment</i> – the concept of writing as a process is introduced                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|                                         | <i>Task analysis</i> – students practise the identification of key words to understand an assignment topic                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|                                         | <i>Dissecting an article</i> – video, audio and written information on the different sections of a peer-reviewed scholarly article                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|                                         | <i>Visual literacy</i> – information, examples and various activities involving tables, graphs and charts as these are often present in academic texts                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|                                         | <i>Plagiarism</i> – how to paraphrase and reference responsibly                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|                                         | <i>Referencing</i> – video and activities on a version of the Harvard referencing style with the focus on text references and the reference list. Builds on activity in unit 2                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| Unit 4<br>Produce and present           | <i>Planning your writing</i> – mapping of found information on the assignment instructions as part of the planning phase of an academic essay                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|                                         | This unit is constructed around the systematic assessment of four essays ranging from poorly written to very well written. The students are provided with interactive rubrics and feedback as they evaluate the essays according to set criteria.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|                                         | Resources available in this unit:                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|                                         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Informative videos <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Academic writing</li> <li>◦ Structure of an assignment</li> <li>◦ Structure of a paragraph</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Printable hand-outs <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Sign-post words (list of possible words that connect clauses and sentences to aid coherence in text)</li> <li>◦ Characteristics of academic writing (supplied in Unit 1 but evaluated in Unit 4)</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Annotated texts <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Well written paragraph</li> <li>◦ Well written assignment</li> </ul> </li> </ul> |
|                                         |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|                                         |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |

## APPENDIX B

Table 2. Focus interview questions

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Section A</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| 1. Did everyone here look at WIReD? Let's discuss your impressions of this electronic module... Why do you say so? Please tell me more..... Do the rest of the group agree with this statement? Any different/other opinions? |
| <b>Section B</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| 2. Would you feel comfortable having WIReD as a compulsory online component for ALDA/E? Motivate your answer.                                                                                                                 |
| 3. What do you think about the idea of WIReD replacing some of the ALDA/E lectures? Any topic in particular for which replacement can work?                                                                                   |
| <b>Section C</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| 4. How did WIReD link up with what your lecturer discussed with you in class?                                                                                                                                                 |
| 5. In what way did WIReD contribute to or enhance your understanding of the information in the ALDA/E-workbook?                                                                                                               |
| 6. Are there some units / aspects that WIReD covers that you <b>did not</b> need to pay much attention to? Can you remember which? (list a few options – list A)                                                              |
| 7. To what aspects in WIReD did you pay <b>most</b> attention to? (list a few options – list A). How did you determine this?                                                                                                  |
| 8. Which skills do you feel more confident / knowledgeable about after your completion of WIReD?                                                                                                                              |
| <b>Section D</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| 9. Do you think WIReD can be used for revision for ALDA/E 111 or 112?                                                                                                                                                         |
| 10. If WIReD becomes a compulsory revision element, what would you add or improve on?                                                                                                                                         |

*Kristien Andrianatos is a senior lecturer in the subject field of academic literacy at the North-West University, South Africa. Her PhD was on the reading support of first year students (2018). She writes and presents on issues of reading in higher education and multimodal blended learning projects within the field of academic literacy.*