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**Project Name:** Fostering Community Cohesion: Examining Access to and Utilization of Activist Literacies in Schools

**Project Members:**

- (i) Dr Lenny Sanchez (MU)
- (ii) Dr Rachel Pinnow
- (iii) Associate Prof. Vuyokazi Nomlomo
- (iv) Associate Prof. Sivakumar Sivasubramaniam

**BACKGROUND**

The project was conceived in 2012 with the aim of understanding how activist literacies are used in schools transnationally. The following are the immediate goals of the project:

- To identify the conceptions of literacy as circulated within the bands of education in South Africa as compared to the United States
- To determine school interests and needs as related to teacher development and utilization of activist literacies
- To triangulate and develop discourses about the conception of activist literacies in schools
- To promote interest in selected South African public schools which may wish to participate in future research efforts associated with this project
- To forge joint publishing opportunities to disseminate research findings from the linkage program collaboration

In the initial proposal that was jointly drafted by the MU-UWC team in 2012, it was stated that the collaboration would include staff visits as a means of strengthening the partnership and sharing experiences between the two participating institutions. In August 2013, Dr Lenny Sanchez made his first visit to UWC. During his visit, two primary schools in different townships of Cape Town had been identified as research sites. Dr Lenny and the UWC research team visited the schools and were able to collect some data that aligned with some of the research questions that underpin the research project. The data were transcribed and circulated to the team members early in 2014 for preliminary analysis.

## **MU VISIT**

I visited MU from the 20<sup>th</sup> – 28<sup>th</sup> of May 2014. My visit to the University of Missouri was not only to strengthen the partnership between MU and UWC, but to proceed with the research agenda that was agreed upon in 2013. At the stage of my visit, the data that were collected from the two South African schools had already been transcribed, and we had to commence with preliminary analysis.

During my week-long visit, we scheduled four meetings which took about three – four hours. Apart from touring the MU campus with beautiful gardens and meeting my UWC colleagues and some staff members of the MU Education College, I was inspired by the rigour and intensity of our discussion around educational issues that were relevant to our research project. Given the unique South African education context, we were able to discuss and interrogate the data in order to gain deeper insights into the various conceptions of “activist literacy” as they apply the two contexts (i.e. South Africa and the United States). The data analysis process led to some new insights into issues pertaining to literacy in the two contexts, and how such insights informed and strengthened the aims and objectives of the collaborative project. Consequently, we discovered an additional angle to our research project, namely “scientific literacy” that emanated from our discussion of the data that we worked on. This discovery was exciting, and was directly inspired by the gardening project of one of the research schools in South Africa. However, it needed further exploration and Dr Pinnow was willing to take the lead as it fell within her research interest/niche.

Overall, the following are the key activities that guided the meetings that I had with Dr Sanchez and Dr Pinnow during my week-long visit at Missouri University:

- 1) Revisiting and discussing the transcripts in order to understand the nature of the schools and educational issues pertaining to the South African context
- 2) Discussion of the data collected from the two schools in order to identify common patterns that aligned with the project aims
- 3) Brainstorming and trying to conceptualise “activist literacies” as it applies in the two contexts
- 4) Questions about what was happening in schools with regard to activist literacies, and how learners were interacting with communities
- 5) Discussion of possible articles to be written with tentative titles and foci
- 6) Setting deadlines for the circulation of the first draft of the article to be written from the data
- 7) Identifying possible journals to publish the articles
- 8) Reviewing the project aims and activities and the possibility of involving other schools
- 9) Planning for Drs Sanchez and Pinnow’s visit to South Africa in July 2014.

## **HIGHLIGHTS**

As mentioned above, the discussion of the data stimulated an interest in the garden project that was taking place in one of the project schools. Some questions were raised about the history and future of the gardening project, and how the project could be linked to the school curriculum. Another interesting question was how the garden project could be sustained to enrich literacies in science, and how to enhance community literacy about the soil. The discussion led to a need to extend the focus of the original proposal to include science literacy. Dr Pinnow had to take responsibility with regard to this addition to the initial proposal.

My visit to MU, though short was very fruitful in many ways. We were able to discuss critical issues that would have probably been barriers to the smooth running of the project given that we did not have the same socio-cultural and political understanding of the South African context. The open discussion enabled us to eliminate some misunderstandings on certain issues that were raised as part of the data. We were also able to reflect on the project and that aided us to be critical and open-minded as we made future plans for the project.

At this stage, we have accumulated even more data on the project during Dr Sanchez' and Pinnow's visit to Cape Town in July 2014. We have to proceed with publishing some of the data, while we continue with our research in schools. We have planned a meeting for the 28<sup>th</sup> January 2015 where some of the issues mentioned above will be concretised.

I wish to extend my gratitude to Prof Uphoff, and Drs Sanchez and Pinnow for hosting me at MU. Many thanks to Leolyn Jackson, the UWC Director of the International Relations office and his staff, Ms Debra Lamson and Ms Hilda Andrew for facilitating my trip to MU.

**Report compiled by:**

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'V. Nomlomo', written in a cursive style.

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