# Developing students' academic and professional literacies in the health sciences

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Academic Literacies Forum
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Structure

- Background
- Discourses of learning and teaching
- Methodology
- Dimensions of literacies
- Occupational therapy case study
- Preliminary insights
- Possible areas for further research

Faculty of Community and Health Sciences (CHS)

Research design

'Student success project'

Academic literacies

Tutoring

Assessment

Occupational Therapy
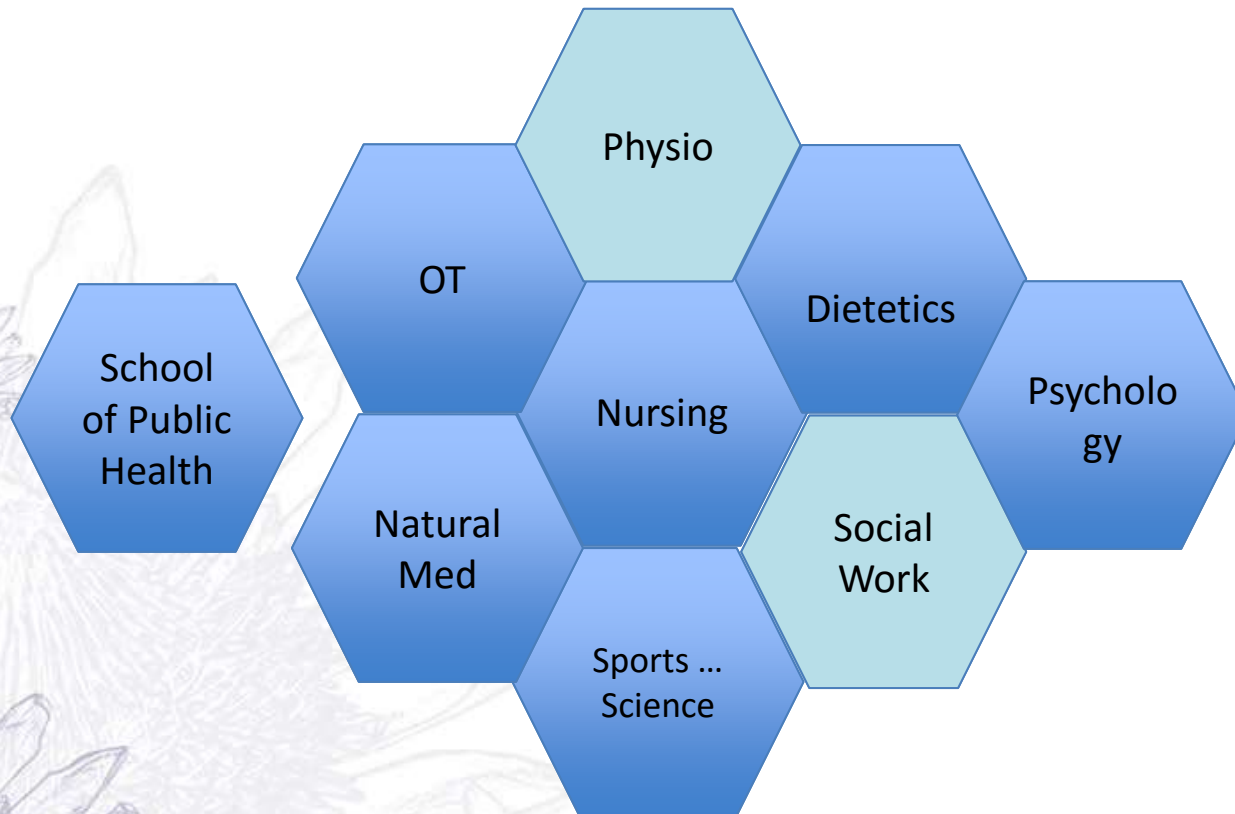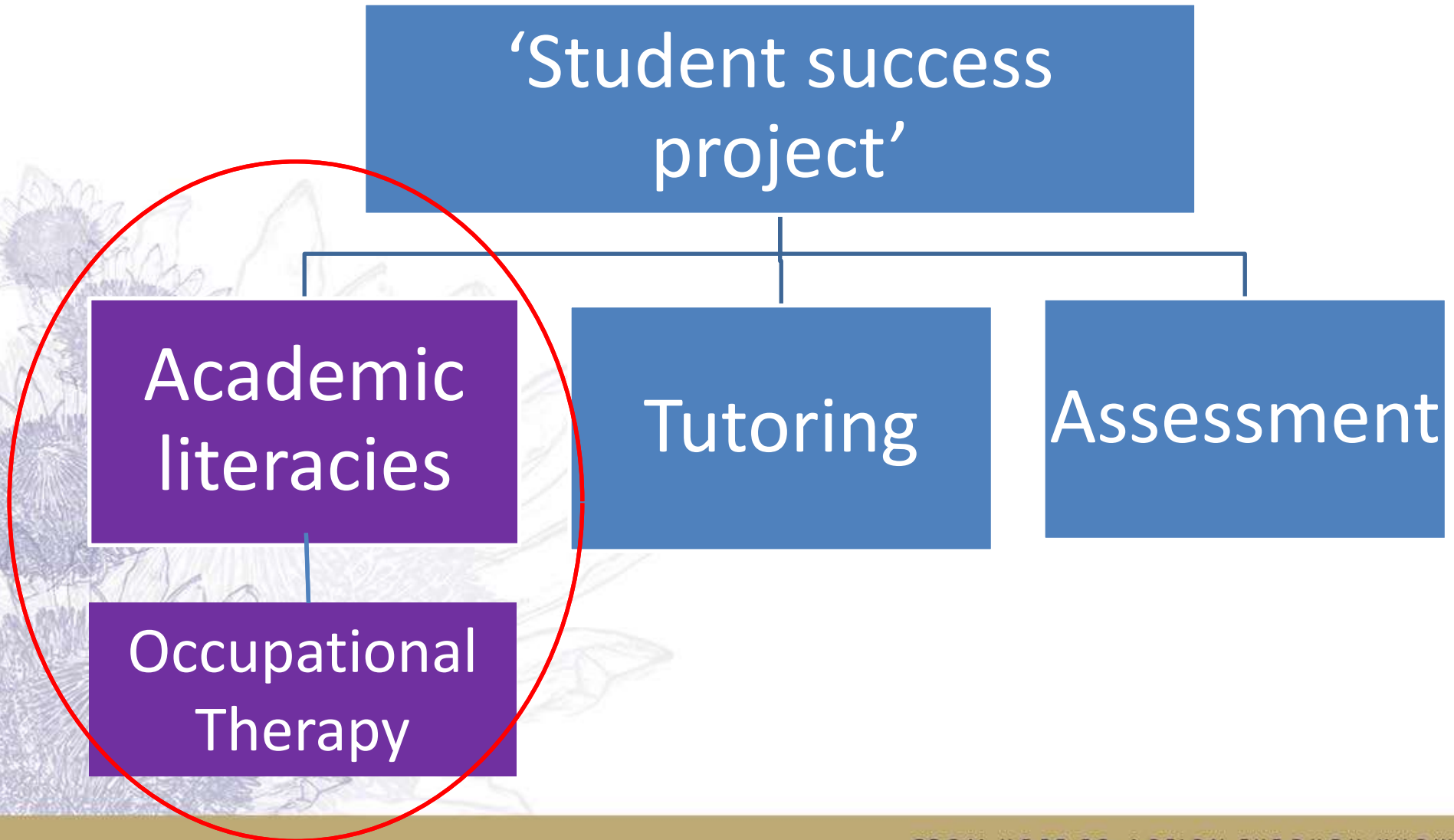
Design-based research

- Conducted in authentic, educational contexts, directed at making a practical impact (Reeves, Herrington and Oliver, 2005)

- Goes through iterative cycles (phases) of research, implementation, evaluation

- An important outcome is formulation of principles for practice.

Purpose of academic literacies project

- To document and interpret literacy practices in the health professional programmes through an academic literacies lens.

- Share these practices with lecturers in departments to raise awareness of need for development of academic literacies

- Work with lecturers to implement T&L activities aimed at developing literacies of students

- Engage in participatory research with lecturers on the implementation of these practices

- Develop design principles

Research questions (in this phase)

- What are lecturers' (informants') perceptions of what academic and professional literacies are required in their professional programmes?

- How do they develop these literacies in their modules?

Discourses of learning and teaching

Contexts

UWC

Institutional Operating Plan (IOP) 2010 -2014
Teaching and Learning Strategy

Charter of Graduate Attributes

Current IOP – academic, digital and
multimodal literacies

UWC's Graduate attributes

Tier 1
Overarching attributes, 'complex interwoven aspects of human ability' (Barrie, 2005:3)

- attributes that allow graduates to prosper in an uncertain world of change **(**Barnett, 2004)
- scholarship, citizenship and the social good, lifelong learning

Tier 2
**Clusters of personal skills and abilities (UWC charter)**

- Inquiry-focused and knowledgeable
- Critically and relevantly literate
- Autonomous and collaborative
- Ethically, Environmentally and Socially Aware and Active
- Skilled Communicators
- Interpersonal flexibility and confidence to engage across difference

Critically and relevantly literate:

UWC graduates will be able to seek, discern, use and apply information effectively in a range of contexts.
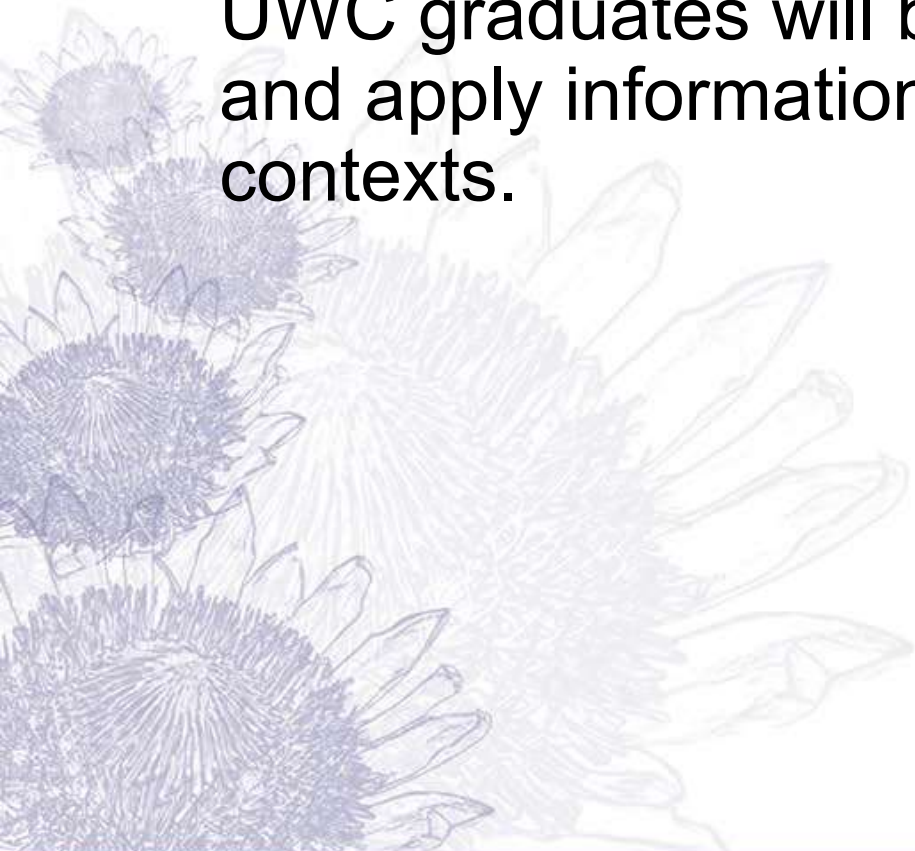
Health education

Knowledge in health education

- knowledge of basic science, applied science knowledge of frameworks, techniques and clinical (health sciences) or practice-based competence (Social Work)

Discourses of learning and curriculum – relate to learning outcomes and competencies

Understandings of competencies range from those that are 'narrow, task-based or behaviourist' to a more integrated, holistic approach (Gonzci, 1994), which comes closer to our conceptualisation of graduate attributes

Health education

Move towards socially contextualized competencies internationally

SA – framed by Primary Health Care and Health Promotion =>

focus on being a change agent

However the dominant trend:

Student writing seen from perspective of autonomous view of literacy (Street, 1995). Can be taught through add-on modules and then applied in disciplinary courses

'Normative' versus 'transformative' approach (Lillis & Scott, 2007)

A normative approach

- emphasis on identifying academic conventions

- assisting students to become proficient or 'expert' in relation to these academic and disciplinary conventions

(identify, induct)

A transformative approach

is concerned with student writers:

a) becoming aware of how conventions impinge on their meaning making;

b) exploring alternative ways of meaning making in academia, and

c) considering the resources that (student) writers bring to the academy (Lillis and Scott, 2007)

- Project appears to be framed largely within a normative approach

- Lillis and Scott (2007) argue that a normative approach rests on the "educational myths that Kress (2007) describes: the homogeneity of the student population, the stability of disciplines, and the unidirectionality of the teacher-student relation".

- Can one take a normative approach to developing academic literacies of students, i.e. are there stable academic literacies that students need to be inducted into?

Academic literacies in professional programmes

- Professional courses such as social work, medicine and law involve students writing in hybrid genres and discourses

- Lecturers and departments often do not recognize the complexity of this for students

(Rai, 2004, Lillis and Scott, 2007)

Academic and professional literacies

- Academic literacies – the literacies needed to learn at university – e.g. academic reading and writing, summarising, integrating, analysing

- Professional literacies – literacies used in professional practice

- In most cases strong links between academic and professional literacies but aspects of professional literacies that are very unrelated to academic literacies.

Data-gathering

- Semi-structured interviews with lecturers from professional programmes – Nursing, Social Work, Physiotherapy, Dietetics and Sports Science

- Informants were selected on the basis of their knowledge and interest in developing academic literacy of students (not necessarily conceived in this way)

- Project includes a participatory case study with the Occupational Therapy department

$\Rightarrow$Focus group discussion with OT staff provides data from 5th professional programme

- OT participatory case-study

Data analysis

- Coded transcripts deductively using Atlas ti
- From Atlas ti reports, identified main literacies needed in each of the professional programmes as identified by the informant
- Identified T&L activities used to develop these, where these were included.
- Extracted broad sets of literacies and how they manifest themselves in different professional programmes

- Presentation of preliminary data analysis to a special meeting of the faculty T&L committee
- Suggested types of interventions that lecturers could do as small-scale research projects

Dimensions of literacy

1. Using texts, extracting meaning, relating different strands to each other and integrating in own text.
2. Acknowledging sources and referencing

3. Relating observation and experience to academic ways of thinking (literature)
4. Relating theory and practice

5. Communicate with patients
6. Health promotion – communicating health messages to the public

Dimension 1: Using texts, extracting meaning, relating different strands to each other and integrating in own text

Dimension of literacy:

Using texts, extracting meaning, relating different strands to each other and integrating in own text.

General: Conventional academic essay using articles and books

Discipline specific:

- Applying theoretical framework to a case (Social Work)
- Drawing on policy frameworks and legislation to inform analysis or writing up of a case (Social Work)
- Drawing on policy, protocols and text-books to inform case-study (Nursing)

Dimension 2:

## **Referencing and acknowledging sources**

Dimension 3:

Relating observation and experience to academic ways of thinking (literature)

(SW and OT)

'they just take the abstract of the literature. They do not read the actual article, and it was about getting into engaging with the actual article and identifying aspects from the article that link to something that they have experienced in practice and it was a lovely way because (at the end of nine visits and nine journals and times it by fifty - it is a lot) so you could see that development' (OT lecturer)

Dimension 4: *Relating theory and practice*

- Link theory (academic content) and clinical practice in order to manage client holistically
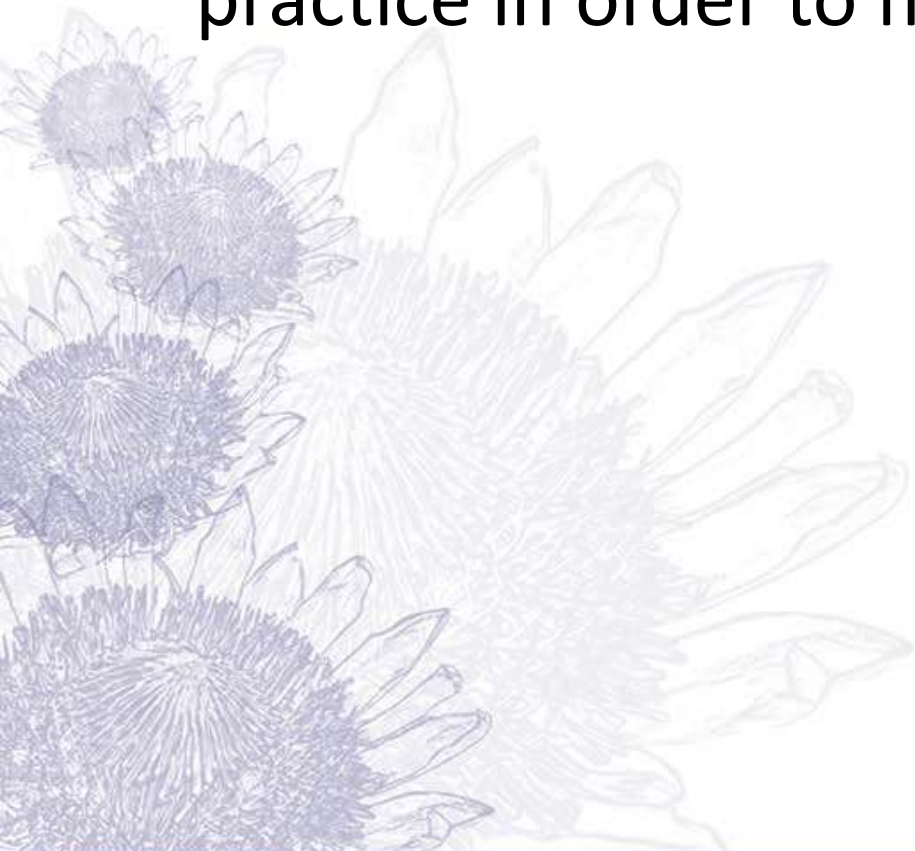
Example of T&L Practice

Nursing - WhatsApp discussion support group specifically related to supporting and learning in clinical practice.

'They do clinical twice a week, so while they are in clinical practice, we will have that open door of communication with them in real time. If they experience any challenges within the facility, but this is patient-related. It is condition related' (Nursing lecturer).

Dimension:
Communicate with patients and with the public

Source and learn scientifically based knowledge and communicate with patients or the public in an accessible way, drawing on that knowledge.

Communicating with patients

Dimension 5:
Communicating with patients:

Students need to have a knowledge base of the main disease conditions and be able to know what information to source and where from. They need to translate scientific knowledge into accessible language to communicate with patients.

But more than this:

Are students [emerging practitioners] actually engaging with [patients]? Are they trying to empower them to make their own decisions so that when they walk out of the consultation, they feel like they can make a change on their own? (Dietetics lecturer)

'we have this disconnected objective view of bodies, because we deal with cadavers and so we talk about the human body as a dead thing and then we forget that when we start talking about patients, patients have live human bodies and that discourse changes or it should change.' (Physio lecturer)

Communicating with patients in a way that recognises their values, eg. 'the reason you need to bend and straighten your knee, is because this movement is really important for walking and you told me that walking is important because you want to go and visit your grandkids' (Physio lecturer)

Dimension 6: Health promotion: Communicating health messages to the the public

[Community –based dieticians] need to think of how they are going to translate their theory into preventative measures in the community setting. They need to think of what educational programmes can they run and that has to be based on [sound] evidence (Dietetics lecturer)

Occupational Therapy participatory case study

Occupational Therapy participatory case study

- Whole department is involved at certain points. Mainly project leader and 5 second year lecturers.
- 3 year project, staff development, implementation and research into practice
- Focused on 2nd year curriculum => embedding development of academic literacies into modules and scaffolding across year level
- Pilot for embedding literacies development in whole programme
- Strong interest in critical literacies

Current status of ac lits project

- OT project – lecturers in implementation and research phase

- Faculty project – initial research and dissemination but no uptake for implementation phase
  [except for involvement of School of Public Health]

- Why? Where to now?

Preliminary insights

- Research project has identified broad dimensions of literacy that are seen as important across the professional programmes

- These dimensions were extracted from analysis of lecturers' rich descriptions of literacy practices needed by students and practitioners in the profession.

- Most of the *informants* in the study confirmed the argument that literacies need to be reinforced and developed in the professional programmes themselves

- Difficulty in involving academics and departments in project outside of the OT department.

Occupational therapy project

- Lecturers in process of making changes to their second year modules with the aim of developing students' academic literacies

- Presentations delivered at conferences and joint papers being written

- Recognise their development of increased awareness about students' academic literacies and their own expectations

Possible directions for further research

- Students' literacy practices from perspective of students
- More varied methods of data collection (e.g. ethnographic methods)
- Need for more research into multimodal and critical literacies
- Exploration of contrasting health education and academic literacy discourses and the impact on teaching and learning practices

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Thank you !