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## Developing an intervention programme to enhance cognitive processes and background knowledge in digital literacy practices

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### Abstract

This paper is based on the premise that a big gap exists between what lecturers expect and what students are doing when it comes to completing research projects as part of ongoing assessment in MA classes. This is because the digital literacy competencies of these students are insufficient especially the ability to locate, evaluate, integrate and communicate information from online sources effectively and ethically. This study investigates how students utilise online information and if they can be taught to employ appropriate strategies to exploit this information. This paper will outline the three phase intervention programme undertaken for this study.

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*Keywords:* Background knowledge; cognitive processes; digital literacy; literacy skills; research practices

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### 1. Introduction

The shift from print to digital technologies has altered the way students read and seek knowledge largely because the younger generation has grown up in a digital landscape (Jules and Dosai, 2006, Prensky, 2001). In university, the practice of reading for information has also seen a visible change in that students are now looking to the internet rather than the library to gather the knowledge needed to complete assignments and projects. Most of the time they are given a list of assignments and left on their own to navigate the World Wide Web without any direction and in addition, they have to decide on the value and credibility of the information they find. The reality is that most reading is done in cyberspace and these students have to first decide where to look for the information they require and then sift through the massive amounts of hits they will get before they even begin to start making sense of what they do eventually choose to read.

What is abundantly clear is these students usually have the technical expertise when surfing the Net but are they able to use the information they retrieve effectively and ethically (Rouet, 2006). What underlies all these competencies is still the cognitive process of reading and the background knowledge in helping to understand what skills are necessary for online reading. This study proposes to document how students are thinking about the

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information available online and how they can be helped to employ appropriate strategies to help them exploit this information to complete course assignments. Specifically the study will examine if students are exploiting their cognitive strategies and background knowledge to help them in their digital literacy practices. This paper will outline the three phase intervention programme undertaken for this study.

## 2. The study

### 2.1 Context of the study

There is a big gap between what lecturers expect and what students are doing when it comes to completing research projects as part of ongoing assessment in MA classes. This deficiency exists because the digital literacy competencies of these students are insufficient especially the ability to locate, evaluate, integrate and communicate information from online sources effectively and ethically. This explains why students find the prospect of doing research engaging and exciting initially but are quickly overwhelmed when confronted with the sheer volume of information available online. The inability to cope with this information overload usually results in them simply completing course assignments without developing deep learning skills, i.e. they do not learn by doing. Hence, most of them do not gain the maximum benefit from the various courses they have to take and the assignments, which are meant to encourage independent scholarship, are seen as burdensome and unnecessary.

### 2.2 The Intervention Programme

A three phase intervention programme was carried out with a group of 10 learners enrolled in the Masters programme at the university. These students were majoring in English language studies and this meant they had to read articles and books in the English language as part of the requirement in their courses. Students from the Reading course taught at the Masters level were invited to participate in the study simply because two of the writers had access to the students enrolled in the course. In the intervention programme a series of workshops were conducted with these learners.

#### 2.2.1 Pre intervention

In this first stage of the intervention programme 2 focus group interviews with 5 learners in each group were conducted. This was a very informal session to help put students at ease and at the same time identify their existing strategies by getting them to talk about how they begin working on research projects. Students were also invited to demonstrate how they would locate information using online sources. Each focus group interview lasted between one and a half to two hours with the students engaging in lively discussions on how they looked for information online. The sessions were recorded and the researchers kept field notes as well.

#### 2.2.2 Intervention

The second stage involved the training of students in online literacy skills and involved 4 specific steps i.e. goal setting, focus search, filter and knowledge assembly. Training students in online literacy skills. This involved the following steps as shown below.

Table 1. Training Schedule for online literacy skills

Objective	Literacy Skills
Goal Setting (Identify task and outcomes)	Locate
Focus Search (Carry out targeted and narrow search)	Evaluate and Integrate
Filter (Confirm credibility and quality of information)	Evaluate and Integrate
Knowledge Assembly(Organizing and synthesizing information)	Communicate

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