Virtual Research Environments: The role of the facilitator

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Background

• The South African Biochemistry and Informatics for Natural Products (SABINA) network was established as a collaborative initiative amongst Namibia, Tanzania, Malawi and South Africa.

• The POL-SABINA project was created to develop policy and support actions for the SABINA network:
  - create a **collaborative environment** amongst partners
  - permit researchers engaged in natural products research and associated capacity building initiatives to **enhance their efficiency and effectiveness as researchers**
  - ensure that an appropriate environment exists to **facilitate the translation** of their research outputs into actual products.
My profile

• Degrees: B.Sc. in Molecular Biology and B.Sc. in Medicine (Honours)
• Worked at: Centre for Occupational and Environmental Health Research, UCT
• ICT literate, but have no background in
  ➢ library science
  ➢ training
  ➢ integrating systems
  ➢ publishing
  ➢ facilitating relationships
Researchers of natural products enhancing food security and improving health!

This digital workspace is home to a number of researchers concerned with the utilisation of African natural products - to enhance food security and improve human and animal health.

**SABINA is a network that constitutes the following partners:** University of Malawi, University of Namibia, University of Dar es Salaam, University of Pretoria, University of Witwatersrand, Council for Scientific and Industrial Research and Tea Research Foundation of Central Africa. **SABINA partnership is focused on the building of capacity in natural product research through training of MSc and PhD students.** The main goal of the SABINA network initiative is to implement proactive postgraduate programmes in the
South African Genetics & Bioinformatics Society Conference

by Natalie Bowers - Monday, 21 May 2012, 08:20 AM

The South African Genetics Society and South African Society for Bioinformatics and Computational Biology have the pleasure to announce: “The Data-mining Revolution”. A joint meeting of these Societies to be held from the 10 – 12th September, 2012, at the Stellenbosch University Conservatoire.

Important Dates
Deadline: early registration June 30th 2012
Deadline: abstract submission May 30th 2012
Acceptance emailed: June 15th 2012
Finalization of program: July 15th 2012
1. **Identification of research area**
   
   As Organic Chemistry lecturer, my research interest from the beginning was in the area of Organic Chemistry. I was involved in the Tanga AIDS Working Group (TAWG) Project with my co-supervisor Dr Vinosh Maharaj in March 2009, and this formed part of my PhD studies in South Africa. Here you would add the information gathered while investigating and identifying your research area.

2. **Identification of funding resources**
   
   I was informed about the SABINA scholarship by a fellow staff member, Dr Quintino Mgani and he asked me to submit all the required documents to the SABINA headquarters in Malawi for possible consideration. By that time the admissions for most South African universities were closed and SABINA representative, Prof Charles de Koning from WITS had to request that the School of Chemistry process my admission. I started my studies in March 2009 at CSIR in Pretoria where I stayed for 1.5 years and completed the first part (phytochemistry and HIV bioassay) of my PhD before moving to Wits in Johannesburg to finish the second part (synthesis).
   
   Here you would add the information gathered while investigating and identifying your funding resources.

3. **Identification of collaborators**
   
   Here you will list the details of all your collaborators in a database as demonstrated below.

   ![List of collaborators](image.png)

4. **Project planning**
   
   Here you will add your project planning files.
E.g. Apple-Science: has a plethora of tools and applications for all scientific disciplines
Roles of the facilitator

- Controlling permissions
- Training & troubleshooting
- Evaluating & testing platform and tool features
- Identifying resources to be integrated into Moodle
- Liaison with the VRE developer(s)
- Scouting for relevant content – irrespective of format
- Facilitating the development of relationships
- Spotting opportunities & making linkages
- Pushing only relevant content to the community
Defining user roles and permissions

• Roles and permissions define exactly what can be done and who is entitled to act

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Short name</th>
<th>Edit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Manager</td>
<td>Managers can access course and modify them, they usually do not participate in courses.</td>
<td>manager</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project creator</td>
<td>Project creators can create new projects.</td>
<td>projectcreator</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project owner</td>
<td>Project owners can do anything within a project, including changing the activities.</td>
<td>prowner</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project observer</td>
<td>Project observers can view the project content, but may not alter activities.</td>
<td>proobserver</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Students generally have fewer privileges within a course.</td>
<td>student</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guest</td>
<td>Guests have minimal privileges and usually can not enter text anywhere.</td>
<td>guest</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authenticated user</td>
<td>All logged in users.</td>
<td>user</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authenticated user on frontpage</td>
<td>All logged in users in the frontpage course.</td>
<td>frontpage</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>web services</td>
<td>Allow to connect via webservises.</td>
<td>ws</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Creating and presenting user training

http://showroom.ituta.net/

Moodle Training Course

Overview of the course

This course will introduce you to and assist you with using Moodle and it's functions.

On completion of this course you will be able to:

- Navigate through moodle
- Create a personal profile
- Manage your own project
- Make use of standard Moodle functions
Evaluating and testing platform features

- Developers can extend Moodle's modular construction by creating plugins for specific new functionality or they can introduce a new module or stand-alone system (e.g. BBB) that would enhance Moodle’s functionality.

http://www.bigbluebutton.org/overview/
MarvinSketch: an advanced chemical editor for drawing chemical structures, queries & reactions
Liaison with VRE developer
• The students in the SABINA network are conducting research on the biochemistry and chemistry of natural products, including bioinformatics.

• In collaboration with an information specialist at the CSIR I was able to create several search strategies to assist with sourcing the most recent and relevant journal articles.

• I have also created a list of trusted web sites that need to be interrogated regularly for new content.
Facilitating relationships: getting users to cooperate and collaborate

• There are several **challenges** to getting our researchers to cooperate and collaborate, including: **time, isolation, poor motivation, lack of appropriate ICT skills and training**

• Initially we targeted the students but we have come to realise that the **supervisor determines priorities** for the students and we will therefore have to ensure that **supervisors become comfortable with the environment**. Without being comfortable it is highly unlikely that they would want to see the benefits of the VRE.
Spotting opportunities and making linkages

• This role is very broad and can be described as taking knowledge gained and putting it to good use

• It is about developing a wide area of interest and pulling in bits and pieces when they could make a difference in the researcher’s very focussed project.

• For e.g. writing articles for the interest of the broader VRE community and adding this and other useful information to the newsletter- something that links them back to the VRE
Pushing content to VRE participants

- POL-SABINA News
- Announcements
- Journal Articles

General News
Forthcoming Books
Upcoming Conferences
Is this a role the librarians should play in the future?

• It has become clear that the participation of the librarians at the very beginning of the VRE can assist both in populating the VRE with content as well as in structuring access to the content.

• However, to be a VRE facilitator requires that the facilitator is then also is involved in the next phase – which would be to assist the researcher in managing the increasingly complex array of tasks involved in carrying out research online.
Conclusion

• VRE facilitation is like being a mother, a logistics officer, a priest as well as a crazy inventor – all in one!

• The mother and the priest assist, forgive and hand out praise.

• The logistics officer is responsible for ensuring that everything that could go wrong does not and the inventor has to find new things to thrill and amaze the audience.

• But, as discussed in previous slides, there are very clearly defined and identifiable roles that need to be fulfilled by the facilitator.
Thank you!

Any questions?
References