

The Alf Model



A Case Study of the Role of Librarians as Mentors in Digital Literacy

Alf,¹ a student from a disadvantaged background, began his tertiary education with very little knowledge of computers, so he did not have the technology skills required for his studies. He entered a one-year bridge program at Helderberg College of Higher Education in Cape Town, South Africa, which provided additional support to students who needed it. While a student in college, he was mentored by the librarians in the academic library of the institution. In this article, I share his story.

The Alf Case Study: Background

A case study is rarely significant without sketching the backdrop against which it unfolds to provide context. This allows the researcher to engage fully with a single participant to get a more intimate picture of his or her life and experiences and to focus on specific experiences and the phenomena surrounding them.

This account of Alf's experience is based on explanatory case-study methodology. According to De Vos, an explanatory study is also referred to as the *instrumental* study and "the purpose of this type of case study is both theory building and testing."² In Alf's case study, the library served as the bridge between the student and his access to education.

Libraries can be a valuable resource for students and staff at all levels of education, but especially at higher education institutions, and can be an important link in the educational metamorphosis of students.

Default "Pipeline" Metaphor

Alf's case study, I believe, is an example of what Adelman referred to when he wrote, "The default 'pipeline' metaphor, used to describe presumably linear learning experiences and environmental sequences, is wholly inadequate to describe student behaviour. Pipelines are unidirectional closed spaces, and under the 'pipeline' metaphor students are passive creatures (as in 'retention') swept along or dropping out of the space completely through leaks at the joints. But student behaviour doesn't look like that at all: It moves in starts and stops, sideways, down one path to another and perhaps circling back. Liquids move in pipes; people don't."³

The Bantu Education Act

To understand Alf's case study, a brief history of education in South Africa is needed. In 1953, Hendrik Verwoerd, the prime minister of South Africa, introduced the Bantu Education Act in Parliament.⁴ It was believed that black South

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Africans needed only enough education to perform menial tasks, and as a result, the black South African population received an inferior education compared with other groups. Segregation took place in universities in 1959. In 1963, a separate education department was created for people of mixed-race descent (referred to as “coloured” in South Africa). Further segregation took place in 1964 when people of Indian descent were also given a separate education department. During this period, there were four separate systems of education, with “glaring inequalities” among them.⁵ In discussing these four systems, Thobejane in *New Learning* observed that these inequalities were found in “teacher qualifications, teacher-pupil ratios, per capita funding, buildings, equipment, facilities, books, stationery . . . and also to ‘results’ measured in terms of the proportions and levels of certificates awarded.”⁶

After South Africa Became a Democratic Country

Twenty-seven years have passed since South Africa became a democratic country and since apartheid came to an end; however, even though large amounts of money have been directed towards education, unequal access to highly trained teachers and adequately funded schools still persists within the nation,⁷ and the results can be seen in how students perform on national standardized tests.

For example, on December 5, 2017, results from the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) Report, which is used internationally to test reading literacy, were released by South Africa’s Minister of Basic Education, Angie Motsheka. This report revealed that 78 percent of South African children in Grade 4 (which translates into 8 out of 10 children) were not able to read and comprehend what they were reading. Of the countries taking part in the PIRLS assessment, South Africa fared worst of all. The South African government divides schools into five Quintiles based on the affluence or poverty of the neighborhood in which the school exists. A school in a very poor, impoverished neighborhood is classified as a Quintile 1 school. These schools do not charge school fees and receive the most funding from the government. At the other end of the scale is the Quintile 5 school in the most affluent, wealthy neighborhoods; Quintile 5 schools receive minimal funding from the government and charge relatively high school fees. PIRLS 2016 mainly tested learners from Quintile 1 schools, with these being the schools attended by the majority of the country’s learners.

South African educators were dissatisfied with the con-

clusions drawn about the nation’s education system after the 2016 PIRLS assessments. Quintile 1 learners mainly speak African languages (e.g., isiZulu, isiXhosa, isiNdebele, isiSwati, or Sesotho), yet the PIRLS assessment instrument was not adapted to provide accurate assessment of South Africa’s unique learner population and its 11 official languages. It was felt that the statistical results were unreliable and not suitable for use in making informed decisions related to literacy policies. However, regardless of the PIRLS’ shortcomings in the South African context, the reality is that most of South Africa’s children are from poverty-stricken areas and primarily speak African languages. The PIRLS assessment results showed that children speaking English and Afrikaans from affluent areas had literacy results which were significantly higher than those from lower Quintile schools,

where the assessments were not administered in languages spoken by the students.⁸

In February 2018, Cyril Ramaphosa became the president of the Republic of South Africa. In his first State of the Nation address, he addressed the country’s long history of educational inequality and brought hope to many South Africans; he emphasized that much hard work would have to be done by all to bring about change.⁹

Educators and researchers have long looked for solutions, but McLoughlin and Dwolatzky¹⁰ believe that not enough information is available to totally fill in the picture of what is happening in education in South Africa. The complete answer to “why” access continues to be unequal is not yet available. Insufficient data has been collected for enough analysts to produce helpful answers to the problems that are being faced. Kallaway says, “We did not take the trouble to understand with care what

was wrong with apartheid education before we set about attempting to remedy the problems through grand plans which included the reform of governance and curriculum. We were in fact suffering from historical amnesia and we have had to pay a high price.”¹¹ Education reform is a long-term process, and many countries must continue to seek solutions to how best to educate all citizens when social and economic disparities persist.

Seventh-day Adventist Schools in South Africa and Apartheid

Unfortunately, the Seventh-day Adventist Church in South Africa was very much affected by apartheid policies, with our schools being segregated along the same lines as state schools. The challenges faced by various categories of state schools in South Africa also impacted our schools, highlight-

met Alf at registration when he enrolled as a student at Helderberg College of Higher Education. He informed me that he had never operated a computer before and thus did not know how to use one. He told me of his fear of entering a computer class and being scoffed at by those whom he thought would refer to him as being “stupid.”

ing the reality that apartheid policies were applied to church schools in South Africa.¹² Alf, the central subject of this study, attended one of these church schools. More study and attention need to be given to how best to address the disparities that persist despite apartheid having ended.

Mentoring Alf

I met Alf at registration when he enrolled as a student at Helderberg College of Higher Education. He informed me that he had never operated a computer before and thus did not know how to use one. He told me of his fear of entering a computer class and being scoffed at by those whom he thought would refer to him as being “stupid.”

Librarians as Motivators and Facilitators

Alf sensed that I would be sympathetic to his plight and would help him to feel comfortable using a computer. In addition to computer skills, Alf also needed study skills. The education he had received up to that point had not prepared him for the demands of tertiary education. Yet because of his excitement at having an opportunity to study at a higher education institution and his determination to succeed, Alf spent many hours in the library. Arko-Cobbah noted that “Librarians become motivators and facilitators in the learning process.”¹³ While Alf received instruction in his computer classes, the librarians were able to help him apply those skills to conduct research and use the library databases—and they even offered help with study skills.

Classroom Situation at Alf’s Learning Institution

Alf experienced additional challenges with the instructional methods used in his classes. In many of his classes, there were students, like Alf, who encountered the barrier of having the study material presented in a language that was not their first language. Many of those students also came from educational backgrounds where learners had not been taught study skills in secondary school or how to cope with the demands of college life; these students had mainly attended rural schools. And, in the same classroom were students from urban township schools, from schools previously known as “coloured” schools, from Indian schools, from Model C schools (now open to all races, but previously state-sponsored white schools), as well as those from less-privileged to very-privileged private schools—ranging from poor to modest church schools to very expensive elite institutions. The instructors found it challenging to present lectures that would satisfy the needs of students from such varied educational backgrounds, and many failed to adopt a variety of instructional approaches since the lecture format is a primary mode of instruction in higher education in South Africa.

Adapting Instructional Approaches to Meet Students’ Needs

Teachers in today’s classrooms not only need to present lessons that will appeal to the typical millennial who is “comfortable with technology . . . easily bored without it; enjoy(s) working as a team—product of their education; very self-aware,”¹⁴ but also present the lessons in a way that em-

powers every student to engage in the learning process even if the coursework and teaching style are vastly different from what they have experienced in the past. Compared to the typical millennial, Alf came from a background of rote learning, where nothing is ever questioned or evaluated, where very little reading is assigned, and where the oral tradition dominates.¹⁵ According to Arko-Cobbah, “A discriminatory education system that denied the majority of the country the right to proper education has been a major contributing factor to the problems faced by undergraduate students from disadvantaged communities when entering tertiary institutions.”¹⁶ Alf conceded that he had to start learning to think in a different way since he had previously never really interacted with learning materials with which he was presented. He had no self-esteem when it came to speaking up in the presence of the self-assured millennials who were enrolled in his courses, and thus resorted to not saying anything in a classroom situation.

Close Working Relationship Needed Between Lecturers and Librarians

The library plays an important role on the school campus, and lecturers and librarians must work as a team. Alf could have benefitted much more if there had already been a close working relationship between the school’s lecturers and librarians. There are several theories as to what exact services the library should provide in conjunction with the classroom, yet I believe this is a matter that is unique to each institution and each subject taught. The crux is that librarian and lecturer need to consult and together design an extension of the classroom in the library.

Huwayah and Alazemi¹⁷ speak of the lecturers promoting the library, of close partnership between lecturers and librarians to enrich the study experience of students, and of lecturers’ need to introduce their students to the library. This enables the mentoring of students by librarians. Such collaboration “stimulates [students’] learning, accentuating the passion to garner knowledge. This strengthens their intellectual maturity to visit libraries and access online knowledge repositories; explore and interpret works of noted researchers; and define a problem and present a new solution.”¹⁸

Connected Learning

Pinfield, Cox, and Rutter see connected learning as one of the pinnacles of the future of academic libraries.¹⁹ And several others in the field of library studies observe that the library can be an essential link as pedagogies change, trends toward students as customers emerge, and as social media and virtual education continue to drive the need for learning analytics and assessment.²⁰ Learning is increasingly seen as social and more intensively technology-enabled; teaching has become more of a process of facilitation and involves blended delivery of content using traditional and digital tools. In this environment, developments in areas such as augmented and virtual reality (A/VR) and haptic interfaces (e.g., simple tools such as computer keyboards, mice, and trackballs; or more complex tools such as virtual gloves and

exoskeletons that track hand postures or joysticks) are likely to become more important in teaching and learning.²¹ Pinfild, Cox, and Rutter note that “key parts of this nexus are students from a wide range of countries, as ‘customers’ of universities, having the expectation of gaining access to learning resources where and when they want, and pursuing the programmes of learning more flexibly.”²²

This calls for partnership between lecturers, librarians, and the Information Technology (IT) department. There is much debate as to how much information technology (IT) librarians should themselves be capable of performing. Raju²³ found in his research in South Africa that 75 percent of library jobs advertised require advanced IT skills. Institutions will need to make a point of training their librarians in these skills so that they can offer the services needed by lecturers and students in order to extend classroom learning into the library.

Friendly Librarians Needed

All librarians need to be open to mentoring students. Alf noted on various occasions that certain librarians were unapproachable and did not seem to want to help him. This, it seems, is the most common library-related problem worldwide, of librarians being seen by students as being unfriendly and unapproachable, the exception being in Middle Eastern and Asian countries.²⁴ Seifert quoted William B. Martin when referring to the librarian, “Customer relations is an integral part of your job—not an extension of it.”²⁵

Alf’s Mentorship: More Than Just Studies

The spiritual master plan of my institution mentions that all of the staff are expected to be spiritual mentors to the students.²⁶ Wonderful opportunities for prayer arose where together Alf and library staff would thank the Lord for blessings and ask for His help in many different matters. Alf would ask for prayers and encouragement as he studied and dealt with various personal worries. Where possible, the staff referred Alf to someone who could provide him with a solution. Without a support system close by, he sometimes just needed to talk. In an Adventist university, faculty and staff can serve as mentors for students who need additional support, and this can be even more effective if there are formal programs in place to assist these students.²⁷

Also, the library should be a place that is welcoming. It is important that librarians display friendly faces, that the library be a zone akin to home. In “Listening to Student Voices,” a report on students’ perceptions of library services, one respondent said that the “layout of the library should be more lifestyle based and user friendly. . . . From the instant you walk in the door, that this is the place you want to be in and have the comfort and ease. . . and feel at home and want to spend time there, quality and quantity.”²⁸ Having a space that is welcoming is even more important because many students are not acquainted with the tools used to find resources. According to Arko-Cobbah: “The librarian’s role becomes more crucial when one considers students from disadvantaged backgrounds for whom most of these learning resources may be entirely new.”²⁹

Conclusion

Apartheid produced unequal education systems for various populations in South Africa. However, even though apartheid ended, its legacy remains. Nearly 30 years later, South Africa as a nation is still striving to provide equitable education for its citizens regardless of socio-economic status or race. Adventist schools are a part of this system and face similar challenges. Alf, a student who was a product of the Adventist system, came to the library for help at the start of his tertiary education. Because of the mentoring he received throughout his tertiary education, he was able to successfully complete his four-year degree.

For mentoring to take place on a large scale, librarians should serve as motivators and facilitators of learning, working in partnership with teaching faculty and in collaboration with IT personnel to create a welcoming space for students to learn. Together, this team can make the library an extension of the classroom, a bridge for success for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. This will increase the value of the academic library, as it will then be part of the learning experience for each student, an extension of the classroom. ✍

This article has been peer reviewed.



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Recommended citation:

Yvette Sparrow, “The Alf Model: Case Study in the Role of Librarians as Mentors in Digital Literacy,” *The Journal of Adventist Education* 83:1 (2021): 16-20.

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