

Report from the first course in Scientific Writing and Information Literacy at MUHAS

October 30th to November 10th, 2018

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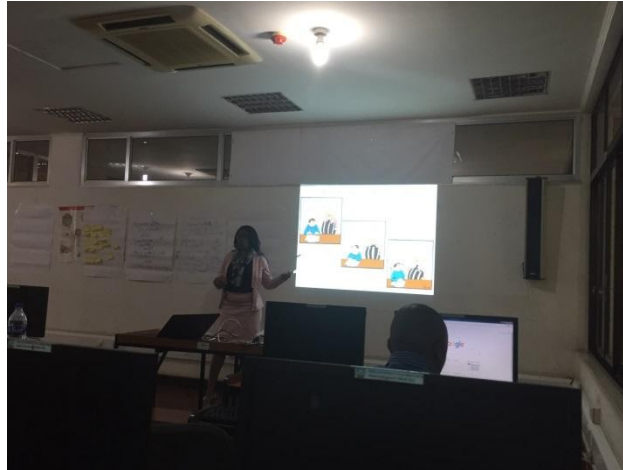
The two weeks from October 30th to November 10th, the Library of the Muhimbili University of Health and Allied Sciences gave the first course “Scientific Writing and Information Literacy”. This course is aimed for PhD students, early-career and senior researchers, and has been developed at MUHAS the last couple of years.

At Karolinska Institutet University Library we have been running a course called “Writing Science and Information Literacy” since 2003 as a campus course, and an online version was introduced in 2012.

When designing the course at MUHAS, the course director Professor Edda Tandi Lwoga and the course coordinators Dr. Sydney Msonde and Dr. Mboni Ruzegea had access to the course materials from Karolinska Institutet (KI). The MUHAS course differs to some extent from the KI course, but in some areas, especially the information literacy part, the two courses resembles each other very much.

As I have been a teacher on the information literacy part of the KI course for the last four years, I was asked by Prof Lwoga to attend the first course at MUHAS in the capacity of “critical friend”. The concept of critical friends is basically that I should be a “friend” and convey feedback from the teaching situation, based on my observations. Normally the critical friend method means that you work as teacher pairs, taking your turns on being the critical friend. This time I was the only critical friend, and the teacher’s reflections on their own teaching was paramount. Two components are important: being friends means that there has to be trust between the observer and the teachers, and the input given by the critical friend (me) is not the truth but should rather be something useful and helpful in order for the teacher to be able to reflect on the teaching.

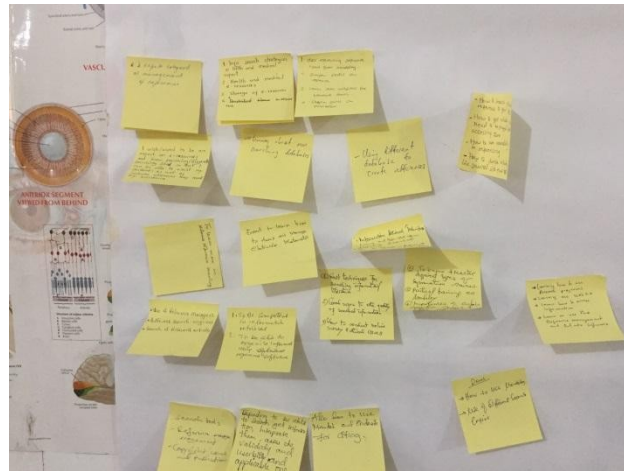
Apart from being a critical friend I also gave some teaching, more specific in the modules for PubMed, Choosing a journal and EndNote.



I was very impressed by the teaching at the course. The atmosphere was very informal, inviting, cheerful and friendly. The teachers really made sure that everyone was following the presentations by a “are we together?” now and then, as well as an invitation to “stop us” if need be. The participants showed a great competence, despite the heterogeneity of the group (a mix between master students, PhD students and senior researchers). As a repository for slides, hand-outs and documents, a dedicated Dropbox account was created.



The information literacy week started with a session where the participants had the possibility to give their expectations for the week. The expectations were noted on sticky notes and were kept for the week in order to check off the different items that were covered during the course.



One problem that occurred during the course was that one of the teachers, scheduled for a teaching module, couldn't attend the specific day. Another teacher had to take over, and it is not an easy task to stand in for someone else, using that person's slides and cover an unrehearsed topic on such a short notice. The quality was somewhat lacking, why I find it very important that the assigned teachers do their utmost to prioritize the teaching they have signed up for. Not being able to attend teaching will put a colleague in a difficult situation, and it may be better to reschedule than substitute in those cases. In the long run this will be less of a problem, when eventually the teachers learn to master each other's topics.

At KI we try to give a highly relevant course to our students, and MUHAS Library of course has the same goal. One way to ensure a relevant course is to cater for the participants to give as much feed-back as possible. Therefore we arranged for dedicated feed-back sessions where verbal comments and suggestions could be given for both weeks of the course. We found these feed-back sessions (brain storming) very useful. The possibility to speak out freely may give a good complement to the more formal course evaluation.



I would like to give examples of a few things that came up during these sessions. A swap between the two weeks? This is very interesting, because this is also something that the participants sometimes ask for when we evaluate the KI courses. The reason for a swap could be that the writing part can benefit from the skills that are picked up at the information search and reference management sessions. How about research ethics? Topics like this were asked for, especially for biodiversity clearances. Can the librarians be used as editors of journal manuscripts? Can the time frame be extended; it's too narrow for the practice/hands-on part? Would it be possible to have a web based platform for the course?

When it comes to suggestions for improvement, I have very few comments. One of them I have already covered, i.e. the need for taking on the assigned teaching or reschedule the session. Another thing I may mention is that some of the slides were taken from e.g. ITOCA. The ITOCA slides are very good, but I can see the need for bespoke presentations, made for the specific course and the specific target group of participants.

As a sum up I can see many similarities between the information literacy part of the courses given at KI and MUHAS respectively. If I should pick one of the biggest differences, it would be that the MUHAS course is given on a higher level since the teachers are full librarians, having their PhD's and that they are familiar with practical research, while most of the trainers at KI are librarians. This doesn't mean that there are differences in quality, but rather that the KI course is more focused on tools, like databases, web resources and software, while the MUHAS course more is geared towards the *principles* of academic writing and information literacy.



Lastly I would like to thank Professor Edda Tandi Lwoga and the course coordinator Dr. Mboni Ruzegea as well as all their colleagues for the great hospitality they showed me when I visited Dar es Salaam and MUHAS.