


Learning to be a health activist

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A resource kit, designed by learners for learners, encourages engagement with TB, self-esteem and poverty.



In 2009, Professor Alan Christoffels from the South African National Bioinformatics Institute and Professor Trish Struthers from the School of Public Health decided to join forces on a multidisciplinary project aimed at developing an innovative health intervention for South African school learners from Grades 7 to 9. Funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) programme from the United States, a learning resource kit, titled "How to Be a Health Activist", was developed with the aim of engaging and educating teenagers about tuberculosis within the context of HIV, as well as dealing with issues of self-esteem, poverty and helping them make informed decisions about their lives to help mitigate some of the health risks they face. This was, however, not just another learning resource for school learners.

There were a number of innovative factors that contributed to the success of the "How to Be a Health Activist" resource kit:

- The material was designed by the learners for the learners. Workshops were held in Western Cape schools in order to listen to the learners' needs and problems and allow them to describe exactly what they wanted to see in such a resource;
- The content was mapped to the National Basic Education Department's Curriculum Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS) requirements for the Life Orientation subject, covering curriculum-based material on HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis while enhancing the current curriculum and life skills for the learners;
- A multidisciplinary team was involved in the development of the kit, including UWC computational biologists, public health experts, educational specialists, e-learning experts and private curriculum content developers, bringing their expertise to bear on developing a relevant, factual, interactive resource with the human touch;
- The resource was developed in collaboration with the main stakeholder, the Western Cape Education Department, ensuring relevance and uptake within Western Cape public schools.

The resource kit includes a 12-chapter learner's handbook, a teacher's guide and an interactive DVD, as well as links to an interactive website, including an Afrikaans edition for Afrikaans-medium public schools. The handbook allows learners to engage with the topics in an interactive manner and, being excellent source material, can stimulate group discussions on particular topics.

"How to Be a Health Activist" was officially launched on 31 July 2014 by Western Cape Provincial Minister of Education Debbie Schäfer at Vanguard Primary School in Athlone, Cape Town. Since then, the Western Cape Education Department has entered into a copyright licence agreement with UWC and, to date, 209 897 learner books have been distributed to learners, and 600 teacher's guides, with distribution in more than 460 schools.

The "How to Be a Health Activist" learning resource kit is an excellent example of the impact that can be derived from universities' research expertise together with community engagement and government involvement, leading to the positive development of the youth of the country.