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Mask education project burgeons into creative remote teaching collaboration

What started out as a fieldwork project for ten postgraduate computer science and information systems students at the University of Cape Town (UCT) burgeoned into a multifaceted, interdisciplinary, creative learning experience using remote teaching and design thinking.

The students were asked to devise innovative solutions to the challenges people experience when wearing cloth face masks (or non-medical masks) to limit the spread of COVID-19. The result was a creative collaboration between the [Centre in Information and Communications Technologies for Development \(ICT4D\)](#) in the Department of Computer Science and the Hasso Plattner School of Design Thinking (d-school) at UCT.

Initially the project tackled face-mask production and distribution (informing people where to get hold of face masks). However, after having scoped the problem, the students realised that the greater issue was a lack of information about wearing and using masks correctly, said Dr Melissa Densmore, a senior lecturer in computer science and a member of the Centre in ICT4D's executive team.

Densmore and Dr Hafeni Mthoko co-teach the Introduction to ICT for Development course, and the project's design-thinking component was led by the d-school's Dr Nailah Conrad.

Design-thinking methodology was used to brainstorm ideas and come up with prototypes. Chikomborero Mwenje, a student, said that she loved this aspect of the project as it required intuition and a careful translation of data from the interviews into actionable ideas.

Not only was this a particularly relevant project, but an example of just how successfully emergency remote teaching and learning can take place, said Densmore.

After conducting further research into their topic, students found that while many people were wearing masks, they were wearing the same mask day in and day out, were not washing them and not wearing them properly. They were surprised at the low levels of information about the pandemic that targeted school learners.

To bring essential messages to young audiences, the students opted for a human-centred approach with ideas that would be usable and implementable.

One team came up with the idea of a children's storybook about wearing face masks (in English, isiXhosa, Tshivenda and Afrikaans – with Swahili and isiZulu translations in process) and a follow-up quiz at the back of the book for 'heroes' to assess their new knowledge. The second group developed a concept for a unified platform for government communications about COVID-19.

At times having to complete this project online was challenging in terms of data costs – videoed conversations between students and respondents were data intensive – with interviews only being conducted online and as student project teams had only met in-person twice before the lockdown.

Wallace Chigona, the director of the Centre in ICT4D, said: "The interdisciplinary nature of the project brought together students from different faculties and study levels, where they worked on practical issues – involving real people and issues – hands on. This was not just a theoretical project, but about students engaging with communities."

As the project shows great potential to make an impact, the team leaders are working with illustrators for the book and talking to teachers about using the quiz at the back of the book to raise knowledge levels. They aim to use mobile platforms to distribute the book electronically.

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