

Tech should be an enabler for education, not a barrier

 By Jackie Carroll

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It's clear how technology has been a saving grace for many learners during the Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa.



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Platforms such as Zoom, WhatsApp and others have been used to keep learning going. And despite the odds, there were many matric learners last year who still achieved a string of distinctions and entrance to university.

This is all encouraging, but the reality is that technology-led learning still has a long way to go in South Africa.

Expensive data a barrier

Despite mobile networks being under pressure for years to lower data costs, the reality is that for the majority of South Africans, the internet remains an expensive luxury.

When you consider that it can still cost R100 for just 1GB, this is a serious stumbling block.

The planned auctioning off of radio spectrum by the government is expected to help lower data prices over the long-term.

But with that matter held up currently by court challenges, the high costs of data persist without any end in sight. This is a major barrier at a time when a lot of learning in our schools is still happening from homes.

Network solutions

In a bid to tackle this problem, one solution for many years has been to zero-rate critical educational apps and websites in South Africa. Ideally, this should apply to both local and international educational content.

But this alone is a huge challenge and requires large-scale coordination. It can be done, but it requires commitment on many parts of our government, business and society at large.

By zero-rating selected e-learning websites and apps, such initiatives could also form part of mobile networks' corporate social investment (CSI) initiatives.

Another network-based solution is the concept of reverse billing. This is where data can be used on a particular app or website, and the end-user is not directly charged for the data-usage. Instead, a sponsor pays for this data usage via the reverse bill.

This is something that can work successfully as we've experienced first-hand. Amid the Covid-19 outbreak, Promaths Online was introduced and key partnerships with network providers allowed the platform to be reverse-billed. In 2020, Promaths learners accounted for 7% of the country's distinctions.

App-focused solutions

Another aspect that can boost online learning during this period is for educational app developers to ensure that their offering is available as an offline download.

For millions of children in South Africa, they can access free Wi-Fi zones — whether it be in a park or school — and then download relevant educational content that can be accessed at a later stage.

In addition, it's also key for app developers to recognise the high mobile phone usage rate in South Africa — which hovers well above 100% of the population. Any online or offline educational content further needs to be developed with a mobile-first approach.

For many South African children, a desktop computer or laptop would be out of reach. But the power of smartphones means that we can democratise access to this content.

Human touch

Finally, to unearth the opportunities that technology presents in the education space, it's important to recognise that the human element of teaching and learning remains crucial.

In this regard, tutors have become an important part of our education system, supplementing teachers outside of the traditional classroom hours.

It takes a village to educate a child and this is even more true in our digital age. If we can start to pay more attention to technology's role in learning, we can steadily start to play a greater role in uplifting larger parts of our society.

ABOUT JACKIE CARROLL

Jackie Carroll is the CEO and co-founder of Media Works, South Africa's leading provider of adult education and training for over 21 years.

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