

If education is the gateway to freedom, digital literacy is the key

By Jackie Carroll and Phemelo Segoe

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Quality education and digital learning aren't just closely connected. They're rapidly becoming one and the same thing. Without a thorough understanding of digital platforms, and the ability to engage with them easily and intuitively, learners - both young and adult - will continue to fall short of their full potential.



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As South Africa celebrates Freedom Day on 27 April, the right to education is as important as it's ever been. It remains, in essence, one of the most critical enablers of our freedom. We all need quality education to secure employment, and to create lives and livelihoods that dismantle cycles of poverty and promote prosperity.

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The lessons of Covid-19

The lockdowns experienced throughout the pandemic not only proved the necessity for digital learning, but also its efficacy. Sceptics of online learning found that it worked. There were challenges, yes, but gradually many academic institutions were able to build strong and rigorous curriculums that could be delivered online, and learners were able to succeed.

Promaths Online, a Kutlwano, Investec and Tuta-Me programme that provides additional maths and science tuition to Grade 10 to 12 learners, is one such example. On an annual basis Promaths is responsible for approximately 5 - 7% of the country's maths and science distinctions. In the past, however, this success has largely been the result of in-person learning. Whether it could remain as successful online was unknown when Covid first hit. Would learners be able to maintain their grades?

The answer, 2020's results proved, was yes. Even when Covid's restrictions on learning were at their most severe, Promaths was responsible for one learner achieving 100% for maths, and another 100% for science. The programme also contributed 5% to the country's maths distinctions and 6% to its science distinctions, a small shift on its annual average.

Digital learning became an imperative during the pandemic. Fortunately, this is unlikely to shift as we increasingly emerge into a post-pandemic world.

Why bridging the digital divide matters

Covid accelerated an existing trend, and as digital learning further entrenches itself in our academic culture, its benefits are becoming clear.

Perhaps most importantly, the rise in digital learning is shining a spotlight on the need for essential computer skills. Today, these skills are no longer optional. Day-to-day activities from healthcare to banking to starting and running businesses simply aren't possible without them. The digital divide has to be bridged.

Computer skills help young learners to engage with new technologies intuitively. Among adult learners, they improve access to quality education and employment. People who might never have had access to brick and mortar institutions now have the ability to improve their knowledge. The success of Media Works' Essential Computer Skills course, which teaches adult learners the skills they need to advance their education and careers, is testament to this.

The result is a levelling of the playing field. And an opening of our collective right to educational freedom.

Looking at a future defined by freedom

Quality education provides us with the knowledge and skills we need to take ownership of our lives, to think critically and to craft our own paths. It facilitates choice, and enables better living and working opportunities, transformation and growth.

Bridging the digital divide and putting digital learning first is already a priority – in theory. It's enshrined in almost every educational policy South Africa has produced in recent years. Now, it needs to be executed. At this point, 28 years into our freedom, it's long overdue that we, as government, the private sector and civil society, work together to deliver on the promises made to every South African.

We have the right to education, to quality education, and to digital education.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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