

Class back in session, but digital learning remains key to future of education

In-person teaching may have resumed in schools across the country from 26 July, but teachers, unions, parents, and pupils are still reluctant to embrace this return to 'business as usual'.



Source: Supplied

“Many teachers have been vaccinated as part of the education sector vaccination drive but this protective measure against the Covid-19 virus has not been extended to pupils, and some parents,” explains Malcolm Mooi, founder and vision bearer of online professional learning community Zibuza.net.

Mooi and many of his peers in the educational sector argue that while there will always be a place for in-person learning, the pandemic has made it clear that digital learning is critical to the future of education.

“The pandemic widened the existing gaps in the country’s education system, between the resourced and the under-resourced schools, as well as the sector’s vulnerability in the face of disruption. Technology appears to be the most effective way to bridge those gaps,” explains Mooi.

Zero-rating key to wider access

While South Africa faces significant obstacles, some progress has been made since the onset of the pandemic.

The Department of Basic Education coordinated with the Department of Communications to set up and support virtual classrooms and zero-rate certain online learning sites to allow learners to access educational resources without using data.



Tech should be an enabler for education, not a barrier

Jackie Carroll 25 Jun 2021



South Africa has some of the highest data costs on the continent and with free Wi-Fi limited mostly to metro areas, accessing educational resources online is prohibitively expensive for many. “Zero-rating educational websites could be the solution to this challenge, but there is still a way to go,” says Mooi.

“Unfortunately, statistics from the DBE indicate that despite efforts to ramp up access to e-learning, only 30% of the country’s pupils were able to access these resources during the pandemic.”

Through the online educational resources hosted on Zibuza.net – which was recently zero-rated by Mweb, MTN, Rain and Telkom – Mooi hopes to increase the uptake of digital learning among teachers and pupils.

Weighing up the pros and cons of digital learning

Mooi is a firm advocate for potential for digital learning as a means to democratise access to quality education in South Africa, but acknowledges that there are “significant obstacles that must first be addressed.”

Disadvantages of digital learning:

- **Schools are where many get their meals.** “Millions of pupils in South Africa rely on school feeding programs and for some, it may be their only meal of the day. We saw the impact of disruptions to school feeding programmes during lockdown.”
- **Schools as a place to learn social skills.** “Schools do play a valuable role in giving children a place to socialise and learn interpersonal skills, but these skills can also be gained in other places.”
- **Schools as a place to monitor the safety of children.** “As sad as it is, in a country with high rates of violence such as South Africa, teachers sometimes need to act as outside observers to watch out for signs of abuse at home.”
- **Not all teachers have the skills necessary to coordinate online teaching.** “While there have been efforts from all quarters to upskill teachers on ICT, many still aren’t digitally literate or confident using these tools.”
- **The persisting digital divide.** “While efforts are being made to reduce the costs of accessing educational resources, technological tools are still needed to access these resources, and many families do not have these tools at home as they are seen as a luxury.”



Malcolm Mboi

Benefits of digital learning:

- **Protection against Covid-19 until the threat subsides.** “Widespread vaccination is the key to restoring stability in the education sector, but until this happens, remote learning can protect pupils and their families.”
- **Transport to schools is an issue.** “With disruptions such as the recent Cape Town taxi violence, many pupils who rely on public transport are at risk of falling further behind by being unable to attend in-person learning.”
- **Individual preferences can be accommodated.** “Pupils who struggle to keep-up with in-person learning are able to learn at their own-pace and flag areas that they may need extra assistance with.”
- **Ideal for learners struggling with the social aspect of schools.** “Pupils who are being bullied or who may otherwise struggle with the social aspect of in-person teaching can now learn from the comfort of their homes.”
- **Increases digital literacy and familiarity with technological tools.** “Being comfortable navigating the online world and using technology will be essential skills for the workplace of the future.”
- **Democratises access to quality education.** “Zibuza.net was created out of my belief that technology is the ‘great equaliser’ and that pupils in under-resourced communities should be able to access the same resources as their more privileged peers.”



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Michael Gullan 14 Jun 2021



New digital learning offerings designed to leave no pupil behind

Zibuza.net plans to join the ranks of online learning environments like Think Digital Academy and the recently introduced UCT Online High School with the launch of its Virtual Classroom and Lab in August 2021, with plans to introduce a library to the virtual learning environment in 2022.

This digital offering will provide pupils with a personalised learning experience that is based on the individual’s cognitive ability and learning modality.

Realising that many prospective pupils are unable to offer the fixed monthly costs of other online schooling options, they have introduced a flexible purchasing model that offers transactional (per lesson) options, subscription-based options and

sponsorship.

“Ultimately, the benefits of increasing access to digital learning and having more digital learning offerings on the market for every need and price-point outweigh the potential drawbacks,” says Mooi. “No one is suggesting that we do away with traditional in-person learning entirely, as it will always play an important role, both in South Africa and in the rest of the world.”

“What we are instead advocating for is a more resilient, inclusive and equitable education ecosystem so that the youth of this country are never again forced to go months without any learning if schools have to close,” he concludes.

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