

# ADULT EDUCATORS AND DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY: A SOUTH AFRICAN CASE STUDY



Linda Daniels is a writer. She has worked as a journalist, media trainer, podcast producer and editor. Her career in journalism includes broadcast and print media. As a media trainer, she has supported women and activists working in popular education movements to become community reporters. She is also involved in training young people from low-income communities in using radio production tools to tell their own stories. Linda has covered a long-running advocacy campaign concerning copyright reform in South Africa.

*Learning environments are constantly changing. Over the last decade, digitalisation has been advanced in education, including adult education. Digitalisation is commonly understood as a transformative mode of thinking and doing that utilises digital technologies as a result of modernisation.*

In addition, digitalisation is a catalyst for innovation. Today, digitalisation is sewn into the fabric of our lives and there is an inevitability about its continued evolution into our collective future. However, its true impact for productive change – within an African context – is yet to be fully realised since many educators face structural barriers in accessing digital technologies and utilising it fully within the context of their work as adult educators.

In 2021, MOJA conducted a survey of adult educators and their use of technology. This article provides a unique insight into the survey's findings on the potential for adult educators in South Africa to make full use of the digital tools available to them.

## Background: The effect of COVID-19 on education in Africa

Governments across Africa hastily forced the shutdown of educational

institutions at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. As COVID-19 protocols were implemented, it was apparent that the entire approach to education based on classroom instruction became unworkable. However, there had been little preparation for a replacement of face-to-face learning in a classroom. This problem confronted governments worldwide, but it was particularly severe in many African nations such as South Africa, given entrenched levels of inequality. Despite the prompt launch of educational television and radio programmes, only those with access to a television or radio were able to view or listen to them. Similarly, only those with reliable internet access could participate in online learning. Most students and teachers, however, had no prior experience with teaching and learning outside of the classroom.

## Bridging the digital divide

The digital divide in South Africa was exacerbated during COVID-19, as internet access became essential to everyday tasks such as education, work, community organisation and communication. But internet access is unequally distributed – poorer communities in South Africa do not have access to affordable and quality internet connection, while wealthier neighbourhoods benefit from copper infrastructure or fibre. As a result, many South Africans rely primarily on mobile data to access the internet.

The African Union (AU) published its policy guidelines on digitising teaching and learning in Africa in 2021. The DOTSS (Digital Connectivity; Online and Offline Learning; Teachers as Facilitators and Motivators of Learning; Safety Online and in Schools, and Skills-Focused Learning) framework discussed in this journal is a key innovation for addressing

COVID-19's challenges (See policy brief by Hlatshwayo in this Issue). The framework aims to strengthen coordinated actions between African nations in order to mitigate future shocks to the education ecosystem.

## Essential elements of DOTSS

The DOTSS framework (African Union, 2020) lists the following essential elements:

**Digital connectivity:** This is a call to action for member states to strengthen the infrastructure required for digital connectivity. From accessible and affordable internet access to waiving or subsidising data use costs for accessing educational materials.

**Online learning:** This is a call to adopt online education as a strategy for bridging the COVID-19 - induced access gap. Investing in high-quality eLearning solutions will facilitate continuous learning at all levels, including TVET (Technical Vocational Education and Training).

**Teachers as facilitators and motivators of learning:** Teachers should acquire the skills necessary to adapt to the new reality of virtual and distance education. They must be proficient in the utilisation of eLearning platforms, scheduling, virtual and remote student engagement, and assessment. This is done to ensure positive learning outcomes.

**Safety online and in schools:** To ensure that, while digitised learning is a means of mitigating the effects of COVID-19 on education systems, strategies related to online bullying and sexual harassment of teachers and students must be developed.

**Skills-focused learning:** To ensure that our youth are equipped with the relevant skills required to function in any industry or discipline, we must provide them with skills that are both foundational and job-focused.

## Adult educators and digitalisation

Although the AU framework is a positive step toward promoting, among other things, online education, one of the limitations is the exclusion of adult education. MOJA (which translates to "one" in Swahili), a network of

adult educators in Africa, and the Institute for International Cooperation of the German Adult Education Association (DVV International), a partner in adult education, suggested developing a policy brief to submit to the AU to advocate for the inclusion of digitised learning and teaching in adult education.

## Uncovering how adult educators use digital tools in South Africa

The survey was designed to appraise the current status of the use of, and access to, digital technologies by adult educators, and aimed to understand more about the potential of digitalisation as a pedagogical tool that could be used to support the work of adult educators. Adult education is part of the post-school education and training (PSET) sector and encompasses both formal and non-formal education and training; and has been conceptualised mostly through the institutional form represented by the Community Education and Training Colleges (CETCs).

The survey objectives were:

- (a) To understand the nature of access to digital technologies in South Africa;
- (b) To establish baseline data about the technologies accessible to adult educators;
- (c) To understand the kinds of technologies used by adult educators;
- (d) To gain insight about the barriers to digital technologies; and
- (e) To suggest ways in which a digital platform could serve the needs and interests of adult educators at the chalkface.

## Geographical spread of survey respondents

Adult educators located across the country were surveyed. Responding to the survey was voluntary. Given that a ready database of adult educators was not at the researchers' disposal,

respondents were drawn from several WhatsApp provincial groups that adult educators have formed and actively participate in, and one national WhatsApp group. Access to all the WhatsApp groups was not possible but to circumvent this limitation, members of the groups were requested to share the instrument widely among adult educators. In addition, there is one Facebook group with adult educators as members. This group is specifically focused on better conditions of service and was not approached because of the invitation being shared with a WhatsApp group involved in grievances related to conditions of service. Thus, it was decided that existing networks among adult educators on the WhatsApp platform would be used to support the data collection process. The survey was also intended to initiate a process of understanding access to technology and to use the survey as a basis for further work.

## The number of employed adult educators

According to the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET, 2018) data, there are 2,643 Community Learning Centres spread across the nine provinces; and 14,259 staff employed (of which 12,975 are lecturers and the rest management and support staff) at Community Learning Centres (CLCs). Following a few reminders on the WhatsApp groups, 48 adult educators responded to the survey.

## Professional experience of adult educators

The survey did not delve into the skills base of educators as part of the professionalisation of adult educators' discourse. Instead, it focused on adult educators' tenure in the sector. Half of all respondents had over a decade of experience in their roles as adult educators. This information has not been further teased out in follow up questions in the instrument to determine what factors motivate adult educators to remain in their job for

more than a decade. 50 percent of adult educators had worked for 11-15 years; 37.5 percent worked for 16-20 years; and 12.5 percent worked for 6-10 years. 22.9 percent of adult educators are employed on a part-time basis and 77.1 percent are employed on a full-time basis. Of the respondents, 75 percent are female while 25 percent are male. 35.4 percent are between 50 and 60 years of age while 14.6 percent are between 30 and 39 years of age and 50 percent are between the ages of 50 to 60 years of age.

## Professionalisation of the adult education sector

The professionalisation of adult educators in South Africa does not have a long and established history because the sector itself emerged only in the mid-1990s. The term “lecturers” was introduced to elevate adult educators working in the sector to a higher status equivalent with their counterparts in the TVET College sector. Similarly, the use of “Community College” is regarded as a way to uplift the institutional status of the old Public Adult Learning Centres (PALCs). Together with TVET, these two sectors now constitute the “College” sector. The TVET College sector has a budget five times that of adult education.

## Adult educators access to and competency in the use of digital technology

Digital technologies used for education purposes include the use of digital readers and tablets, cloud technology and online learning games, among many others. Digital competencies of adult educators are an increasingly significant skill because it enables the educators to fully harness technology in their efforts to educate youth and adults who are themselves in need of or are already proficient in digital

technologies. The line of enquiry involved a series of questions that followed on from each other about the respondents access to several common devices, digital tool preference as well as the length of time that they have been using digital technologies.

64.6 percent of respondents confirmed that they had access to a computer or laptop while 35.4 percent did not. However, 97.9 percent of respondents owned a mobile phone. A high percentage, 89.6 percent owned a smartphone while 8.3 percent owned a basic phone and the rest a feature phone. Many had experience in the use of digital technologies, with 37.5 percent having 6 to 10 years’ experience while 27.1 percent said that they had 16-20 years of experience. 100 percent of respondents answered that the cellphone was their go-to technological device, followed by laptops or computers. 85.4 percent of respondents use technologies for educational purposes such as accessing learning materials, articles and teaching aids, and networking with other educators while 14.6 percent of respondents said that they did not.

## Competency in the use of digital tools

Digital competence refers to the overall understanding and comprehension, as well as the skills and attitudes which facilitate the creative use of digital tools in the educational setting. Technology has evolved at a rapid pace and its impact continues to reverberate in all spheres of our lives. Thus, digital competency is an important skill and it can be argued vital to full and active participation in society. Respondents were asked about their digital skills level and where they lacked knowledge in the digital realm. Close to 100 percent of respondents rated their digital competency between 3 and 5 score with 5 being highly competent. 81.3 percent of respondents said that they wanted to learn more about online learning and collaboration.

## Digital divide experienced by adult educators

In South Africa, the digital divide is deeply felt by the majority of citizens who struggle to access affordable and reliable internet. In addition, digital tools are expensive. Efforts to bridge the digital divide include calls for cheaper data costs. Adult educators are not immune to this reality and are also caught up in the digital divide. 81.3 percent of respondents said that cost was a barrier to accessing technologies. The same percentage confirmed that they connect to the internet via their mobile phones. 50 percent of respondents use more than 1GB of data per month and 66.7 percent of respondents pay R200 or more for data each month.

The replies we received and the statistics we have compiled are fascinating given the respondents willingness to use technologies as an aid in their teaching methodology. The significance of communications technology and education to Africa’s future economic development is widely acknowledged because they show the nature of adult educators’ experience with technologies and their appetite to know more in this regard so that they may incorporate online learning into their teaching. There appears to be a tacit understanding among adult educators surveyed that technology will inevitably play a much greater role in the successful education systems of the future, particularly if South Africa is to ensure that the youth are equipped with the skills they need for the dynamic labour markets of the fourth industrial revolution (4IR).

### References:

- African Union, (2020). Policy Guidelines on digitizing teaching and learning in Africa. Addis Ababa: African Union.
- Damani, K. (2021). COVID-19 and EdTech in Africa: A Country-Level Review Based on eLearning Africa Data [Academic papers]. EdTech Hub. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4703718> Available at <https://docs.edtechhub.org/lib/CDC2W7Q6> Available under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0
- DHET, (2018). Statistics on Post-School Education and Training in South Africa: 2015. Pretoria: DHET.
- Creative Commons, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.