



You still have to make the effort

Technology may save time and make things easier but it is not going to do all the work

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EVERY year on September 8, we celebrate International Literacy Day to promote literacy as an instrument to empower people. This year's theme, "Literacy in a digital world", raises an important question: Is being literate in a digital world still only about being literate – or are there other challenges facing a multilingual, diverse society such as ours?

According to the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, literacy is the "ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society".

However, the concept of literacy needs to be redefined to leverage the learning opportunities that access to the digital world offers, as well as to bridge the technological gap between resource-poor and resource-rich societies.

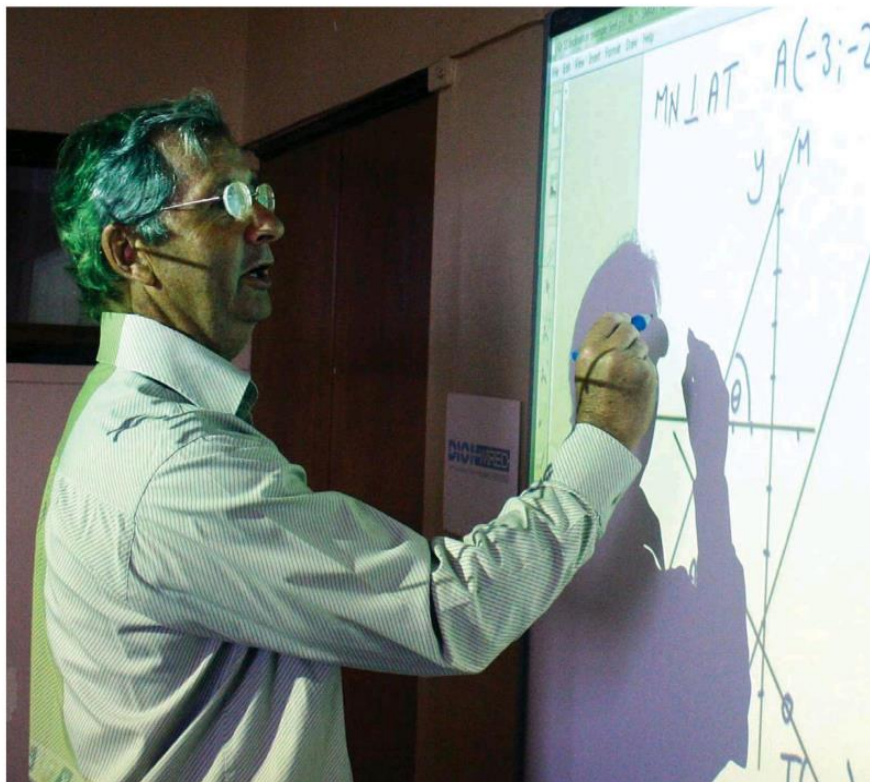
The concept of literacy has gained an additional layer of meaning, as more students are using their smart phones, tablets and laptops to access content and to gain understanding for their general reading, research, referencing and study purposes.

Increasing digital literacy in the information age has helped transform the traditional top-down, gate-keeping role of the lecturer in accessing and imparting knowledge. In the classroom, technology has promoted more collaboration between teacher and student, making learning and teaching a more personalised, interactive and varied experience for all involved.

Unfortunately, the importance of reading for academic success is often underestimated. First-year students often feel swamped by the masses of material they have to read for tests and exams. They simply struggle to understand complex reading vocabulary and often need help to improve their reading speed and comprehension to perform better.

Another key issue for academics and parents faced with "digitally active" students is the potential for academic dishonesty. While the internet has typically become a primary research tool and a source of almost unlimited information, students run the risk of using unaccredited or inappropriate content for their research, and need to be exposed to writing strategies to mitigate this.

It's for this reason the Writing Lab at Stellenbosch University's Language Centre



HIGH TECH: The smart board can be a useful tool.

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PEOPLE WHO WERE NEVER CONNECTED PREVIOUSLY ARE NOW FINDING INNOVATIVE WAYS OF MAKING THEIR VOICES HEARD IN THE DIGITAL SPACE, AND THEIR DEMANDS MET

places special emphasis on assisting students to navigate that sea of information and to find their academic voice, while avoiding the perils of plagiarism.

In considering the notion of language and literacy in a digital world, there is also a danger that the immediate nature of technology and all its devices and apps, such as GoogleTranslate, might cause us to be overconfident about the ability of technology to bridge all language barriers.

While GoogleTranslate might give us an immediate sense that we understand a text in another language, research has shown that its output is considerably less professional than that of a translation student. And if one wishes to communicate a message effectively using plain language, there is still no replacement for a profes-

sional language service which integrates rigorous quality assurance and qualified staff with communication design analysis.

In the early and idealistic days of the digital revolution, people believed that technologies would solve the universal problem of access to information, giving the previously under-represented the power to shape opinions of how the world was to operate. In many ways, some of these ambitions have been realised.

People who were never connected previously are now finding innovative ways of making their voices heard in the digital space, and their demands met. Citizens now have direct access to those in power, which is dramatically changing how governance works world-wide. Consumers are also empowered through their ability to

interact and negotiate with companies, and provide reviews based on their experiences of products and services.

But it is important to remember that this access is not universal, and does not always address diversity. Most interfaces are primarily through English, presume digital literacy in their interface design, and cater only to the privileged few who already have digital access and presence.

Some countries have realised that web access and literacy are closely connected, and have been putting a great deal of effort into localisation initiatives. China and South Korea, for instance, have worked tirelessly at designing input devices that can be used by non-English speakers.

South Africa, too, has made some progress. Google, Microsoft Office and search engines like Firefox and Internet Explorer are available in Afrikaans and African languages, and cellphones can be accessed in these languages too. Keyboards, touch screen interfaces, spell-checkers and voice language inputs that work with local languages have also been designed and implemented in the past decade or so.

Unfortunately, despite these innovations, the digital space still reinforces the primacy and importance of English over local languages. Difficulties in building local language archives, finding non-English interfaces, and developing literacy for people who speak other languages are indicative of how exclusionary our digital dreams can be.

A multilingual online terminology resource – about 6 000 terms – available in English, Afrikaans and Xhosa has been developed at the Language Centre to assist students in making sense of the terminology used in the various academic disciplines. Learning can be blended in various ways in the digital space, including the use of podcasts of lecturers' presentations. This is only a dent in English-dominated internet online resources, but it's a start.

Technology can also be a two-edged sword when it comes to learning a language. It has made us see that literacy was always all about integrating content and language learning. The digital dimension is just another way of bringing this to the fore.

Thus, while crowd-sourced language learning apps might assist one in finding a buddy who speaks a foreign language, there is still no substitute for a good teacher who is creative and able to create space for learning to take place in various ways.

Technology may save time and make learning more accessible, but it is not going to do the total job for you – you still have to make the effort.

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