

Reimagining education with interactive learning and reliable connectivity

By [Jacques du Toit](#)

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As South Africa emerges from its extended national lockdown in a phased approach, educational institutions across the country are faced with a difficult and complex task. There is clearly an urgent need to re-institute onsite teaching and kickstart curriculums, yet the pandemic continues to pose a grave threat to public health (and will do so for many months to come). Perhaps unsurprisingly, many education sector decision-makers are pursuing a hybrid approach to learning, blending some form of onsite teaching with remote learning programmes. Without doubt, there are difficult logistical challenges ahead for the education sector - and many learners have fallen far behind curriculums in the absence of adequate remote learning resources and engaging virtual learning environments.



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However, far from being all doom and gloom, positive change and opportunity beckons for SA's education sector – which is at a critical inflection point.

Ripe for reinvention

Arguably, this is an important moment for the country's embattled education sector, which now finds itself at a crossroads: leaders can pursue a return to 'traditional' education (the way things were); or they can use this crisis as an opportunity to reimagine - and revolutionise - their approach to teaching and learning in a digitally powered world. Today, while technology tools have been used by many local educators as a stopgap to fill the physical void during lockdown, technology can play a far more fundamental and supportive role in education, at every level. Yet this will require a deeper interrogation of the current limitations in technology adoption and infrastructure, as well as an understanding of the immense possibilities – and tremendous benefits - that smart technology can bring to education in the months and years ahead.

Static and unresponsive

As with many other sectors, the lockdown forced educators to move to a complete reliance on virtual learning tools. With almost no time to prepare, many schools embraced free online platforms and basic Cloud computing offerings such as

Google Suite and Office 365 – following a cost-driven approach to staying connected and sharing content with students and colleagues. Early on, it was clear that many teachers lacked the training to keep learners stimulated and engaged via these virtual platforms – and their challenges have been exacerbated, in many instances, by poor or non-existent connectivity and lack of access to data.

With the support of telecoms providers and savvy technology partners, educators have to make sure that institutions and programmes are equipped with reliable, high speed data connectivity. This is the first and most fundamental step – and some forward-thinking providers are actively engaged in helping educators to cost effectively and conveniently acquire the technology tools and connectivity that is essential to successful home learning.

Once the problem of robust and reliable connectivity has been solved, educators must take the next step and boost learner engagement with next-level technology tools and resources. As it stands, many learners finish their virtual school day by mid-morning, and there are growing difficulties in keeping learners engaged with existing content – and simultaneously preparing them for examinations and assessments. Yet when we take into account the static (and highly unresponsive) virtual learning environments that many students are having to spend time in, poor learner engagement levels should hardly come as a surprise. If we look to first world education sectors, such as the US, it is clear that even with well-developed connectivity, engagement has been a critical stumbling block.

Dynamic virtual learning environments

As with the enterprise environment, leaders need to transform the virtual learning space, and make it just as interactive, dynamic, and stimulating as the physical environment ... if not more. This can be achieved by replicating and simulating certain physical classroom elements in important ways, while also providing highly personalised learner feedback and interactive assessments that only the digital realm can offer. By blending advanced technology tools and offerings with physical learning elements, today's learners can accelerate their development and deepen knowledge in ways that have previously not been possible.

Having recognised the infinite scope of new learning tools, the education technology (or EdTech) sphere is quickly rising to the challenge – and innovators such as Kaltura are helping education leaders to reimagine blended learning solutions in a way that will not only support learners through the current pandemic, but position them to succeed in a rapidly changing, digitally-driven world.

For example, emerging solutions include interactive virtual classrooms with 'perpetual whiteboards' – in which students can interact and 'make notes' that will remain there for the duration of the semester. Other important features and concepts include video-on-demand, allowing learners to access and revisit lessons when they need to, with advanced search functions so that learners can navigate through lessons and content with ease. Teachers can also initiate virtual breakout sessions, allowing clusters of students to brainstorm and work together, thereby simulating the collaborative environment of physical classrooms.

Optimising content

Looking ahead, one key feature of these interactive virtual classrooms will be the ability to track and gauge learner engagement levels. For example, new platforms can alert educators when learners have clicked on a new tab or opened up a new browser and have disengaged with the lesson – even providing real-time percentages to indicate the level of learner engagement with a certain piece of content. Armed with this insight, teachers can adjust and tailor content accordingly, and also identify learners who perhaps need more personal attention or guidance in a certain subject. Increasingly, educators are identifying the importance of structured and engaging content within virtual learning environments – and technology will be a key enabler in helping to optimise content for each learner.

While there is no doubt that South Africa's educators are tasked with an enormous challenge in the months ahead, the current crisis can be harnessed to reimagine static learning environments and lay the foundation for a digitally-enabled and highly interactive approach to education. If we can empower our youth with technology, we can empower a nation to succeed.

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