

Technology and digital tools can improve overall literacy in SA

According to the Department of Higher Education and Training, literacy is and always will be a topic of conversation in South Africa, where 3.7 million people are illiterate. The reasons for these illiteracy rates are vast and range from the legacy of Apartheid to the cost of books and other materials needed for better reading and comprehension. And this only speaks to literacy when it comes to reading and writing. However, there are additional literacy areas that need more attention, too, such as financial literacy, data literacy, digital literacy and so much more.



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The effects of illiteracy across all sectors can affect many aspects of life. This includes an inability to participate in civic processes or the economy, earn a living and drive economic growth. There are no quick fixes for tackling literacy problems in South Africa, but there are digital and technological tools that can help.

“Access to quality reading materials and literacy tools is a struggle in countries such as South Africa where books and resources are often very expensive,” notes Lea-Anne Moses, executive director of the Fundza Literacy Trust, an organisation that tackles teen and adult literacy in South Africa. “However, about 20 to 22 million people in South Africa use a smartphone, with many more having internet access through shared devices. It is, therefore, imperative that more literacy tools become easily accessible via mobile devices”.



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The role of online reading tools

“Improving literacy and reading comprehension across South Africa is imperative to grow generations of educated, engaged and empowered citizens,” shares Moses. “Ensuring that young people have access to reading tools and resources is key to facilitating such improvement”.

Online reading tools play an important role in creating easy access to quality reading materials. Young people now have access to a library of local stories written by themselves and their peers about them and for them.



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Moses advises that an environment in which teenagers can develop an appetite for reading is equally important as the reading tools themselves. “If young people are given the encouragement to read for pleasure and the space to do just that, it will go a long way to help in the development of critical thinking and analytical thinking, improve their concentration and memory, strengthen their own writing ability, and even gain a better understanding of the world around them.”

The importance of digital literacy

In a world where almost, everything relies on some sort of digital touchpoint, digital literacy has become incredibly important, and big tech companies such as Google have been doing their part. The company has a digital safety and citizenship curriculum for children that aims to help children use the internet safely and with caution.

Additionally, in South Africa, digital literacy is also important in vernacular languages. The digital divide is widened at a technological level due to the absence of written content in African languages. This translates into poor datasets for machine learning and translation, making it harder to provide local-language versions of popular and useful apps.



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“This makes it increasingly difficult for those who don’t speak English to upskill themselves in the digital world or be more involved in technological innovation in South Africa,” says Moses. “Digital tools in home languages need to be made available to South Africans from a young age in order for them to thrive later in life”.

Zoho, a company that works with micro, small and medium enterprises to create digital literacy and provide critical skill development, echoes this sentiment, and believes that children need to be adequately equipped from early on in order to meet the demand of digital skills in South Africa.

“We need to future-proof children so that they are equipped to apply for jobs that require digital and development skills,” says Andrew Bourne, regional manager for Africa at Zoho Corporation. “And we can help do this by ensuring that educators have the skills to encourage children to become more digitally literate.”

“With low-code platforms, for example, citizen developers can create complex and powerful business applications without requiring costly and lengthy training. Most low-code application development can be managed with users who only have moderate technical knowledge.”

Why data literacy matters

Data is at the forefront of the world today. Everything we do includes either consuming data or sharing our data and information for various reasons. Data literacy is, therefore, an important part of learning in today’s world.

To make learning about data literacy that much easier, ALT Advisory, data privacy advocates, and Fundza have teamed up on a story called *Stolen Dreams*, by South African author Zimkhitha Mlanzeli. The story speaks about data protection through a compelling human-interest story. Bongji, the main protagonist, is a young woman who dreams of getting into university. These plans are halted when she becomes a victim of identity theft. The story unfolds as Bongji, and her friends investigate a shady businessperson who she suspects of stealing her personal information.



ALT and Fundza team up for a story about data privacy

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The goal of this project is to help equip young people with the tools and knowledge they need to protect their data in a digital world.

Moses concludes: “Literacy across all aspects of life is becoming more important and it’s great to see how technology companies and platforms are doing their part to improve literacy levels in South Africa. With South Africans often having easier access to a phone than a book, these digital tools and apps will only become more useful in our plight to address the literacy challenges that we face as a country”.

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