

From the sage on the stage to the guide on the side

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Generative AI, and technology's increased role in our daily lives, have been important narratives influencing societal development for the past ten years. However, it has been the events of the past three years, which have been shaped by a global health pandemic, that has increased the importance of this narrative. The education sector was hit hard by Covid and is now feeling the impact of accelerated digitalisation.

Technology has the potential to fundamentally change the way we educate our youth. The biggest concern that educators are currently facing surrounds generative artificial intelligence (AI) and the influence that it will have on the current education model.

"While educators and institutions are cautiously considering their position, it would not be prudent for them to dwell on the challenges associated with this technology. Generative AI can offer significant benefits," says Professor Zaheer Hamid, chief academic officer at Mancosa.

Addressing historical challenges

One of the most significant benefits of technology is that it has the potential to address the historical challenges found in the South African education system.

Professor Hamid points out that access to education has always been a significant issue in South Africa. This challenge not only focuses on the fact that most South African schools are focused on urban centres, but the cost of education is often beyond the reach of many South Africans.

"The democratisation of information has had a major impact on the education environment. Education providers are not the sole providers of education in the modern world. However, up until very recently, access was still a major issue. With almost half of the population having access to a smartphone in South Africa (26.3 million users in 2023, according to Statista), there is greater access to education than ever before," says Hamid.

Therefore, while many institutions are cautiously wary of the future impact of technology, it does present institutions with a significant opportunity to rethink the value and purpose of the education they provide. It also gives these institutions a platform to increase their student numbers significantly.

From sage to guide: A holistic approach to education

In the traditional education model, students and learners handed over a significant amount of trust to the teacher or lecturer on the stage, who was seen as the sage or the font of knowledge that would provide them with an education.

This trust has shifted towards technology. As a result, teachers and lecturers are increasingly playing the role of guiding learners and students through a world where a myriad of information is available at the click of a button.

"It must be pointed out that while the democratisation of information has changed the world as we know it, not all available information is accurate or safe for human consumption. Critical thinking is a virtue that educators have always encouraged. This is becoming even more important as educators need to encourage students and learners to interrogate the validity of the information they have access to," says Hamid adding that once the validity of the information has been confirmed, students are then guided on how to use the information appropriately.



Duncan Park, associate director of assessment at Mancosa

Duncan Park, an associate director of assessment at Mancosa, points out that it was inevitable that digital natives would use the internet to drill down into the information they want rather than the general nature of the information provided by several sources. "A person may be dealing with a situation where a family member is diagnosed with dementia. Instead of reading volumes of information about the condition, a few specific prompts can get AI to provide them with a very focused summary of the symptoms associated with dementia and the treatments they can seek. They won't have to sift through all the other information, analyse it, and discard the information they don't need before they get to the critical bit," says Park.

New skills for a new world

Undoubtedly, the influence of technology has created a whole new world that educators and students have to navigate on their knowledge journey. With this comes an entirely new set of skills that must be taught.

Hamid points out that skills such as numeracy and literacy were always seen as the essential tools that a learner and students would need to succeed in their education journey. With the influence of technology, skills such as coding and prompting have been added to this list.

"I suppose that the requirement for educators to step so far out of their comfort zone is disconcerting. The fact that educators had to be innovative and live close to the edge of their comfort zone has always been a requirement. However, with the current pace of change, some educators may feel that the sands may be shifting too rapidly for their liking," says Hamid.

Challenges

While Mancosa feels that technology will positively influence the education landscape, technology does come with challenges.

The first challenge is the digital divide. South Africa is a developing country, therefore, issues such as access to technology and the cost of data are challenges that need to be addressed. Additionally, not all students have the same basic technology skills. "As leaders in education, it is critical for us to find solutions and means to close this divide," says Park.

Then there are the ethical aspects of generative AI that have educators worried.

"When educators were the gatekeepers of information, knowledge could be presented to students with a greater context and through a lens of critical thought. However, the unrestricted nature of information access is one of the challenges of technology. The current challenge is that virtually all the information in existence is immediately available to anyone at the click of a button. In this context, it is vital that people have the necessary critical thinking and digital literacy skills to navigate this landscape," says Park.

Analysis paralysis

Hamid points out that there have been several occasions in the past where there were similar concerns about the influence of technology. For example, when scientific calculators were invented, educators were concerned about a student's ability to do trigonometry. However, these calculators proved to be helpful student aids.

"We would be remiss to say that technology does not come with challenges and that these challenges are genuinely concerning. However, we cannot be caught up in analysis paralysis. Technology is not going away, and early adopters can then adapt their systems and processes where they have greater control of the narrative surrounding the influence of tech. Mancosa is very excited about the future," says Hamid.

It is important to note that the core purpose of educational institutions is to expand the knowledge of learners and students on the current trends influencing an industry/profession. Therefore, these institutions will never be one step ahead of technological advancements. However, educational institutions can embrace technology and use it as an effective tool to

offer a level of tuition that is cutting-edge and produces the skills that are highly desirable by businesses.

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