

Why we need to take a lifelong approach to learning

 By Jackie Carroll

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The world commemorated the 2018 International Literacy Day under the theme "literacy and skills development" on Saturday, on 8 September. As technological advancements continue to drive the global economy, linking these two aspects of learning has become essential. To be employable and relevant in the 21st century, employees not only need to be literate and skilled, but must also have the capacity to acquire additional skills. Learning has to be viewed as a lifelong activity, and all parties have to be committed to its sustained progress.



Literacy and learning in South Africa

Statistically speaking, South Africa's literacy rate is in a better position than it has been for some time. In the 15 years between 2002 and 2017, Stats SA reports, the percentage of people over the age of 20 who were regarded as functionally illiterate dropped from 28.5% to 13.7%. But "functional literacy", unfortunately, only indicates an education of Grade 7 or above, and not an individual's ability to read and write at a level suitable to acquire and maintain a job.

In fact, very few young adults are adequately prepared for further learning or employment. South Africa's leading adult education and training (AET) institutions continue to supply literacy training at levels that are below Grade 9, and constantly have to create programmes designed to improve their learners' skills.

This situation has far-reaching ramifications. Often referred to as a silent disability, poor-quality and low levels of literacy hinder personal growth and limit opportunities. Collectively, they perpetuate poverty and inequality, and can constrain entire economies. Investing in both literacy and skills is critical to the advancement of individuals, communities and countries.

Why skills development matters

"In order to find a place in society, get a job, and respond to social, economic and environmental challenges, traditional literacy and numeracy skills are no longer enough; new skills, including in information and communication technology, are becoming increasingly necessary," says Audrey Azoulay, UNESCO's Director General.

Today, employees need to be equipped not only with soft skills, such as the ability to communicate effectively, work in a team and think critically, but also hard skills that require deliberate instruction and training. The latter ranges from basic computer skills, which are essential for most positions (or at least for acquiring them), to anything from knowing how to weld to knowing how to code. Without these skills, doors remain closed to prospective employees.

Acquiring these skills, however, is only the first part of the equation. They also need to be sustained and constantly updated as technology evolves. Ensuring that this ongoing learning takes place is the responsibility of educational institutions (including AET entities), non-governmental organisations, businesses, and learners and employees themselves. In order to be successful, this task has to be undertaken collectively, and in as innovative and integrated way as possible.

An innovative and integrated approach to learning

As technology makes demands on literacy and skills development, perhaps the best solution is to use technology to improve the way we learn and teach. Such approaches have the capacity to be meaningful, beneficial and to support sustained, lifelong learning.

Media Works, South Africa's leading AET provider, recently launched a programme with precisely this method in mind. The programme, Accelerate Pro, uses a combination of computer-assisted and face-to-face training methodologies to meet the literacy and skills development needs of adult learners. Its high-quality computer- and paper-based course material is made available to learners through a variety of media, and its textbooks contain quick response (QR) code technology, which provide learners with access to short multimedia lessons via their mobile phones. These lessons explain complicated concepts and provide practical examples, so facilitating learning and improving understanding.

If used effectively, technology-based learning programmes have the capacity to access learners across all levels, subjects and geographic locations. They also provide a consistent level in the quality of instruction, and are not dependent on the qualifications and abilities of facilitators, which inevitably vary.

Taking a lifelong view

"Preparing young people and adults for jobs, the majority of which have not yet been invented, is a challenge," says Azoulay. "Accessing lifelong learning, taking advantage of pathways between different forms of training, and benefiting from greater opportunities for mobility has thus become indispensable."

The first step to transforming literacy and skills development in South Africa is enhancing the collective understanding that learning happens consistently, throughout the course of a lifetime. Effective learning programmes therefore require perseverance and continuous adaptation.

ABOUT JACKIE CARROLL

Jackie Carroll is the CEO and co-founder of Media Works, South Africa's leading provider of adult education and training for over 21 years.
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