

# Educational reform for the social media age

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The internet has revolutionised the way we interact and has turned the world into one big virtual village. Social media are at the fulcrum of this seismic shift in the way people acquire, consume and disseminate information. It is necessary and sufficient that an assessment be done to gauge social media's effect on how learners learn. Is the current system in sync with today's reality? How can education stakeholders harness the power of social networks to deliver on the promise of a quality education? It is vital that the education on offer actually prepares learners to be relevant in this fast-changing data-intensive age.



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Social media have been a direct offshoot of human beings' yearning for fundamental needs such as the freedom of expression and association, curiosity, accessibility, the need to connect with like-minded people and pursuit of happiness through sharing of notable achievements and memorable moments. This has been expressed through the creation of platforms that propagate brand identity, enhance conversations, sharing, presence, relationships, reputation and groups through co-creation of information among communities of users. Connectivity has increased exponentially with social media and the proverbial "six degrees of separation" has been reduced to "about two degrees of separation", meaning that everyone is about two people away from any other person on earth through the densely populated mesh of social media networks. According to Wikipedia, "Social media are computer-aided tools that allow people to create, share or exchange information, ideas and pictures/videos in virtual communities and networks." The emergence of social media and associated innovations has disrupted business models across the spectrum of society and the delivery of education has not been spared.

The crowd-sourced nature of social media content means that users have control over what information is transmitted, how they wish to consume the information and with whom they interact with. Social media has democratised information exchange and there is no need for the industrial age pipeline model whereby teachers were the sole custodians and gatekeepers of knowledge. The interoperability of social media across devices has enabled learners to access knowledge-bearing platforms on demand (anytime, anywhere and in any chosen format). New knowledge is now a click away as opposed to the pre-printing press era when a monk took two years to scribe a copy of the Bible. The Bibles were so few that only "men of letters" could own such ornamental treasures. Social media has proliferated information dissemination beyond the traditional "brick and mortar" classrooms to online portals which are much cheaper to maintain and update.

When the internet started it was predominantly used by males but according to the South African Social Media Landscape 2015 report by South African consultancy company World Wide Worx, males and females are equally connected to social media. The company used Facebook as a proxy for measurement as it is the most used platform. The increase of female users can be attributed to mobile phone penetration and intentional girl child and women empowerment programmes such Intel's *She Will Connect* project that seeks to give females the confidence to participate on the wide world web without fear

of harassment and other forms of discrimination. The widespread use of the internet surely presents an opportunity for education service providers and consumers to come up with models that ensure quality learning takes place.

## **The power of social media at the heart of classroom practices**

Social media give a chance to learners to cross-reference learnt principles and to access alternative and engaging explanations to important concepts. Social media allows for the co-creation of knowledge and is vital for the growth of learners as they become co-producers of knowledge that is in tune with their reality. South Africa has to take a proactive approach in ensuring that the power of social media is not relegated to the side-lines but is at the heart of classroom practices. It is sad that some schools in South Africa still do not allow mobile phones at school. These schools have focused on the negative aspects of the digital revolution which include cyber-bullying and pornography among other ills. The benefits of seamless internet access for learners far outweigh the negatives and it is paramount that schools be creative in their approach to ICT usage. A simple intervention among others would be to have every child logged onto the school intranet and then administrators monitor and control which websites are viewable. Logging on and off the system can replace the register taking in classes as the teacher and ICT administrators can just refer to a dashboard.

Social media can cut costs of educational collaboration among schools through in-class real-time streaming. Best performing schools and those that need more support can "attend" the same class being offered by some expert in a remote location. It is necessary that schools give teachers and learners room to innovate and fully exploit the power of social media. Social media are fertile ground for optimal learning and it will take a shift in the mind-set of all stakeholders in the education sector. Parents can now tune-in to their children's lessons from home or the office. Discipline can be enforced in an efficient way as parents are now a click away and can monitor what is happening in their child's education.

In as much as the barrier to educational information has been lowered it would be naïve to conclude that teachers are no longer necessary in the system. The overload of unverified information coupled with the easy access can be a huge hindrance to learning thus an efficient model has to be developed to re-engineer the role of the teacher in today's and tomorrow's education value-chain. One suggestion is turning teachers into facilitators of lessons as opposed to purported fountains of knowledge. Social media surely gives the education stakeholders an opportunity to self-evaluate and move away from self-preservation but expand into the unknown for the good of the learners who are the primary beneficiaries of the educational activities.

Let us all be players in the upheaval of education for our own sake.

## **ABOUT EDZAI CONILIAS ZVOBWO**

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