Lower data costs a key starting point in boosting SA education

By Dennis Lamberti   5 Dec 2019

This week, the Competition Commission made a big announcement regarding forcing large mobile networks to cut their data prices by between 30-50% in the next two months or face prosecution.

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After the #datamustfall movement, this is the most serious development yet in making the internet more affordable for all South Africans.

Recent research released by broadband market analyst firm Cable.co.uk revealed that SA ranks just 143 out of 230 countries when it comes to affordable data costs.

Lower costs will therefore not only make life easier for South Africans when it comes to communicating, but it will also benefit education by further democratising access to information.

However, lowering data costs should be just the first step in leveraging the internet to make quality education more accessible.

Here are four other further steps we can take to ensure that lower data costs make a real difference.

Making data completely free for learning

Local mobile networks should also be encouraged to make data costs completely free for specific e-learning websites.

We've become accustomed to seeing local networks over the years 'zero-rating' several online services such as WhatsApp, Facebook and even Wikipedia.

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It's clear then that mobile networks have the capability to roll out this free access to a niche set of applications and platforms while still earning revenue from all other online offerings.

By zero-rating selected e-learning websites and apps, such an initiative could form part of these mobile networks' Corporate Social Investment (CSI) initiatives and make a massive difference to millions of learners across the country.

Taking online learning offline with apps

Interestingly, e-learning smartphone apps also have a role to play in boosting education by taking online learning 'offline'.

By using e-learning smartphone apps, learners can update their content when they are in a free Wi-Fi zone, such as at their school or even a shopping mall.

Many e-learning apps out there enable this capability and allow learners to download and even upload content via their smartphones.

Once at home, these learners can then run that content directly off their smartphone.

Structuring unstructured e-learning content

Making e-learning as cheap as possible is just the first hurdle to overcome in order to empower the digital learning experience in South Africa.

This is because there is a further need to create more structured e-learning platforms in South Africa and across the globe.

While there is a lot of learning material for many school subjects on platforms such as Khan Academy and even YouTube, it can still be difficult to find exactly what you're looking for.

It can be challenging, for instance, when it comes to searching for content part of a CAPS aligned curriculum. Then there's also the risk of being distracted by adverts and other content on these platforms.

In an ideal world where data costs are falling or even free, the case for using paid-for e-learning options - which structure this content - becomes more feasible.

Rethinking learning and the classroom

Finally, teachers need to have a good understanding of what's out there when it comes to e-learning so that they can direct learners in the classroom to relevant online content which will help them enhance their learning experience.

Teachers also need to understand the power of apps and which apps can deliver the most value to their learners.

E-learning can also assist in supplementing learning in the classroom by providing lessons from other top-quality teachers in the country.

Taking all of this into consideration, it's clear then that internet technology can bring unlimited benefits to learners in South Africa.

Lowering data prices is just the first key step in truly unlocking this medium for more South Africans.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dennis Lamberti is Development Director at Media Works, which has been South Africa's leading provider of adult education and training for over 22 years. Dennis' particular expertise has been in heading the take-up of technology-driven solutions for Media Works, including the rollout and implementation of learning management system tools such as Moodle.