

# Cell phones, learning and literacy in a South African township

December 3 2014

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Teaching texting skills and stimulating cell phone use can improve the literacy of a very vulnerable group of people who have had very limited access to education or none at all. Researcher Fie Velghe of Tilburg University has conducted ethnographic field research in the Wesbank township of Cape Town, South Africa, to study the potential of cell phones as an informal, 'alternative' learning environment for underprivileged older women. Learning to use an abc keyboard, for instance, helped them to have more social interaction through texting, and learning to use facebook allowed them to create a new identity.

It may seem a small step, [learning](#) to use a cell phone, but it made an immense difference to the women who were the focus of Velghe's PhD thesis, entitled 'This is almost like writing'. Cell phones, learning and [literacy](#) in a South African township. In the post-apartheid era, these colored women lead a marginalized existence in society, even though they are often breadwinners and heads of families. These women, who never went to school or only received very little education, show great energy and creativity in finding solutions for their poverty, but constantly run up against all kinds of obstacles. PhD researcher Fie Velghe wondered whether teaching these women how to text and how to use cell phones and facebook could help to empower them.

Access to computers, internet, and landline telephones is limited among the poorer sections of the South African population. However, relatively many people in these communities have cell phones. During various field studies on location, Velghe investigated how older, underprivileged

women already used their cell phones. In addition, she organized brief courses in which she taught the women to text, search for information, e-mail, save phone numbers, and use Facebook and Whatsapp. However, this required basic literacy: the women had to learn to read and write.

The [cell phone](#) proved to be a useful learning tool so that learning moments could be fully adapted to the needs of the target group. The first results are encouraging. The [women](#) learnt 'new' forms of reading and writing and were better able to build and maintain new social networks. They were able to find information on potential jobs and perform such practical and administrative actions as managing their finances or making arrangements for church services.

Velghe's research offers insight into the often arduous learning process for people with low literacy and into the benefits and limitations of basic literacy in an era of information technology. People need to acquire an entirely new type of dexterity that is physically and cognitively complex. In addition, Velghe's thesis provides information on the pedagogical aspects of informal learning and the potential of alternative types of literacy for people with certain forms of dyslexia.

Provided by Tilburg University

Citation: Cell phones, learning and literacy in a South African township (2014, December 3) retrieved 18 April 2024 from

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