

Multimedia is key to distance education: Researcher builds a model South African universities can use

November 2 2023, by Khanyisile Yanela Twabu



Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

Distance education first appeared in the United States [in the 1800s](#). At the time, students received the relevant material through the post and

then returned it to the institution.

Scholars in the field say that [distance education](#) is now in its "[fifth generation](#)". This means that, like so much else in the world, knowledge is delivered via the internet. Students want to be able to access learning materials at a time and place that's convenient to them. Flexibility is key.

The increasingly important role of multimedia in higher education was [emphasized during the COVID pandemic](#). Universities that previously held in-person classes switched to digital, remote learning. Even though open distance universities were hypothetically better equipped for the switch, since their model meant they already used technology and [digital tools](#), many were more comfortable with a blended learning approach (some in-person teaching and some remote teaching).

It is now nearly four years since COVID was [declared a global pandemic](#). Much of society, and much of higher education, has returned to "normal."

But it's important that higher education institutions don't waste the lessons learned during the height of the pandemic about the powerful role that multimedia can play in learning and teaching. This is especially the case for open [distance education](#) since it offers a way to improve access to higher education for people from diverse societies and backgrounds.

So, for [my Ph.D.](#) in education, I set out to develop a post-pandemic multimedia framework for teaching and learning in open distance institutions in South Africa.

The study identified a number of challenges that might keep the country's open distance institutions from adopting such a framework. One is [insufficient access](#) by both students and institutions, though

mostly students, to information and communication technology infrastructure such as capable networks, cloud infrastructure, and the relevant hardware and software tools.

Institutions also need to regularly update their software and ensure that their staff are constantly learning new skills as technologies change. Crucially, institutional websites must be zero-rated— service providers should not charge for access and use of specific internet pages. It also emerged from my research that lecturers found WhatsApp to be a powerful tool for learning and teaching.

The study

The majority of students in the country's higher education institutions are enrolled through the contact mode. But 370,891 (34.5% of all students) are [pursuing their education through distance learning](#).

To conduct the study, I engaged with 15 participants from three selected support departments (four deans, eight lecturers from four selected colleges, and three support staff participants) at an open distance higher learning institution in South Africa.

I handed out questionnaires and conducted interviews with these participants. I wanted to know what their skill levels were regarding multimedia technologies and how they used those technologies during the pandemic. I also analyzed relevant institutional documents.

One participant emphasized that not only were multimedia solutions made available to staff, but academics were trained to use these. The [institution](#)'s multimedia center, they said, also equipped some staff with "audiovisual tools of the trade such as podcast equipment."

Several participants emphasized how valuable WhatsApp had been as a

platform, particularly for "fast communication" with students. It was also, they said, a good way to build relationships with students. One told me that Facebook was their go-to platform for general communication but that "for module-related content, WhatsApp was the main platform we used."

What comes next

Based on the results of my study, I propose that collaborative leadership is needed to ensure there are proper frameworks for multimedia as teaching and learning tools at open distance institutions. This can serve as a guide to institutions for incorporating [multimedia](#); it helps to organize the structuring of video content, audio, graphics and text in a manner that enhances teaching.

The South African government (particularly the department of [higher education](#) and training), individual researchers, educational institutions and the private sector all have a role to play.

The government, for instance, should recruit and engage mobile network service providers to install fiber and internet connectivity, even in the country's rural areas. This will broaden access. Integrating solar systems into [electricity supply](#), especially but not limited to these areas, is also important.

Watching and downloading videos requires a great deal of data. So, zero-rating all websites related to education is another way to create access. In this way [students](#) can access all the resources they need, not just static, text-based modules.

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Multimedia is key to distance education: Researcher builds a model South African universities can use (2023, November 2) retrieved 29 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2023-11-multimedia-key-distance-south-african.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.