

Using Mobile-based Social Media to Facilitate Interaction and Build Communities through the Lens of Ubuntu in Distance Education

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Abstract: This paper examines how WhatsApp can be used to build learning communities and facilitate interaction, through the lens of Ubuntu – an African concept of humanness, which means that an individual person owes his or her existence to the existence of others. The Afrocentric concept of Ubuntu and interaction work concomitantly towards the realisation of vocabulary teaching and learning within distance education. Through this study, students were encouraged to work together through a mobile-based social network to learn English vocabulary. Ubuntu was used as a framework to analyse the WhatsApp chats to find salient themes relating to building communities and enhancing interaction. The key elements of Ubuntu grounded the findings and demonstrated how technology can be used to bridge the interaction distance and how Ubuntu principles are articulated in the communities of learning. This paper illustrates how Ubuntu is manifested in a local context, with principles that can be applied globally to enhance collaboration.

Keywords: Ubuntu, interaction, mobile learning, vocabulary, WhatsApp.

Introduction

Interaction is central to any educational experience, irrespective of whether the students are studying through distance or not (Garrison & Archer, 2000), and it has a positive effect on academic performance (Amry, 2014; Shishah, Hopkins, FitzGerald & Higgins, 2013). The problem arises when face-to-face interaction is missing as in the case of distance education. This distance, according to Moore (1993), is a “psychological and communications space to be crossed, a space of potential misunderstandings” (p. 22) between instructors and students who are physically separated. This is further aggravated by the fact that many students in South Africa struggle to meet the academic demands of higher education because they do not study through the medium of their mother tongue. Their success is hampered by lack of proficiency in English, the language in which they are expected to be fluent for them to adequately cope with academic work.

For language teaching and learning at a distance, mediated interaction is crucial. Studies have shown that mobile-based social media have been used successfully to enhance social interaction through collaborative learning (Amry, 2014; Shisha et al., 2013). While mobile phones have been used extensively as social communication contraptions, they are now being utilised as tools that nourish collaborative learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Shandu, 2017). The ubiquitous nature of mobile technologies offers a space to make social interaction possible in distance learning, since it is not the technologies that possess inherent pedagogical qualities that are successful in distance education, according to Keegan (2005), “but technologies that are generally available to citizens” (p. 14). More than 95 percent of students at the University of South Africa (UNISA) own mobile phones and it



stands to reason to harness the affordances of mobile phones to enhance language learning at a distance.

Mobile phones have transformed the education landscape by offering students opportunities to use varied forms of interaction, thereby, enabling learning collaboratively through communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Makoe, 2012). Community, which plays a crucial role in meaning making (Vygotsky, 1978), is described as “having mutual interdependence among members, connectedness, interactivity, overlapping histories and shared values and beliefs” (Rovai, 2002, p. 42). These community attributes exist within contexts, which should be invariably acknowledged as part of interaction, include the people involved, the location, the function, purpose and topic of such interaction (Garrison & Archer, 2000; Lave & Wenger, 1991). People learn through their cultural lens by communicating with each other as they follow rules and values shaped by their culture (Vygotsky, 1978).

In this study, communication and interaction took place through WhatsApp, which brought together students from different parts of South Africa as they learned English vocabulary. WhatsApp provided a nurturing social atmosphere where students formed groups for creating and sharing knowledge. Previous studies have illustrated how WhatsApp can be used to support collaborative teaching and learning strategies (Hamad, 2017; Hani, 2014; Justina, 2016). The benefits of collaborative learning include increased higher order thinking, greater engagement, higher self-esteem and higher test scores (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007; Hani, 2014; Hamad, 2017; Jacobs, Renandya & Power, 2016). In such contexts, students are responsible for each other’s learning as well as their own (La Hanisi, Risdiyana & Sulisworo, 2018). This is more important in distance education where students often feel isolated from and neglected by their peers. Therefore, using mobile phones for teaching and learning is most suitable in places of limited resources, such as South Africa, because of their ability to connect less privileged people to information at affordable costs.

The aim of this paper, thus, is to examine how WhatsApp can be used to build communities and enhance interaction in language learning. This is done through drawing on the principles of Ubuntu, which encapsulate the mutually beneficial interaction within and between human beings in communities.

Conceptual Framework

In African cultures, working together is prominent and learning is inherently a collective social process whereby a student feels the need to interact with fellow students and teachers. This deeply social view of education is embodied in Ubuntu, which is linked to the concept of communalism (Venter, 2004). Ubuntu is difficult to define (Tutu, 1997), because there is no one direct English translation and, thus, “a plethora of definitions exists, each emphasizing different elements of the concept” (Mabovula, 2011, p. 39). Definitions range from those where Ubuntu is a moral quality of a person and those where it is a phenomenon according to which persons are interconnected (Gade, 2012), but what is key is that “there is no Ubuntu without the community” (Letseka, 2014, p. 544). The legitimacy of Ubuntu as a theory has been previously questioned, with some calling it an invented tradition (Marx, 2002). However, Ubuntu has been widely theorised (Letseka, 2012; Metz, 2011), with Ramose (1999) arguing that Ubuntu represents the epistemology informing cultural and legal practice.

While Ubuntu is referred to as a theory (Letseka, 2012; Metz, 2011; Ramose, 1999), in this paper, Ubuntu is a concept which “speaks of the fact that my humanity is caught up and is inextricably bound up in yours. I am human because I belong.” (Tutu, 1997, p. 78). Central to Ubuntu is one’s relation to others, that is, *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* – “I am what I am because of others”. Ubuntu does not negate the rights of the individual and one does not lose his or her identity (Du Toit, 2004), but it emphasises that the individual becomes through and together with others. Thus, individual learning is not learning in isolation, but an individual develops through and with others. It has been argued that Ubuntu is unique to Africa, even though some of its principles can be shared with other Asian and European philosophies (Kamwangamalu, 1999). An example is the philosophy of humanism, which espouses shared humanity (Gaylard, 2004) and “affirmation of our ability and responsibility to lead ethical lives of personal fulfilment that aspire to the greater good” (American Humanist Association). What makes Ubuntu stand out, though is how it “articulates social interdependence and a deep rootedness in community” (Letseka, 2012, p. 48).

Ubuntu relates to communities, which, whether poor or thriving, cannot survive on individual efforts. In times past, people had to live together in large families and clans and shared basic needs such as shelter, food and water (Broodryk, 2002). Ubuntu, thus, insists that the good of all determines the good of each as Adonisi (1994, p. 311) observes, “traditional African values foster a communalistic world-view towards life”. The essence of Ubuntu is that an individual owes his or her existence to the existence of others. “I am because ‘you are’ and ‘we are’ because ‘you are’ and ‘I am’” (Mbigi & Maree, 1995, p. 2). This interpersonal character of Ubuntu is the source of many of its distinctive features that have been highlighted in literature, such as patience, hospitality, loyalty, respect, conviviality, sociability, vitality, endurance, sympathy, obedience and sharing, to list but a few (Adonisi, 1994; Broodryk, 2002; Mbigi & Maree, 1995). Ubuntu finds its roots and meaning in humanity and, therefore, espouses values that emphasise sharing, co-operation, compassion, caring (Letseka, 2013); “being humble, thoughtful, considerate, understanding, wise, generous, hospitable, socially mature, socially sensitive, virtuous and blessed” (Le Roux, 2000, p. 43); as well as survival, solidarity spirit, compassion, respect and dignity (Mbigi & Maree, 1995; Poovan, 2005). The concept of Ubuntu “offers an understanding of ourselves in relation with the world, focusing on people’s allegiances and relations with one another” (Karsten & Illa, 2005). Therefore, Ubuntu is in direct contrast with individualism, which is espoused in most Western cultures. Although African culture promotes communality and collectivism, individualism was bound to seep in to the education system due to the Western colonial powers from which it was inherited (Poovan, 2005). Despite the colonial influence on the African way of life, African cultures discourage the view that the individual takes precedence over the community.

What this means in an educational context is that “traditional educational thought and practice should be directed at encouraging cooperative skills” (Venter, 2004, p. 157). Since the process of learning is a dynamic interaction between the individual and her physical, cultural, social and political environment within which they interact, peers become the most influential group in the learning environment (Makoe, 2012). In these cultures, according to Sawadogo (1995), dependency relationships are nurtured and strengthened amongst peers. In short, a student feels very dependent on others for survival. Vygotsky (1978) argues that learning is a social concept where socio-cultural practices such as beliefs, values, customs, norms and attitudes tend to influence individual behaviour.

The context in which learning takes place provides the setting for examining experience while the environment and the community shape learning (Makoe, 2012; Cole, 2003). It seems prudent, therefore, for distance education institutions to embrace socio-cultural realities in order that they deliver educational programmes that are responsive to student needs. That's why many students at UNISA, the largest distance education institution in the continent, prefer to belong to informal study groups. To these students, learning is a collective social process, which is characterised by the need to interact with fellow students, making group interaction central to the way they learn.

In such a context, students feel a heightened sense of communalism which is a "strong and binding network of relationships" (Mthembu, 1996, p. 220). Hence, most students find the study groups helpful because they are sources of motivation and support. This support within groups is highlighted by Garrison and Arbaugh (2007), who argue that open interaction, which is indicated by risk-free expression and group cohesion, encourages collaboration. The dynamic nature of social media tools, thus, has the potential to support collaborative learning because it allows students to become active participants and co-producers of knowledge as they learn together in technology-mediated groups. Therefore, this paper demonstrates how the principles of Ubuntu are used to explore the utilisation of social media in building communities of students who are interacting and helping each other as they learn English vocabulary.

Methodology

Data was collected from students who were studying a first-year English module which is aimed at equipping students with the necessary academic literacy skills to prepare them for university studies. Invitations were sent out to more than a thousand students, however, only 29 returned the consent forms and these were the first group that showed interest in participating. Perhaps, it is worth mentioning that the number of students who responded is not unique to this study. Past experience of inviting students to participate in studies and informal observations, seems to point to lower responses to invitations for participation in research studies. This could be due to the scarcity of time that distance students face. Although empirical research is needed in this regard, it seems distance students barely have time to complete activities for their studies and they are wary to take on what is perceived as extra work. In this study, even though the vocabulary activities pointed to learning benefits, the activities were not part of the assignments for their module, so they could have been perceived as additional work.

It should be mentioned that although some students had expressed interest in the study, they could not participate because they had not submitted the study consent forms on time. The participants were then randomly allocated into five WhatsApp groups. The groups were named VocabNation 1 through to VocabNation 5. A discussion was initiated within these groups outlining ground rules for group behaviour, placing emphasis on respect, focusing on the learning as well as encouragement to participate in discussions.

WhatsApp was used both as a vocabulary learning tool as well as a data collection instrument. The WhatsApp chats did not need transcription as WhatsApp saves chats, which were emailed and saved in Word for analysis. Every morning, the instructor sent a word of the day, the part of speech, the definition and example sentences. This was later followed by prompting questions and messages encouraging the participants to engage and discuss the word of the day in groups. Some discussions

were prompted by the participants who would ask other group members for further explanations or translations of the assigned word. At the end of each day, the researcher sent exercises which tested understanding and use of the new word. As the study progressed, the participants had to write their own sentences and paragraphs where they could recycle the past words to demonstrate understanding. These sentences were shared in the groups for the benefit of others.

Thematic Analysis was used to analyse the series of message threads, which included over a thousand WhatsApp posts, through deductive coding, based on the Ubuntu principles. The WhatsApp messages were emailed to the researchers and saved as Word documents. The researchers then read and reread the discussion threads and used different coloured highlights to underline phrases that were related to the Ubuntu principles. The phrases were categorized into various Ubuntu principles in a table. Two raters completed this activity and compared the categories. Areas of deviation were discussed until there was an agreement. In short, Ubuntu principles were utilised as a theoretical foundation and a framework for grounding and validating the themes emanating from data. For the purposes of the analysis, we clustered the principles of Ubuntu as identified by Adonisi (1994); Broodryk, (2002), Le Roux, (2000), Letseka (2013), Mbigi and Maree (1995) into four key values:

1. Interdependence (solidarity, survival, respect, interconnectedness)
2. Caring (compassion, thoughtfulness, understanding)
3. Respect (human dignity, being considerate, socially mature, socially sensitive, wise)
4. Sharing (communalism, being hospitable, being considerate, being generous).

Findings and Discussion

While some of the discussions below might be similar to some online forums, they are presented in this paper to illustrate how ubiquitous and accessible mobile spaces facilitate interaction, where Ubuntu is facilitated and demonstrated.

Interdependence

The ubiquitous nature of mobile devices has the ability to facilitate the formation of virtual learning communities so that students can interact and learn from each other. It also helps students to collaborate with each other as they learn the English language in communities that value interdependence. These communities rely on trust and loyalty to advance the well-being of others in the group (Mbaya, 2011). Because the participants were interacting openly, they were able to encourage each other.

5/22/16: 12:58 – P24: I encourage everyone to participate in this group so that we can help each other.

Virtual group members were also able to admonish each other when it was felt that the others were not contributing enough. There is a marked understanding that it is in working together that they will all achieve much.

8/5/16: 08:12 - P3: Can I be candid? What happened to the other students as I see no comments? P4? P6?

08:17 – P3: We have to show an instructor that we appreciate her efforts.

While the group was engaged in learning English vocabulary, they used their own languages to clarify some of the concepts. Nelson Mandela valorously stated that, “if you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head, but if you talk to him in his language, it goes to his heart” (cited by Ginsburgh & Weber, 2011). Therefore, meaning can only be understandable in the plane of inner speech, according to Vygotsky (1978). These words resonated throughout the study as participants repeatedly lauded the fact that they were able to express themselves and exchange ideas in their language of choice. While language choice is espoused in South Africa’s constitution, the reality is that English usually takes centre stage leaving little room for indigenous languages to be used at universities.

When the participants found learning vocabulary too difficult, they felt that they could understand the English concepts much easier in their languages. Using their first language to understand a word was an advantage, as indicated in the following excerpt.

5/29/16, 18:45 – P19: *Otlasi kqatello ya maikutlo kapa ya jwala* [Under personal or alcoholic pressure] (Defining the word of the day, *stupor*, in SeSotho)

5/19/16, 21:43 – P6: *mutsho ,ufhisa na u oma* [hot and dry weather] (Defining the word of the day, *torrid*, in TshiVenda)

5/19/16, 18:26 – P24: *Torrid means xesha linzima* [times are tough] (Defining the word of the day, *torrid*, in IsiXhosa)

5/23/16, 07:43 – P3: *Welwillendheid of liefdadigheid* [Goodwill or charity] (Defining Benevolence in Afrikaans)

Although participants came from different language backgrounds, they still understood each other and were able to work as a community to assist each other in learning English vocabulary. South Africa has eleven official languages and participants in this group reassured each other, arrived at understanding the word of the day and generally communicated with each other in their own languages. To this end, second-language students tend to rely on their native languages to analyse and provide order to their meaning and thought (Rublik, 2017). This was similar to other studies that have shown that “several languages promoted overall mental development, and a better understanding of one’s native language,” (Rublik, 2017, p. 338). Participants used their indigenous languages and corrected each other as they interacted towards building understanding. Because the group was heterogeneous, it also demonstrated the multilingualism, which is the tapestry of South Africa.

In this ‘virtual social space’, according to Garrison and Arbaugh (2007), people are socialised purposefully towards cognitive development. In this instance, the social interaction reflected the development of the negotiation from a mere exchange of ideas to a meaningful building and confirmation of knowledge within the community. The WhatsApp group provided a sense of belonging which created personal and purposeful relationships. Working with other people is especially important in this context because most distance education students often feel isolated from their peers, as sources of motivation.

6/6/16, 17:05 – P16: *Andiqinisekanga ingathi kukuqubisana*, [I am not sure, it might be a competition] P14 will help me

6/6/16, 17:10 – P15: What are u asking?

6/6/16, 17:13 – P16: If *ukuqubisana* [competition] is the right word in isiXhosa?

6/6/16, 17:13 – P15: Are u sure abt your spelling?

6/6/16, 17:16 – P16: Yes

6/6/16, 17:18 – P15: *Ukuqubisana* [competition], means conflict

6/6/16, 17:20 – P16: No you are wrong some times *kuthiwa* [they say] Orlando pirates *izakuqubisana ne* Kaizer chiefs *kulempelaveki* [will compete against...this weekend] and that is not a fight

6/6/16, 17:21 – P15: it's a clash

Sharing

The concept of communality lies in the principle of sharing. It is therefore expected that every person in these communities should be hospitable. African hospitality is grounded on the fact that no one is an island to himself or herself, rather, each one is part of the whole community, including those who have passed on (Mbaya, 2011). Such is the magnitude and depth of the concept of sharing. As such, it is customary to even pour a few drops of traditional beer on the ground for the ancestors before drinking it (Mbaya, 2011), evincing sharing what one has with one's ancestors. In an African culture, the community comes first and as a result, "the individual has a social commitment to share with others what he has" (Teffo, 1996, p. 103). Sharing in this society includes sharing resources, food, space, wisdom, to name a few. People who do not share with others are considered outcasts. The elements of sharing enhance human interaction in relation to working collaboratively and having a shared destiny of a defined group (Mbaya, 2011). In these WhatsApp chats, sharing was manifested in how the participants shared knowledge and information, as illustrated in the following excerpts.

8/12/16, 08:30 – P10: Thanks instructor for everything, I would also like to thank the members of the group for their participation. I learn a lot from you guys. Good luck with your studies.

7/12/16, 09:15 – P8: Yes I got mine (referring to examination results)

7/12/16, 09:18 – P7: *Mna* [As for me] not yet

7/12/16, 09:19 – P8: Log in to my unisa *zozbona* [you will see the results]

Through sharing, the participants were providing each other with various types of support that is helpful in distance education. In addition to sharing information, the participants used the space provided to share a piece of their own culture as they applied the new acquired vocabulary. Closely linked to sharing cultural information, personal vulnerabilities were also shared and the group empathised. They were even beginning to use the new words in their interaction as illustrated in the excerpt below.

8/9/16, 23:05 – P21: I really cannot wait for the big day, one that would turn sour days to *euphoric* moments. My graduation day. My favourite word.

8/10/16, 11:43 – P24: *Euphoric* moment indeed ... , I will also cherish that moment forever.

In this way, sharing solidified the group's solidarity. It seemed as though sharing showed the participants that even though they were separated by distance, they were united in their experiences.

While the participants lauded WhatsApp for the opportunity to exchange ideas and learn from others, sometimes group work presented challenges to learning. In the beginning of the study, some participants felt that some answers were shared before they participated in the exercises. Some also felt apprehensive about sharing their answers, not knowing if they were correct or not. As the study progressed, the participants felt more like a community and they were more open to sharing. In one of the later exercises, participants were asked to write a paragraph and send it to the instructor who shared some of the answers with the group if the original author agreed. This was done in order to bolster the confidence of the participants, so the activity was completed without anyone feeling self-conscious. It was interesting to note that the participants were amenable to sharing, as none of the participants declined to have their work shared with the other group members.

Respect

Over and above sharing, another key value of Ubuntu is respect, which includes human dignity, social maturity, social sensitivity, wisdom and compassion, all of which are exploited to enforce group solidarity (Gathogo, 2008). Respect, in this paper, was evident in two ways: respect for diversity and respect for hierarchy. Respect for diversity was portrayed in how the various languages were respected, accommodated and encouraged. Even religious diversity was acknowledged in a non-discriminatory manner. When discussions were around blasphemy as the word of the day, the facilitator had to steer discussions so diversity was acknowledged without being discriminatory.

Although this group was heterogeneous in terms of gender and age, respect for hierarchy and for age and gender is particularly a very important component in African culture. People tend to be more comfortable amongst people of the same age range and gender. From a young age, according to Sawadogo (1995), children from the same gender and age are raised together and, therefore, age differences bind people together in specific social relationships. Interaction between different age groups in an African tradition is based on respect for the elders. This emanates from a common understanding that elders are custodians of knowledge. Although participants interacted openly in their groups, they sometimes *inboxed* the instructor on the side with other issues. In this study, the instructor was perceived as an elder and a knowledgeable person. The response of the lecturer is even more appreciated and valued in distance education because it gives students an opportunity to interact with the lecturer.

5/31/16, 08:41 – P18: Hello Instructor. Thank your for writing straight to me about the app. To be honest I never tried it, I just appreciate the fact that you choose to use whatsapp to accommodate everyone after it did not worked out. I still think that whatsapp is the great idea, because some of us do not have money to download while whatsapp is affordable.

Even though participants did not see each other, they still wanted to portray themselves in a positive light. Social presence in online learning, according to Gunawardena & Zittle, (1997) is also related to how students want to be perceived, socially and emotionally. It made sense that participants would want to filter their openness when they were in the group or when they were interacting with the

facilitator, individually. Whether seen in person or virtually, people often alter how they act amongst peers or in one-on-one interaction with the instructor.

7/7/16, 18:22 - P3: Hi Instructor, I was wondering if you could not send a voice note with the word for us to hear the proper pronunciation? That is often a problem.

8/18/16, 11:44 – P13: It was easy for us on WhatsApp than the App.the only thing you could change is exemple sentences should come from us not from you, we should work harder and you help us where we struggling.

The above excerpts, which were taken from side chats outside the group, illustrate that the participant did not want to be perceived as someone who operates outside the group norms. Participants appreciated the side chats because they felt that they communicated freely on matters they deemed sensitive and were meant for the instructor’s attention. In a face-to-face context, such an event would be cumbersome. Firstly, it would mean the student waiting until class is over to get time alone with the teacher. It would also mean the student might get suspicious glances as the others see her or him chatting alone with the teacher. In the mobile learning realm, however, all it took was for the individuals to inbox the instructor, maybe while they were also actively engaging in their groups.

Caring

While collaborative learning facilitated interaction, it is also manifested in affective expression. The participants used the forum to tackle socio-emotional issues as they interacted (Shandu, 2017). One participant expressed the usefulness of the group in mitigating the loneliness inherent in distance education. This statement was especially telling, particularly in the mostly isolated distance education context.

6/18/16, 10:03 – P24: Sometimes distant learning is very lonely and boring but when we have whtsap groups to share ideas it become easy and motivating

What is distinctly imperative about virtual collaborative learning is the shift from it being viewed as a social space for making friends to facilitating learning. While it has been shown that, over time, affective and open communication decrease as group cohesion increases (Vaughan & Garrison, 2006), the distance education setting allows participants to interpose between personal posts relating to personal wellness, personal achievements and personal concerns examples of the most advanced stages of group cohesion.

7/12/16, 09:50 - P13: You have no idea how many times I wrote this module

7/12/16, 09:51 - P24: Dont give up, I failed this module last year 2nd semester. I was writting supplementary exam now.

The extract above highlights two of the most prominent challenges for the distance student, which are isolation (Shandu, 2017; Birch & Volkov, 2007) and motivation (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007). The participants congratulated each other as well as providing an emotional anchor and steered each other on.

7/12/16, 09:47 – P24: Thanks n u how did u do

7/12/16, 09:49 – P13: Bad and I'm about to give up now

7/12/16, 09:49 – P24: Please don't!

It is interesting how P24 reassures P13 by putting himself out there to say, they are in the same boat as he also failed the module, but persevered and now he passed. In his encouragement, he is closing the gap of isolation while he motivates. The participants also demonstrated elation when they felt it.

5/23/16, 06:31 – P10 I m inspired by these new words I am very excited to be in this group though at times I miss opportunity to answer

8/12/16, 19:32 – P13: I am so glad that I was part of this group.thank you to you all.

Inasmuch as the participants in this group did portray themselves as real people, since they used the group as a socio-emotional outlet, group cohesion was evident because the participants mostly interacted for learning purposes as they built knowledge and understanding. However, some students have noted how university life somewhat removes students from their traditional values, where the South African university learning environment has been claimed to be usually individualistic and competitive (Costandus, 2009). This goes against the student's traditions and their value systems of Ubuntu where people are encouraged to work collaboratively and share their learning experiences.

Implications for Practice

The principles of Ubuntu are rooted in interaction within communities and they are enshrined in values of interdependence, respect, caring and sharing. Learning, according to Vygotsky, (1978) occurs in social contexts and is actuated through social interaction in collaboration with teachers and peers. Social interaction in teaching and learning, as well as for assessment purposes, could be employed to accommodate communal orientations (Costandus, 2009). It is therefore important that students who comes from interdependent cultures should be encouraged to put their individual self forward and be encouraged to rely on those values for successful learning. While interaction might be presumed as the norm in face-to-face education contexts, the same cannot be taken for granted in distance education where the distance is marked and felt. As a result, it is difficult to facilitate social interaction when teaching and learning occurs at a distance. However, the affordances of mobile technologies and other modes of flexible learning have proven to be effective in facilitating interaction and building learning communities.

It should be borne in mind that learning communities benefit from working collaboratively. Institutions, therefore, should realise that students are resources to themselves and could provide cognitive and affective support to each other. This means that institutions should create flexible spaces for interaction; place high value on students as resources to each other; invest in mediated learning and offer content that will allow for collaboration (Shandu, 2017). Because distance education principles are grounded in accessibility, openness, student-centredness and flexibility, it stands to reason that distance institutions should invest in creating spaces for interaction that will foster the

principles of Ubuntu. The answer to how such interaction is mediated comes in the form of mobile technologies.

While other technologies, such as computers, can also mediate interaction, mobile technologies provide the personalised, flexible and ubiquitous qualities which are congruent with the distance education context, especially in developing countries such as South Africa. In essence, mobile devices allow for students to be connected. This points to a shift in education where learning is not merely transmitted from lecturer to students but co-developed through interaction in learning communities. Learning, thus, is “most successful when people interact with each other through interrogating and sharing their description of the world” (Makoe, 2012, p. 2). There is a need therefore, to revisit our perception of supporting students from a top-down approach, to providing support that enables students to be a community that supports one another. This does not preclude the involvement of the lecturer as a facilitator to guide and to show direction when needed.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that when language and culture are interlinked, positive results emanate. In Vygotsky’s (1978), sociocultural perspective, learning is viewed as an enculturation process which is influenced by social interaction. In the distance education context, the crucial role of technologies for mediated interaction cannot be overemphasised. However, in the South African context, interaction should be grounded in Ubuntu principles of interdependence, sharing, respect and caring, if learning is to be successful. Institutions of learning, especially distance education, would do well in providing spaces that can be appropriated for meaningful interaction through communities of learning.

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