USING WHATSAPP TO SUSTAIN FUNCTIONAL SCHOOL LIBRARIES IN KHAYELITSHA

Connie BITSO

Senior Lecturer, Library and Information Studies Centre,
University of Cape Town, South Africa
Connie.Bitso@uct.ac.za

Abstract

Taking into account the social ills and injustices prior to democracy in South Africa, the University of Cape Town (UCT) incorporated social responsiveness and redress in its transformation agenda. To achieve social redress, UCT established the School Improvement Initiative (SII) to link with schools in an impoverished township of Khayelitsha for positive contribution and long-term development. Realising the problems facing Khayelitsha schools and the role that functional school libraries could play towards improving schools as part of development and social justice, the SII partnered with The Bookery (a not-for-profit organisation based in Cape Town that assists schools to establish libraries) and also approached the Library and Information Studies Centre, UCT for expertise to establish an interdisciplinary collaboration that will work towards developing functional school libraries in Khayelitsha (Silbert & Bitso, 2015). As noted by Silbert and Bitso (2015), through this collaboration The Bookery, LISC and SII conceptualised a collaborative support model for library assistants that is managing school libraries in this township. Faced with communication challenges and the need to sustain functional school libraries in Khayelitsha, the support model considered adopting WhatsApp. This paper shares an experience of using WhatsApp to sustain functional school libraries in Khayelitsha.

Keywords: WhatsApp; Mobile applications; School libraries.

1. Introduction

The SCECSAL[1] XXII theme calls for a discourse on digital transformation and the changing role of libraries and information centres in the sustainable development of Africa. The Conference is yet another opportunity for African librarians and scholars to converge and this time critically reflect on digital transformation; share knowledge and experiences of the dynamics presented by technological advancements and web developments; and pave way for libraries and information centres in sustainable development on the African continent. Within this frame, there is a strand to engage on discourse on the role of social media and social networking sites in the subtheme *Role of Social Media, Social Networks and Networked Information*. It is in this context that this paper shares the experience of using WhatsApp to sustain functional school libraries in Khayelitsha, an impoverished township about 30km east of Cape Town CBD[2], in the Western Cape Province of South Africa.

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[1] SCECSAL – Standing Conference of Eastern, Central and Southern African Library and Information Associations
[2] CBD – Central Business District

Social networking sites (SNSs), a term often used interchangeably with the term social media, are the cyber-spaces that enable people to present their biodata; display their information; create, store and share content; and make connections with others (Aharony, 2015). While some SNSs are work oriented such as LinkedIn, others are for promoting academics and scholarly communication, for example Academia.edu and Research Gate. There are those that are more socially apt such as Facebook, Instagram and Pinterest, while some are for microblogging (e.g. Twitter) and others are for mobile instant messaging such as MixIT, WeChat and WhatsApp. WhatsApp is a mobile application which functions as an instant "cross-platform messenger" (www.whatsApp.com) that allows exchange of information (text and voice), images (motion and still) and web links, including e-books's identifiers via mobile devices such as smart phones, tablets and iPads (Arahony, 2015). WhatsApp uses the same internet data plan that one uses for email and web browsing, therefore its use does not add extra cost for exchanging information and networking with people. WhatsApp instant messaging is multimedia given that people are able to send and receive text, images, video and audio messages. This feature makes it versatile and accessible to people with various needs and impairments. Through WhatsApp, one is able to communicate with people already in their contacts list. In addition, they can form a WhatsApp group from their contacts list which can be viewed as an interest group that can even result into a community of practice.

Contrary to many SNSs such as Facebook, where one can see and accept posts from people one hardly knows, WhatsApp is a SNS for sharing messages only with people one knows who are in their contacts list. Although it is limiting one's chances of connecting with new people when compared to Facebook, the feature to share messages with people in one's contacts list is important to information privacy given that individuals communicate with people they are familiar with and not with strangers who are friends of their friends (Aharony, 2015). The benefits of using WhatsApp have been well articulated by Aharony noting that "it offers a closed platform for communication with acquaintances, a characteristic that may change and affect people patterns of participation" (2015, 137) because knowing that the information is only shared amongst themselves, they feel safe to freely express their views. S/he adds that WhatsApp does not include advertising which can sometimes be disturbing when one wants to focus on information regarding their interest group or community of practice. WhatsApp is increasingly replacing short message service (SMS) because it does not consume the internet data already on the device and yet sending and sharing photos and videos is very simple through this mobile application. Moreover, one is informed when the message is delivered, when it is read and when people have last been online on WhatsApp. Furthermore, unlike other messaging services, it is much more streamlined given that it does not offer opportunities to play games, stream YouTube videos or get digital stickers (Aharony, 2015) thus making it 'handy and neat' for the conservatives but probably too mainstream for the progressives.

As far back as 2014, World Wide Worx and Fuseware reported that more than half of South Africa's urban adult mobile phone users are using WhatsApp. In January 2015, Mybroadband blog showed statistics of use of top ten SNSs in South Africa and WhatsApp made top of the list with 31% users, followed by Facebook at 26% (Writer, 2015). In view of these reports on WhatsApp use in South Africa, it would be an oversight to disregard this seemingly powerful instant messaging mobile application in digital transformation for library and information services.

2. Background

Recognising the social adversities and inequalities caused by colonialism and the apartheid regime, the University of Cape Town (UCT) integrated social responsiveness and redress in its transformation agenda. This resulted in several social interventions such as the School Improvement Initiative (SII) that links UCT with schools in an impoverished township of Khayelitsha for positive contribution and long-term development. Considering the plights of Khayelitsha schools and the role that functional school libraries could play towards improving schools as part of development and social justice, the SII partnered with The Bookery and the Library and Information Studies Centre (LISC), UCT for expertise to establish an interdisciplinary collaboration that will work towards developing and sustaining functional school libraries in Khayelitsha (Silbert & Bitso, 2015). As noted by Silbert and Bitso (2015) through this collaboration, The Bookery, LISC and SII together with the library assistants formed a community of practice to sustain functional school libraries in Khayelitsha. This community of practice hereinafter referred to as Bookery, LISC, SII and Khayelitsha School Library assistants CoP in this paper, 'was initiated by conceptualising a collaborative support model for library assistants who are managing school libraries in this township' (Silbert & Bitso, 2015). The model entails, among other things, informal and non-formal education for the library assistants as well as monthly support meetings where the library assistants share highlights of successes and lessons learnt.

Although some library resources are hardly used and some students used to complete their education and training without ever visiting libraries, "with emphasis on resource-based learning, which discourages total dependency on the teacher as a source of knowledge, libraries have an increasingly important role in the teaching and learning process" (Maepa & Mhinga, 2003:270). Hence the Bookery, LISC, SII and Khayelitsha School Library assistants CoP saw the need to work on sustaining functional school libraries in Khayelitsha schools. Seeing the restrained circumstances within which library assistants in Khayelitsha schools operate and the importance of shared objectives in a community of practice, the functionality of the school library is determined by success measured using criteria formulated by Khayelitsha schools library assistants reported by Silbert and Bitso (2015:57) as:

- Building relationships with the principal, heads of department and teachers;
- Building external links such as with the public community libraries;
- Professional development through training and support of the library assistants;
- Strong systems and structures such as policies, timetables and library monitors;
- Integration and involvement of the library and library assistant in the school;
- Alignment of library activities with the curriculum;
- Usage of the library by classes in the school; and
- Amount of reading taking place across the grades.

Central to this criteria is networks and relationships within and outside the school, continuing professional development, systems and structures for monitoring and managing the school library. Equally fundamental to the success criteria is the integration of school library activities into the school programmes especially the curriculum; the use of library space and its resources including the amount of reading done by learners therein. Sustaining functionality of school libraries in

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Khayelitsha through networks, forging relationship and partnership and community of practice requires effective communication. Communication is not only essential to any community of practice but also key to functionality of Khayelitsha school libraries. Consequently, from the onset the Bookery, LISC, SII and Khayelitsha School Library assistants CoP shared email addresses and cell phone numbers.

Continuing professional development of the library assistants involves training and meetings in various places either at UCT, University of the Western Cape, the Bookery Centre, in other schools, or in public libraries. Organising all these events requires communication. In addition, it is important to start meetings on time with all attendees present which is sometimes a challenge because the library assistants depend on public transport that is unreliable resulting in the need for instant communication to make others aware of the situation they are in. Late or lack of communication was the biggest challenge that emerged in the Bookery, LISC, SII and Khayelitsha School Library assistants CoP monthly support meetings. This was attributed to lack of airtime to make a phone call or send an SMS at a critical time as well as erratic access to email facilities. Although some of Khayelitsha school libraries have computers with internet connection and access to email facilities, from time to time, they run out of internet data, their computers malfunction due to virus attacks or system errors and these take time to resolve because these schools depend on external IT support provided by the Western Cape Department of Education. Despite these challenges, it was decided that communication with the school and members of CoP when one would be absent from work or unable to attend the meeting is of paramount importance. It was also evident that instant communication is important on the way to meetings when one faces transport challenges. In view of this situation coupled with an observation that the Bookery, LISC, SII and Khayelitsha School Library assistants CoP members have smart phones, WhatsApp was adopted as another mode of communication.

It also emerged in the monthly support meetings that while the primary schools' library assistants are motivated and making good progress per the criteria for functional school libraries, some of the high school library assistants were concerned with low interest of learners and teachers in using the school libraries. The concern raised by some of the high school library assistants was viewed as a challenge that needed to be addressed collectively by Bookery, LISC, SII and Khayelitsha School Library assistants CoP. It was perceived as an indicator for disfunctionality of a school library. Although Khayelitsha is an impoverished community, given that high school learners belong to the igeneration, coupled with an observation made by library assistants that some learners or their parents have smart phones and could possibly be on WhatsApp, this mobile application was considered as a tool that could help sustain functional school libraries in Khayelitsha. The critical question was: **how can WhatsApp be used to help sustain functional school libraries in Khayelitsha schools?** In an attempt to address this question, literature was reviewed to explore possible benefits of WhatsApp that have been tested empirically.

3. Literature review

There is a lot of literature on WhatsApp particularly on its use which seems to be growing. Notably "WhatsApp has become the largest mobile text messaging service in the world and is very popular in South Africa, Malaysia, Argentina, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Spain" (Aharony & Gazit, 2016, 175). Its successful use is evident in medicine, health science and education, particularly in facilitating teaching and learning to an extent that it is perceived as a support to social constructivists' theory of learning, because it improves students' construction

of understanding and promotes students' skills of interaction (Ibrahim et al, 2015). Another important study to note on WhatsApp in schools is that of Bouhnik and Deshen (2014) which demonstrates positive benefits of WhatsApp in teaching and learning environment such as sharing of information related to studies and facilitating group assignments.

In medicine, WhatsApp has demonstrated not only to be 'an efficient and economical alternative in clinical practice when compared to the traditional pager system but also helps to break down previously held hierarchical barriers between junior and senior members of the clinical teams' (Drake et al, 2016). Maximilian et al (2015) affirms that WhatsApp represents a successful innovation that effectively replaced the pager and further show that mobile hand devices improve efficiency, clinical decision making, and documentation practice in clinical practice which has potential to improve quality and safety of health care delivery. In the same vein, Khanna et al (2015) reveal the usefulness and practicality of WhatsApp in terms of availability, affordability, and compatibility thus enabling protected sharing of patient data over an accessible platform which increased efficiency, improved communication and residents' awareness of admitted patients, and faster handovers between staff without any disruptions. However, they caution that while WhatsApp increased efficiency in daily working routines all necessary precautions pertaining to data security and virus threats have to be given due importance (Khanna et al, 2015).

WhatsApp studies conducted in Africa include Farmer et al (2016) who found that WhatsApp "can be an efficient, low-cost mechanism for information exchange, problem solving, and coordination for health care workers" (2016, S54). These scholars show a benefit of WhatsApp "as a means of effective communication and capacity building" (2016, S54) and therefore support the use of mobile phone applications to expand efficient communication and information exchange among young health volunteers within low-income countries. Additionally, Ibrahim et al's (2015) article shows the power of WhatsApp in teaching and learning revealing that teachers create WhatsApp groups for their students to facilitate teacher-student and student-student communication mainly because of its capabilities and affordability. Ahad and Lim (2014) indicate that with the ease of use and affordability provided by WhatsApp use, students benefit in terms of discussing and sharing information related to study matters and also from everyday communication with their families, friends and relatives. Communication with family is particularly important to tertiary students who are in universities far from home (Aharony and Gizat, 2016).

Given that this paper focuses on WhatsApp to sustain functional libraries, attempts were made to search literature specifically on WhatsApp use in libraries, one empirical study (Caplan, 2014) in Hong Kong showed a clear application of WhatsApp in library reference services. The only limitation is that at the time of writing this paper I could only access Caplan's abstract and the PowerPoint slides of his/her conference presentation and therefore prefer not to discuss it. There are a significant number of conference papers and blogs reporting the use of WhatsApp in libraries on the internet. They provide evidence that WhatsApp has become another means of communication with librarians; showing that ***WhatsApp a Librarian*** has become quite common in reference services particularly in many academic and research libraries. Although, there is scarcity of reputable literature specifically on WhatsApp use in Libraries, a lot is available on social media and mobile applications, a few examples include Bomhold (2014); Becker et al (2013); Chang (2013) and Patterson and Low (2011) – this is a testimony of digital transformation in libraries through mobile applications.

While there are clear benefits on the use of WhatsApp especially among university students; in schools between teachers and students as well as students and students; and in health sciences and medicine, drawbacks of WhatsApp from the literature particularly among young people were found. On the down side, Anderson Jr's (2016) study reveals that the use of WhatsApp by junior high school female learners in Ghana negatively affects their morality given that majority of them share pornographic material, abusive content and engage in incongruous performances such as phone sex with their peers online. 'Exposure to these contents and performances has introduced them to social immoralities which they did not know prior to using WhatsApp' (Anderson Jr, 2016). This is very crucial information for the Bookery, LISC, SII and Khayelitsha School Library assistants CoP to bear in mind when introducing this application to high school learners in Khayelitsha because even with good intentions there is a possibility that things can go amiss. In the same vein, Ahad and Lim (2014) found that students that participated in their study faced critical issues arising from their frequent use of WhatsApp as they often feel the need to immediately attend to WhatsApp messages which can be disruptive when they are concentrating on their studies. The other issue of concern they found is the exposure to false information, unregulated information or inappropriate media contents which can damage and corrupt young minds. Lastly they found that mobile connectivity comes with addictive-like behaviour towards WhatsApp which can be unhealthy and disruptive to their studies (Ahad & Lim, 2014). These issues and arguments therefore constitute key ethical considerations for the Bookery, LISC, SII and Khayelitsha School Library assistants CoP. There are possible risks hovering over WhatsApp use among the youth which require critical mitigation before WhatsApp is used in Khayelitsha schools. It is of utmost importance to establish systems of monitoring WhatsApp groups among young learners before they are established. Consequently, the library assistants were requested to apply their minds on how they can possibly use WhatsApp to deliver library services in their schools with possible mitigations for concerns revealed through the literature review.

4. Method

Being part of the Bookery, LISC, SII and Khayelitsha School Library assistants CoP, the author is immersed in the setting of sustaining functional school libraries in Khayelitsha schools and therefore this paper is informed by observations made as the researcher as well as input from the library assistants as they were requested to apply their minds on how they could use WhatsApp to sustain school libraries. Although the paper reports work in progress, it is part of a study that takes a qualitative approach using ethnographic research design. Studies that involve children need ethical clearance and an informed consent of parents, principal and learners; which takes a bit of time hence this paper is not ready to report on the results, but only shares key observation and how the library assistants in Khayelitsha schools are paving way to use WhatsApp.

5. Using WhatsApp to sustain functional school libraries in Khayelitsha

5.1 Using WhatsApp to overcome communication challenges within the CoP

In the interest of facilitating communication within the CoP, the Bookery together with library assistants formed a WhatsApp group to enable effective communication essential for sustaining functionality within the CoP and within school libraries – WhatsApp was deemed the most affordable and accessible means given that all the members of the Bookery, LISC, SII and Khayelitsha School Library assistants CoP have smart phones. The decision to have a WhatsApp group was a result of communication challenges alluded to earlier and it was made at a point

when it was clear that failure to communicate instantly at a critical moment to let a colleague know that one is running late would result into disputes that had potential to bring serious tensions within the community of practice. The adoption and use of WhatsApp by the Bookery, LISC, SII and Khayelitsha School Library assistants CoP helped to resolve some of the major communication challenges encountered in impoverished communities such as Khayelitsha. It was clear that the communication challenges were beginning to cause tensions that could have long term repercussions. As explained by Silbert and Bitso (2015) the Bookery, LISC, SII and Khayelitsha School Library assistants CoP is a structure in place to sustain the functionality of school libraries in Khayelitsha. Therefore the challenges it faces are likely to impact on the effective functioning of school libraries.

5.2 Establishing how WhatsApp can be used in Khayelitsha school libraries

As mentioned earlier, the library assistants were requested to apply their minds on how they could use WhatsApp in their libraries. Central to their contributions is creation of WhatsApp groups per class, based on age, to facilitate effective communication of announcements for meetings and other library events. Library assistants further indicated that they could use WhatsApp to:

- Create a platform for learners to discuss books and get information on which books they would like to read;
- Promote books in the library to the learners, informing them about new books through WhatsApp;
- Market the library by sending pictures and videos via WhatsApp that create the "spark" to want to get hold of the book or see the video.

The drawbacks of WhatsApp among the youth required the group to critically think of mitigation for possible risks associated with using WhatsApp among the learners. One of the library assistant suggestion is effective administration of WhatsApp groups thus:

> *Another thing that is so great about WhatsApp is that as the "Admin" of the group, you have the power to add and delete people in your group. That means that if someone is misbehaving you have the power to remove and block that person. Also, unlike any other social network, the are no aliases on WhatsApp because since you will be adding the learners on the group, you will require the person's name and surname regardless of what name they may be going about on WhatsApp plus they can't just add them-selves.* (Library Assistant X)

In the interest of inclusivity, another suggestion that could help to minimise the risk and possibly address the challenge of accommodating learners without smart phones was to use parents' phone numbers:

> *At the beginning of each year you could ask learners who are interested in joining a WhatsApp group to leave their own or parent's cellphone numbers with you that way you could communicate with them via WhatsApp.* (Library Assistant Y).

6. Conclusion

There is a digital transformation through WhatsApp that has resulted in paradigm shift from SMS and traditional pagers. Because of its simplicity, versatility, affordability and unlimited number of messages; WhatsApp presents opportunities that clearly eliminates communication challenges in precarious situations, impoverished African communities and in development initiatives. It

has smoothened communication problems that were experienced by the Bookery, LISC, SII and Khayelitsha School Library assistants CoP thus helping to sustain functional school libraries in Khayelitsha. In addition, it is proving to be effective in clinical practice, in teaching and learning and among community health workers. It is possible that WhatsApp could play an important role in sustaining functional school libraries in African society; Khayelitsha school library assistants are paving way for digital transformation in their libraries through WhatsApp. How else can libraries and information centres in Africa use WhatsApp for sustainable development?

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