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Title: The neglected grass root adoption of mobile phones as learning tools in resource-limited settings. A study from advanced midwifery education in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

Background/rationale: Many mhealth and mlearning interventions fail, because they adopt a techno-centric view and ignore the local context. To address this, the present study investigated the 'organic' adoption and educational usage of mobile phones by health workers in rural health settings.

Methods: A qualitative study was conducted interviewing nursing/advanced midwifery students, facilitators and nursing managers from rural, resource-constrained regions in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Content analysis used the concepts of Community of Inquiry theory as 'a priori-constructs'.

Results: The research revealed a number of unexpected learning and teaching practices - based on the grass-root adoption of mobile phone functions and in particular social apps. These practices involved cognitive, teaching and social presence as well as reflective practice and enabled rich educational experiences - according to the Community of Inquiry Theory."

Theoretical discussion: 'Traditional' communities of inquiry are based on pre-determined online environments. By contrast, learners used bundles of phone-based functions/apps to embed mobile and blended communities and other resources that were fragmented across social, temporal, topical, geographical, digital and 'real' spaces in the inquiry process in very dynamic ways.

Conclusion: In view of future mHealth and mobile learning efforts, mobile phones appear to be particularly suitable to facilitate competence development in the following ways: (a) problem solving and situated co-construction of local knowledge (b) socio-cultural participation - to alleviate professional isolation; (c) connecting learning in workplaces with formal education systems; and (d) addressing unpredictable opportunities and challenges that are typical for the changing and provisional (health) contexts observed. Instead of ignoring the revealed practices, health and education institutions are well advised to support learners in media literacy - enabling them to more effectively and critically use existing (mobile) technologies.