

Content developers as stakeholders in the blended learning ecosystem

The Virtual Institute for Afrikaans' Language Education Portal as a case study

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ABSTRACT

Within the blended learning environment, it is important to consolidate expert content and pedagogy inside and outside the classroom. Subject experts who serve as content developers play a vital role in blended learning by contributing quality controlled subject content covered by the curriculum, which can be made available to students on digital platforms. However, in developing countries and in communities where resources are limited, good and complementary digital content that promotes self-directed learning, may not be accessible to all learners. Teachers are often left to their own devices to develop teaching content, and not all teachers have the skill or access to infrastructure to do so effectively. When considering Afrikaans language teaching in South Africa specifically, there is a great need within the language community for learning and teaching support. This chapter reports on the role that the Virtual Institute for Afrikaans (VivA) is playing as a content provider of quality Afrikaans

linguistic material in the blended learning environment. The aim is to present VivA as a case study or prototype of an independent organisation acting as a key stakeholder in the blended learning ecosystem.

Keywords: Blended Learning Ecosystem, Content Developer, Taalonderrigportaal, Taalportaal, Virtual Institute for Afrikaans, VivA, Language Teaching Portal.

INTRODUCTION

Students and learners who engage in learning within the context of university and school classrooms today are considered “digital natives” (Prensky, 2001), which means that computers, the internet and other technologies form an integral part of their everyday existence and way of life. This is why blended learning, where students obtain and process new information through technology and digital media in addition to a more traditional face-to-face teaching and learning context where the physical presence of the teacher and student is required (Bataineh et al., 2009, p. 324; Friesen, 2012, p. 1) is such an ideal teaching approach for this generation of learners. Blended learning not only encourages flexibility in learning seeing as students can have access to content and online assignments anywhere and anytime (Mirriahi et al., 2015; Wichadee, 2018, p. 37), but it also promotes student autonomy and self-directed learning (Gülbahar & Madran, 2009, p. 1). Furthermore, it has learning advantages such as additional learning time and access to additional learning materials, as well as additional opportunities for collaboration (Means et al., 2010, p. xviii; Protsiv et al. 2016, p. 7). Picciano (2009, p. 16) also notes that blended learning enables the teacher to “meet the needs of a variety of learners”, meaning students with different personality types and different learning styles, and in the process encourages students to learn in a manner in which they are more comfortable, while also challenging them to learn in new ways.

Nikolaidou et al. (2009) indicate that blended learning can only be successful if the interrelationships between stakeholders are effectively explored. Such interrelationships can be referred to as the blended learning ecosystem. Within the blended learning environment, it is important to “bring content and pedagogy experts into the classroom, using asynchronous delivery, not to replace the in-class teacher but to significantly enhance and multiply her teaching impact” (Larson & Murray, 2008, p. 87). Subject experts who serve as content developers play a vital role in blended learning by contributing quality controlled subject content covered by the curriculum, which can be made available to students on digital platforms. Institutions such as Open Educational Resources (OERs) provide these digital platforms where learners can access learning material with the help of technology.

However, in developing countries and in communities where resources are limited, good and complementary digital content that promotes self-directed learning, may not be accessible to all learners. Teachers are often left to their own devices to develop teaching content, and not all teachers have the skill or access to infrastructure to do so effectively (see DBE, 2004, p. 9).

When considering **Afrikaans language teaching in South Africa specifically**, the Virtual Institute for Afrikaans (VivA) receives language queries daily, indicating the great need within the language community for learning and teaching support. In 2003, Heyns and Snyman (2013) stated that “information available on the Internet for Afrikaans language teachers is, without doubt, totally inadequate.” This lack of accessibility and support did not really improve in the last or so decade. Olivier (2018) indicates that, though it is clear that there currently are a number of useful educational resources for Afrikaans, these resources do not really function as

open educational resources and can't therefore not really be regarded as part of a digital language movement (also compare Pretorius 2016).

This shortage of Afrikaans learning material is incomprehensible when the position of Afrikaans as a first language is considered within the broader South African linguistic landscape. Not only is Afrikaans spoken as a first language in 12.2% of South African households, but it is also one of the eleven official languages of South Africa. In addition to this, Afrikaans is the language spoken by the third most speakers in the country (compare Kramer, 2020). Furthermore, there are approximately 2400 schools in South Africa where Afrikaans is used as the language of learning and teaching (LoLT) (compare Colditz, 2018). The expectation would therefore be that there should be sufficient teaching material and support available for Afrikaans language teachers, but this is clearly not the case. This also raises the question about the availability of teaching material written in and for the other indigenous languages in South Africa spoken far less than Afrikaans, including, but not limited to Xitsonga (2.4%), Tshivenda (2.2%), IsiNdebele (1.3%) (Kramer, 2020).

Gordon and Harvey (2019) also indicate “the general lack of school resources and training required for teachers to teach in many of the country’s African languages”. The problem of good learning material is therefore not a problem specific to Afrikaans language teaching, but rather a problem that persists in the South African linguistic landscape. This insufficiency as well as the socio-economic advancement that is linked to being taught in English, motivates parents to choose English as LoLT for their children (Gordon & Harvey 2019) although South African teaching and language policies indicate that school children must receive instruction in their mother tongue for at least the first three years of their school years (Owen-Smith, 2010, p. 32). This is not only a problem in the foundation phase (grade 1-3) where more parents opt for English as LoLT. Gordon and Harvey (2019) state that “the preference for English [is] extended into later years of education too. In fact, we found that the number of people supporting English rose the higher up the education ladder went. In other words, the more advanced the phase of education the smaller the share of the public supporting options other than English.”

This all points to the “symbolic power that the knowledge of English holds” (Kaiper, 2018, p. 754). This calls for the promotion of African languages and logically also Afrikaans by means of the development of quality teaching materials as well as providing adequate training to teachers on using these materials (Manyike & Lemmer, 2014, p. 256; Gordon & Harvey, 2019) in order to also give “power” to the knowledge of these languages. In addition, creating language content will contribute to the promotion and development of the use of different languages, thus complying with Act no. 108 of 1996 of the South African Constitution. The development of teaching and learning material also promotes the acknowledgment of linguistic diversity and consequently the advocate for cultural diversity, thus also adhering to the Language in Education Policy Act (Act no. 27 of 1996) and the South African Schools Act (Act no. 84 of 1996). A key area in need of development is **Afrikaans digital grammar content**, as will become evident in the following sections.

The shortage of digital grammar content for use in the Afrikaans classroom is in stark contrast with the abundance of digital platforms for Afrikaans literature, such as *LitNet*, *Storiowerf*, *Versindaba*, *Roekeloos*, *Woes*, *Afrikaanse Kontemporêre Drama-argief* / *Afrikaans Contemporary Drama Archive* and the *Digital Bibliography of Afrikaans Literature*ⁱ. The information contained on these platforms focuses mainly on Afrikaans prose, poetry and drama, and the content ranges from informal to more scientific and peer-reviewed (Olivier, 2018, pp. 906, 918-920). These platforms do not only provide an abundance of information,

but also create a digital environment where discussions of recently published works can take place, and where the writing of published as well as unpublished authors can be showcased.

Some resources, such as *LitNet*, even contain a section aimed specifically at teachers (and in some cases also learners). These “school sections” focus on the promotion of Afrikaans across different fields, making available different types of content situated within a broader Afrikaans teaching context. This content is, however, not necessarily only Afrikaans subject-specific content and, more specifically, not inclusive of Afrikaans grammar (see Olivier, 2018, p. 919).

In contrast to the numerous digital sources on Afrikaans literature, as mentioned above, Olivier (2018, pp. 918-920) points out that there are relatively few digital resources dealing with Afrikaans grammar: *BeterAfrikaans*, *Afrikaans Wikipedia*, *Taalportaal* and the *Digitale Bibliografie van die Afrikaanse Taalkunde / Digital Bibliography of the Afrikaans Linguistics* (abbreviated as *DBAT*)ⁱⁱ. However, there are certain limitations to these resources, as will be discussed below.

- *BeterAfrikaans* is a resource that could be used as an assessment tool in the Afrikaans classroom. It includes questions and information on Afrikaans spelling and other language conventions, such as anglicisms, the appropriate use of the relative pronouns *wie* (“who”) and *wat* (“what”), fixed expressions, and word classes. Unfortunately, the content of this resource is not reusable (Olivier 2018, p. 919), since the tests used to assess the previously mentioned conventions, cannot be downloaded or edited. It is also impossible to gain access to some of the information contained in *BeterAfrikaans*, since a user only receives information pertaining to a specific question after the question has already been answered. Thus, certain content on this site may be considered 'open educational resources', but most are not. In addition, this site does not use an open license (like Creative Commons), which means that if content is reused, it is an infringement of the Copyright Act (J.A.K. Olivier, personal communication, November 10, 2020).
- *Afrikaans Wikipedia* also provides Afrikaans linguistic content. However, Van Huyssteen et al. (2016, p. 422) reported that in a study carried out in 2016, only 36% of the respondents (all translators, lecturers or teachers) claimed to have known about the *Afrikaans Wikipedia*. In addition, Pretorius (2016, p. 373) describes this resource as not “extensive enough” yet. Pretorius (2016, p. 385) also points to the fact that anyone can contribute information by creating new articles or editing existing ones, which could lead to unreliable information appearing on the *Afrikaans Wikipedia*. Even though the nature of the resource provides an opportunity for knowledgeable collaborators to correct such unreliable information, the possibility of unsubstantiated information appearing on this site still exists.
- A resource which Olivier (2018, p. 919) characterised as being more “academic”, is *Taalportaal*, which offers a modern, scientifically based description of the Afrikaans grammar (Van Huyssteen, 2017). However, this resource is presented in English and has international linguistic scholars as its target audience. It is therefore not suitable as a reference work for Afrikaans teachers in an Afrikaans classroom, or as a resource for Afrikaans learners in a blended learning environment or for self-directed learning.
- Finally, the *DBAT* is a comprehensive database of Afrikaans linguistic sources (Breed et al., 2016, pp. 394, 402). Although the *DBAT* also catalogues resources that are relevant to Afrikaans language teaching (for example *Klasgids*ⁱⁱⁱ), it is only a database that references available Afrikaans linguistics resources and – in most cases – does not provide direct access to these resources.

Olivier (2018, p. 918) also mentions smaller resource websites or blogs that are maintained by teachers, such as *My klaskamer*, *Afrikaanse Hulpmiddels vir die klaskamer* en *Mr. V's*

Classroom Companion^{iv}. However, Olivier (2018, p. 906) warns that very few Afrikaans digital sources are peer-reviewed, and this may very well be the case for these sources. He also refers to *Taalarsenaal* (2020)^v, a resource supported by a provincial education department, and *Afrikaans.com: Leerhulp*^{vi}), supported by an organisation. *Taalarsenaal* contains a substantial amount of information on word classes. Some material relating to spelling, vocabulary, morphology and language variation are also available, but to a much lesser extent. It should also be noted that in the section on word classes, some words are classified incorrectly (for example, some words are classified as pronouns when they should be classified as particles), and non-theoretically sound definitions are provided (for example, the term *preposition* is defined as “small words that are always in front/under/behind/on top of other things”, even though the word itself can clearly not occupy these positions).

Afrikaans.com is a comprehensive website about Afrikaans that provides a large range of material such as news pertaining to Afrikaans, articles about artists working in Afrikaans, information on new book releases, etc. The website, however, also has a section called *Leerhulp* that provides resources that can be used in the classroom or by learners. Afrikaans grammar is dealt with by means of quizzes and short extracts from study guides, and is therefore not comprehensively explained.

The digital resource *Wolfskool*^{vii} was also initiated by an organisation (Skoleondersteuningsentrum), but was not included in the study of Olivier (2018), as it only appeared after this date. The homepage of *Wolfskool* contains a considerable amount of spelling errors, a characteristic Olivier (2018, p. 921) associates with “quality issues”. The content offered by *Wolfskool* was not peer-reviewed, and was not submitted for scrutiny by subject experts. In addition, all the content offered by *Wolfskool* is hidden behind a pay wall, which makes it inaccessible to the majority of Afrikaans teachers and learners. It is therefore not considered as a general language resource.

The need for comprehensive, theoretically sound digital Afrikaans grammar resources aimed at teachers and learners is clearly evident from the shortcomings of existing resources, but an even bigger challenge faced by teachers is the discrepancy that exists between “School Afrikaans” (the Afrikaans grammar that is taught to learners at school) and “University Afrikaans” (the Afrikaans grammar that is taught to university students). This discrepancy has already been observed in the early 1990s (see Menkveld, 1992, p. 419), but it is still relevant in the current educational context. This discrepancy becomes evident to lecturers who have to teach Afrikaans grammar to education students. Morphological and syntactic constructions, for example, are analysed in different ways in School Afrikaans and University Afrikaans. In School Afrikaans the complexes *geelkleurig* (“having a yellow colour”) and *boekrakkie* (“little bookshelf”) are both analysed as derived compounds. In University Afrikaans *geelkleurig* is analysed as a derivational compound, while *boekrakkie* is analysed as a derived compound (see Van Huyssteen, 2017, pp. 201-202). With regards to syntax, the whole noun phrase (e.g. *die beroemde man*, “the famous man”) is analysed as the subject of a sentence in University Afrikaans, while only the head noun and article (e.g. *die man*, “the man”) is analysed as the subject of a sentence in School Afrikaans (see Lamprecht et al, 2013, p. 145).

Another concerning factor relevant to the availability of digital Afrikaans grammar content is the fact that, in a number of cases, unqualified or underqualified teachers are appointed in South African schools (Savides, 2017). Teachers are therefore not always equipped to develop their own content or teaching material. This concern is exacerbated by the fact that Afrikaans teachers within the Further Education and Training Phase (FET Phase) have to adapt to teaching grammar within an integrative framework, identifying teaching and learning

opportunities when other language skills (listening and speaking, reading and viewing, writing and presenting) are being taught (DBE, 2011, p. 11). In addition, grammar has to be taught using a communicative approach (DBE, 2011, pp. 42, 44), which highlights the “relationships among units, rules, classes, and structures within the grammar code itself and between them and their functions” (Moe, 2019, p. 75). Menkveld (1992, p. 427) notes in this respect that to teach communicatively, teachers have to possess extensive and relevant knowledge of Afrikaans grammar:

The teacher must know exactly what knowledge of the language and the language structure the learner needs for each skill or, put another way: [H]e must know what structure, system or rule is underlying each type of communicative situation or skill with which the student is busy. [Translated and adapted] (Menkveld, 1992, p. 427)

As can be seen from the discussion above, the development of enriching online grammar material is necessary and urgent for Afrikaans language teaching in South Africa. It will provide Afrikaans teachers with the opportunity to make use of complementary material in the classroom, enabling them to create a blended learning environment. Furthermore, online Afrikaans grammar content will aid in reaching the following goal set forward by the DBE in their White Paper on e-Education (DBE, 2004): “The introduction of ICTs to our schools is creating new ways for students and teachers to engage in information selection, gathering, sorting and analysis”. Also, by contributing to the knowledge economy of Afrikaans an effort is made to bridge the “digital divide” that is referred to in the White Paper on e-Education, a divide that is partly caused by disparities in “local content development in terms of the number and quality of local websites [and] local language content” (DBE, 2004, p. 9). Such an online grammar should also make theoretically sound, extensive and quality-assured grammar content directly accessible to learners, in order to enable them to act as self-directed and autonomous learners. Having an active and critical approach to learning rather than learning without understanding, is one of the principles on which the current National Curriculum Statement is based. In addition, the National Curriculum Statement encourages learners to use technology responsibly (see DBE, 2011, p. 5) – a goal which can be accomplished by making digital grammar content available.

This chapter reports on the role that the Virtual Institute for Afrikaans (VivA) is playing in the blended learning environment, namely as a content provider of quality Afrikaans linguistic material based on research undertaken by subject specialists and language researchers, but which is made accessible to the entire language community. The aim is to present VivA as a case study of an independent organisation acting as a key stakeholder in the blended learning ecosystem. The hope is that the model developed by VivA to collaborate and participate in the education environment can serve as a prototype for other content developers to participate in the blended learning ecosystem – especially within the context of blended learning in developing countries with limited resources and infrastructure.

The purpose of this chapter is not to make a theoretical contribution to the understanding of blended learning, but rather to serve as a concrete example of the vital role that content developers can play within the blending learning ecosystem in underprivileged or developing communities.

This chapter should therefore be regarded as a review article, and it is structured as follows: In the first section, the motivation and establishment of VivA as a non-profit organisation will be explained. In the second part the various projects (also called *portals*) of VivA will be introduced and contextualised. The third part will focus on VivA's Language Teaching Portal

– an online tool for Afrikaans teachers, learners and parents who participate in the blended learning ecosystem. The concluding section illuminates what other potential or emerging content development stakeholders are gaining or can gain from the experience of VivA as a stakeholder in the blended learning ecosystem.

THE BACKGROUND OF THE VIRTUAL INSTITUTE OF AFRIKAANS

The focus of this chapter is on the involvement of VivA as a stakeholder within the teaching and learning context, but more specifically the important role that VivA plays as a content contributor within the blended learning ecosystem. However, to understand this role, it is necessary to look at VivA as an organisation as a whole, as it better contextualises the nature of VivA as a content developer, and – as will be shown – illustrates how it is possible for an independent organisation like VivA (i.e. an organisation that is not formally affiliated with or launched by any national or accredited education board or body) to be playing such an important role in the education sector. It will be shown that VivA succeeds in fulfilling this role for specific reasons.

Firstly, as already mentioned in the contextualisation, there is **a clear need** within the language and language teaching community for reliable (and digital) information on Afrikaans grammar – specifically content that is aligned with the school and university curriculum. Secondly, VivA's content development plan has been drawn up in such a way that it succeeds in making reliable, comprehensive and useful **content on Afrikaans available** on a digital (and free) platform. Thirdly, VivA is maintained and supported by **external stakeholders** that are not necessarily affiliated with or from the education sector. This external involvement makes it feasible and affordable for an institution such as VivA to exist. This in itself naturally removes some of the pressure on the Afrikaans education infrastructure to develop this digital content from its own ranks and with its own resources.

VivA's business model stems from extensive market research conducted by the South African Academy for Science and the Arts (in Afrikaans the *Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns*, thus henceforth SAAWK) in September 2013 in collaboration with the Department of Business Management at the University of Pretoria. Since the establishment of the SAAWK in 1908, not only science, technology and art have been promoted, but also the use and quality of Afrikaans. The Language Commission (in Afrikaans the *Taalkommissie*, thus henceforth TK) of the SAAWK is the primary agent with which this goal has been pursued so far.

To keep Afrikaans relevant and usable in the twenty-first century, the TK wanted to make a major effort by setting up a so-called virtual institute for Afrikaans, which would be engaged in the development of digital, online resources and services for Afrikaans. The above-mentioned market research conducted by the SAAWK made it clear that Afrikaans users in particular have a need for four electronic Afrikaans tools, namely i) an online/mobile version of the Afrikaans Word List and Spelling Rules; ii) an Afrikaans grammar checker; iii) a terminology bank; and iv) automatic translation tools (see Van Huysteen et al., 2016). The establishment of VivA stems from the original initiative of the TK, in collaboration and consultation with the North-West University, the University of Stellenbosch and the Dutch *Taalportaal* (under the management of the Meertens Institute in The Netherlands), mainly to meet these formulated needs among Afrikaans users.

Formally, VivA was established by four organisational founding members, namely the SAAWK, the Afrikaans Language and Culture Association (in Afrikaans the *Afrikaanse Taal-*

en Kultuurvereniging, thus henceforth the ATKV), the Trust for Afrikaans Education (in Afrikaans *the Trust vir Afrikaanse Onderwys*, thus henceforth the TAO) and the North-West University (NWU). VivA is managed by an executive director that is appointed by a board of directors, and every three months, the executive director reports to the board on VivA's activities. The board consists of eight representative members of VivA's founding members and most prominent donors. In addition to the executive director, VivA has only one permanent staff member and further employs contract workers or consultants to work on specified projects.

VivA^{viii} (<https://viva-afrikaans.org>) is a research institute and service provider for Afrikaans in digital contexts. VivA is also a registered non-profit company. VivA's main objectives are to expand the use and quality of Afrikaans locally and internationally by: i) the description and study of Afrikaans in its full scope; ii) the development of comprehensive digital and other resources, tools and platforms for spoken and written Afrikaans; and iii) the delivery of a practical Afrikaans language service by means of technology. In addition to the main objectives, VivA also strives to: i) act as a virtual institute for Afrikaans, promoting the study and development of the language, which includes autonomous, separate organisations that pursue the same goals; ii) act as an initiating, coordinating and networking virtual institute and to recognise and utilise the specialist function of interest groups and founding member organisations, without infringing on the autonomy of the individual organisations; iii) play an initiating and coordinating role in unlocking Afrikaans expertise, and utilising the infrastructure of the Afrikaans community network effectively, and also in recruiting and unlocking financial and human resources; iv) develop strategies for the use of Afrikaans in virtual contexts in different areas of life; v) give purposeful content to the development of the main objectives of the company through virtual network creation and collaboration; and iv) facilitate the use of Afrikaans in a virtual environment among non-Afrikaans speakers.

A number of organisations, institutions and individuals are affiliated with VivA. In addition to the four founding members, there are at least six other institutions that act as financiers of VivA. VivA also has four national media partners that help to introduce VivA's new products and services to the public, as well as six academic organisations or publishing houses that act as collaborators of VivA. About fifteen individuals (linguists, literati and public figures) act in their personal capacities as collaborators of VivA (for example, to create linguistic content or write opinion pieces and blogs on specific topics). An increasing number of institutions also offer language content to VivA to create corpora that can be used for linguistic research.

From the way VivA came into being, as well as the manner in which VivA is organisationally structured, it is clear that it is built on the foundation of collaboration with other organisations and stakeholders. Moreover, this collaboration is not necessarily only with institutions and entities that practise language or language teaching as a core business, but also entities that recognise the importance of developing reliable language content and resources. The continued involvement of these organisations in a non-profit organisation such as VivA, enables VivA to continue to grow and perform focused activities that meet the needs of the language community (of which reliable content for language teaching is but one of many).

VIVA'S PORTALS AND RESOURCES

A number of platforms (also referred to as "portals") and material are being developed by VivA that – although it does not have this as a primary aim – could be useful in the blended learning ecosystem. Eleven initiatives from VivA are relevant here, namely **a dictionary portal**, where

users can search for words in a variety of dictionaries; **a language portal**, namely *Taalportaal*, a comprehensive and contrastive grammar where the phonology, morphology and syntax of Afrikaans, Dutch and Frisian are thoroughly described (see Van Huyssteen, 2020); **an advice portal**, where users can send queries to a language adviser who answers in real time; **a corpus portal**, where users can search for patterns of language use in a large collection of texts; and **an information portal**, where users can, among other things, participate in webinars or get information on language conferences or workshops. However, of particular interest for this chapter, is VivA's **language teaching portal**, which will receive special attention in the next section.

VivA is also continuously developing the following resources that may be relevant to or useful in language education:

- A **speech atlas**, where different speakers of Afrikaans – from all over the world – read a short paragraph. These recordings are then indicated on an online world map, so that users can listen and hear how Afrikaans sounds in different parts of the country and world
- A **listen-and-read library**, which is an online, free library with texts for young and adult readers. Each group of texts is presented at different skill levels, from very beginners where the voice recording is matched to each word, to novels that are just read aloud. The important feature of the texts in the library is that the voice recording and written representation are presented together. A user who listens to the text therefore also sees the text at the same time, and the relatedness of sound and spelling is made clear
- Weekly **podcasts and blogs**, in which language topics are discussed by experts in the fields of linguistics and education. These podcasts and blogs are shared on social media, as well as on more traditional media platforms such as on the radio or in the newspaper
- **Social media material**, such as daily memes in which Afrikaans language or spelling tips are shared on platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram
- A **free cell phone app**, which provides users with offline or online access to more than 55 dictionaries and terminology lists. The app has a predictive text function, and enables users to search for words with Google Voice

Figure 1 is a screenshot from VivA's home page, from where the different portals can be accessed.

Figure 1. Screenshot of VivA's home page

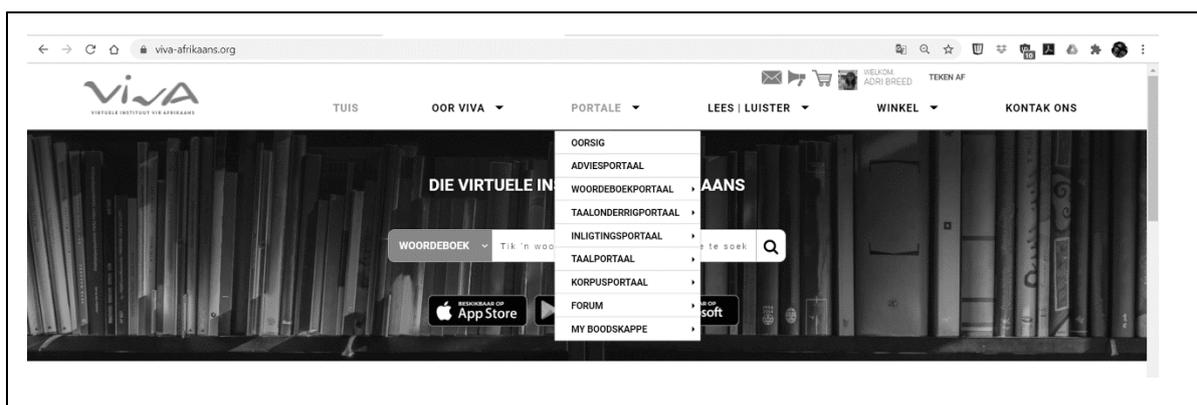
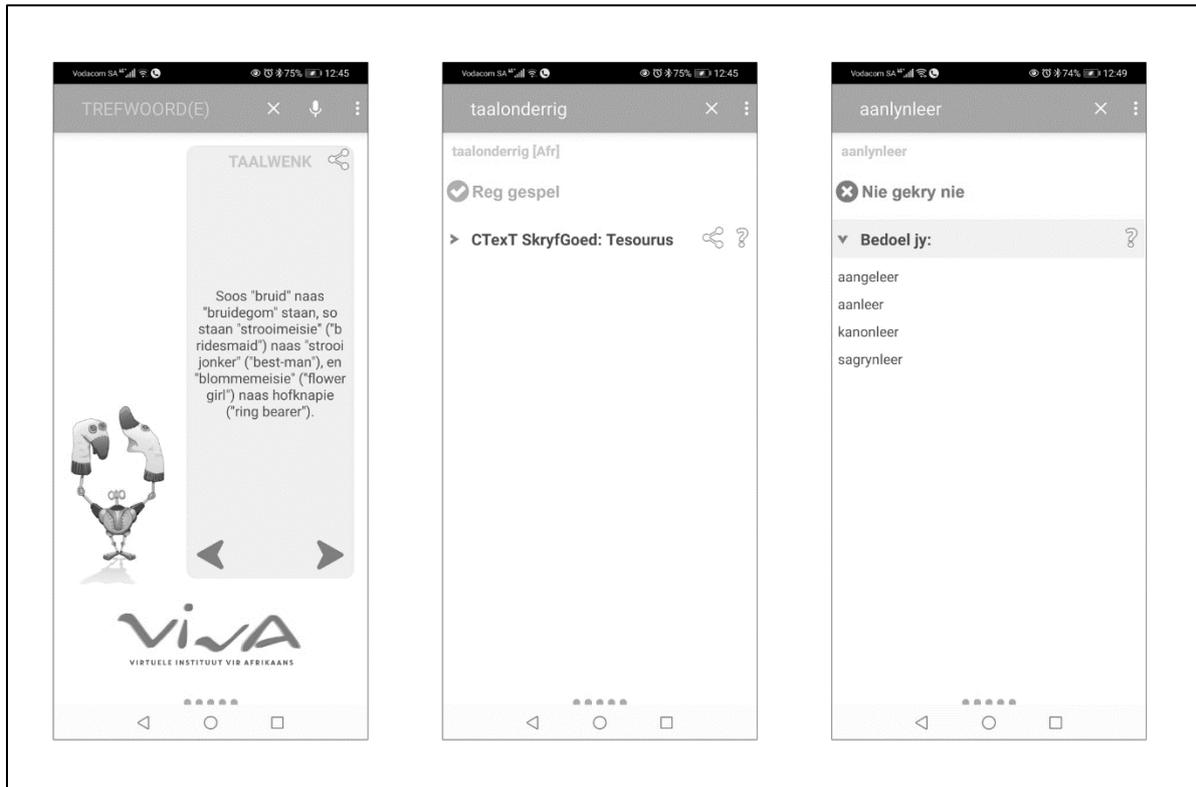


Figure 2 is a screenshot of the VivA app, offering writing tips and indicating that the word *taalonderrig* ("language teaching") is spelled correctly, but that the word *aanlynleer* ("online learning") is not spelled correctly.

Figure 2. Three screenshots of VivA's cell phone app



The various resources, products and services that VivA provides, enable VivA to become a recognisable brand in the greater Afrikaans speaking community. VivA's website currently has more than 26,000 registered users and, to date, the mobile app has been downloaded more than 80,000 times. VivA's Facebook page has more than 42 000 followers, and VivA has more than 3,000 followers on Twitter.

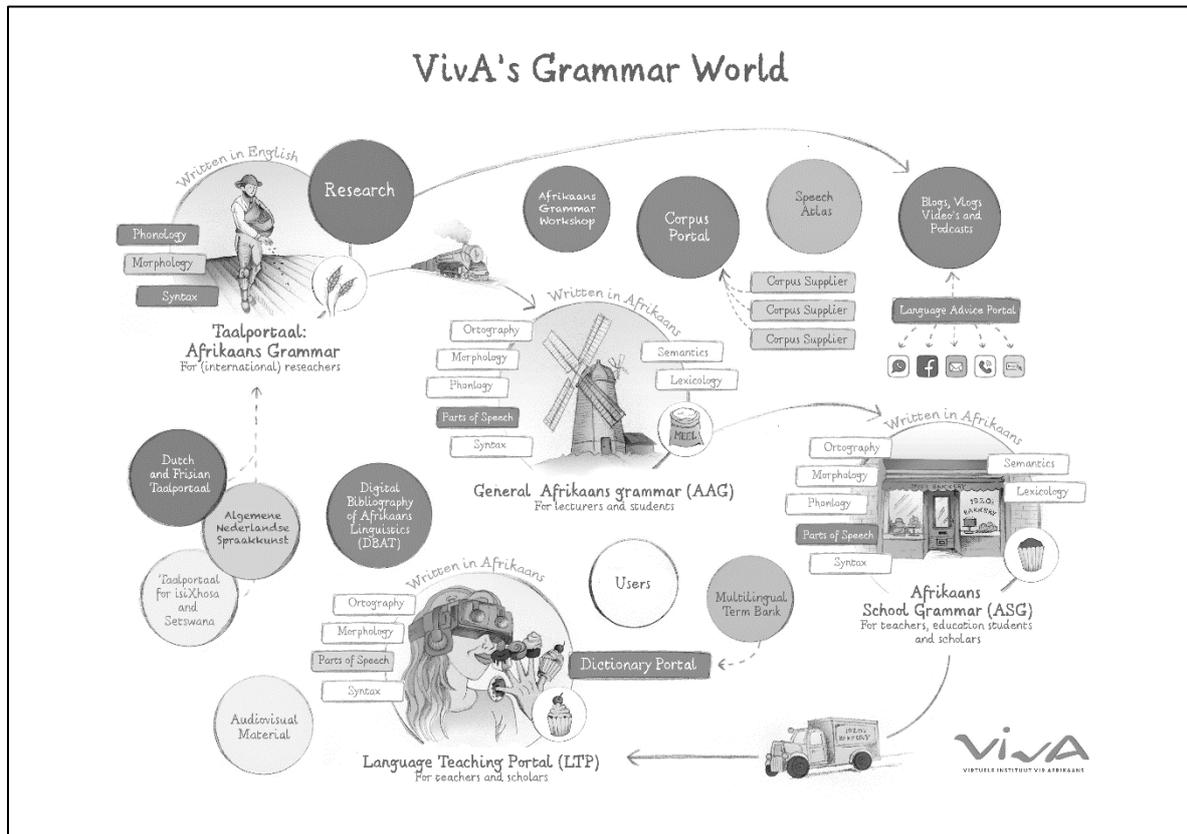
VIVA'S LANGUAGE TEACHING PORTAL

This chapter reports on the latest portal created by VivA to specifically serve as an online tool for Afrikaans lecturers, teachers, learners and parents who participate in the blended learning ecosystem, namely the **Language Teaching Portal** (TOP – in Afrikaans the *Taalonderrigportaal*, thus henceforth the TOP). The TOP is an open, digital space in which quality-assured, academically grounded and verified subject content on Afrikaans grammar is made available to the entire language community. Two of the primary resources in TOP are a **general Afrikaans grammar** (in the Afrikaans the *Algemene Afrikaanse grammatika*, thus henceforth AAG) and an **Afrikaans school grammar** (ASG – in Afrikaans the *Afrikaanse skoolgrammatika*).

The TOP forms part of a larger approach of VivA with regard to its involvement in online language teaching, language research and language resources. During the launch of *Taalportaal* ('language portal') and the TOP on 21 May 2020, Van Huyssteen (2020) explains

– with reference to Figure 3 – that "with *Taalportaal* and the TOP, VivA created a first linguistics pipeline for Afrikaans, which is also unique in the world."

Figure 3. *VivA's pipeline for Afrikaans language resources (translated)*

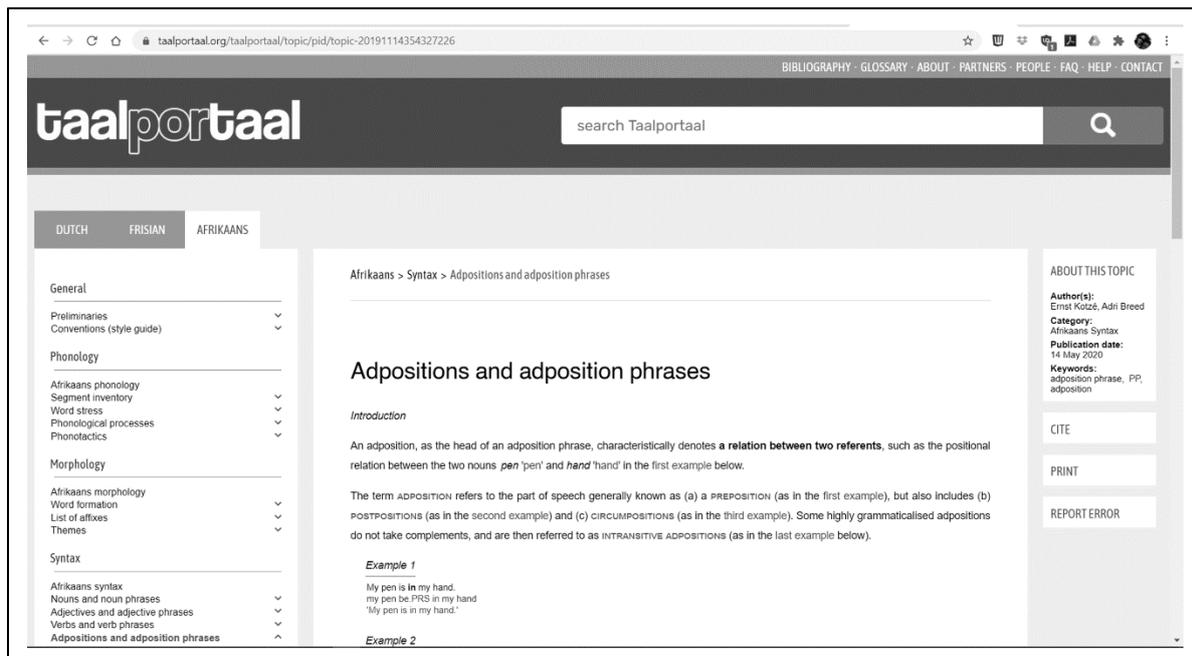


This pipeline begins with the research undertaken by subject specialists and language researchers, and extends to every member of the language community, including language learners who come into contact with Afrikaans for the first time.

The idea for this pipeline came from discussions amongst academics members of the Language Commission, and with language planners such as Proff. Wannie Carstens, Ernst Kotzé, Rufus Gouws and Dr. Theuns Eloff, who agreed that a modern, scientifically based description of the Afrikaans grammar must be made available to the language community. *Taalportaal* was established, where research by subject specialists with international stature is made available, setting up the source of the linguistic pipeline.

Taalportaal is a digital platform (available here: www.taalportaal.org) on which comprehensive, comparative descriptions of the phonology, morphology and syntax of three West Germanic languages (namely Afrikaans, Frisian and Dutch) are developed, housed and made available free of charge. This means that research by internationally renowned subject specialists is now freely accessible to any interested party. These interested parties are, however the secondary target users. The primary target users of *Taalportaal* are local and international linguistic researchers and stakeholders, with the aim of supporting, encouraging and continually expanding sound research on the grammar of the languages. The research in *Taalportaal* is made available in English, so that international researchers who are not proficient in Afrikaans can now include Afrikaans in their investigations.

Figure 4. Screenshot from *Taalportaal*'s section on adpositions



To compile the grammar descriptions for Dutch and Frisian, the Dutch Organisation for Scientific Research (in Dutch the *Nederlandse Organisatie voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek*, thus henceforth the NWO) made available an amount of €1,7 million to the *Taalportaal* Consortium (consisting of the Meertens Institute, Fryske Akademy, Leiden University and Institute for Dutch Lexicology). It soon became clear from discussions with the *Taalportaal* Consortium that the project offers a significant opportunity to create a comprehensive and comparative description of Afrikaans as well, which would position Afrikaans internationally as a language of scientific importance.

A collaboration agreement was concluded between the Meertens Institute (Amsterdam, the Netherlands) and the SAAWK, and funding was obtained from the Dagbreek Trust. In October 2014 work on the Afrikaans *Taalportaal* formally kicked off. In May 2020, the complete phonology and syntax section, and a part of the morphology section were introduced and made available; the morphology section will be completed by the end of March 2021.

From *Taalportaal* flows the Language Teaching Portal (which contains AAG and ASG as mentioned above), where specialist research is presented in a format that makes it accessible to the current generation of Afrikaans lecturers, students, teachers and learners. The knowledge pipeline ensures that the subject content offered to an emerging generation, and to any user who wishes to gain insight into the grammar of Afrikaans, is quality-assured content based on the latest, cutting-edge academic research.

The general Afrikaans grammar (AAG) is a living source in which the grammar of Afrikaans is described comprehensively and in Afrikaans. AAG is based on the insights in *Taalportaal*, but also on older and well-known research published in existing grammar sources (such as, amongst others, the works of Ponelis 1979, and Van Schoor 1983), and on the insights of the AAG writers who work with examples from contemporary Afrikaans corpora. The content in AAG is moderated and quality controlled by linguistic and language education experts. AAG will be expanded and updated continuously, so that new insights on grammar can be reflected, ensuring that the information contained in AAG remains relevant and up to date. AAG is

specifically aimed at lecturers and students of Afrikaans linguistics, who teach and study the subject Afrikaans at undergraduate and postgraduate level. AAG also aims to serve school teachers of Afrikaans and curious language users who need answers on grammar issues.

The necessity of a resource like AAG becomes especially salient when it is noted that the most recent Afrikaans grammar written in Afrikaans dates back to 1983 (Van Schoor, 1983), while the most recent Afrikaans grammar written in English dates back to 1993 (Donaldson, 1993). From a teaching perspective, the content of these sources may therefore be outdated, and can thus not be prescribed. At the same time, Afrikaans linguistics is a very small niche market, which means that few publishers will publish new textbooks on Afrikaans grammar. In other words – Afrikaans linguistics will, from now on, only be described in a digital environment. This, of course, supports blended learning very well indeed.

The Afrikaans school grammar (ASG) is a resource with education students and Afrikaans teachers in the FET phase as target users. The description of any grammar is obviously much more comprehensive than what is prescribed by a school curriculum. ASG is therefore not directed or restricted by the South African Curriculum Assessment Policy Declaration (CAPS). The aim is, however, that ASG will fully meet the requirements set in the CAPS regarding the teaching of language structures and conventions. The CAPS sets the requirements – ASG provides the content that is needed to meet the requirements.

The Afrikaans described in AAG and ASG is the general form of Afrikaans, the form that is used by the most speakers in the most contexts, and is considered “unmarked” by mother tongue speakers themselves. It is the spoken and written Afrikaans of mother tongue speakers at the beginning of the 21st century, as can be read and heard in the mainstream media today.

General Afrikaans (as opposed to Standard Afrikaans) is described in AAG and ASG to acknowledge and emphasise the existence, place, role and necessity of the varieties of Afrikaans. These varieties are the lifeblood, the living, beating heart of the language. General Afrikaans can be regarded as the form of the language which all these varieties have in common. In linguistic research, a description of this common form is a starting point for studying the language in its full complexity. One can only recognise what is unique about the Afrikaans spoken in Cape Town, Namaqualand, Windhoek, Pretoria Mossel Bay or Koekenaap if one already know what all these varieties have in common with each other. This is exactly why the description of the general form can be useful – to show which language treasures exist in the unique forms of Afrikaans, and how general Afrikaans is constantly evolving from it.

AAG and ASG are hosted together on Viva’s website as the two parts of the TOP. The content in AAG and ASG is not strictly separated, precisely because it is essential that users are able to trace the origin of the insights in ASG back to AAG. It is in fact not two sources, but one source in which information is presented in two different ways to two sets of target users. Users are informed which content was created for ASG, and which content forms part of the more intricate work covered in AAG. Figure 5 is a screenshot of the TOP's description of the Afrikaans adposition phrase. From this, it is clear that the information presented to Afrikaans teachers, students and scholars in this grammar, are directly informed by research presented on *Taalportaal* (compare again Figure 4).

Figure 5. Screenshot from Viva's TOP on the adposition

The screenshot shows the Viva Afrikaans website interface. The main content area is titled 'Setsels' and includes the following information:

- Outeur(s):** Nina Brink, Sophia Kapp
- Kategorie:** Woordsoorte
- Sleutelwoorde:** agtersetel, alkantsetel, naamwoordstuk, onoorganklike setel, setel, voorssetel, setelkomplement

Below this is a table titled 'Wat is 'n setel? Terminologie en definisie'.

Sinoniem(e)	adposisie
Afkorting(s)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> voorssetel = voors ; vs ; PREP agtersetel = POSTP alkantsetel = CIRCP onoorganklike setel = INTRP
Engelse vertaling(s)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> setel = 'adposition' voorssetel = 'preposition' agtersetel = 'postposition' alkantsetel = 'circumposition' onoorganklike setel = 'intransitive adposition'
Definisie en doel	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 'n Setel is 'n woord of woorde wat gebruik word om die verhouding tussen twee referente in 'n sin aan te dui. Die referente is meestal, maar nie altyd nie, entiteite (dus, naamwoorde of naamwoordstukke). Voorssetels is die uitgebreidste subklas binne die setelkategorie en word dus ook gewoonlik as die benaming vir die kategorie as geheel aanvaar. In hierdie oorsig word voorssetels eter gereken as 'n subkategorie van

The TOP is not a textbook or workbook, but rather an online source of reliable content from which teachers can develop textbooks, workbooks or additional blended learning material. AAG and ASG do not replace the lecturer or teacher, because no source, however comprehensive, can never replace the teacher. AAG and ASG empower teachers to perform their task as mediators of knowledge to the best of their ability, whether in a face-to-face or blended learning context.

CONCLUSION

Blended learning has many definitions, but all of these definitions have certain commonalities: “[T]hey refer to two different learning environments — face-to-face (synchronous) and online (asynchronous); and they refer to combining those two learning environments in a complementary way to deliver a programme of study so that learners can be supported both within the classroom environment and outside of it” (King, 2016). The linguistics pipeline and also the other Afrikaans resources being developed and maintained by Viva are examples of how digital tools and resources can be structured to support learning outside of the classroom.

As indicated above, Viva's Afrikaans linguistics pipeline is a first of its kind. This pipeline and its different resources have already been established to such an extent that it is well known among and frequently used by the members of the Afrikaans language community. The registered users of the Viva website are, for example, teachers, linguists, lecturers, journalists, language practitioners (e.g. translators, interpreters and copy editors), school learners, university students, parents, and other people interested in language matters.

The success of Viva as an organisation, and the usefulness of Viva's resources for the language community, are proof that the model on which Viva is based is a workable model. The model involves some key aspects:

- Role players from within the language and language teaching community have identified and formulated specific needs relating to their community. These same role players have also contributed to this project/product to satisfy the identified needs.

- VivA is continuously supported by organisations, entities and other stakeholders who have the interests of the language and language teaching community at heart.
- Since a number of stakeholders (from within the community that VivA aims to serve) are formally involved in VivA's activities and projects, there is also a liability relationship between VivA and these stakeholders, which means that VivA's planned activities must continuously satisfy the (growing) needs of the community.
- The resources (with specific reference to the linguistic content being developed) testify to quality and reliability, as experts are involved from the outset. The content is also based on existing gaps or needs in the existing infrastructure, and is therefore relevant as a resource for the language and teaching community. More concretely, TOP is an important digital grammar resource within the blended learning ecosystem.
- The advice portal created by VivA serves as a valuable resource to determine which needs exist within the teaching community. Direct contact with teachers, learners, tutors, writers of textbooks, and other content developers, enables VivA to create content that serves very specific needs.
- The interaction between the personnel of VivA, the Language Commission, lexicographers, lecturers and researchers at universities, and members of the education establishment such as subject advisers and examiners, ensures that the content created for TOP remains integrated, relevant and reliable. This interrelatedness also ensures trust within the language community that the products delivered by VivA set the benchmark for Afrikaans language description.
- Contract workers are appointed for their specific skills, and are appointed for specific subprojects. While the task undertaken by VivA is herculean, the small number of core personnel enables it to move very quickly on new ideas and projects. The use of contract personnel also ensures that each project is undertaken by the best possible people with vast experience in the field, who are able to maintain their full-time employment and status at their respective institutions.
- While the description of the grammar of any language always has to grapple with the matter of language variety, Afrikaans has an additional burden of a very complex and politicised standardisation history. In addition, school grammars tend to be prescriptive, which can be perceived to be exclusionary and alienating by large portions of the language community. The grammar described in TOP is therefore not based on Standard Afrikaans, but on general Afrikaans, and it is descriptive rather than prescriptive. Instances where the curriculum requires of users to learn rules and conventions, are clearly indicated.
- VivA is an independent, non-profit organisation that is not formally affiliated with or registered as a teaching institution. This enables VivA to develop content that meets the needs of the language and teaching community outside the framework of formal or national structures – and without taxing the existing structures.

Since this model creates an organisation that meets multiple needs of the community, and one that is supported by different stakeholders from within the community, it provides an opportunity to bridge the gap between what learners learn in school and what is relevant to the real world. In this way, students and scholars gain access to reliable content that aids self-directed learning. Content that is complementary or enlightening to the school curriculum is made accessible to the learners through blended learning and with the help of technology, regardless of personal circumstances or challenges.

The above-mentioned model is duplicable, and could be a useful model to establish other institutions or initiatives aimed at meeting specific needs in the language and teaching community. It will be particularly useful when context-specific blended learning and teaching content has to be developed in countries and communities where resources are limited. Ideally, this model can also be duplicated and used within the South African context to develop digital and reliable linguistic content for the various resource-scarce languages of South Africa, which includes all the indigenous languages of South Africa. After all, all the South African languages offered as a school subject face the same challenges: The (especially digital) available information on the grammar of these languages is not sufficient and reliable to i) fully support language teachers in blended teaching and learning situations, and ii) encourage self-directed learning and student autonomy among students with the help of electronic language resources.

Creating digital language content is one way of assisting language teachers to create a blended learning classroom, but it also creates the conditions to preserve indigenous languages - especially within learning environments where language resources are scarce. The survival and development of these languages are dependent on resources, but not just any resources, digital resources (see Partnered Content, 2020). According to Partnered Content (2020), we need “to digitise our efforts and carve out a space” for these languages. This will inevitably reflect that an inclusive approach to language is followed.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Blended Learning Ecosystem: All parties who have an interest in or participate in blended learning in different ways.

Content Developer: Individuals or organisations that create content that is useful in different contexts and applications.

Digital portal: A page, subpage on website that provides access to published content.

Student autonomy: When a student makes his or own decisions concerning his or her learning experience.

Non-profit organisation: An organisation that does not aim for profit, but rather to satisfy a need in the community or try to promote a social cause.

Digital resources: Material and content that is stored and made assessable on digital platforms and in digital format.

ⁱ These digital platforms can be found at the following web addresses: *LitNet* – www.litnet.co.za; *Storiewerf* – www.storiewerf.co.za; *Versindaba* – www.versindaba.co.za; *Roekeloos* – www.roekeloos.co.za, *Woes* – www.woes.co.za; *Afrikaanse Kontemporêre Drama-argief / Afrikaans Contemporary Drama Archive* – <https://akda.co.za/>; *The Digital Bibliography of Afrikaans Literature* – www.nwu.ac.za/dbal

ⁱⁱ These digital platforms can be found at the following web addresses: *BeterAfrikaans* – www.beterafrikaans.co.za; *Afrikaans Wikipedia* – af.wikipedia.org; *Taalportaal* – www.taalportaal.org; *Digitale Bibliografie van die Afrikaanse Taalkunde / Digital Bibliography of the Afrikaans Linguistics* – nwu.ac.za/dbat

ⁱⁱⁱ *Klasgids* is a magazine containing contributions from seasoned teachers regarding different facets of language teaching (Von Branden and Meyer, 2014). This magazine is published by Lapa publishers – see <https://klaskameraad.co.za/collections/klasgids>.

^{iv} These digital platforms can be found at the following web addresses: *My klaskamer* – <https://myklaskamer.co.za>; *Afrikaanse Hulpmiddels vir die klaskamer* – <https://afrikaansehulpmiddels.wordpress.com/>; *Mr. V's Classroom Companion* – <http://mnrvermeulen.blogspot.com>.

^v This digital platform can be found on <http://taalarsenaal2.yolasite.com/>

^{vi} This digital platform can be found on <https://afrikaans.com/leerhulp/>.

^{vii} This digital platform can be found on www.wolkskool.co.za.

^{viii} All information about VivA and its products presented in this chapter was obtained from VivA's website (www.viva-afrikaans.org.za), press releases on specific products and resources, or internal documentation, for example funding applications or annual reports to the board.

<https://www.news24.com/news24/Columnists/GuestColumn/education-problems-are-afrikaans-schools-to-blame-20180118>