Sarah’s Hard Labour: Literacy acquisition and mobile phones in a South African township.

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The high uptake of mobile phones in the developing world, even by those living at the very bottom of the income pyramid, can play a unique role in reaching those who are outside the scope of formal or institutionalized schooling and open doors to out-of-school learning practices. The uptake of the mobile phone has made certain forms of literacy and the possibility of practicing (newly) acquired literacy skills more accessible and appealing to a vast amount of poor, marginalized and -very often-uneducated people. In a community like the research site Wesbank, located on the outskirts of Cape Town, where macro-contextual circumstances of poverty, unemployment and social marginalization turn various forms of literacy into rare commodities, the uptake of the mobile phone has created highly instructive and motivating informal learning environments. It has instigated an often unprecedented literacy enthusiasm amongst the residents, in an environment where out-of-school literacy stimulation is almost absent.

This article tells the story of Sarah, a sixty-year old unemployed and uneducated resident of Wesbank who calls herself ‘illiterate’. We will look at the different aspects of learning Sarah goes through from the moment she learns how to write and send text messages and the hard labour she has to put into the acquisition and maintenance of those different aspects and skills. We will see how Sarah is slowly ‘getting somewhere’, learning to learn even more. We will discuss how this learning instigates a continuum of results and progress and changes her (meta-)identity awareness.

Keywords: informal learning, mobile phones, literacy.