

**“Yes we can!”**

**“Obami” as potentially inspiring**

**as Obama**

**– Part two**



**Barbara Mallinson**

**B**arbara Mallinson is the brains behind Obami, a digital community designed specifically for schools, and currently piloting at St Mary's School for Girls in Waverley, Johannesburg. Here she describes its specific features and some potential applications.

#### **First stop: home page**

Still in its infancy, more applications will appear as the Obami site develops and grows, says Mallinson. “In its current state, a user will sign in and go straight to his or her home page where users can access their own profile, as well as any personal administration (e.g. upcoming events). It also enables users to stay updated on school notices as well as their friends’ activities.”

#### **From home page to community portals**

From the home page, members can move to their respective community portals. “This can happen in or between schools. They act like mini websites on the Obami site. Mrs Jones’ Grade 9 Science class will be able to upload videos of a science experiment, or notes from the day’s lessons, and users can comment on the content to stimulate interaction,” explains Mallinson.

#### **Content is monitored**

She’s quick to point out that every page has an “it’s offensive” button, that when clicked, will generate an email that goes straight to the administrator who can override the controls to determine whether or not something is offensive.

The blogging facility means that members can create a personal diary, or a more public blog on which to opine about something. It’s also a platform for submitting homework, because teachers can then comment on the work. “In future,” adds Mallinson, “We will be able to add a grading system that teachers can utilise to mark work.”

#### **Obami also offers photos, calendar and money tools**

Obami’s photo tool means that members can upload, share and comment on images. “Art students can utilise

this tool to assemble a digital record of their art portfolios.”

The calendar facility will no doubt prove indispensable to learners and educators alike. Explains Mallinson, “Students can place an event on their calendar and share it with whomever. They can then invite people to that event, and keep a record of how many people will be attending the rugby match in question, for example. It’s also handy for term dates and exam timetables, test dates, or project submission dates.”

The money tool will teach youngsters personal financial management skills, envisions Mallinson. “There’s also a widget section that allows people to upload widgets from other websites, such as YouTube videos or online dictionary entries, weather reports or online blog feeds.”

#### **Obami should facilitate communication**

Mallinson is particularly excited about Obami’s instant messenger service. The intention is to facilitate communication. If a teacher has set a particularly tricky assignment, she can decide that on Friday afternoon from 15:30 to 16:30, she’ll be available online to answer any questions.

“Users can also use Obami to keep in touch with their friends/teachers/pupils/parents via messaging within the site, as well as through the sending out of email or SMS messages. SMS credit bundles are the only item for which Obami will charge schools. (This is a useful for sending out parent’s evening reminders, or notifications of a cancelled hockey match, for example.)”

#### **Interest in Obami growing steadily**

Mallinson is grateful for the assistance of IS Labs, an initiative made available by Internet Solutions. “Their mandate is to make the Internet a better place in South Africa, and they see Obami as a potential vehicle for achieving this. They have offered us free dedicated hosting.



St Mary's learners explore Obami

"We've also had interest in Obami from schools in other provinces, such as the Western Cape. At the time being, however, we are still in development mode. The roll-out to other provinces will happen once we've employed a team of marketers and trainers."

### Believe in yourself and your ideas

Mallinson is eager to give advice to other young entrepreneurs. "You must believe in yourself completely. Some doors will close and others will open – it's the law of averages. Learn from every person you meet. Keep in mind a realistic time-frame – things don't happen overnight. It's taken me at least 1½ years to get here because I developed everything from scratch. I've learned a lot along the way. In five years' time I want to see Obami in every school in the country. When our undersea cabling is done, and we've got greater bandwidth and greater capacity, broadband costs will go down, and Internet use will really take off in Africa."

### The sky's the limit for Obami

Mallinson anticipates that Obami can be adapted to every learning context, such as higher learning. "It also makes a great deal of sense to get very young learners involved as well, as they are increasingly the most computer literate of us all. We can customise it once again for them, and limit their access to potential dangers, but they need social sites aimed at their age groups."

Overall, the sky's the limit for Obami. "Adding more applications is easy. We've already had some good suggestions, like a Q & A section, or a 'My Games' section that will involve educational games."

But for now, how are pupils responding to the pilot? "I love it!" beamed one. "It makes school cool." But it's Mallinson who deserves the last word. "The true measure of success will be to see that every learner in South Africa – whether they are in a rural or urban school – has the same access to technology and information." ●



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