19 India: Arts for all, Slam Out Loud

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Type of intervention: non-governmental
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General description

Slam Out Loud (SOL) is an Indian non-profit that uses the arts along with multiple low-tech platforms to deliver support for arts-based socio-emotional learning and mental well-being to the most vulnerable children at scale. By offering localised, need-sensitive and engaging at-home audio, video, text and print resources for learners who have limited access to the Internet, it aims to lead children towards creative outcomes and build mental resilience during the COVID-19 school closures.

Within a few weeks of school closures, SOL rapidly adapted its interventions to create resources that are free of charge, interactive, and accessible in English and Hindi (and being translated into Punjabi, Tamil, Malayalam and Marathi) and made them available through various low-tech distribution channels (WhatsApp, interactive voice response systems [IVRS] and radio).

SOL launched a WhatsApp channel delivering arts-based socio-emotional learning activities directly to 70 000 children daily across 23 states within India as well as in 19 other countries. For children with Internet access, an at-home "Do-It-Yourself" styled theatre course is also available as video content accessible on-demand and hosted on its YouTube channel. For users without Internet access, Slam Out Loud

provides remote learning content through IVRS, radio and television platforms and distributes printed materials in collaboration with other non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and state governments.

Main problems addressed

Enhancing student well-being. To combat COVID-19, more than 180 countries mandated temporary school closures, leaving, at its peak in early April, close to 1.6 billion children and youth out of school (World Bank, 2020[1]; 2020[2]). The majority of India's 320 million students remained at home as part of the effort to fight the COVID-19 pandemic (UNESCO, 2021[3]). This situation is further increasing educational inequity and adding to the anxiety and stress levels of learners. One challenge that educators across the globe faced was addressing students' well-being during these times, with learner loneliness increasing due to lack of social interaction and creative output.

Reaching students with varying access to technology. Nationally, only 24% of households in India have access to the Internet. Two-thirds of India's population lives in villages, and only a little over 15% of rural households have access to the Internet. For urban households, the proportion is 42%. This makes it challenging to reach a vast majority of children in India with remote online learning. However, India has more than 400 million active WhatsApp users. Just over half (53%) of phone users in India use non-Internet enabled phones (National Statistical Office, 2019[4]).

Given diverse levels of access to technology, SOL's intervention is designed to be flexible and to be hosted across different platforms to reach children in the most under-resourced areas.

Mobilising and developing resources

Building networks and institutional partnerships. Slam Out Loud leveraged its existing network and contacted multiple additional stakeholders, including various non-NGOs, schools, educators and parents to support equitable remote art learning for students across the country. Through a pilot project with the government of Patiala (India), it was able to disseminate art activities to over 140 000 children every day, via a systemic network of block mentors and teachers in the region. Teachers and mentors were introduced to art-learning content through virtual workshops, and were supported to cascade this to children within their schools. Content reached children in a top-down approach through block mentors and teachers, while their artwork was shortlisted at the mentor-level daily and shared with SOL via a bottom-up approach. Additionally, Slam Out Loud partnered with Gram Vaani's community media platform, Mobile Vaani, to disseminate art activities to children in an audiovisual format, thus enhancing art access for children with extremely low Internet bandwidth. The Boston Consulting Group made the high-quality content on socio-emotional learning available to over 40 000 children in the states of Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand and Rajasthan. The collaboration with Leadership for Equity led to the art-based learning resources being uploaded on the Ministry of Education's and the National Council for Teacher Education's teacher training portal DIKSHA, and rolled out to 1.8 million students in Maharashtra. Thanks to those partnerships, Slam Out Loud could thus easily scale the programme without significant additional investment in human resources and technology.

Leveraging the reach of WhatsApp. With 50% of India's Internet-enabled audience (over 400 million users) having access to WhatsApp, and a previous internal review finding that 75% of children in SOL's programmes have access to their parent's WhatsApp accounts for at least one hour a day, WhatsApp presented itself as the most immediate medium to reach children. Additionally, deploying WhatsApp content in various formats such as text, image, video and voice notes made for more equitable learning opportunities for children with diverse learning skills and needs.

Using an existing repository of resources. SOL also leveraged its existing repository of resources and content principles (curriculum design, focus around children's socio-emotional learning and well-being) to address the remote learning needs of children during COVID-19. These resources were customised during the school closures for delivery over low-tech platforms such as WhatsApp and IVRS. Customisations were made to cater to the limitations of the platforms (the amount and nature of content that can be shared), data bandwidth and app access.

Creating content that is context-relevant. Additionally, particular attention was paid to ensure the activities and tasks created and sent to students daily were contextual, addressed current challenges, required few resources and could be accomplished easily at home. Students received activities via WhatsApp but did not need digital resources to complete the activities.

Fostering effective use and learning

Creating high-quality arts-based experiences. Students received short tasks related to poetry, theatre, storytelling or visual arts daily via WhatsApp, and were encouraged to share their work with professional artists, peer groups and teachers and to reach out for support to the mentor assigned to them. The idea was to provide a creative outlet to students, allowing them to express themselves and build their artistic confidence to support their well-being and further develop their arts-based skills. Activities included puppet-making, writing poems, interviewing family members about what is most precious to them and writing stories about this, and producing drawings or paintings on a theme, such as "how are you feeling today?". Content was shared across platforms that were easily available to children, parents and educators – starting with WhatsApp and moving towards IVRS in audio format (available in English, Hindi and Punjabi).

Using a creative confidence rubric. Slam Out Loud has developed a creative confidence rubric to help students, parents and teachers reflect on children's confidence in creative communication, critical thinking, collaboration, creativity, self-esteem and empathy. Children's art was published across its digital platforms and children received oral responses and feedback at the end of the automated scripted calls to encourage and assess growth in creative confidence (as part of socio-emotional and life skills).

Incentivising participation. The programme also incentivised participation of children by rewarding them with titles such as "Artist of the day/week" and used qualitative surveys and recurrent follow-ups to measure participation and learning. Children's progress was also shared with their parents and teachers to keep them informed of the activities, as well as to create space for appreciation and support.

Attending virtual workshops. Children were encouraged to attend virtual workshops organised by the organisation, which focused on their well-being, as well as to engage with their family members through activities at home. For instance, the theatre course allows children to learn the art of theatre within their own home, as well as to co-create meaningful experiences with their family members in the process.

Consulting stakeholders, including students. A mix of focus group discussions and individual interviews with stakeholder groups, such as grant makers, government officials, NGO heads, teachers and students within India and across the globe were used to ensure that content was flexible, contextual and adaptable. The priority was to ensure children's safety and their parents' willingness for them to take part in the programme.

Multi-layered quality assurance processes. Before deployment, all content is tested across three layers. First, two levels of content creators and experts review the material before it is shared with a sample of 300 children across WhatsApp groups to test engagement. Second, high-frequency oral diagnostics are used to assess rate of engagement and response along with text/WhatsApp-based assessments (powered by artificial intelligence tools) to monitor the quality of responses and subsequent growth on creative confidence aspects. Third, qualitative surveys of stakeholders (teachers, parents, government officials) are

also conducted to monitor growth in an art-proficiency rubric. Growth in the organic user base is assessed through tech-generated analytics on usage.

Implementation challenges

The key challenges Slam Out Loud faced, along with how they were mitigated are:

- **Market.** Art learning through low-tech platforms was not being used at scale before this point. SOL created a scaled market through institutional and governmental partnerships, such as with the governments of Patiala, Gujarat and Punjab; the State Council of Educational Research and Training; the Ministry of Human Resources Development; Gram Vaani; Boston Consulting Group; and Leadership for Equity. These systemic partnerships enabled it to disseminate art-learning resources to children in the respective states where these partners were operating.
  - **Operations.** Content production requirements steadily increased with the programme process. This was addressed by consistently introducing new volunteer cohorts who specialised in content creation, along with subsequent capacity building of existing volunteers.
  - **Finance.** The application-programming interface (API) for IVRS requires largely tech-heavy platforms, which increase project costs. Given its financial constraints, SOL relied on institutional partnerships to cover part of the costs. For example, a tech-based non-profit (assisting the setting up of a WhatsApp API), subsidised rates from an IVR vendor and implementation partners to pay for the printing and distribution of physical copies of learning resources.
- **Regulations.** Since SOL's primary beneficiaries were children, it was paramount to ensure that parental permissions and individual data protection were focused upon. Child protection regulations vary across countries, which added a challenge when it expanded to countries other than India.

Monitoring success

The reach of the initiative. Within the first month of the WhatsApp channel, the initiative gained 521 NGO representatives from organisations such as Room to Read, Aga Khan Foundation, Dream a Dream, Piramal Foundation, Teach For India and many more, and school partners such as Essar International School Surat, government and semi-government schools across Punjab, Delhi, Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh and several more Indian states along with more than 500 individual subscribers (comprising parents, educators across the world and children themselves). Through a cascaded model, each NGO, school partner and educator further distributed activities received from Slam Out Loud in their own contexts and geographies, thereby taking the reach to more than 70 000 children daily (as identified by an internal survey to determine reach) across 23 (out of 31) Indian states and 19 countries.

SOL offers content in Hindi and English and has also translated content into four more Indian languages (Punjabi, Tamil, Malayalam and Marathi) to make it accessible to vernacular speaking children. The educational body of the state government of Gujarat, the Gujarat Council of Education Research and Training, has added the remote learning content to its state-wide remote learning packets. In June 2020, the remote learning initiatives were scaled to three more Indian states: Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Jharkhand. The collaboration with the government of Patiala led to an eight-week long pilot project, disseminating art activities focused on socio-emotional learning to over 140 000 children (as determined by the Patiala government) daily. Further, they also collaborated with grassroots initiatives such as Gram Vaani (an audio-based social media over IVRS) to reach children in Bihar, Jharkhand,

Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh in India and are also in discussion with two more Indian state governments to further scale their initiatives and reach many more Indian children.

Recognition. SOL's aggregate partners and organisations, such as [Girl Rising](#), [HundrED](#) and [Give a Hand](#) have highlighted this remote learning solution as one of the most innovative educational responses to the COVID-19 crisis.

Assessing engagement. Content with the highest engagement on SOL's WhatsApp channel is posted on [YouTube](#). This, along with tech-generated analytics on usage and responses, helps assess the rate of engagement and response (through number of response videos, audio clips and artwork created) as well as their quality. For instance, through SOL's eight-week pilot project with the government of Patiala, children created more than 460 artworks and 120 response videos. During the pandemic, more than 100 000 artworks, comprising audiovisual responses of children's poems and stories, have been created as part of the programme. SOL also monitors completion of courses, and number of viewing hours (currently about 45 hours for [DIY:Art videos](#) as determined via YouTube Analytics) on content-hosting platforms such as YouTube and collates testimonials of users completing the courses to further inform content creation and delivery.

Adaptability to new contexts

Individuals and organisations in 19 countries already subscribe to Slam Out Loud's initiative. The intervention is largely replicable across any space within the English-speaking population, and countries can also further customise the programme to suit their context and translate content into languages other than English. The learning content is age-appropriate and applicable to children across contexts.

The initiatives will continue to be sustained beyond the COVID-19 crisis. Through government level and institutional partnerships, SOL aims to advocate for socio-emotional learning to be adopted as a key component in educational systems, and provides a replicable example of how low-tech resources can be used to implement arts-based remote learning with a focus on the development of socio-emotional learning.

> **Box 19.1. Key points to keep in mind for a successful adaptation**
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> 1. Interventions should require few resources and ones that are easily available to enable access for as many children as possible.
> 2. Pre-existing technology such as WhatsApp, radio and television should be leveraged, particularly for children with limited access to the Internet.
> 3. Community members should be involved and regularly updated on progress, including the children's parents and their primary educators.
> 4. The chief concern should be ensuring children's safety, that parents give permission for children to be involved and that data regulations are carefully followed.
> 5. Mechanisms to provide feedback to children should be created, so that they receive suggestions for development and appreciation for their work to build confidence and skills throughout the programme.
> 6. It is important to ensure that all learning resources are relevant to the context and simple to understand, keeping in mind where the children who use them come from and what they most relate to.

Acknowledgements

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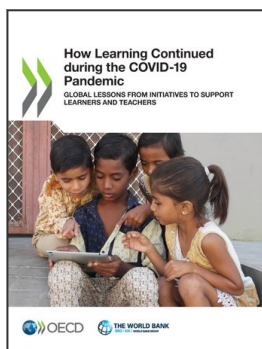
From:

How Learning Continued during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Global Lessons from Initiatives to Support Learners and Teachers

Access the complete publication at:

https://doi.org/10.1787/bbeca162-en