

Albert Einstein once said, 'In the middle of difficulty, lies opportunity'. Although the teaching-learning process is one of the challenges COVID-19 brought with it, everyone is trying their best in this situation to find alternatives to overcome the difficulties caused by the pandemic. Schools closed soon after the effects and the impact of COVID-19 became clear and for a while, teaching and learning stopped completely. Capacity-building of teachers took a new turn – it shifted from the physical interaction mode to digital mode. Government schools responded by decentralising teaching and creating imaginary learning situations and using the online mode.

I am sharing the experience of the teacher capacity-building exercise we did during this time.

Initially, we were not sure if we would be able to engage our teachers who were not physically present. The distance mode was a different and new way of working for all of us. In the beginning, it seemed difficult for both us and the teachers, but we gradually found that it works and that using technology is not difficult – it is actually very easy and effective!

Many of us are trying different ways to be in touch with teachers, head teachers and functionaries and engaging them in meaningful activities. So, some amount of experience has already been built. We realised that we could reach out to a greater number of teachers and cover wider areas more frequently than before. Teachers are also finding the online mode great, both to develop themselves as well as to beat the undue stress the pandemic has created.

We brainstormed on the various ways we could work with teachers by understanding their responses and their willingness and began with a group of teachers with whom we had engaged earlier in the direct mode. Knowing them and their needs, we mapped them according to their interests, attitudes and involvement and the subjects they taught.

Preparing for the change

'Before anything else, preparation is the key to

success,' said Alexander Graham Bell. Once we had identified the cohorts and their needs, we had to design their learning, keeping in mind the current level of the teachers and the levels we wanted them to reach in terms of content knowledge, understanding of the teaching-learning process, teaching practices etc. It was important to include them in this process so that they would take ownership of their learning. We did this by discussing their needs and our plans for addressing them. We also talked about our objectives, the modes and frequency of interactions. We prepared concept notes and shared them with the team for their opinion. This enriched the process, helping us to identify the areas we might have missed.

Since we needed to have concrete examples and experiences in our tool kit, preparation was important. To do this, we collected resources, read, sought guidance and reached out to people in the organisation who could act as resource persons so that we could gain from their experience. This helped us to prepare well in terms of the content as well as the design of the sessions.

Readying ourselves for facilitating in distance mode was also very important. We were working with teachers without their being physically present and also interacting with teachers with whom we had never met physically. We could not read their minds or see their expressions. It requires a great amount of people skills to connect with virtually. We needed to work on our communication skills, how much to speak during sessions, when to intervene, how to moderate, how to engage all the teachers so that none of them feels left out, and; how to effectively modulate our voice, etc.

Equipping teachers for online sessions

Using digital media

First, we had to prepare our teachers to use digital media like *MS Teams* for teleconferencing and to join the sessions. We spoke to them individually and explained the steps, including things like using audio buttons for *mute*, *unmute* and *not to go on hold* if they had to take phone calls while

on a teleconference session. We practised how to disconnect from the session, take the phone call and then re-join the session. We took screenshots of the steps for joining an *MS Teams* meeting and its other utilities and shared these with the teachers.

Sharing reading materials

We shared reading materials through *WhatsApp* and emails two to three days before a discussion so that teachers could come prepared. We found that it was better to share these materials in a PDF format as it is easier to open on the phone. We had to make sure that the reading material was not too large since most of the teachers would be using only their mobile phones to read.

Content

While choosing topics, we had two questions in mind: How can I help better classroom teaching and learning? What are the right topics for me to achieve this?

We started with very simple articles so that teachers could connect with them easily and we progressed based on the group's response, needs and interests.

Some of the resources we used in our work with the teachers were Kannada, English and Maths handbooks on various topics. We referred to articles from the *Learning Curve*, Arvind Gupta, *Balaga*, APU pull-outs, *Bayalu*. Other sources were books like *Child's Language and Teacher*, *Toto Chan*, *Diwaswapna*, Kamala Mukunda's *What Did You Ask in Class Today*, *Children doing Mathematics* by Bryant and Nunes. IGNOU materials for maths, articles from Guru Chetana, NCF Position Papers, NCERT Learning Outcomes, DSERT Learning Outcomes were some of the other publications which provided valuable inputs to engage our teachers and facilitate their self-learning. The ASER and NAS reports were also used in our discussions to enable teachers to get a broader picture of the current educational scenario.

Designing a session

Know teachers' strengths

This was essential. For example, if in a cohort group, one teacher is good at classroom practices and making teaching aids, she could be a very good resource to make others understand the importance of these aids and practices based on her own experiences. She could also influence others in the team to adopt this practice.

Visualise the session

The online sessions had to be planned – from the lesson plans to the learning outcomes to be achieved. To do this, the larger objectives were broken down into smaller parts that could be achieved by our teachers. We reinforced learning through various worksheets, assignments and made sure that the teachers were assessed at every step and changed our teaching methodology accordingly. We identified the levels to be achieved by every teacher in the group and mentored them in doing so.

Some tips from our experience

Our sessions started with a summary of the previous session and concluded with a brief sum-up of the topics discussed. This helped teachers to connect in case they had missed the flow. We found it helpful to invite a colleague to participate in or facilitate the session for a change. It helped teachers to interact and learn from a new person. If we were not able to conduct the session at the agreed time, we informed the teachers beforehand so that they were not kept waiting. These things really helped to sustain the continuity of the group discussions and develop a strong bond among the participants.

We shared the minutes/updates of the meeting with participants after the session. A teacher who missed the session was contacted after the discussion and briefed about it. The teacher was asked if there had been any difficulty in joining and invited to join the next session. We also spoke to the teacher about how his/her presence would have enriched the discussion. For the teachers who joined the discussion, we messaged them to say how their participation enhanced the value of the discussion. We kept reviewing ourselves in various ways for making our sessions more effective.

Our learning so far

- Teachers are open to adapting to new technologies if the approach is user-friendly.
- Clear, systematic planning, continuity of concepts, connecting concepts to the classroom, bringing new dimensions to already known concepts are key to keeping teachers engaged in the process.
- Creating a sense of belonging among teachers is vital to sustaining interest.
- It is possible to create a non-threatening, inviting space in online forums, provided there is a shared understanding of the strengths and limitations of the medium.

Based on our observations and discussions with teachers and among team members, we are able to estimate our impact. Teachers, too, are able to adopt meaningful teaching practices for early grades and prepare supporting materials, like designing activities, games and teaching aids for the classroom. They are able to write articles to share all the learning and understand the connection between concepts and developing and designing different levels of activities to work with children of different levels.

Way forward

Once schools reopen, we will be visiting the classrooms of these teachers to observe the changes in their practices, understand their needs, form groups and design further engagements accordingly. We will take the support of these teachers in reaching out to larger groups in an offline mode. The changes these teachers will bring in once they are back in schools are definitely going to influence others. We would like to design processes to share the best practices which come out of this experience.

We will be continuing online engagements like voluntary teachers' forums as we are able to reach out to a larger number of teachers from various blocks, something which would be difficult to do offline. We are happy that, as a team, we could explore opportunities to continue our work with teachers creating some lasting experiences for both parties during this critical period, a process that increased self-confidence.

We realise that we have worked seamlessly with teachers in distant places by exploring technology and discovered that it is easy, and these platforms are designed for self-learning. Even people with no prior knowledge can easily learn to use these. Many of our teachers have become very comfortable with *MS Teams*, teleconferencing, *Zoom*, *Google Hangouts* etc. Sharing of articles and other reading material is taking place through *WhatsApp* and emails. In our experience after two or three sessions teachers work perfectly well and smoothly on any virtual learning platform.



Bibi Raza Khanam has been working with the Azim Premji Foundation as Resource Person for the last two years. She is a post-graduate in science with a specialisation in physics. Presently, she is working with the science and maths team at Koppal, Karnataka. She can be contacted at raza.khanam@azimpremjifoundation.org