Walking an Unknown Path | Online Learning

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We are undergoing a crisis in the present times. The pandemic has totally upended the lives of people – the lockdown and its restrictions, social distancing and the closing of schools! The question that arose for us, teachers was: how we can connect with our students from afar, that too in a situation of uncertainty, mistrust and fear generated due to this mysterious virus? Learning had to continue and at first thought, the engagement over a distance mode came out to us as an instant possibility. At the same time, we had to anticipate the possible structure of the classroom in distance mode, something that was unknown terrain for all of us in the school.

In this article, we share the preparation of our work, occurrences over online platforms and the methods we used for our distance engagements, the challenges we faced, our learning in the process and finally, the way forward.

Our preparation

As the online platform was new to us, we first had to learn several things. One was getting acquainted with and exploring different platforms like *WhatsApp, Google Meet, Google Classroom, Zoom, Microsoft Teams* as well as other complementary platforms like *Google Forms, Facebook*, and *YouTube*. After doing some pilot programmes among our colleagues, we took it to the students. We started collecting and creating resources that could be shared online, read books related to the subject, followed up more rigorously by brainstorming over online meetings in subject/grade groups and general groups on *Microsoft Teams, Google Meet* and through conference calls over the phone. We discussed our reading and shared the work in suitable formats to develop thematic worksheets and assignments.

After preparing ourselves, we collected the phone and *WhatsApp* numbers of the students by calling their families or visiting their homes. Then, we created two *WhatsApp* groups: one grade-wise and one general.

Going online

In response to the parents' demands, we provided the students with PDF copies and screen-shots of chapters in the textbook in the first few days. Parents thought that their children would study if this was done, though we knew that this approach would be ineffective. The small size of a mobile handset screen demanding long periods of students' engagement with the device, made sustained attention difficult. Parents also realised that sharing textbook chapters in PDF does not work.

By this time, we had started giving questions on *Google Forms* for which students had only to click the correct options. On the same platform, we also included short questions requiring investigation and survey and for this, *YouTube* videos and images were used. Initially, we got many enthusiastic responses from students. We also provided NCERT textbooks and notebooks to them and referred to the textbooks along with the online work. In our context, textbooks are the only academic resource students have at home. But only those who were at grade-appropriate learning levels could use the textbooks as self-learning material.

Other resources

There were several online activities based on the observation of natural phenomena, conducting simple investigations and experiments, recording daily activities, reflecting on the experiences students were going through which did not require textbooks. Along with this, we shared the links of *YouTube* videos of rhymes, songs, stories and explanation of the basic concepts of many topics. Many of the resources were also shared on the school *Facebook* page. Additionally, we prepared several *YouTube* videos addressing both the local context chapters from NCERT textbooks and *Eklavya* books.

As an example of our online work, here is a *WhatsApp* message sent to grade I students for a task based on a chapter in their textbook:

प्यारें बच्चों! अपनी हिंदी की किताब 'रिमझिम-१' के पेज 76 को खोलिए और उसमें आई कविता 'पतंग' को पढ़कर अपने घर के किसी सदस्य को सुनाईये फिर इसको रिकॉर्ड करे हमें भी भेजिए|इसके बाद

पेज 77 पर आई गतिविधि 'पतंग का चित्र बनाईये' और 'अब कविता बनाएं' को अपनी नोटबुक में कीजिये | फिर इसका भी फोटो खींचकर हमें भेजिए|

Another example is a video based on a *Santhal* folk story *First House* put up on *YouTube* by *Book-Box*, about two friends building their first house with suggestions from different animals. Each animal suggested a part of the house analogous to their body parts. The friends collected materials to build the parts as well as the whole house. This was followed up with these questions: After watching the video, do you think this story is an example of teamwork? In what way? How many animals were there in the video? What was the house made of? (Wood/brick) Which part of house was made with bamboo?

Features of platforms

Over time, we have come to realise that running academic engagements in the asynchronous distance mode, without seeing each other, is ineffective. So, we started synchronous distance engagement over *Google Meet* with the students who had access to the internet and smartphones and were willing to join in. We used the telephone for those with no internet access.

Every online platform has certain advantages. For instance, the telephone is the most accessible mode for all students and has the least network issues. Then again, *WhatsApp* provides affordable space to share links of videos, audios, *Google Forms*, website links, images and even documents. It also helps the sharing of views/updates with a large group of members in real-time. *Facebook* provides a digital resource repository as well as allows sharing and a discussion platform. *YouTube* is a video repository and allows access to these resources without having a Google account, unlike *Facebook*. *Facebook* and *YouTube* both afford running live sessions. The advantage of *Google Meet* is that it provides, both individual as well as, group support. However, this requires considerable internet bandwidth and is, therefore, limited to a few students.

We have tried to use all these platforms to optimise different types of assignment along with home visits.

What we learned

We knew that providing PDF copies or screenshots of textbook chapters would be ineffective. However, due to parental demand, we had to agree (though parents too soon realised the limitations of sharing these files).

When the lockdown restrictions eased, getting students' responses online reduced a lot. Accessing mobile devices reduced and for various reasons, the students' overall academic engagement declined. One of the major reasons for the low and slow response was weak and interrupted internet connectivity. In several cases, students were doing their work but were unable to share it over *WhatsApp*.

After the lockdown was lifted, we gave hard copies of worksheets and handouts to students at their home on a weekly or fortnightly basis. To reduce the challenges of limited access to the internet and smartphones we also extended academic support to students in their homes.

One interesting aspect is that we were able to cover only 80-85 percent of the students through home visits in a 15-day cycle and 5-10 percent in a 30-day cycle. Five percent of the students were living very far away and were unreachable, so, for them, we had to rely only on *WhatsApp* and *Google Meet* mode. The remaining five percent of the students could be met only intermittently.

We have learned a lot as teachers in our attempts to engage students online. For example, thematic assignments required us to break the boundaries between subjects. We had also to study subject content and concepts in a deeper way to present it to students. According to Ruchi, 'My area of interest is Arts, and I feel most comfortable while teaching it. However, after I started teaching Hindi, English and maths to grades I and II, I became interested in those subjects. I have also learnt to design worksheets, use *Google Forms*, produce *YouTube* material, and give voice to stories.'

Challenges of going online

Some of our major challenges included the small screen size of mobile phones, weak internet connections, inadequate academic environment at home, students not taking the online classes seriously and unfamiliarity with digital technology for academic purposes. In addition, many students' families could not afford data recharge costs. Another issue was two or more children wanting access to the mobile at the same time.

Way forward

COVID-19 has created an unprecedented and complex situation. As teachers, we had to bridge

the gaps in learning but in contrast to a regular classroom, we could not engage personally with the students or use all the pedagogic and learning resources in real-time. Although we provided worksheets and textbook-based assignments, lent books, gave short home tuitions, there were limitations in the distance and online modes. Better work in this area depends completely on how we engage after understanding this situation.

Having observed all the challenges, both during the lockdown and following it, we are placing greater emphasis on our visits to students' homes. We are continuously exploring dynamic modes of engagement for learning and preparing online materials and sustaining online engagement so that we will be able to face lockdowns or other emergencies that we may have in the future.

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