



Her Abilities. Endless Possibilities.

Ek Tara

Ek Tara is a school located in Kolkata, India, with a total of 850 students enrolled in grades K-6, almost 90% of whom are girls. Ek Tara employs 40 teachers and uses English as the primary language of instruction. The majority of students in Ek Tara speak Hindi, which is their native language, and 40% of them have access to the internet and a smartphone.

Given country-wide school closures in India and the absence of functional distance learning systems, Ek Tara partnered with EAA to pilot The Internet Free Education Resource Bank (IFERB), which is a project-based learning resource with over 650 of its students. Ek Tara had to work around students' varying levels of access to the internet and digital resources to ensure the success of any intervention targeting learners in underserved contexts.

Before the start of the pilot, EAA and Ek Tara engaged in extensive correspondence that allowed us to understand the context and needs of the school and its learners to develop an appropriate distance learning solution. The school's administration provided details on students' backgrounds and current curriculum units that were covered before school closures. EAA worked with Ek Tara to develop both the mechanism as well as the content for communicating with students. For students who had access to the internet through their parents' smartphones, the internet-based text messaging application WhatsApp was used by teachers to communicate with them and their parents in their assigned groups.

Four types of phone call communications have been identified: topic introduction, daily instructions, clarification, and feedback. Group-wide messaging such as daily instructions and student final submission requests can be accomplished using WhatsApp groups, which can accommodate over 250 participants per group. Ideally, however, student groups led by a single teacher or facilitator should not exceed 30-50 students to allow for individualized communication. Individualized communication, such as providing clarifying answers to students' questions and requesting feedback, can be accomplished through either private messaging or calls. Providing

schools and NGOs with a toll-free number can be considered to expand access to individualized calls.

Below, we evaluate elements of the solution used for each case and the feasibility to replicate the solution.

SOLUTION

Criteria	Category	Details
Technological Readiness	Basic Phone/SMS Intermittent Internet- connectivity	Ek Tara uses Phone Calls, SMS and WhatsApp to share lessons and tasks with their students depending on their access to either technology.
Content availability	No	The school uses the IFERB projects created by EAA, which are under a Creative Commons License.
Personalization	Yes	IFERB content is adapted for the context of the community.
Interactivity	Yes	Learners engage with teachers
Mode	Asynchronous	After a scheduled call with the teacher, students perform the tasks required on their own time.
Feasibility to replicate		
Time	Short	The time needed to replicate the concept is short since the content is available and only needs to be contextualized.
Effort	Medium	Some effort is needed to contextualize lessons and connect with learners.
Money	Low	Phone calls and limited SMS messages are the only costs in this program.

FOLLOW-UP AND IMPLEMENTATION

In the first week of the pilot, students were divided into groups of 15 to 20 students, and each group was assigned to one teacher. Each teacher is tasked with delivering instructions and following up for clarifications, daily guidance, and feedback. There were 123 of the students in the pilot who are 4-6 years old, while 276 are 7-10 years old, 182 are 11-13 years old, and 95 are 14+ years old.

On a 5-day project week, teacher-student communication typically resembled the following:

- On the first day of the project, teachers call their students individually to introduce the project and share the task for the day.
- Teachers call their students individually to explain the task of the day and help students problem-solve through daily challenging tasks.
- Teachers call students at the end of the week to receive feedback on the project.
- Students take pictures of their project outcomes and send them back to the teachers at the end of the week.
- Students that do not have access to smartphones receive instructions via phone calls, but they do not submit their homework. Instead, teachers discuss their project outcome or another project component to verify completion.

Criteria	Category	Details
Preparedness of teachers to design and facilitate learning	Low	EAA helped train teachers for the implementation of IFERB (interacting with learners, contextualizing content, etc.)
Availability and ability of parents or caregivers to facilitate effective home-based distance learning	Available for guidance but not as an educator	Over 70% of parents are available to support their children with home learning. However, The average years of schooling for parents of Ek Tara students is 5 to 9 years, with the majority of parents having completed up to grades 5-7.

Monitoring and evaluation capacities

Monitor distance learning processes	Yes	Teachers have regular calls with learners as well as individual follow-up calls.
Track the access to courses and engagement	Yes	Teachers collect feedback from students at the end of every project week. They also fill out a Google spreadsheet to keep track of their students' performance and write individual remarks about students documenting whether they were able to reach them and receive their submitted work
Assess learning outcomes	No	The outcome is not assessed since many of the students are unable to submit their projects
Sustain immediate distance learning responses for achieving long-term goals	Yes	The school plans to continue using the project-based learning post-COVID-19. Ektara continues to work for a sustained change in their pedagogical model when schools open. EAA has trained the teachers to sustain the approach.

IMPLEMENTING CHALLENGES

Ek Tara faced three main challenges in implementing this solution: parental involvement, connectivity, and engaging 14+ students.

Parental involvement

Given that the average learning levels of parents of Ek Tara's students are at the primary to middle school grade levels, it was essential to ensure during the project adaptation phase that instructions were clear and required minimal prerequisite knowledge. Aside from literacy and numeracy, parents' physical availability for support should also be accounted for in the design of learning resources. Fortunately, over 70% of students at Ek Tara receive parental support. However, in contexts where this is not possible, the learning journeys of particularly young

students (aged 4-9) could be severely disrupted, given the high need for supervision in this age group.

Lack of direct contact

Another challenge faced by Ek Tara teachers was the difficulty of relaying some instructions verbally, especially when an image is included in the lesson plan or when there is a need for visual representation. Learners were also exposed to new concepts that were more challenging to explain remotely. For instance, Ek Tara teachers discovered that some learners had never visited a restaurant and therefore found the “My Pop-Up Restaurant” project – where students create their restaurant – particularly challenging to execute.

Connectivity

Recharging mobile phones became increasingly challenging following the lockdown, which prevented a small number of students from full participation. Also, it was difficult for some students to submit their work. Students who only had access to feature (non-camera) phones made verbal submissions by describing the final product to teachers verbally on calls.

TAKEAWAY LESSONS

Teachers and students gave very positive feedback on the projects, which had an average completion rate of 83%. Teachers describe the projects as interesting, creative, and easy to explain. They remarked that this project has awakened students’ curiosity and has made students very excited about doing something independently. Over 90% of students and parents reported that they found the projects engaging, educational, and easy to follow and implement using resources that are easily accessible to them. Teachers also reported that the projects fostered academic growth and 21st century skills among students. Teachers said that they were able to grow professionally in implementing project-based learning methodology while providing remote learning support for struggling students and brainstorming solutions to technology-related challenges.

Due to the success of the pilot, the duration of EAA’s partnership with Ek Tara was extended for the duration of the closures and as schools partially open to using IFERB as a supplementary project-based learning resource that complements traditional lecture-style classes.

The IFERB solution proved to be a model to ensure learning continuity in cases of educational disturbances. The technology-free and low resource requiring projects are designed for students to lead their learning and leverage parents for support. The resources are being used for screen-free learning and adapted into various languages for broader support.
