

Re_action for Education Programme

Learning Log

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Introduction

Coming to the end of the sixth, and final week, of the Re_action for Education programme, we now reflect on our learnings to date and our experience of the programme. The following six points will be covered in this report:

1. The research phase: Who I spoke to, how I assessed the needs around me and the conclusions I drew.
2. The intervention/resource design phase: The vision for the design, goals, plan and outcomes.
3. Experience as a mobilizer: Volunteers recruited, my work, impact created and spread
4. Partnership development and roll-out: The analysis that led me to seek out specific partners? How was this partnership built? What impact will be created?
5. Leadership attributes and Laidlaw values developed and demonstrated. These are discussed in detail in a separate document.
6. If this programme were to be run next year, what differences could improve the experience and outputs? What would I keep the same?

The Research Phase

The programme began with an assessment of the needs around us, to allow each of us to get a feel for an area in which we could help out most. We were encouraged to look into all areas relating to education and learning from home during COVID-19, including the teachers' experience of having to adapt their teaching style, the parents' experience of supporting their children in learning from home and the extent to which they were able to homeschool, and students in attempting to cover the syllabus from home, without the same level of guidance from a teacher. I began the first day by speaking to my sister and mother about their experiences, and asking my sister how her friends had found the transition. I also video called some of my friends who are currently studying to become primary and secondary school teachers, to find out how they found the transition, and what their opinion was on how education would be going forward.

I also emailed the principal of my old primary school and secondary school to ask how they had adjusted, and how teachers, parents and students had responded. My primary school principal replied straight away and informed me that it had been very difficult for teachers to teach the younger children virtually, as a parent had to be with the child for any e-learning, for child protection reasons. While some parents had the time to do this, others had work or several children of different ages, all doing different work at the same time. The principal also emphasised how the children were missing out on playtime with their peers, which is a crucial part of socialization. Overall, it seemed that there was a huge reliance on primary school children's parents, and where the parents were unavailable or had more than one child, the education of the child would suffer and the parents would be very stressed. Teachers were unable to do much to help in these situations.

My secondary school teacher didn't reply until the end of the first week but also provided some useful insights into this older group of students. He conveyed less reliance on parents compared to primary school, as less supervision was needed. However, in this school, the facilities for live classes had not been made available and all lessons were prerecorded and uploaded for students to view in their own time. He said that this did lead to somewhat lower engagement amongst students

and as the school was very rural, some students did not have fast enough Wi-Fi to download hour-long videos of lessons. He informed me that teachers often reported that students did not hand in assigned work but that little could be done about this, as often a lack of technology or quiet spaces were reported. Some parents also said that they found it difficult to motivate students, particularly those who felt very anxious about COVID-19, and did not feel that their education was a priority anymore. The uncertainty of examinations and progression also contributed to this.

While these correspondences with principals gave a great insight into some of the problems faced, there was a lack of diversity of opinion, as these were only two schools. Therefore, two other Laidlaw Scholars—Ellen McGrady Hogan and Róisín Winters—and I decided to roll out some surveys together. We made three surveys: one for educators, one for parents and one for students. We used Google Surveys and reviewed the questions in each to ensure they were appropriate before administering the surveys to anyone. All three of us had access to these surveys and we all asked people we knew to fill them out in order to get a representative set of results.

For survey one: Effects of Covid-19 on Education: Educators, we got 16 responses from teachers, principals and SNA's. Many of these educators said that the move to online teaching had negatively impacted their lives and that they found it more difficult to separate their work from their personal lives, especially for those who had children themselves. They also felt that students had adjusted moderately well to online learning but not very well or excellently. Some teachers also struggled with not being able to easily tell when students were struggling, which they felt may have affected the levels of engagement. They relied on parents to convey any struggle on the student's behalf, and that meant that the student had to share this struggle in the first place. This was very different to teaching in person, as it is much easier for teachers to gauge how well students understand a topic and help those students who may be struggling more than others. Secondary school teachers also reported higher stress levels in older students and said that they hoped that those students entering sixth year this September would have a reduced curriculum, a greater emphasis on continuous assessment or access to free additional tutoring.

For survey two: Effects of COVID-19 on Education: Parents, we received 77 responses, after posting in parents' Facebook groups, which worked very well. Most parents had two or more children in the household, meaning that they faced extra challenges in learning from home straight away, in relation to quiet space, access to laptops or tablets and the parents' time. Many parents reported higher levels of anxiety in their children, especially younger children who were missing out on social interaction. Some parents had to buy new laptops and printers in order to facilitate the move to online learning, which may have put a financial strain on some. This also meant that those who could not afford to do this were disadvantaged. Parents of senior cycle students in secondary schools were particularly worried about the increased stress levels that they saw in their children, although this varied somewhat between responses.

For survey three: Effects of Covid-19 on Education: Students, we received 28 responses. This survey was exclusively for senior cycle students, meaning students entering transition year, fifth year or sixth year. 82.1% of the participants who took our survey were just finished fifth year and therefore entering sixth year. This was partially due to the fact that both my and Ellen's sisters were in this category and we asked them to help us distribute these surveys. Of the respondents, only 44% had a good quality internet connection, meaning that over half of students struggled to participate in online learning from the get-go, simply because they couldn't reliably log on or download the videos that were required for online learning. This was before motivational issues or lack of space to work were taken into consideration. Most students conveyed that they struggled to motivate themselves when learning from home and half were unhappy with the effort that had been put into the quality of the learning on the teachers and school side of it. 85% of students said that they felt they had a lot of work to catch up on in September and 75% of students would rate their stress levels as "very high" in relation to this. 64.3% of students said that they would avail of extra resources to help them catch up and alleviate the stress somewhat should it be made available.

Looking over these responses and discussing them within the group led us to conclude that the group of people that were potentially least supported in their education in the aftermath of COVID-19 were those students who were entering sixth

year, as their Leaving Certificate would likely not be altered despite missing a substantial amount of time in school and being behind on the syllabus. This was supported by articles online about the widening of the attainment gap between private and public-school students, as private schools were much more intensive in their approach to online learning and had much higher engagement levels. This meant that students in private schools were much less disadvantaged than public school students as a result of the closure of schools. As well as this, these are the students who can afford extra grinds and expensive notes to help them catch up if they did fall behind. This stands in contrast to students in public schools who are already disadvantaged but then also may not be in a position to pay for grinds and extra tutoring, and may not have the funds to make use of paid websites with Leaving Certificate notes.

Therefore, it seemed clear to us that the group of people who would benefit the most from our help would be disadvantaged students who were entering sixth year, having missed a lot of school and not having access to the same resources as more advantaged students, particularly those in private schools.

The Intervention/ Resource Design Phase

By the end of the second week we had the vision of a resource for this group of students, namely a website of free Leaving Certificate notes that anyone could access. Initially, we also wanted to create an online tutoring platform to mirror the Coronavirus Tutoring Initiative (CTI) that had been set up in England. This involved students volunteering to tutor for free over Zoom for disadvantaged students who would otherwise not be able to afford grinds. While this seemed promising at first, with CTI expressing optimism about expanding into Ireland with us, it soon became clear that there were many challenges to this aspect of our idea. Firstly, Garda Vetting would be an issue, in ensuring safety online, and secondly, as we were nearing the end of the academic year, it would be harder to find tutors or students to take up the service. We also got in touch with the Voluntary Tuition Programme (VTP) in Trinity who ordinarily give free in-person grinds. They told us that they had attempted to move to doing this online at the start of COVID-19 but had found low

engagement with the online version, mostly due to a lack of fast internet connection, laptops or quiet space. We felt therefore, that if a society with that many resources, connections and a long history of tutoring had such problems tutoring online, we should first focus on the notes and potentially explore this area later.

Therefore, the next step was to define exactly what we wanted our resource to look like. We decided it would be a free website with notes that were donated by college students and ran by volunteers. After speaking to VTP, they offered to get volunteers to help us by donating their own notes, typing up any hand-written notes and formatting them into a standard format for the website. However, before we could get them involved, we had to first buy a domain, agree on a theme and logo and develop the website itself and a clear vision for what it should look like.

We spoke to entrepreneurial advisors, social entrepreneurs, the Trinity Civic Engagement Officer and more in order to understand what we could and couldn't do, as well as how to go about actually setting up a website and marketing it, et cetera. This took a week of Zoom calls, as we clarified the finer details. We also spoke to Ellen's cousin who is a website designer and provided us with advice in choosing a platform to create the website and templates to use. The Laidlaw fund in Trinity paid for the domain plus hosting for a year and we set about choosing a theme, which ended up being harder than expected, as we had to be clear on what features it would allow and more. We ended up choosing a theme that was too complex and had to re-download one that would be more user friendly, as none of us have any website making experience.

Currently we have the new theme downloaded and are working together to get the layout for the subjects right. We have also decided on a logo, which Róisín's uncle is currently working on for us. This will be centred on our website, which is called: studentonlinesupport.com. We plan to use the initials SOS on our branding and marketing, and will add further resources such as links to free books and mental health supports to the website as we begin to add the Leaving Certificate notes. As this is quite a large project we have taken on, it will go far beyond the six weeks of the programme, but will hopefully be up and running by September, when students will be returning to school.

Experience as a Mobilizer

Before becoming a mobiliser, it was important that we recruited volunteers, which was harder than anticipated. Many people that I reached out to said that they would participate later in the year or during term time, but were too busy due to part-time work or other commitments. Many of my friends also said that they had enough going on going into fourth year and were not interested in participating in further extra-curricular activities. However, I found more success in recruiting when I chose to use my social media, particularly Instagram, to advertise the programme. Ellen was also running an Instagram page for the programme with lots of information about what volunteering would involve and how to go about signing up. Therefore, it was easy to post links on my story, encouraging people to go have a look. Ellen took a similar approach, meaning that our reach was quite concentrated to final year students, particularly in Trinity.

This meant that when we were assigned our Irish group to mobilise, it was quite small and we vaguely knew most of the people who had chosen to get involved. This caused Ellen and I to feel somewhat awkward in making the WhatsApp group and organising calls, particularly at the start. However, as the week went on, the calls became a little more comfortable and most people were enthusiastic in participating to the best of their abilities. We shared the questionnaires with them that we had created to give them some insight as they researched their own areas and reflected with them on the progress made each day during our calls. In a unique move, the group decided to collaborate on their project and produce a website with user friendly guides to using the main online learning platforms, including an FAQ section. When this was decided, tasks were divided up between participants and everyone sent what they had worked on into the group chat to be collated by the group member in charge of setting up the website itself. We then all used the link to distribute it to different people who we felt would benefit from having it, particularly parents of primary school children.

Overall, the mobilising was a very interesting experience and allowed me to become more confident in leading groups that are a similar age to myself. It was also great to interact with more people who would have different perspectives on the same topic. And as this was an Irish group, it meant that more Irish-specific discussion could be had than in the main mobilisers chat with predominantly English people.

Partnership Development and Roll-out

A key partnership which I briefly mentioned above is with VTP in Trinity, who have agreed to help us in getting and organising notes. This will alleviate some of the ground work which has to be put into getting the website up and running. However, as we are just now getting the website to the point of uploading notes, this partnership has not been fully explored yet and will most likely take form properly next week. Another benefit to this partnership is that VTP already have a strong relationship with selected disadvantaged schools in Dublin inner-city, who they have agreed to advertise our services to, once the resource is ready to be shared.

Another key partnership is the relationship which we have formed with a disadvantaged rural secondary school, where Róisín's father is a teacher. Through this connection we have an agreement with the school to act as a pilot school for our resource. This means that when we have the website ready, we will first share it with the students at this school and gather valuable feedback to incorporate before rolling the website out on a national scale. As well as the feedback that we'll obtain, we will also be able to get some marketing this way, as students will tell their friends and relatives about the resource if they find it useful. We were told by many advisors that word of mouth is still the most powerful marketing technique in this area.

Between these two partnerships, we have ample support to get the website to as high a standard as possible and genuinely helpful for students. It will also give us a platform from which we can start to market our service and reach as many students as possible.

Feedback on the Programme

I feel that this programme cannot be ran with the same COVID-19 focus next year, as it will most likely not be as relevant anymore. Even now, I feel like it would have been ideal to do the programme earlier, as many schools were already closed for the summer holidays when we were tasked with helping parents, students or teachers with learning during COVID-19. Of course, I understand the restrictions that we were working under and that the programme had to take place in the summer, but it did narrow the possibilities for us, and the group which we mobilised, to make a difference in learning that was no longer happening anyway due to the summer holidays.

Perhaps the more general make_sense approach would be useful, in allowing scholars to work on a range of areas and choose one which they feel most passionate about. This may make mobilising somewhat more difficult as there would be a greater range, but I don't think that the very specific day-by-day breakdown of tasks is necessary in most cases. Maybe more general weekly guidelines would benefit people more, as it would give them more freedom to explore an area and develop an idea to help. I would recommend giving the contacts for alumni of the programme (with permission, of course) to new recruits so that they can ask questions and get a better idea of what's ahead, as well as build their network and gain support.

It may also be helpful to give more clear expectations of the deliverables by the end of week six from the start, as the resource we're working on will take us much longer than six weeks, while some people carried out actions which took only a few days. Of course, this is due to individual differences among other factors but I feel that I would have liked to know the end deliverables more clearly from the start.

Overall, I liked the idea of guiding us to work on our own ideas and getting more people involved. I felt that our two mobilisers, Rachel and Lauren, were genuinely interested in the programme and supporting us through it, which was very helpful. The calls to debrief and get clear on instructions were well-organised, and provided a clear structure to follow from the beginning. I did enjoy the programme and what it

stands for, and would like to see it continue, although somewhat altered as mentioned above. The core idea of getting the scholars involved in thinking creatively to develop an idea that aids in a social issue is admirable and one which should be developed further and expanded into several areas. I have definitely benefitted from participating in this programme and hope that our resource will genuinely help some students in catching up with the work that they have left to do ahead of their Leaving Certificate.

I would like to thank our mobilisers, Rachel and Lauren, our Laidlaw coordinators, Joel and Ann, and the Laidlaw Foundation for making this experience possible. I have learned a lot and will continue to work on our project alongside Ellen and Róisín for weeks, if not months, to come.