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Striving for Teamwork and Concrete Positive Change:

A Reflection on the COVID-19 Re_Action for Education Program

Introduction

To tackle the rising educational needs during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Re_Action for Education program was launched where scholars were first trained in the MakeSense engagement model then strived for real-world impacts by developing diverse actions and mobilizing communities.

During this engagement experience, a primary focus was to address the younger student demographics' accessibility to resources as education transitioned to home. In the needs assessments phase, it was realized that younger pupils may be less adaptive to living and learning virtually compared to their older counterparts which may prevent them from effectively searching for resources for themselves. Moreover, this challenge may be exacerbated in certain groups such as those with special needs or mental health needs. Thus, an illustrated, interactive resource hub containing wellness, productivity, learning, and recreation ideas was selectively curated to cater the needs of families with children. The goal was to provide easy-to-access resources which are also fun for the family to explore while stimulating the curiosity of the pupil.

This report discusses the needs assessed during the research phase, intervention actions taken, the teamwork behind developing the resource hub for younger students, my experience as a mobilizer, and reflections on the program. Beyond the 6 weeks with the Re_Action program, ongoing efforts are focusing on incorporating feedback received into the resource package while disseminating it to community partners.

Research Phase

To effectively assess needs that were still outstanding, and limitations of the past virtual semester, first-hand information from parents, teachers, and students were collected. During this phase, social media, emails, and interviews were extensively employed. While the challenges, needs, and experiences on education during COVID-19 were diverse, a few of them were particularly noted during this research phase and coincided with concerns of others. Topics explored included positive and negative experiences with virtual schooling, improvements expected if virtual schooling were to continue, and good practices seen in virtual schooling.

While schooling transitioned to home, unique challenges were present to both the parents and the children of the household. Firstly, supporting homeschooling can be demanding to the parents as they may need to be out at work (essential services) or not necessarily be familiar with supporting particular school subjects. Just like teachers, parents also faced the challenges from adapting to virtual learning platforms. Secondly, as parents managed schoolwork, the chances of disagreement or conflicts increased. On the children's side, a lack of interaction with peers caused strains and anxiety. Maintaining productivity and managing work-life balance also became more difficult.

The dynamics between educators and students were hindered as classes transitioned remote. While grading standards were modified due to the pandemic, for example pass/fail systems replaced percentage, a decrease in student motivation to do work or to participate was witnessed. In other cases, such as a public school district in New Brunswick, Canada, enrollment in the course became the sole requirement for completion. Maintaining academic integrity during assessments also became challenging due to the lack of measures to enforce it. As students became less motivated, a negative feedback was also perceived on teachers' motivation. It may be worthy noting that students who were already motivated tend to maintain the work ethics while others became detached, which in a long run could lead to a trend of polarization.

Nonprofit organizations, which play important roles in delivering education and opportunities outside the traditional classroom setting are also affected. This includes Let's Talk Science, one of the largest science communication organizations in Canada which relied heavily on in-person demonstrations. Youth mentoring initiatives which relied on field trips/ outings were also forced to transition online. Much effort is needed for supporting such initiatives during the 'new normal'.

Intervention and Resources

1. Leveraging Existing Resources

Initially, interventions were undertaken in parallel with the research and needs assessments. To maximize the effects and concretely support parents, students, educators around, smaller actions that involved existing nonprofit initiatives and resources were taken and were met with positive results. For example, massive open online courses resources were connected to international students in need, guides on supporting homeschooling were referred to families. A website compiled by UNESCO's COVID-19 Response was particularly effective which included hundreds of free e-learning tools, softwares, guides grouped by country, language, and age groups. Some of them even do not require smartphone or

internet access. This tool also turned out to be helpful for the websites other scholars were developing.

Attempts to establish partnerships with preexisting nonprofit initiatives were also well underway. However, due to the time constraints on acquiring approval for new proposals, the partnerships which include developing virtual science outreach events are likely to be undertaken outside the Re_Action context. Therefore, the focus pivoted to creating resources for families and educators.

In conclusion, the actions from this phase were instrumental for learning and exploration. Although the recommendations on daily actions could be improved, they were helpful for getting a headstart and experimentation. In the meantime, meetings with MakeSense coordinators were helpful for clarifying the objectives and plan for next steps.

2. Pivoting to Resource Creation

Transitioning to resource creation, the focus was to address the drop in motivation and provide incentives for students. Homeschooling incentives which focused on activities instead of grading pressures emerged as an attractive alternative at home and at school. Its direct effect would be increasing motivation for staying engaged with school work. Its other potential benefits might be that the activities could facilitate the interactions between students and educators/parents, which has been a frustration for virtual schooling on both sides. Thirdly, such activities could potentially help enrich the virtual schooling components. However, these incentives would have to be adapted to the age groups, and the needs of educators and families.

To realize this idea, efforts were devoted to collecting such incentive ideas, filtering them and writing a document explaining the concept of non-grade incentives. Suggestions on how to adapt them for one's child/ student were also written. Results from this part of the work became incorporated into a larger, illustrated resource hub for families with children which was undertaken with the team of volunteers. Other actions could have been also taken to address motivation issues, such as creating social media posts promoting academic integrity.

3. E-learning guide 'Riley the Resourceful Rhino' (with the 2nd batch volunteers)

The proverb went, 'if you give a hungry man a fish, you feed him for a day, but if you teach him how to fish, you feed him for a lifetime'. It was realized that for resource hubs, while the contents were central, it may be also crucial that it stimulates the curiosity of the children and provides positive role models for learning. During the research phase, it was

also realized that resources specific for the younger demographics were much needed. Thus, in order to stimulate the curiosity of children and motivate them to learn and aspire during homeschooling situations, a resource hub nicknamed 'Riley the Resourceful Rhino' was initiated.

To effectively serve the purpose of resource referral and help families with children, the focus was to be selective for high quality, free resources that required minimal registration/ navigation during the compilation phase. In addition, illustrative, graphic presentations for each resource were provided for helping the audience to grasp its function and to determine at a glance whether it was needed. Furthermore, creative presentation strategies were developed for engaging the child and stimulating interests. Activities which were friendly for special needs, and the wellness of the whole family were emphasized. Ultimately, the goal was to develop a petite collection of virtual or physical activities that combined wellness and learning purposes, which would stimulate the child to further discover their interests.

While electronic resources and resource hubs are amenable for distributions, a major limitation is its dependency on internet and computer access. As a result, the resource hub highlights the technology support initiatives by the Canadian government which are available to provide free or subsidized electronics in all provinces.

Presently, the resource hub takes the form a single GoolgeSlide/ PDF file consisting of 50 activities (hyperlinks) in 4 domains (Wellness, Recreation, Productivity, and Learning). Each activity is illustrated with cliparts or screenshots descriptive of the content. A clipart character, Riley the Rhino, engages with the reader and walks them through the activities. For each domain, 30% of the activities are special-needs-friendly.

This intervention is designed and executed by the team that joined Re_Action as volunteers together with myself. Ongoing efforts are focusing on dissemination, incorporating feedback from piloting, and establishing partnerships with libraries and nonprofit organizations.

Contributors of this project: Amaan Malik, Arshdeep Jawanda, Cheerie Zhu, Jackson Weir, Katherine Ding, Nathaniel Vo, and Ben Xu.

Mobilization Experience

1. Recruitment: Laying the Foundation

Since early in the program, fellow scholars and I have been working towards mobilizing a global community. While rebranding the Re_Action program website which serves as an important portal for anyone interested, we highlighted the mission and

opportunities offered by joining this voluntary initiative. As other scholars furnished the program's social media presence on Facebook/LinkedIn/Instagram and decorated them with a variety of posters, I synergized their creativity by spreading them to my own networks. While at one point the North American group was challenged by a shortage of recruits, I communicated with program coordinators about being open to arrangements (mobilizing vs developing individual projects) while redoubling the efforts to market our initiatives. Eventually, our efforts were met with success and we entered mobilization.

During the mobilizing efforts, I worked with a team of 6, 3 of which were directly recruited through my effort while others were assigned by the MakeSense coordinators. The entire group was stationed across Canada, dispersed from Vancouver on the Pacific coast (2) to Toronto in the center (3) and Saint John on the Atlantic coast (1). The diversity of backgrounds, levels of education was instrumental for forging ideas while the familiarity of the group helped create a cohesive and welcoming environment.

2. Team Building: Paving the Way for Successful Teamwork

To a large extent I retained the program format inherited from the previous batch. The participant kits were greatly enriched by the work of fellow scholars and effectively delivered vital suggestions on actions taken by the participants. Having in mind only a one-week mobilization, I adopted the routine of daily Zoom calls which was combined with the Whatsapp group for staying connected during the day. On top of that, I created a GoogleDrive folder for our group in order to keep meeting slides, minutes, notes, and working progress.

Entering the program, the team carried with them a high level of motivation and desires to help. After a few icebreakers where they swiftly bonded with each other, they dived into the daily actions with phenomenal proficiency and resourcefulness. Apart from laying ground rules about respectful and active participation, my main role in this phase was to engage them with one another and bring everyone into the conversation.

3. Fostering Problem Solving and Creativity

When faced with a wide array of challenges, moving from problems to solutions could be challenging. In order to facilitate concrete actions by the team and create impacts in their communities and beyond, I focused on two levels of support which drove the problem solving and creative processes.

On one hand, as group members divided into the needs witnessed in their home communities and took direct actions to support individuals, I ensured their efforts were

backed up by the rich repository of experiences, perspectives offered by the team. Especially in earlier on, the collective brainstorming activities brought together a wide range of discussions and information that opened the eyes of everyone. For example, while one raised the point about finding technologies for a classmate, the group brought forth a range of ideas on mobilizing electronics recycling repositories and existing nonprofit initiatives.

On the other hand, I facilitated the group's interests in working together by funneling their ideas on motivation, special needs, resources into a collective effort. The outcomes of this process was the aforementioned 'Resource Hub' initiative. During this process, I established priorities, milestones, division of labor, to streamline the progression of the project. Most importantly, I ensured the continuation of an active and productive discussion such that ideas from everyone were discussed and enriched the work.

4. Impacts Created

A cohesive, highly dynamic team emerged out of the mobilization phase. While the engagement during the official program week was high, team members continued to collaborate and ensured their ideas and work concretely supported families. As the collective project which came from the ideas and efforts of everyone keeps developing, its impact will continue to grow.

Direct and lasting impacts may be resulted in the team's home communities. Examples of the actions taken included helping children planning their summer schedule, connecting classmates who missed an important required calculus course with equivalent online programs, helping friends who lacked technology for studying to find nonprofit initiatives that address such needs.

Feedbacks on the program

Despite the challenges of being a pilot program and the situation created by COVID-19, the program was an excellent experience for learning and creating real-life impacts. It could not have been done without the collaborative efforts of the Laidlaw and MakeSense communities.

A main advantage of the program is that individuals were free to create and realize their ideas guided by facilitators. However, the stringent communications on daily actions in the first week created an opposite impression. Instead, streamlined accountability measures such as daily update writings could be used to retain the effect of keeping everyone motivated. In addition, much success has been seen when scholars bridged ideas and

critical skills fostered in their previous Laidlaw research experience to this program, which is a highlight and may be encouraged amongst future scholars.

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