

# **Reflection on the 6-week Reaction for Education Program**

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## **Introduction**

This report outlines my involvement in the 6-week leadership-in-action experience called the Reaction for Education program, initiated by the organization Makesense. I will share about the challenges I faced, the development of my project, and conclude with the impact I was able to make through this program.

## **The Research Phase (Week 1)**

We all know that Covid-19 has had a huge impact on every aspect of our lives, especially on education. For some, the transition was a simple matter of switching from in-person to online learning; however, for many, the crisis has not only shone a spotlight on, but also exasperated vast educational disparities within their communities. The reality is that the loss of schedule and social interaction, the barriers to language and technological literacy prevent students from achieving their full learning potential.

This was something I discovered on Day 1 of the Reaction for Education program, when I started to contact people in my own community about the challenges of remote education. My method of communication was largely through email, Facebook Messenger, and Instagram, where I reached out to family, friends, parents, the children I tutor, and my old high school teachers asking them to share about the obstacles they faced. This step would prove very useful in the weeks to come.

For example, when I asked a parent about her child's workload, she mentioned that during the beginning of the lockdown period, her son received one huge package of notes, assignments, and homework to complete. For some students, this gave them the autonomy to work and study at their own pace. However, for others, without a regimented routine or access to help from teachers and parents, it was very difficult to find motivation on their own. Thus, the parent whom I contacted saw a decline in her child's learning efforts and stated that the school

lacked the initiative to aid parents and students during the pandemic. Moreover, I discovered that some parents and teachers were not as familiar with technology and needed virtual support to guide them through Zoom, Google Classroom, and other online applications. After hearing about their experiences, I began to research existing initiatives to ensure that these challenges were not ignored. For students who needed extra help, I connected them with local tutoring organizations that offered free or discounted tutoring services during the pandemic. Then, I shared learning resources, educational channels such as TedEd and Math Antics, and webinars to help parents gain technological literacy.

### **The Resource Design and Partnership Development Phase (Weeks 2&3)**

At the end of the research phase, the US cohort discussed the three areas of specialization—logistics, tutoring, and training—and the projects we wanted to work on for the following week. I decided to specialize in providing logistical support; I wanted to create a website that contained online materials and resources to ease the transition into remote education. Realizing that two other participants from my batch also had a similar idea, to create a resource hub for students, parents and teachers, I sought to establish a partnership with Chloe Gong, a student from Columbia University, and Scarlet Bliss, a student from Tufts University, both of whom were eager to begin this new adventure.

During the resource design phase, we had the latitude to dive into a specific area of our choosing with the guidance of our mobilizers to help us succeed. Personally, I was able to perform to the best of my abilities while maintaining transparency with my team by providing constant updates on my progress. Creativity was at the heart of my project and method of leadership. Before the three of us began our website, however, we did more research on other websites to better understand the existing initiatives. For instance, although the UNESCO website included many links to remote learning tools, they had vague descriptions and no further information about the pricing or suitable audience (e.g. “Kolibri – learning application to support

universal education, available in more than 20 languages”).<sup>1</sup> The goal here was to assess its strongpoints as well as its shortcomings to ensure that our website had the potential to fill in those gaps. The more we worked on our website, the more creative we had to be, because the entire website design process revolved around innovation, which required a clarity amid chaos mindset.

Our next task was to come up with a name for our website. We wanted the name to reflect the content and purpose of our site, which involved providing tech support for remote education. We went through an iterative process of brainstorming names and obtaining feedback from friends and family, but we were stuck. During the daily check-in, we were able to talk about the challenges we faced for Week 2, which elicited an impromptu brainstorming session with our group. As we bounced around some ideas, Kenza, one of our mobilizers, suddenly had an epiphany: “What about teach?” Someone raised the issue that this name was a bit too generic, but she responded on the Zoom chat, “No, I meant te(a)ch, as in ‘teach’ and ‘tech’!” Evidently, these meetings were very effective because we were able to use our collective intelligence to find solutions together. Thereafter, we became TE(a)CH, the website that provided tech support for teachers, students and families so they can continue learning and connecting with one another during the virtual education era.

### **TE(a)CH: Our website, objectives, and plans**

To give a brief description of our site, it includes an ‘About Us’ page, three resource pages for students, teachers and families, and a teacher’s blog on the ‘Connect’ page. In the ‘About Us’ page, we want our audience to have a clear idea of what TE(a)CH stands for—our purpose, our goals, and our mission. We empathize with those who are struggling, which is why we want to inform and equip others to best support our students' educational and developmental success. In the ‘About Us’ section, our website features information about Makesense to introduce the work they do. Finally, there is more information introducing the Reaction for

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<sup>1</sup> “Distance Learning Solutions,” UNESCO.

Education program, out of which TE(a)CH was born. In each of the resource pages, we provide detailed descriptions on popular ed-tech platforms to ensure that users can easily explore these tools and choose ones that are most suitable for them.

We know that the current pandemic has exasperated the education attainment gap and shone a harsh light on challenges such as technological literacy, language barriers, and financial anxieties. Students who worry about their parents' health may neglect their own, all while trying to adjust to remote learning. To weather the stresses of the pandemic, we have included mental health support, articles on parenting strategies, tips on privacy and online safety, and homeschooling solutions for parents as well as a timetable to keep students motivated. Moreover, we understand that not every student thinks and learns the same way, which is why we incorporated special education resources to normalize online learning for students.

Furthermore, our website features a 'Connect' page which functions as an interactive space for the education community to share their expertise in a peer-to-peer method. Teachers may simply sign up and request to be a writer in order to create blog posts, upload educational videos, and like or comment on other posts. We hope that through this horizontal diffusion of knowledge, teachers from different countries and backgrounds can share about their experiences, discuss the challenges they faced, and develop solutions together.

## **Reflection for Week 2**

When I first started TE(a)CH, I just wanted to help people and make some sort of contribution to my community. Referring to the traditional design thinking process, the five steps include: empathizing with one's users; defining their needs; ideating innovative solutions; creating a prototype; and finally testing one's solutions.<sup>2</sup> Unknowingly, we followed every step of the design thinking process. We had an idea, then we plunged right into it; in a matter of days, we created TE(a)CH. When we started sharing our website with friends and family, we received

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<sup>2</sup> Teo Yu Siang, "What Is Design Thinking?," The Interaction Design Foundation.

constructive feedback on our product, which allowed us to make the necessary improvements and alterations to our website. People liked TE(a)CH and believed in it. After seeing the fruits of our labour and the level of impact we were able to make, my team and I wanted to devote all of our efforts into developing and expanding TE(a)CH. In other words, it definitely became more than just a university project to us. Now, our hope for the future is to launch our project as an official non-profit organization.

### **The Mobilizer Experience (Weeks 4&5)**

Being a mobilizer was a strenuous but certainly rewarding experience. Originally, when we started promoting the program, the US batch thought that they would be leading a 2-week program, identical to the one in which we had just participated. However, there appeared to be a slight error in communication pertaining to the duration of the program, which was supposed to be only one week. Luckily, we were able to resolve this issue quickly as our mobilizers decided that we could give our participants the option to participate in either a one or 2-week program, whereafter they would choose an area of specialization.

Before the start of the program, my partner and I spent the weekend preparing a Week 2 plan for those who would continue the program. During the first meeting, our group consisted of four university students and one incoming high school senior. After icebreakers and introductions, we began to go through the action steps for each day. What inspired me the most was that we all came with different ways of learning, absorbing information, and seeing the world, but we were joined together in our passion for education. For one of our meetings, we decided to dedicate a large portion to simply getting to know each other. We wanted to share about our lives and they theirs, and not long after, a friendship emerged among the seven of us as we discovered similar tastes in music, hobbies, and shared funny stories. One of the most memorable moments was taking group pictures at the end of every call. Our group always posed according to the action of the day. For example, since Sunday evening was our “Kickoff” call, we all gave our best kickboxing pose for the camera.

## **Impact Created**

For Day 1, the action of the day was to assess the needs around one's community. One participant in particular was very successful in receiving feedback on the challenges of remote education. She created a Google form and sent it on Facebook with the help of her parents who then shared it with friends who were affected by school closures. After receiving many responses, she was able to fully understand the barriers of remote learning and provide her contacts with a list of resources tailored to their needs.

Our high school participant was part of a speech and debate club that began funding urban schools during the early stages of the pandemic. As secondary school student, she was able to speak to the direct impacts of remote education on extracurriculars such as athletics, music, and clubs, as well as the generally limited speaking platforms for minors. This information proved extremely useful for some mobilizers from the US batch because they were working on an initiative that provided extra support for high school students transitioning into post-secondary studies during Covid-19.

## **Reflection for Weeks 4&5**

My pedagogy was rooted in a peer mentoring model, which afforded space for personalized support, troubleshooting, and autonomy over individual projects. For example, at the beginning of every check-in, we set out clear goals and milestones for the day in order for our participants to measure their successes. Part of our mentorship dynamic involved the rose, thorn, and bud method of introspection. We would go around sharing a rose of the week: a highlight, success, small achievement, or something positive that happened; a thorn: challenges they experienced or something they could use more support with; and a bud: something they're excited about in the coming weeks or an idea that has blossomed out of this program and has yet to be explored. Reflecting back on my experiences, self-reflection sessions coupled with establishing regular milestones helped cultivate a space for empathy, a willingness to learn, and

the ability to work together as vested partners to lead a successful project.

## **Improvements and Additions to the Reaction for Education program**

Overall, Reaction for Education was very successful as a pilot program. However, if this were to be run next year, I would like to offer a few suggestions to enhance and maximize the experience altogether. I would suggest that all mobilizers lead a 2-week program. Drawing from personal experience, while the first week was mainly a discovery process, the second week allocated more time and attention to delve deeper into my area of specialization. Thus, I was able to execute and follow through with my action plan when I was given more autonomy and flexibility to work.

In terms of networking and collaborating with others, I would encourage frequent interactions with other mobilizer groups in order to build partnerships. Members from my team were especially inspired by the stories shared in the international call because they could see the impact and reach of their efforts on a global scale. On a related note, one piece of advice I wish I knew before the program was the importance of networking. Through the leadership experience, I was able to engage with a professional network of Laidlaw scholars and mobilizers at Makesense. What was surprising was that after a LinkedIn post about TE(a)CH and our involvement in the Reaction for Education program, the Senior Director of Innovation and Strategic Partnerships at Visa contacted us to gain insight into the community we were building through our website. Scarlet, Chloe, and I have met with the director three times over the past two weeks and discussed business strategies, challenges we faced, and areas of opportunity. She has been a wonderful mentor and we plan on keeping in touch with each other throughout our journeys.

## Final Thoughts

One of my biggest takeaways from this program is epitomized by the Makesense mantra, “alone we go faster, but together we go further”—the idea that building partnerships can help form an ecosystem of problem solvers who want to find a solution on a global scale. These peer-to-peer exchanges train us to be more proactive because each of us comes with a different world perspective. The Reaction for Education program excels at the strategy of using a grand panoply of collective intelligence to find global solutions to global problems.

I am very grateful to have been a part of the Laidlaw leadership-in-action experience this summer and to have met brilliant minds from all over the world, who have been and will continue to be my inspiration to strive for excellence. Going into the program, I did not know what I could accomplish in only six weeks. However, the coordinators of the Reaction for Education program always emphasized that we would be creating a project that has great potential. Within a short amount of time, I realized that as long as I had the passion and the perseverance, I could create something meaningful and worthwhile. To that end, TE(a)CH has certainly become more than just a university project; it is my *magnum opus*, my *chef-d'œuvre*, a creation that my team and I have carefully crafted and nurtured, and will continue to develop this year and beyond.

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