

India: Arts For All, Slam Out Loud

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Type of intervention: Non-governmental

Website: www.slamoutloud.com

General description

Slam Out Loud is an Indian non-profit that uses the arts along with multiple low tech platforms to deliver support for arts-based socio-emotional learning and mental well-being to the most vulnerable children at scale. By offering localised, need-sensitive and engaging at-home audio, video, text, and print resources for learners who have limited access to the internet, they aim to lead children towards creative outcomes and build mental resilience during the COVID-19 based school closure period.

Within a few weeks of school closures, Slam Out Loud (SOL) rapidly adapted its interventions to create resources that are free of charge, interactive, and accessible in English and Hindi (and being translated into Punjabi, Tamil, Malayalam and Marathi) and made them available through various low-tech distribution channels (WhatsApp, Interactive Voice Response Systems (IVRS) and radio).

Slam Out Loud launched a WhatsApp Channel delivering arts-based [socio-emotional learning activities](#) directly to 70 000 children daily across 23 states within India as well as 19 other countries. For children with internet access, an [at-home 'Do-it-Yourself' styled theatre course](#) is also available as video content accessible on-demand and hosted on their [YouTube channel](#). For users without internet access, Slam Out Loud provides remote learning content through

The coronavirus crisis led schools and universities to rapidly transition to a distance-learning mode, via the Internet, television or radio. This series documents some country initiatives that ensured education continuity for all using technology and provided support to teachers, students, and their families.



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Interactive Voice Response System (IVRS), radio, and television platforms as well as distributing printed materials in collaboration with other NGOs and State governments.

Main problems addressed

Enhancing student well-being. In March 2020, pandemic-induced school closures left some 1.5 billion students globally out of the classroom (World Bank, 2020). In India, school closures have affected 320 million children, further increasing educational inequity and adding to the anxiety and stress levels of learners. One challenge that educators across the globe faced was to address student well-being during these times, with learner loneliness increasing due to lack of social interaction and creative output.

Reaching students with diverse access to technology. Nationally, only 24% of households in India have access to the Internet. 66% of India's population lives in villages, and only a little over 15% of rural households have access to Internet services. For urban households, the proportion is 42%. This makes it challenging to reach a vast majority of children in India with remote online learning. However, India has more than 400 million active WhatsApp users. 53% of phone users in India use non-Internet enabled phones (National Statistical Office, 2019).

Given diverse levels of access to technology, Slam Out Loud's intervention is designed to be flexible and to be hosted across different platforms to reach children in the most under-resourced spaces.

Mobilising and developing resources

Building networks and institutional partnerships. Slam Out Loud leveraged their existing network as well as contacting multiple additional stakeholders including various non-governmental organisations, schools, educators, and parents to support equitable remote art learning for students across the country. Through a pilot project with the Government of Patiala, India, they were able to disseminate art activities to over 140 000 children every day, via a systemic network of Block Mentors and Teachers in the region. Teachers and mentors were introduced to art learning content through virtual workshops, and were supported to cascade this to children within their schools. Content reached children in a top-down approach through Block mentors and teachers, while their artwork was shortlisted at the mentor-level daily and shared with Slam Out Loud via a bottom-up approach. Additionally, Slam Out Loud partnered with [Gram Vaani](#)'s community media platform, Mobile Vaani, to disseminate art activities to children in an audio-visual format, thus enhancing art access for children with extremely low internet bandwidth. The Boston Consulting Group (BCG) made the high quality content on socio-emotional learning available to over 40 000 children in the states of Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand, and Rajasthan. The collaboration with Leadership for Equity led to the art-based learning resources being uploaded on the Ministry of Human Resources Development (MHRD) and National Council for Teacher Education's (NCTE) teacher training portal [DIKSHA](#), and rolled out to 1.8 million students in Maharashtra. Thanks to those partnerships, Slam Out Loud could thus easily scale the programme without significant additional investment in human resources and technology.

Leveraging the reach of WhatsApp. With 50% of India's Internet-enabled audience (over 400 million users) having access to WhatsApp, and a previous internal review finding that 75% of children in SOL's programmes have access to their parent's WhatsApp accounts for at least one hour in a day, WhatsApp presented itself as the most immediate medium to reach children. Additionally, deploying WhatsApp content in various formats such as text, image, video, and voice notes made for more equitable learning opportunities for children with diverse learning skills and needs.

Using an existing repository of resources. Slam Out Loud also leveraged their existing repository of resources and content principles (curriculum design, focus around children's socio-emotional learning and wellbeing) to address the remote learning needs of children during COVID-19. These resources were customised during the school closures for delivery over low tech platforms such as WhatsApp and

Interactive Voice Response Systems. Customisations were made to cater to the limitations of the platforms (the amount and nature of content that can be shared), data bandwidth and app access.

Creating content that is context-relevant. Additionally, particular attention was paid to ensure the activities and tasks created and sent out to students daily were contextual, addressed current challenges, required few resources, and could be accomplished easily at home. Students received activities via WhatsApp but did not need digital resources to complete the activities.

Fostering effective use and learning

Creating high-quality arts-based experiences. Students received short [tasks](#) related to poetry, theatre, story-telling or visual arts daily via WhatsApp, and were encouraged to share their work with professional artists, peer-groups and teachers as well as reach out for support to the mentor assigned to them. The idea was to provide a creative outlet to students, allowing them to express themselves and build their artistic confidence in order to support their well-being, and further develop their arts-based skills. Activities included puppet-making, writing poems, interviewing family members about what is most precious to them and writing stories about this, and producing drawings or paintings on a theme, such as 'how are you feeling today?'. Content was shared across platforms that were easily available to children, parents and educators – starting with WhatsApp and moving towards Interactive Voice Response Systems in audio format (available in [English](#), [Hindi](#) and [Punjabi](#)).

Using a creative confidence rubric. Slam Out Loud has developed a [creative confidence rubric](#) to help students, parents, and teachers reflect on children's confidence in creative communication, critical thinking, collaboration, creativity, self-esteem, and empathy. [Children's art](#) was published across its digital platforms and children received oral response and feedback at the end of the automated scripted calls to encourage and assess growth in creative confidence (as part of socio-emotional and life skills).

Incentivising participation. The programme also incentivised participation of children by rewarding them with titles such as '[Artist of the Day/Week](#)' and used qualitative surveys and recurrent follow ups to measure participation and learning. Children's progress was also shared with their parents and teachers to keep them informed of the activities, as well as creating space for appreciation and support.

Attending virtual workshops. Children were encouraged to attend [virtual workshops](#) organised by the organisation, which focused on their wellbeing, as well as engaging with their family members through activities at home. For instance, the [theatre course](#) enables children to learn the art of theatre within their own home, as well as co-creating meaningful experiences with their family members in the process.

Consulting stakeholders, including students. A mix of focus group discussions and individual interviews with stakeholder groups, such as grant makers, government officials, NGO heads, teachers, and students within India and across the globe were used to ensure that content was flexible, contextual and adaptable. A priority was to ensure children's safety and their parents' willingness for them to be part of the programme.

Multi-layered quality assurance processes. Before deployment, all content is tested across three layers. First, two levels of content creators and experts review the material before it is shared with a sample of 300 children across WhatsApp groups to test engagement. Second, high-frequency oral diagnostics are used to assess rate of engagement and response along with text/WhatsApp based assessments (powered by artificial intelligence (AI) tools) to monitor the quality of responses and subsequent growth on Creative Confidence aspects. Third, qualitative surveys of stakeholders (teachers, parents, government officials) are also conducted to monitor growth in an [Art-proficiency rubric](#). Growth in the organic user base is assessed through tech-generated analytics on usage.

Implementation challenges

The key challenges faced by Slam Out Loud, along with how they were mitigated is captured below:

- *Market.* Art learning through low tech platforms was not being used at scale before this point. Slam Out Loud created a scaled market through institutional and governmental partnerships, such as with the Government of Patiala, Punjab, State Council of Educational Research and Training (SCERT), Government of Gujarat, Ministry of Human Resources Development (MHRD), Gram Vaani, Boston Consulting Group and Leadership for Equity. These systemic partnerships enabled them to disseminate art learning resources to children in the respective states where these partners were operating.
 - *Operations.* Content production requirements steadily increased with the programme process. This was addressed by consistently introducing new volunteer cohorts who specialised in content creation, along with subsequent capacity building of existing volunteers.
 - *Finance.* The application programming interface (API) for Interactive Voice Response (IVR) require largely tech-heavy platforms that lead to project costs shooting up. Given its financial constraints, Slam Out Loud relied on institutional partnerships to cover part of the costs. For example, a tech based non-profit (assisting the setting up of a WhatsApp API), subsidised rates from an IVR vendor and implementation partners to pay for printing and distribution of physical copies of learning resources.
- *Regulations.* Since Slam Out Loud's primary beneficiaries were children, it was paramount to ensure that parental permissions and individual data protection was focused upon. Child protection regulations vary across different countries, which added a challenge when it expanded to other countries than India.

Monitoring success

The reach of the initiative. Within the first month of the WhatsApp channel, it gained 521 NGO representatives from organisations such as [Room to Read](#), [Aga Khan Foundation](#), [Dream a Dream](#), [Piramal Foundation](#), [Teach For India](#) and many more, and school partners such as Essar International School Surat, Government and semi-government Schools across Punjab, Delhi, Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh and several more Indian States along with more than 500 individual subscribers (comprising parents, educators across the world and children themselves). Through a cascaded model, each NGO, school partner and educator further distributed activities received from Slam Out Loud in their own contexts and geographies, thereby taking the reach to more than 70 000 children daily (as identified by an internal survey to determine reach) across 23 (out of 31) Indian states and 19 countries.

Slam Out Loud offers content in Hindi and English and has also translated content into four more Indian languages (Punjabi, Tamil, Malayalam and Marathi) to make it accessible to vernacular speaking children. The educational body of the state government of Gujarat, Gujarat Council of Education Research and Training (GCERT) has added the remote learning content to its [state-wide remote learning packets](#). In June 2020, the remote learning initiatives were scaled to three more Indian states: Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Jharkhand. The collaboration with the Government of Patiala led to an eight-week long pilot project, disseminating art activities focused on socio-emotional learning to over 140 000 children (as determined by the Patiala Government) daily. Further, they also collaborated with grassroot initiatives such as [Gram Vaani](#) (an audio based social media over IVRS) to reach children in Bihar, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh in India and are also in conversations with two more Indian state governments to further scale their initiatives and reach many more Indian children.

Recognition. Their aggregate partners and organisations, such as [Girl Rising](#), [HundrED](#) and [Give a Hand](#) have highlighted this remote learning solution as one of the most innovative educational responses to the COVID-19 crisis.

Assessing engagement. Content with the highest engagement on SOL's WhatsApp channel is posted on [YouTube](#). This, along with tech-generated analytics on usage and responses, helps assess the rate of engagement and response (through number of response videos, audio clips and artwork created) as well as their quality. For instance, through SOL's eight-week pilot project with the Government of Patiala, children created more than 460 artworks and 120 response videos. During the pandemic, more than 100 000 artworks, comprising audio-visual responses of children's poems and stories, have been created as part of the programme. SOL also monitors completion of courses, and number of viewing hours (currently about 45 hours for [DIY:Art videos](#) as determined via YouTube Analytics) on content hosting platforms such as YouTube and collates testimonials of users completing the courses to further inform content creation and delivery.

Adaptability to new contexts

Individuals and organisations in 19 countries already subscribe to Slam Out Loud's initiative. The intervention is largely replicable across any space within the English-speaking population, and countries can also further customise the programme to suit their context and translate content into languages other than English. The learning content is age-appropriate and applicable to children across contexts.

The initiatives will continue to be sustained beyond the COVID-19 crisis. Through government level and institutional partnerships, Slam Out Loud aims to advocate for socio-emotional learning to be adopted as a key component in educational systems, and provides a replicable example of how low tech resources can be used to implement arts-based remote learning with a focus on the development of socio-emotional learning.

Key points to keep in mind for a successful adaptation

1. Interventions should **require few resources** and ones that are easily available to enable access for as many children as possible.
2. **Pre-existing technology** such as WhatsApp, radio and television should be leveraged, particularly for children with limited access to the Internet.
3. **Community members should be involved** and regularly updated with progress, including parents of the children and their primary educators.
4. The chief concern should be **ensuring safety of children**, ensuring that parents give permission for children to be involved and that data regulations are carefully followed.
5. **Mechanisms to provide feedback** to children should be created, so that they receive suggestions for development and appreciation for their work to build confidence and skills throughout the programme.
6. It is important to ensure that all **learning resources are relevant to the context** and simple to understand, keeping in mind where the children who use them come from and what they most relate to.

References

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