Education continuity during the Coronavirus crisis

Colombia: A prender la Onda (To turn on the wave)

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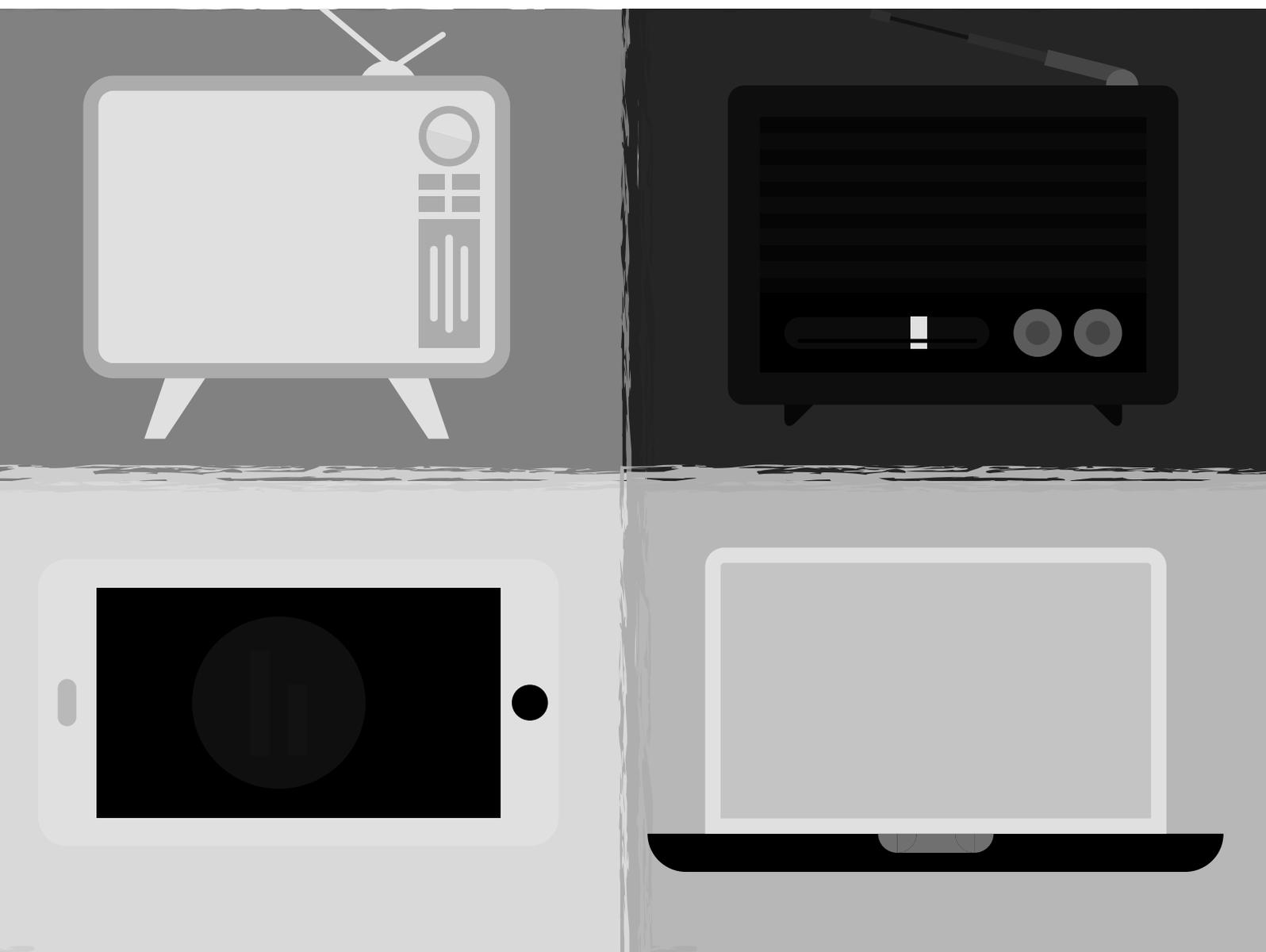
Colombia: A prender la Onda (to turn on the wave)

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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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General description

A prender la Onda (ALO) is an initiative led by a group of Enseña por Colombia's (Teach for Colombia) fellows, alumni and other teachers with the aim of continuing to support students' learning during the COVID-19 crisis. Enseña por Colombia (ExC) is a non-profit organisation that is part of the Teach For All global network. Its purpose is to develop leadership and learning in children and youth in Colombia to help them shape their future and the future of their communities. Currently, Enseña por Colombia has 98 fellows teaching in 48 schools in five main regions and cities of Colombia: Bogota, Medellin, Urabá Antioqueño, and the Caribbean and Pacific Coasts. Fellows teach at both peri-urban and rural schools in these regions.

ALO designs, records and distributes learning audio podcasts through WhatsApp, local radio stations and other streaming platforms. It has produced 9 seasons and 72 episodes that are broadcast on 30 radio stations, covering more than 40 municipalities in the country. The episodes are designed and recorded by teachers for other teachers, students and their families. They reach students through a number of different channels: local radio stations, WhatsApp (through their parents' or their own smartphones), community loudspeakers, and digital platforms. The episodes are 10 minutes long on average and follow a basic structure: an introduction, the learning objective and core content, an activity that brings the learning objective to life and connects the listener with the core content,

and a conclusion. ALO is one among many initiatives that Enseña por Colombia (ExC) is implementing to support communities during the COVID-19 crisis.

ALO began producing episodes 3 weeks after classes were suspended in Colombia and was inspired and motivated by three factors:

1.   *The lack of infrastructure and connectivity for continued education during the pandemic*. The restrictions on movement caused by the COVID-19 crisis aggravated the academic achievement gap between low-income students, often from rural areas without internet connection, and those who can afford access to the Internet. In addition, many children faced mental health difficulties as a result of coping with isolation. In the quest to identify quick but effective solutions, Enseña por Colombia's teachers realised that many of their students have access to community radio stations and WhatsApp.

2.   *The history in Colombia of radio stations facilitating access to education in times of hardship over many generations*. A notable example is Radio Sutatenza, a community radio station that broadcast programmes that aimed to tackle rural illiteracy through cultural and educational programmes between 1947 and 1994.

3.   *The opportunity to broadcast a high quality audiobook that had been already recorded by Click Arte, an educational editorial agency and partner of Enseña por Colombia*. This educational content gave the ALO team a starting point around which to build the radio programme.

ALO is innovative because of seven main features: (i) it is a grassroots solution 100% led by teachers; (ii) students are involved directly in the production process; (iii) it uses existing resources and skills; (iv) it was rolled out and scaled quickly; (v) it operates beyond the geographical and institutional scope of the participating teachers; (vi) it uses and combines different technologies; and (vii) it uses both old and new content.

Main problems addressed

Lack of connectivity, in both peri-urban and rural areas. Many students cannot access the internet because a) there are areas in a rural area where no Internet operators have signal, b) as family income decreased severely, they may no longer prioritise buying data plans, and c) some families do not have laptops, tablets or smartphones. Hence, ALO offers content through radio broadcasts, and connects with students and their families through WhatsApp to follow up on the radio shows, and exchange and correct homework.

Potential loss of student motivation and engagement. Some students felt they were not learning during the COVID-19 pandemic and might fail the academic year, and thus said they would prefer to repeat the year. ALO aimed to address this issue by increasing opportunities for contact with teachers, who can provide the connection that students need to retain their engagement with their schoolwork.

Helping parents to support their children's learning process. Many students that ALO caters to are the first in their immediate family to attend school so their parents may be poorly equipped to support their children's learning, having not attended school themselves. In addition, many students have not yet developed the skills to be independent learners and organise their own time, which can cause them to fall behind. The structure of the radio shows aids students with this issue, as it is easy to follow, with a single objective and an engagement activity that brings the lesson to life. Moreover, contact with teachers through WhatsApp allows them to support both the parents and children in their learning journeys.

Mobilising and developing resources

A prender la Onda (ALO) relied on various resources to roll out and scale quickly:

- *Human resources*. One of the main features of ALO is that it is led 100% by teachers, and also that students are involved in the production process. Thirty-four Enseña por Colombia (ExC) fellows

and alumni expressed interest in joining the initiative in a matter of days and went through a rigorous recruitment and selection process that evaluated their academic and leadership skills. They received training on pedagogy, leadership and social justice. Most of them were between 22 and 30 years old and had no previous experience in radio or recording podcasts, but their digital skills allowed them to learn quickly. With no specific support from the organisation, they organised themselves and coordinated the work. They had a high sense of urgency and motivation, and thus dedicated many hours to the project. As they are teachers, they were able to test the episodes directly with their students and iterate. Some Enseña por Colombia Alumni who joined the ALO team were also part of Cuenteach, an initiative of Teach For All Alumni that had been recording podcasts for the past two years to support teachers in Latin America and Spain. Thus, they brought specific technical expertise that was fundamental for the project. As a grassroots initiative led by teachers, ALO has fostered a network to help each other reach students in difficult times. The group has 30 permanent members.

- *Personal technology devices.* ALO used the personal devices (computers and smartphones) and WiFi access of the individual teachers.

- *Existing educational materials*. For the first seasons, ALO used existing educational materials from various organisations such as La Aldea, Secretos para Contar, Ápite Editorial, among others. Enseña por Colombia had previous partnerships with these organisations so it was easy to ask for permission to use the materials. ALO used audio books and other methods published by these organisations to create 10 minute episodes. For example, the book "Historias y Lugares" of Secretos para Contar enabled ALO to adapt the written content to audio and create a season about the importance of taking care of the fauna and flora of Colombia. From season 4, ALO started to create new content building on existing projects that aim to develop skills that are relevant for students. For example, "Poderosas" is a sexual education project that provides a safe space where girls and women can talk about taboo subjects in their communities. ALO partnered with "Poderosas" to create a radio soap opera to talk about sexuality, sexual and reproductive rights and menstrual health and care, in family-friendly terms.

- *Existing social connections* also helped to scale the programme. Once they had the first episodes produced, ALO teachers started to reach out to other teachers and organisations that work in municipalities where Enseña por Colombia is not currently working, for example in Nariño-Antioquia, Arauquita-Arauca and Cúcuta-Norte de Santander.

ALO did not need additional resources to roll out and grow. Thus, they were able to start producing episodes very quickly. The size of the team has allowed them to produce one episode per day since 20 April 2020. However, ALO also needed to develop some new features:

- *Training teachers to design, produce and edit podcasts.* Training was provided by Cuenteach and had two main components: the editing process and the script writing process. Cuenteach gave important tips to ALO and offered two online 2-hour courses via Zoom.

- *Training students and teachers as broadcasters.* Once teachers learned how to broadcast and record, they had to train students and other teachers. So far, 6 students and 27 other teachers, that are not part of ALO, have participated as broadcasters. Additionally, 15 students from all over the country have applied to be new members of the team of broadcasters.

- *Developing a flexible curriculum for each season and design plans for each episode.* The ALO team develops a flexible curriculum for each season and plans every episode as they would plan a lesson. Once the lesson plan has been completed, the ALO team adapts the plan into a script.

- *Building new partnerships, especially with local radio stations.* The ALO team had to build partnerships with organisations that own some of the pedagogical material or that designed specific material for ALO. They also had to build partnerships with local radio stations.

- *Collecting WhatsApp contact information of students and family members.* Before the COVID-19 outbreak, teachers had WhatsApp contact information of only some students and families. To be

able to share ALO episodes through WhatsApp, teachers had to extend this to all students and families.

- *Creating structure and flow for ALO team.* With a team of 30 members and a lot of work to complete, the ALO team had to create a work structure and workflow that would guarantee an episode could be broadcast every day from April onwards. The team was organised into three groups: 1) social media and brand, 2) curriculum and research, and 3) administration. In addition, four groups run the production and are in charge of: 1) script, 2) recording, 3) mock-ups, and 4) editing. These four groups are divided into five smaller teams, one for each day of the week.

- *Creating ALO accounts on social media* such as Facebook and Instagram to share information, content and to position the ALO brand with students, families, partners and a broader audience.

- *Using Spotify as a platform for sharing content online.* This streaming platform allows the team to share the episodes with members of the Teach for All network, possible donors and the broader audience.

Fostering effective use and learning

Teachers use ALO episodes as part of their distance learning strategy to support students and families during the COVID-19 pandemic. Carefully selected and trained teachers are involved directly in developing the materials to ensure they are usable by teachers and pedagogically appropriate. Teachers combine technologies to work with their students. For example, students listen to the programme on the radio and discuss the episode using WhatsApp with their teachers, as well as sending their completed activity as a photo via WhatsApp to their teachers. The teachers evaluate and give feedback through WhatsApp. The ALO team also sends images to teachers and students daily through WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram to motivate and enhance the learning experience. This combination of technologies and communication channels better allows teachers to support students.

Students participate in two ways. First, a group of six students are part of the ALO team as broadcasters. The ALO team is designing a broader plan to motivate their participation and ensure that the experience helps them to develop relevant skills and mindsets, with the goal of engaging 20 students by December 2020. Second, students listen to the daily episodes and work on the learning challenges set. Each challenge takes between 1 and 2 hours per day. The episodes are targeted to all ages. Some activities are more challenging than others but the goal is to capture the attention and promote learning for every member of the family, understanding that parents' educational background may be basic. Each episode is transmitted twice, morning and afternoon enabling students to revisit the lesson or catch up if they could not hear the morning programme.

As a result of feedback from students and other teachers, the ALO team realised the importance of planning a curriculum for each season of episodes, according to the guidelines of the Ministry of Education and the need to organise each week of episodes as a graduated and flexible learning process. To achieve these goals, ALO created a team to focus on curriculum and research. Moreover, ALO discovered that it was better to propose only one activity or challenge per episode to have more time to explain the instructions and generate better understanding.

Implementation challenges

- *Technical expertise, time management and sustainability.* The first challenge was to learn how to make podcasts with no previous technical knowledge in script writing, recording, editing, etc. A second challenge was to combine ALO responsibilities with a higher teaching workload during the COVID-19 crisis. Although school leaders support ALO, it was difficult to get them to allow teachers to work on ALO within regular work hours. Because of this, the production of each episode is finished just the day before it airs. A team of seven teachers spends on average 12 hours to

produce one episode. In recent weeks, teachers have expressed their concerns regarding the time pressure this involves. Some of them feel exhausted and do not think they will be able to continue participating fully in ALO once students go back to school. To deal with these challenges, the ALO team have tried different solutions. For example, they divided the team by function (script writing, recording, editing) and this work specialisation helped to train a smaller group of teachers in each task. Another solution was to get pro bono help from a professional editor so teachers in the editing team can support their peers in other tasks. Fundraising efforts will focus on hiring an editor in the near future.

- *Clarity regarding copyright and intellectual property.* The ALO team uses educational material from ten partners that authorise its use. However, after several episodes were produced, one partner expressed its concern regarding the limits of use in its authorisation. Due to this concern, Enseña por Colombia and the ALO team had to seek advice from a copyright and intellectual property lawyer and sign agreements with partners that specify more clearly the limits of use in terms of territory and time. Moreover, agreements with local radio stations and other organisations that are broadcasting the episodes also had to be designed.

- *Building trust and negotiating fees with local radio stations.* After discussions with the first radio station ALO realised that episodes needed to be short (10 minutes max) so that radio stations would agree to broadcast them for free. Additionally, during the second week that ALO was on air, one of the radio stations said that they would start charging a fee after seeing ALO on the national news. Community-based radio stations have very few funding mechanisms and the pandemic has affected them severely. With the help of school and community leaders, the ALO team talked with the radio station and managed to secure the broadcasting for free arguing it is a non-profit activity.

- *Engaging students as broadcasters.* One of the innovative features of ALO is that it involves students as broadcasters. However, some of the students did not have consistent signal or energy to record the episodes. This has delayed the production process. To solve this problem, ALO is fundraising to buy data plans for the students.

- *Access to radios, sound systems and speakers at home.* Lastly, access to radio is higher in Colombia than access to Internet. In fact, 63% of middle school students do not have Internet access. However, many students do not have radios at home to listen to the programme. The fundraising efforts also focus on buying sound systems and speakers that can be used in open community spaces. The alternate solution so far has been to share episodes through WhatsApp.

Monitoring success

- A first measure of success is the scope of production and broadcasting. ALO has already produced more than 50 episodes that air on a daily basis, several times a day.

- The reach of the broadcasts is a second measure of success. Each episode is broadcast in 28 community radio stations in 9 departments of Colombia (the signal of these stations reaches more than 100 municipalities), 6 online radio stations and in Spotify. The episodes are also shared with different community leaders, organisations and teachers through WhatsApp and are used as a distance learning strategy in 14 schools. ALO calculates that the episodes are reaching 500 or more students a day.

- In terms of monitoring, ALO is trying to calculate the reach of the radio broadcasts, which is difficult in Colombia since radio stations do not collect such metrics themselves. However, the ALO team is gathering information to enable them to estimate the geographical reach of the radio stations, for example by utilising information from school and teachers form those regions.

- Another means of monitoring is through user feedback. Every episode has a contact phone number to receive feedback from students and teachers from outside the network of Enseña por Colombia. This information has allowed ALO to identify that 14 schools are using the episodes as part of their distance learning strategy, 8 of which are schools that are not partners of Enseña por Colombia.

Also, the teachers of the ALO team that use the episode as part of their distance education have received direct feedback and responses from their students.

Adaptability to new contexts

ALO can be adapted and implemented to other contexts as a scalable initiative. In 11 weeks, it has scaled from one radio station to 30 radio-stations, 3 local foundations and allies that play episodes over community speakers, and 2 streaming channels. It expects to grow to a minimum of 10 new radio stations and 6 local foundations and allies by the end of 2020.

ALO connects learning to students´ homes. ALO intends to sustain this initiative after the COVID emergency subsides because the crisis has made evident the need to strengthen the relationship between school (learning) and home (families). The testimonies of several families suggest that ALO broadcasts achieve engagement of the whole family in fun and effective learning activities.

Key points to keep in mind for a successful adaptation

1. Build a team of teachers who are motivated, committed and willing to learn to run the project
2. Engage students and other teachers as broadcasters so the content is more relevant for families.
3. Provide basic technology to teachers and students involved in producing programmes (laptops and WiFi).
4. Give teachers and student broadcasters basic training on script writing, recording and editing podcasts.
5. Search for and use existing materials that address topics that are relevant for students. Using existing materials in the first instance helps to roll out and scale quickly. Sign copyright and intellectual property agreements from day one. Producing tailored content can come at a later stage of the process.
6. Design a work structure and work flow that helps reduce the workload for teachers.
7. Partner with local radio stations.
8. Obtain contact information from parents and students with smartphones to distribute through WhatsApp.

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- Radio stations
- Go to Producciones
- Broadcasters (Students and teachers)
- Teachers that use ALO