Virtual Trips by the Zilla Parishad Students

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Students in Zilla Parishad Primary School in Kadamvasti (Paritewadi) in Solapur district in Maharashtra traveled 5990 miles for a global trip to South Africa, Thailand and Malaysia in just two days! What sounds unbelievable was made possible because of communication technology, as these were virtual trips organized as part of Skype-a-thon by Microsoft on 29-30 November 2016.

I can imagine the excitement of the students since I myself learned a lot from these virtual trips. Exploring the potential of the technology to transcend geographic boundaries and providing a direct learning experience to children was a major milestone in my journey as a teacher passionate about technology.

My first experiments were with the mobile in my hand. Turning the cell phone into a learning tool I introduced the digital medium to my students. I explored and learned along with other techno-savvy teachers in Maharashtra. Our interactions and collective learning have helped to introduce digital education in many schools in Maharashtra, to complement other teaching-learning methods.

Then I developed QR (Quick Response) Code digital content for classroom learning, which helped to spread the use of digital education.

Microsoft acknowledged this effort and honored me with Golden Innovation Educator award. Then I also received the honor as Plickers Ambassador on September 23, 2016, which is given for outstanding contributions in teaching and an ongoing commitment to fostering a thriving Plickers community of educators dedicated to improving learning for all.

These awards opened up opportunities to interact with global teacher community to me. It also made me eager to expose my students to fun-filled, creative and educative experiences like the virtual trip.

Since the digital education has already been introduced in my school a year ago, they were prepared to interact with teachers and children from other countries. Thus the virtual trip on 29-30 November would remain a memorable experience for them.

On the first day children met the Class in Thailand's Saint Maharaj School played their favorite snakes and ladders game with children. The ZP school students gave the word 'R' to identify a maximum number of words, while the Thailand children demonstrated basket weaving. Both were thrilled for being able to talk to and play with each other.

In Malaysia, we were greeted by Alif. After playing a puzzle game our students showed them a model of windmill made by them and showed how he made it. The trip to South Africa was memorable because our students could see a penguin for the first time. Tamlyn and Alex in Cape Town SA, who work for Sanccob, an Institute for the Penguin preservation, shared the screen with a penguin named Chic. Our children wanted to feel the touch, count the fingers and know every possible detail about a penguin that they could.

I was thrilled to interact with elementary grade children from the US. Using my pet talking doll Tom, I introduced myself. The students were thrilled and were jumping up and down to see the doll. We sang the 'Row row row your boat' poem together. Interestingly this was the favorite poem for children in both the schools and they knew this poem which is part of the textbooks in Maharashtra. I felt the world has really come closer.

This experience has boosted my confidence to explore technology to enhance the quality of education and, more importantly, to bridge the digital divide among rural and urban students.

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British council published case study on an innovative project for Virtual Tour.

The teaching process

Ranjitsinh says, 'I use mobile-based technology in teaching. I have developed "QR-coded Textbooks" for grades 1 to 4. I have developed all the content of grades 1 to 4 in digital format. This content is encrypted in the QR codes. All these QR-coded stickers are pasted on the relevant pages in the textbook. If a student wants to listen to an audio format of a poem or he wants to watch a video of a lesson, all he needs to do is to scan that QR code.'

In the early stages of adding the QR codes to the coursebooks Ranjitsinh used free online resources like maths worksheets and 'Emma's spellchecker', but now he makes his own tests using Google forms and Flubaroo. Students can use these resources in class, or if they have access to a mobile in their family they can do follow-up activities at home.

Ranjitsinh has spent a lot of time providing the children in the school with an introduction to different technologies and they are now also working with QR codes to link materials to the curriculum.
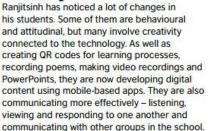
Challenges

Ranjitsinh explains: 'The biggest challenge was to build awareness with the parents about education and try to reduce the girls' absenteeism. I am from a drought-prone area of Maharashtra and parents were completely unaware about the importance of education. In the early stage I had focused on three major issues:
1. lack of awareness about importance of education
2. absenteeism
3. lack of quality education.'

Ranjitsinh has started to tackle these challenges. In order to increase parent awareness around education and decrease absenteeism his focus has been on ensuring continual interaction with the community as well as initiatives like 'alarm on, TV off', a Google

SMS channel called 'Ranjitsinh' and the creation of a 'Baalak-Paalak' WhatsApp group. He also gets his students to give presentations in parent meetings as a way to create a bond between students, parents and teachers. He has begun to provide quality education by adopting project-based learning, developing and collecting digital content, using communicative activities, using puppets and encouraging the use of QR-coded textbooks beyond the school gates.

What Ranjitsinh observed

Ranjitsinh has noticed a lot of changes in his students. Some of them are behavioural and attitudinal, but many involve creativity connected to the technology. As well as creating QR codes for learning processes, recording poems, making video recordings and PowerPoints, they are now developing digital content using mobile-based apps. They are also communicating more effectively – listening, viewing and responding to one another and communicating with other groups in the school.

The way forward

The Government of Maharashtra has now recognised the value of this project and started to print QR-coded textbooks from June 2016. All the textbooks of Standard 6 (Marathi-medium) are printed with QR codes. This project will now reach 1.8 million children in the state of Maharashtra.

To find out more

- https://www.youtube.com/user/onlyranjitsinh
- http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/pune/ZP-teacher-to-share-tech-knack-with-counterparts-in-Thailand-Malaysia/articleshow/55655749.cms
- https://sites.google.com/site/zerotricks2/home/google-sms-channels-send-sms-text-messages-to-your-group-for-free
- www.flubaroo.com