

The context

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought a mixed bag of experiences with respect to teacher professional development programmes. While it has enabled many more persons to access training programmes at very low costs, it has also extensively changed the dynamics of the programmes, not necessarily for the better.

For one, the *number* of participants has dramatically increased – if I was told six months back to anchor a series of lectures for 400 teachers at one go, I probably would have been at a loss! However, where online programmes are concerned, the only limitation of numbers appears to be the number of participants *allowed* by the technology platform as well as the capacity of mobile phones to access the platform. It also follows that it becomes difficult to keep track of the chat-box even if only a proportion of participants are asking questions or responding to a thought.

Second, online platforms can create an *illusion* of extensive participation. Since you cannot really see the person responding each time, if the video is off or response is from a person not on the grid in front of you, or chat messages are coming in quickly and even if the same persons are responding to the facilitator, again and again, it appears that a rich discussion involving the participants is underway. However, it is entirely possible that the remaining participants are struggling with technology issues or are somehow not able to connect with the topic under discussion. Thus, compared to the online experience, face-to-face programmes offer much greater ease for facilitators to assess participants' interest and understanding and enable them to alter the discussions as required.

Third, the *duration* of the programmes is limited by the need to keep screen time at a minimum. In our experience, the duration for which participants and facilitators can stay meaningfully engaged is about one-and-a-half to a maximum of two hours.

Last, but certainly not the least, the *planning* process itself has changed. This shift has taken time

– from thinking of sessions as is usual in a face-to-face mode, to thinking of them in an extremely structured manner with very strict time boundaries – each moment has to be planned, leading to a kind of detailed *storyboarding* while preparing the sessions. Resources have had to be tailored to the online mode, or an entirely new set of resources sourced and/or created. It follows that the kind of flexibility offered by face-to-face programmes – to take short diversions into related areas, to modify an activity on the spot, etc – have to be dispensed with.

Modalities

The foregoing methodology has informed several programmes in the past six months since the first lockdown – the approach has been to clearly identify the *objectives* of the programme, the nature of the *platform* and the *capacity* of facilitators and participants. A key component of planning has been to try and give every participant a voice, even if it is not necessarily 'heard' by all the other participants, not only through keeping track of participation but also through submissions related to assigned tasks on *WhatsApp* or other platforms.

The effort has been to keep the number of participants similar to that in a face-to-face programme unless the approach is to have webinars, wherein speakers put forth their thoughts on a focus topic, with questions or comments invited periodically from the audience. While webinars are useful in the sense that they enable the reach to a large group of people, their purpose is to *inform* or *orient*, as opposed to helping participants engage with something in a more focused manner.

While the number of participants has ranged at times from 30-40, there have been instances of about 200-300 participants who needed to be part of the same programme. In the latter case, two approaches have been taken. One is to create parallel sessions, provided a sufficient number of facilitators are available and the other is to have a webinar followed by planned interaction among smaller groups of participants.

When using parallel sessions, groups of 30-50 participants have been created. Criteria for grouping have included: subject area of expertise, a mix of gender as well as the districts/schools the participants belong to and in some instances, we have mixed educational qualifications to distribute persons across groups.

In the case of parallel sessions, planning becomes even more critical – even if the subject areas for each group are different, there has to be coherence. For example, one group cannot concentrate primarily on content and pedagogy while another concentrates on classroom management. Therefore, numerous discussions among facilitators and several iterations of plans are required to ensure commonality across groups while retaining the specificity required on account of each group's focus area. This is applicable even if the groups are addressing the same areas since each facilitator must have the autonomy to plan sessions and to alter their plan as they go along based on the responses of participants.

Tasks

As mentioned earlier, when getting a large number of facilitators together is not possible, interactions among smaller groups of participants can be facilitated. One of the modes could be to have a common webinar in the morning with the facilitator creating a task or set of questions for participants to discuss, and if relevant, a video or a reading to be shared. This is followed, after a suitable interval, by small-group discussions among participants based on the task set by the facilitator. The discussion is facilitated by a peer mentor who has been oriented to the task. Again, the scope for scaffolding by facilitators is not available. At the end of the day, each participant submits her responses to specific questions, which the facilitator can read and incorporate in the next session.

Breakout rooms

Another option exercised was to use *breakout sessions*, offered by some platforms, wherein the facilitator orients participants for a task and then sends them into 'breakout rooms' (unfortunately, this facility is available only with Zoom). Sharing by the participants can be used to take the session forward.

While breakout rooms are useful to enable small group discussions, it takes time for discussions to build up and it is also difficult for the facilitator to move from one room to the other since time

is limited. The need to keep screen time to a minimum is an ever-present criterion and all too often, breakout rooms end up having suboptimal usage. Also, since each group may not be able to present their views, sessions remain truncated.

All these options were tried out for different groups of participants and the one that was most satisfactory in terms of participant engagement and facilitator ease involved small groups of 20-30, with two sessions a day. The first session was led by the facilitator, followed by discussions based on specific tasks during the second session of the day.

Using tasks optimally

To optimise time for learning, two sessions can be arranged in a single day, with participants engaging with a relevant task in the time between sessions. These tasks are usually submitted on *WhatsApp* groups created, especially for the programme. This task is extremely useful in the sense that it enables participants to review their learning and, if there are related submissions, for the facilitator to assess the transaction so far. However, the scaffolding that face-to-face programmes enable through small-group-facilitation or the support provided by facilitators is entirely missing.

The task becomes even more important when a concrete outcome is expected. For example, an online programme was conducted for developing a plan document for teacher education institutes – a complex task even when conducted in-person requiring three-fold changes: first, participants need to make a shift from their current functioning to one informed by policy and best practices; second, identifying specific actions they need to take over a period of a few years and; third, identifying the resources that will enable this shift. The approach was a mix of interactions with experts in various key areas related to teacher education and the sharing of tasks based on detailed templates with very specific questions for inputs from experts as well as peers.

However, despite a pre-task to prepare the participants for the reflection required for the programme, the task spilled over beyond the stipulated time spent online. In a face-to-face programme, time for interaction would have been greater along with scope for discussion with peers and scaffolding by facilitators. This would have helped achieve the outcomes more efficiently.

Using tasks also puts tremendous pressure on the facilitator to go through all the submissions

and collate areas that need to be discussed again or need to be presented differently. At the same time, personal references to submissions also reassure participants that their thoughts are not going into some kind of a digital vacuum. This also implies that whatever the task may be, to ensure that the facilitator can read them quickly and make sense of them, submissions must be brief. Hence the need to create simple templates or questions for participants to place their observations and reflections for the facilitator to go through in a quick and efficient manner. While this restricts the autonomy of the participants, it is a necessary compromise.

Reflections on the experience

Technology-related issues persist throughout the programmes. While facilitators, at times, reported hardware issues, participants frequently had connectivity glitches which caused them to miss parts of the sessions. Time was also a constraint in many sessions. While some facilitators felt they needed more time to close discussions or take more responses from participants, a spill-over of 5-10 minutes meant some participants logged out due to battery issues or because their phones were getting heated.

At times, the transaction had to be one-way due to the need for structure and limitations of the medium. The lack of a black/whiteboard (although platforms offer this option, its use needs expertise) or the sharing of group work hampered the development of ideas using participants' own experiences. With a few groups, it was clear that due to the lack of facilitation during breakout sessions, discussions were not adequately scaffolded. Reflections shared by participants later indicated they were capable of far richer responses than they were able to contribute during sessions.

Facilitators are used to reading body language, which was entirely missing and caused unease at times on how well participants were following the line of discussion.

Another issue was that the participants took time to get used to the online platform – there is a clear need for a dedicated person to support participants in dealing with technology. It is impossible for the facilitator to deal with technology issues while managing sessions. Similarly, a single facilitator would find managing a session very taxing, particularly since participants tend to use the *Chat* function a lot. It is also easy to miss a 'raised hand' since the computer window shows a limited number of participants.

Detailed planning by facilitators, including practice in using various technology platforms and a quick shift to a transaction style required by the online mode, is necessary. Facilitators also need to be wary - it is easy to slip into the feeling that everything is going well since the Chat keeps buzzing and there are no disturbances (participants are on 'mute' unless they need to contribute to the discussion). However, it is difficult to be certain that all participants are engaging.

Lastly, consolidation of sessions in a structured manner is key, since it ties together all the discussions at the end, including for participants who may have missed something.

Final thoughts

There is no denying that technology increases the reach. It enables a single speaker to reach out to large numbers, but at the same time, meaningful interaction is only possible with small groups, over a period of time. Hence, this can be an effective means for small groups of teachers to come together as communities of learners provided, they meet in person periodically for formal lectures or interactions, or even to create materials, etc.

It is important to note that relationships can develop even in this mode – when groups are smaller, facilitators and participants get to know each other over a few days and a lively interaction is possible. At this time, when we have had to make dramatic shifts in the way we live and learn, it is heartening to know that human interaction, even if mediated by technology, still has priority.



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