

Conference call with Payir: Distance education: Sunday November 14, 2010: 11 am EST

Attendees: Chandan (Atlanta), Praveen, (Portland), Sanketh (UFlorida), Loki (UFlorida), Rajeev (Boston), Melli (Boston), Padmanava (Atlanta), Meera (UFlorida), Ajoy (UFlorida)

Q1. Please tell us briefly about Payir.

Payir aims to bring holistic rural development in the village of Thenur, Tamil Nadu by fostering development in community health, primary education, youth education and vocational training, goods and service. It is also working on income generation, circulation of money, watershed management, and economic sustainability of the whole area. Payir started its development initiative in 2005 with 5 villages, watershed management in 2 panchayats and income generation works.

We have two school programs: **(a) Intervention program** which focuses on primary and middle schools: In this program we work for strengthening government Panchayat schools. For this program we have support staff with mixed educational background viz. 10th std. education, BEd, Diploma etc. We have found that the efforts of Govt. teachers in the 4th standard is lacking. Support staff was provided in 3 panchayat schools. One major aspect of low quality learning experiences in schools is because children do not get enough food at home and stay hungry when they attend schools. We have started breakfast scheme to address this issue. **(b) Non-formal education program (NFE)** This program is modeled on the "gurukulum" system of education that were prevalent in India in the past and aims to create leaders for the community. These students will be drivers of change in the future. We have 13 students. Regular NCERT curriculum is followed in addition to learning about the local environment, communities etc.

We are also working on strengthening the public and government libraries. Other efforts include creating competition among schools, after school program, computer education, distance learning etc.

Q2. Please elaborate on Payir's distance learning initiatives.

In this program volunteers teach village kids from different regions through video conferencing. They get connected directly to the children. Volunteers from Chennai, Greece, Dubai, San Francisco, Hyderabad teach Payir students. From Greece 2 doctoral students teach physics to the students in Tamil language. English, Math and other subjects

are also taught by volunteers. Currently this is an after school program and is helping students to augment their knowledge outside school.

More information here:

http://www.ashanet.org/projects-new/documents/956/E_learning_FAQ.pdf

Volunteers pick the class they want to teach. They have to be comfortable with the Tamil language. English and Tamil books are used for instructions. Venkat and Satish are the volunteers who are helping to drive the distance learning initiative. Delivery styles in teaching differ with volunteers. Some teachers are very good in their delivery styles and teaching methodology. At the end of class homeworks are assigned to the students. Slow learners are helped by the support staff on a one-to-one basis. We organize orientations for new teaching volunteers to make them familiar with our school environment.

Q3. How effective is the distance learning initiative? Can the students connect to someone teaching from a faraway place?

Children get into the computer mode very quickly, they get immediately hooked up. Sujata madam is one of our first teachers. She is successfully conducting classes through video conferencing. Students also help the teaching volunteers in making them comfortable with the teaching/learning setup.

Q4. How is the classroom set up for distance learning?

The video-conferencing is a two way interactive system. The most important requirement is a broadband internet connection. Min 500 kbps speed is necessary, 1 mbps minimum for you-tube viewing. There is only one computer, one monitor, one camera, one mike and a blackboard. We tried a projector initially. However we stopped using the projector once it started shutting down. We are planning to have a 32 inch LCD TV. However because of fund crunch this has not yet happened. Children sit on the floor with 1 ft tall desk in front of them. They work in groups with 2-3 members in each group. 12-15 students are allowed for each class. A maximum of 20 students can be taught effectively using this setting. The number of students that can be taught depends on the capability of the teacher. We use Logitech cameras. The quality of the mike should be very good. 1 mike is enough. If the quality of the mike is poor it will not be able to catch the feeble sounds. The classes are 50 minutes to 1 hour in duration.

Q5. Do children interact with the teacher?

Children do ask questions, staff help in asking questions. Sometimes we check and encourage students to ask questions.

Q6. How many volunteers are needed to conduct classes through distance learning?

For 15 students other than the teaching volunteer who is not in the classroom we need 2 support staff to manage the students inside the class.

Q7. What are the problems that you face with the distance learning initiative?

A big problem is with electricity and power cuts. We need both electricity and battery backup. Generator cost is high. There were times when for 25 days we had no electricity, transformers blew up. Having a battery backup is very important.

Not every one can teach. Two volunteers we have to let go. Volunteers get frustrated sometimes and drop out.

Q8. What do you do when the teacher for a scheduled class is unavailable?

This is quite a challenge. We have volunteers lined up so that a volunteer can come quickly and teach when the scheduled teacher fails to show up. The volunteers have the material ready beforehand. Our staff repeat a part of the worksheet, we also have TV sessions lined up.

Q9. How easy or difficult will it be to scale up this teaching methodology for other Asha projects?

The backbone of this program is broadband internet. So the availability of high speed internet will be critical to the successful implementation of this program. High speed internet is available in India within 20 Km of most big cities. Here we have broadband everywhere within 20 Km from Trichi and Madurai.

We are trying to get a VSNL radio tower here in Thenur. This will cost us 1.2 lakhs. Besides Payir the Thenur community can also use this facility.

Q10. Can you give us a list of resources and the cost necessary for the whole distance learning set up?

- High speed broadband facility Rs. 3,000/5,000 initial set up cost, Rs 500 per monthly rental
- Physical room separately
- Backup electrical power battery 200 Amp, Rs. 25, 000
- Electrical connection, Rs. 5,000 new
- Good monitor or TV, Rs. 30,000 for computer
- Have to have a good camera
- DVD player

- Good mike \$20/30
- Blackboard
- Nutritional support
- 3-4 good volunteers 1-2 backup volunteers, Support staff Rs. 3,000/5,000 per month
- Stationery Rs. 500/1,000
- Local person who can manage and follow through

The whole package will be around 1-1.5 lakhs.

Q11. What are the strengths of this program? Are the students benefitting from this program?

Exposure of these children to knowledgeable new people has made a world of difference. Just interacting with these people changed their way of thinking. Students taking these classes performed better in examinations and their understanding of the subject matter improved. 9-10 standard students perform really well after taking these classes. 6-7-8 grade students not assessed yet.

Q12. What are the advantages of video conferencing over lessons taught using recorded DVDs?

Students who are new to a topic usually fall asleep during a recorded DVD lesson. However the video conferencing is an interactive session and the teachers can adjust the tempo of teaching depending on the mood of the class. Thus video conferencing is a more effective mode of teaching compared to learning from DVDs. However the slow learner may fall behind in the video class. They will need other assistance. The video conference class can be backed up by recorded lessons in DVDs.

Another alternative is to have someone teach the material recorded in the DVDs. This will be an interactive session and can be very beneficial. However getting the teacher to understand the material in the DVD and deliver that to the students in their vernacular language will be difficult.