Innovations in smart phone based professional development

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The SAGE Zimbabwe project is funded by UK Aid from the UK government. It is formed by a consortium, led by Plan International UK and including faith-based, academic (Open University) and private sector actors. Its focus is on providing high-quality, accelerated, non-formal education in accessible, girlfriendly community-based Learning Hubs.
The Challenge

Surge in covid-19 cases during May – June 2020. Persistent lockdowns making volunteer access a challenge due to movement restrictions.

Need to continue learning for the girls amidst concerns around disengagement and ‘learning loss’.

Ongoing need to induct new volunteer recruitments and replacements.

Over 70% of volunteers have access to smartphones, creating opportunity for WhatsApp low-cost trainings and engagements.

Volunteers reported competence gaps in supporting girls with disabilities (31%) and remote teaching (85%) (date when the survey was taken).
A rapid and pragmatic response to the new context:

CoVid 19 restrictions heralded the need for refocus and reframe ‘hub volunteer’ practice in line with move from ‘Hub’ based learner engagement to telephone and later small group engagement.

The widespread use of and access to WhatsApp within Zimbabwe provided a means of communication and engagement in real time at scale.

Within the context of ongoing efforts to embed reflective practices within the programme, a new model of professional development was adopted along with bespoke learning materials.
Structured Guided Reflection:  
Example of model 1 learning material
Developing the training model:

**Model 1**
- Principles into Practice
- Case study alongside examples of practice
- Top tips
- Reflection and discussion in large groups

**Model 2**
- Aspects of practice
- Activity based engagement in small groups
- Share insights
- Ongoing reflection on practice
Facilitator capacity building

- Provide clear and detailed session guidance and notes
- Provide briefings/session run-throughs
- Co-facilitation
- Incorporation of feedback into programme development
- Communication and support through side discussion thread
- Reflection on practice during and post session
Learning:

“The strength of the WhatsApp platform was reach! As long as people had access to a smartphone and network it allowed us to reach out to the people.”

“The case studies allowed participants to easily relate to the issues we needed to explore. Starting with a story made it easy for participants to visualise their own classes, their own practices and what they would do in such cases.”

“Facilitating in WhatsApp was new to me and there were challenges initially in establishing the conversation flow. But later, we became familiarised with the guiding question and were able to take advantage of the group sessions to make sure everyone participates.”

WhatsApp as a platform:
Using established communication resources and practices key in securing engagement and participation.

Facilitation of professional development as a distance:
Co-facilitation and parallel reflection on practice supports on going development of approach and facilitation expertise.

Learning support materials:
Contextualised support materials reflecting a clear understanding of practice context support exploration of issues and practice principles.

Impact on participants:
Over time the level and quality of participation became more sophisticated on the part of participants and facilitators. District coordinators report clear evidence of translation of professional development into practice settings.
Thank You! / Tatenda! / Dankie!