

Remote Ethnography in Crisis Contexts

Evaluating Educational Continuity Amidst COVID-19 in Afghanistan



Case Study

Introduction

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic posed unique challenges worldwide, prompting rapid adaptations in various sectors, including education.

This case study focuses on the innovative use of remote ethnographic methods by Adroit Associates for the Afghanistan National Institute of Music (ANIM) to understand and manage the impacts of the pandemic on its educational programs.

The objectives of this case study are to analyze how ANIM transitioned to remote learning environments, assess the effectiveness of these methods, and examine the broader implications for remote ethnography in crisis situations.

This exploration aims to highlight the resilience and adaptability of educational institutions in maintaining continuity and quality in education during unprecedented disruptions.



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Project Overview

Traditionally, ANIM's programs—including the English Language program, the annual Winter Music Academy, and various international cultural diplomacy initiatives—relied heavily on in-person instruction supported by a diverse array of national and international artists.

These programs were integral in enriching Afghanistan's cultural landscape and providing essential educational opportunities to the youth.

However, the advent of COVID-19 required a drastic shift in methodology. With schools closed and public gatherings restricted, ANIM was compelled to quickly devise alternative strategies to continue its educational offerings.

In response, a three-month pilot online program was launched, segmented into three phases to methodically evaluate and adapt to the new teaching paradigm. This program was designed not only to sustain educational engagement but also to test the viability of remote learning in a rapidly changing environment.

To ensure a smooth transition to online learning, ANIM equipped students with tablets and reliable internet access, enabling participation from homes. The phased structure of the program allowed for meticulous monitoring and adaptation, with Adroit Associates closely overseeing the process through innovative remote ethnographic methods.

This approach allowed for continuous evaluation and real-time adjustments to the educational delivery, ensuring that learning objectives were met despite the logistical challenges posed by the pandemic.

The successful implementation of remote monitoring and the adaptation of educational programs underlined ANIM's capability to navigate through crisis-induced challenges.

The detailed monitoring reports validated the program's success, leading to subsequent phases receiving approval for continuation.

This case study serves as a testament to the potential of remote ethnographic methods in ensuring educational continuity and highlights the adaptability required to overcome the barriers posed by global health emergencies.



Methodology

The monitoring methodology for the ANIM online pilot program was meticulously designed to evaluate various aspects of the educational initiative under the constraints imposed by COVID-19.

The approach was multi-faceted, incorporating a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods to ensure comprehensive coverage and robust data. The assessment focused on four primary areas:



Each of these domains was vital for understanding the effectiveness and efficiency of the online transition. Data were gathered through a combination of:



Online surveys targeting ANIM students



Telephonic key informant interviews with the ANIM Director



Non-participant observations of online classroom sessions

This mixed-methods approach allowed for a rich collection of data, enabling the team to capture not only the logistical and administrative functions of the program but also the qualitative experiences and challenges faced by participants.

The use of remote observation tools and telecommunications reflected a significant adaptation to traditional ethnographic methods, aimed at overcoming the limitations of physical distancing requirements.

Ethical Considerations:

Recognizing the sensitive nature of conducting research during a pandemic, the project placed a strong emphasis on ethical considerations. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were assured of confidentiality and the voluntary nature of their participation. Special attention was given to ethical concerns related to digital data collection, including data security and participant privacy.

Implementation

The implementation of the ANIM pilot program's monitoring activities spanned from August to December 2020 and was conducted in three distinct phases. This phased approach facilitated a structured evaluation process, allowing for adjustments and improvements between each stage based on the data and feedback collected. Initially, the program was set to include all 55 students in the surveys, but due to connectivity issues, responses were successfully gathered from only 41 participants.

class timings limited the observation to only 12 sessions during the first phase of the pilot. Subsequent phases saw significant improvements, with over 190 sessions successfully monitored, indicating an adaptation to the digital challenges as the program progressed.

Observations of the online classes were planned for various subjects including English, Music Theory, and Practical Music. However, logistical challenges such as invalid links and unscheduled

The insights gained from these activities were compiled and analyzed by Adroit Associates, which then provided detailed reports to the donor. These reports were crucial in determining the continuation and scaling of the project and were instrumental in informing the decision to proceed with later phases of the pilot.

Key Findings



Technological Adaptations and Challenges

ANIM successfully negotiated with telecommunication providers to secure monthly data packages for students but the variability in service quality across different providers and regions posed significant challenges. Many sessions were hindered by unstable internet connections, leading to interruptions and the inability to conduct classes with full audio-visual engagement.



Program Implementation and Oversight

The pilot program included detailed instructions and orientations on using digital platforms like Google Meet and agreements with parents to monitor internet usage to ensure it was confined to educational purposes. Issues with class timings and invalid session links reflected the logistical challenges of remote education delivery.



Improvements in Subsequent Phases

Enhanced training for trainers, better content delivery mechanisms, and more robust feedback systems led to high levels of satisfaction among participants. The adaptations made from the first to the second phase demonstrated ANIM's responsiveness to feedback and its commitment to optimizing under challenging circumstances.



Educational Outcomes and Student Feedback

While the sessions recorded a lower-than-expected dropout and session cancellation rate, indicating successful engagement for many, a significant portion of students (nearly 80%) expressed a preference for in-person classes. Common concerns included difficulties with internet connectivity and a preference for the tactile, interactive aspects of traditional education.

Key Recommendations



Enhanced Internet Connectivity Solutions

Invest in more robust internet solutions to ensure stable connectivity. Partner with multiple internet service providers or explore the use of internet boosters to enhance signal strength in areas prone to weak connections.



Phased Data Collection and Expanded Metrics

Collect data in multiple phases throughout the program and expand the metrics used to include more qualitative and quantitative indicators.



Regular Training and Support for Educators

Conduct regular training sessions for educators on the use of online teaching tools and digital engagement techniques.



Parental Involvement and Education

Develop programs to educate parents on the technology and platforms being used, potentially including them in the learning process.



Strategic Partnership Development

Cultivate partnerships with technology firms and educational content providers to access high-quality resources and support.



Ongoing Monitoring and Feedback Mechanisms

Implement continuous feedback mechanisms involving students, parents, and educators to regularly assess the satisfaction and effectiveness of the online programs.

Lessons Learned for Remote Ethnography

This section highlights the key lessons learned from implementing remote ethnography for the project, which was critically influenced by the pandemic's restrictions and the evolving security situation in Afghanistan.



Adaptability in Research Design


The project underscored the necessity of flexibility in research methodologies. Traditional ethnographic approaches, which rely heavily on physical presence, were quickly adapted to incorporate remote data collection methods due to the pandemic. The use of digital tools such as Microsoft Teams, Google Meet, and telephonic surveys became essential in continuing data collection amidst movement restrictions and security concerns.

 **Key Takeaway: Remote tools can effectively substitute traditional methods, but require rigorous planning and adaptation to the specifics of each project context.**



Overcoming Technological Barriers

Remote ethnography introduced unique challenges, particularly in a country like Afghanistan where internet connectivity can be unreliable and there are significant disparities in access to stable internet connections among participants. To mitigate these issues, ANIM provided internet-enabled tablets and negotiated data packages with local providers, which was crucial for maintaining participation.

 **Key Takeaway: Proactive measures to address technological disparities are crucial for the success of remote interventions, particularly in regions with varying levels of infrastructure development.**



Importance of Hybrid Methodologies

While remote methods were indispensable during lockdowns, the project highlighted the importance of maintaining a hybrid approach whenever possible. The initial reliance solely on remote techniques had limitations, particularly in capturing nuanced social interactions and ensuring engagement from all participants. The project adapted by combining remote observations with periodic in-person follow ups when safety and regulations permitted.

 **Key Takeaway: Hybrid methodologies leverage the strengths of both remote and in-person approaches, allowing for greater flexibility and depth in data collection.**



Selecting Appropriate Indicators


A crucial lesson learned was the importance of selecting the right indicators for remote data collection. Initially, we focused on metrics such as dropout rates, session cancellation rates, internet quality, and variances in the actual versus planned sessions. However, feedback from the first monitoring report highlighted the need for a broader range of indicators to capture the full spectrum of the program's success and challenges.

 **Key Takeaway: It is critical to select the right indicators, considering the limitations of remote data collection.**



Ethical and Security Considerations


The transition to remote methods raised significant ethical and security concerns, particularly regarding the confidentiality and safety of participants. In Afghanistan, where security risks are prevalent, ensuring the privacy and safety of participants during remote communications was paramount. This required rigorous protocol development and careful consideration of the local context in every interaction.

 **Key Takeaway: Remote ethnography must prioritize participant safety and data security, adapting practices to protect confidentiality and integrity, especially in volatile environments.**



Building Local Capacity


The project's success was also attributed to the focus on building local capacity for remote data collection. Training local enumerators and leveraging their understanding of the cultural and linguistic landscape proved invaluable. This approach not only improved the quality of data collected but also enhanced the sustainability of research efforts by empowering local teams.

 **Key Takeaway: Investing in local capacity for remote ethnography enriches data quality and fosters sustainable practices that extend beyond the life of the project.**



Valuing Participant Experience and Feedback

Understanding the experience of participants in remote settings was vital. Moreover, feedback from project enumerators also highlighted both the challenges and the unexpected benefits of remote learning.

 **Key Takeaway: Participant feedback is invaluable in calibrating remote ethnographic methods to better serve the community and achieve project objectives.**

Conclusion

The journey of adapting to an entirely remote learning model amidst a global pandemic, as undertaken by the ANIM, provides critical insights into the resilience and adaptability required in crisis situations.

This case study not only demonstrates the viability of remote educational models but also enriches our understanding of remote ethnographic practices as effective tools for monitoring and evaluation.

One of the major lessons learned from this project was the importance of real-time problem-solving and iteration.

As Adroit Associates meticulously monitored the online educational processes, they gathered vital data that informed immediate adjustments to teaching methods and technological deployments.

This iterative process was crucial in refining the approach to remote learning and ensuring that educational objectives were met.

Moreover, the case study highlighted the value of remote ethnographic methods in capturing deep insights into the educational experience during a crisis.

By adapting traditional ethnographic tools to a remote context, Adroit could effectively assess and respond to the challenges encountered during the transition. This not only facilitated a comprehensive understanding of the immediate impacts of the pandemic but also provided a blueprint for navigating future educational disruptions.

Looking forward, the experiences and strategies developed through this project suggest a robust framework for leveraging remote ethnography in other crisis-affected sectors and regions.



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