The promise of using WhatsApp for low-tech distance learning

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With support from the MIT Governance Lab, the South African civic technology organization Grassroot has developed a first-of-its-kind training course entirely on WhatsApp to help improve the leadership skills of community organizers and to build deep networks. Credit: Nina Gregg

WhatsApp is one of the most widely-used communication apps in South

Africa. Though it's often portrayed in the news as a way to spread disinformation, it shows surprising potential as a tool for online learning during the era of social distancing.

Grassroot, a civic technology organization based in South Africa, has developed a first-of-its-kind training course entirely on WhatsApp to improve the leadership skills of community organizers and build deep networks.

The MIT Governance Lab, led by Lily Tsai, the Ford Professor of Political Science, supported the Grassroot pilot course with wraparound research to assess course content and the promise of behavioral change.

Tsai notes, "Civic tech initiatives often measure impact by the number of people who engage. But Grassroot focused on the quality of engagement, by equipping organizers with skills to get a better response from their government. This is precisely the kind of innovation that's needed to improve governance outcomes."

The study was conducted in 2019, before the coronavirus outbreak occurred. Yet the results show how WhatsApp can be an effective tool for organizers to move training and people development online when face-to-face interaction isn't possible.

Improving access to leadership development for social change

To develop course content, Grassroot collaborated with Harvard University Professor Marshall Ganz. His work on public narrative uses storytelling on individual and collective values and experiences to inspire leadership and commitment to social change. Ganz teaches a version of his course online to organizers around the world using the latest distance

learning technology, requiring high speed internet to sustain video interactions.

Grassroot chose WhatsApp to reach organizers who don't normally have access to in-person or online training. Traditional online courses are typically out of reach in low-income areas that lack access to broadband internet and large data downloads. They also depend on a student's ability to reliably be home with no distractions or background noise at certain times.

Participants in a WhatsApp-based course, on the other hand, get to use a familiar medium that allows for rich media interchange (via voice notes, infographics, etc.) without the usual concerns about connectivity and location.

Piloted over five classes, the course reached more than 40 distance learners in South Africa, largely in urban and peri-urban areas near Johannesburg and Durban.

"This is a timely endeavor," says Koketso Moeti, founding executive director of Amandla.mobi, a community advocacy organization based in Johannesburg. "For many people, coming together to learn is not always easy. This course provides a low-tech, accessible way for organizers to learn with and from each other, which is something key for an organization like Amandla.mobi with a national community."

Designing rich online content for data-poor environments

Using a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods, the research conducted in collaboration with the MIT Governance Lab found that WhatsApp is a viable medium for online teaching, if combined with a

strong teaching team, behavioral incentives, and attention to design details from the start.

As might be expected, developing an engaging course on WhatsApp is challenging both technically, to create rich course content in a data-poor context; and pedagogically, to maintain students' interest without face-to-face interaction. That's why the team has also produced a how-to guide with lessons from the pilot that others can use when designing their own WhatsApp courses.

Expanding from community organizing to health care training

The research has already attracted interest in the health care field. Grassroot and the MIT Governance Lab presented these findings to IT for Health and Education Systems Equity, led by George Washington University professors Seble Frehywot and Yianna Vovides. The initiative uses technology and computing to train and build capacity for medical workers around the globe, especially in low- and middle-income countries.

Frehywot notes, "Since currently e-learning is neither accessible nor equitable in many countries, understanding the process engineering behind what Grassroot and MIT have done to utilize WhatsApp as an e-learning tool may be one way to mitigate this problem, especially in training of health-care workers on the ground in countries that WhatsApp is being used widely."

Based on this research, Grassroot is now experimenting with a second course delivered over WhatsApp focusing on organizing tactics and skills. The overall implication, for Grassroot and other organizations, is that WhatsApp's potential as a pedagogical medium should be further

explored to better understand how to build relationships and networks that translate into offline action.

More information: A Novel Approach to Civic Pedagogy: Training Grassroots Organizers on WhatsApp: [mitgovlab.org/results/a-novel- … anizers-on-whatsapp/](mitgovlab.org/results/a-novel-anizers-on-whatsapp/)

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