2019 CLA CASE COMPETITION

COLLABORATE • LEARN • ADAPT

Case Title:

CLA 2.0: Evolving CLA to promote partnership and reading in Uganda

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A parent assessing his child's reading ability. using a flashcard. Photo Credit Kalab Yakii, USAID/Uganda School Health and Reading Program, RTI.

Summary:

For the USAID/Uganda School Health and Reading Program (SHRP) – implemented by RTI, adapting to improve results was at the heart of early grade reading efforts since the program started in 2012. Today, together with the USAID/Uganda Literacy Achievement and Retention Activity (LARA) and the Ministry of Education and Sports implemented Uganda Teacher and School Effectiveness Project (UTSEP), the reading model first developed under SHRP now covers 80% of government primary schools. But the reading model for what are now national reading reform efforts is substantially different from the original -- teams worked shoulder to shoulder trying out new ideas learning from successes and failures with an eye towards doing things better to get more Ugandan children reading.

What started as really good M and E with right fit, efficient data collection systems and staff as animators who helped technical teams keep a strategic yet adaptive focus, transitioned to more deliberate and intentional CLA thinking with the support of USAID/Uganda -- a pioneer and early adopter. CLA became the center of it all with more focused program reviews and reflections, after action debriefs, “stocktaking” in crucial programmatic areas and a robust research and learning agenda all of which have contributed to dozens of program modifications and guided the development of national reading reform. CLA has subsequently moved beyond M and E, SHRP and USAID as Ministry and partners have incorporated more learning and adaptive thinking. Through CLA, the reading programs have worked together to streamline teacher training content to focus on teacher practice, developed better materials and found more creative ways to support teachers in the classroom to ensure children are actually reading (rather than simply repeating and chanting) and increase reading achievement. CLA has indeed grown up in Uganda.

Think about which subcomponents of the Collaborating, Learning & Adapting (CLA) Framework are most reflected in your case so that you can reference them in your submission:

- Internal Collaboration
- External Collaboration
- Technical Evidence Base
- Theories of Change
- Scenario Planning
- M&E for Learning
- Pause & Reflect
- Adaptive Management
- Openness
- Relationships & Networks
- Continuous Learning & Improvement
- Knowledge Management
- Institutional Memory
- Decision-Making
- Mission Resources
- CLA in Implementing Mechanisms

1. What is the general context in which the case takes place? What organizational or development challenge(s) prompted you to collaborate, learn, and/or adapt?

In response to persistently low levels of reading achievement and unacceptable levels of HIV in Uganda, USAID and the Ugandan Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) envisioned and put in place the School Health and Reading Program (SHRP) with the dual goals of improving literacy and ensuring that learners have access to lifesaving health information. After 2 years of implementation, evidence of positive impact spurred the creation of sister reading programs: the USAID/Literacy Achievement and Retention Activity (LARA) and the MoES implemented, Global Partnership for Education supported, Uganda Teacher and School Effectiveness Project (UTSEP). Today, a common approach to reading developed and refined under these programs covers over 10,000 schools (80% of government primary schools nation-wide) ultimately supporting over 6 million Ugandan children to learn to read.

Though we believed CLA-like thinking was at the heart of programming from the onset-- it was the more holistic CLA vision that brought the learning to life and led to change. A vision that included bringing the right people together to set the learning agenda and carry out the research and learning. CLA continues to guide not only SHRP into its final year of implementation, but is guiding what are now national reading reform efforts. Since the beginning of the program, SHRP has always been looking for ways to do things better. These “better ways” were the jumping off point for LARA and UTSEP – and working collaboratively, these joint reading reform efforts were modified and improved to better ensure more children were reading.

While Increases in reading achievement started very modestly, by the end of Primary 4, SHRP learners were almost 4 times more likely to be reading 60 or more words per minute in English compared to control learners. Reading results increased as partners worked together to put forward better materials, better training programs and better support to teachers in the classroom through Collaborating, Learning and Adapting efforts.

2. Why did you decide to use a CLA approach? Why was CLA considered helpful for addressing your organizational or development challenge(s)?

Though reading gains were being realized early on (program schools were performing significantly better than control) we always believe results could be higher. SHRP started with really solid, programmatic M and E with right fit, efficient data collection systems and staff as animators who helped technical teams keep a strategic, yet adaptive, focus. Though CLA was not built into the program design, collaboration certainly was and learning is a hallmark of RTI programs generally. With the encouragement, guidance and support from USAID/Uganda the program transitioned to more deliberate and intentional CLA thinking. USAID/Uganda (a pioneer and early adopter of CLA) was receptive to and encouraged programmatic changes to work plans and strategy. CLA helped address the need to bring people together to identify challenges and look for solutions – in a coherent framework that would lead to adaptation. And it was that collaborative atmosphere nurtured thoughout that made it easier to take on this collective vision of CLA.

Over time, CLA became the center of it all with more focused program reviews and reflections, after action debriefs, “stocktaking” in crucial programmatic areas and a robust research and learning agenda all of which have contributed to dozens of program modifications and guided the development of what is now a national reading reform. CLA has subsequently moved beyond M and E and beyond SHRP and USAID as Ministry and partner programs have taken on this learning and adaptive mindset. The resources invested in CLA have been mainly in redirected energy and focus – data collection often takes place alongside other planned activities.

3. Tell us the story of how you used a collaborating, learning and/or adapting approach to address the organizational or development challenge described in Question 2.

SHRP started with tight, right fit M and E systems that supported technical teams to “connect the dots” bringing information to light to improve programmatic activities. USAID/Uganda was an early adopter in the CLA area – sharing the CLA spirit with programs, providing training and a supportive environment. Being a passionate M and E team, we attended trainings and read the materials but didn’t initially consider what we were learning to be much more than really good M and E. That being, said we ramped up our programmatic reflection and action research efforts.

So why weren’t teams and stakeholders adapting to learning? We realized that while we were collaborating and learning, we might not be collaborating with the right individuals early enough in the process -- to define and undertake the learning – the ones who would be expected to lead or make some type of change. So, it was a bit of a disconnected C and L -- which wasn't leading to A. It took a shift in mindset shift to realize we needed more deliberate and targeted collaboration -- defining and undertaking the learning with those who would be advocating, planning for, leading and undertaking the adaptation.

We started to bring more technical staff and practitioners into the learning and research -- earlier. One mantra was “who else can we include”. We developed a robust learning agenda and incorporated issues that we knew were important or “pain points” on the part of Ministry, partners and technical teams. Just recently, we supported the National Curriculum Development Center to conduct a field review of the teacher’s guides that support the teaching of reading as they are the ones who will be making any necessary revisions in the future. We also supported the Ministry to "remap" their direct support to schools and teachers after efforts by another donor fell through as the issue was central to the ministry and key to overall sector reform efforts. Learning efforts led teams to realize that they needed to think beyond physical remapping of schools and personnel, but clearly defining the support itself.

Once again, the support and leadership of USAID/Uganda cannot be over-emphasized. Some of the Program’s most compelling and lasting contributions to early grade reading in Uganda were not in the program’s original scope or work plans. Examples of this include the development of an addendum to the pre-service teacher training curriculum to ensure that newly trained teachers were trained to teach reading before being stationed in schools and our work with the Uganda National Examinations Board to support their own Early Grade Reading Assessment. USAID now has CLA built into quarterly and annual reporting ensuring that partners keep it at the forefront. As a program, we track learning activities and adaptations very closely, tracking hurdles and stumbling blocks.

Adaptations have run throughout the program including:

- Streamlining teacher training with a focus on teacher practice
- Changing the delivery of teacher training to include less expensive, smaller, local training venues and trainers
- Incorporating learner reading assessment into teacher support and now even parents are assessing their children’s reading ability.

As the program is nearing completion (it is closing in August, 2019), CLA has taken different forms. In our final work planning cycle, recognizing that planning cannot simply be like any other planning year, we organized a visioning exercise -- a pause and reflect moment. Asking teams to reflect on the following questions:
- What would you hope to see in existence in 2, 5 10 years from now as a result as the program?
- What can we do in the last year that would give us the best chance of making these visions a reality?

Spreading the CLA culture and increasing team skills, the SHRP team worked with another RTI implemented governance program to undertake the same type of visioning exercise and worked with the MoES to develop an “evidence to action” visioning workbook for early grade reading sustainability planning.

Collaboration and a focus on soft, technical support from the onset, certainly paved the way for these CLA efforts.

4. Organizational Effectiveness: How has collaborating, learning and adapting affected your team and/or organization? If it's too early to tell, what effects do you expect to see in the future?

CLA has turned teams into questioners who are not afraid to fail and this spirit is carried to our undertakings in the Ministry, at the districts and at the schools. We have seen tremendous change even at the school level where once school inspectors would visit schools only to find fault and fill in reports, they now go to schools to work with the teachers, discuss challenges and ways to overcome them. Technical program staff are currently leading and undertaking two pieces of action research with the Ministry: looking at the extent to which reading has been incorporate into pre-service teacher training systems and piloting of scripted, school level teacher training sessions.

Field Assistants are the day to day face of our program in the schools. Before the start of every school term, the technical teams meet with them to discuss challenges and share new approaches. With the CLA approach, field assistants have become more open in sharing challenges they face. One of these was a need to be more strategic about how we supported to improve parent and school support to reading. With field assistants input and testing, we developed a parent "learner check" that was used to stimulate conversations with parents about their children's reading. We have amazing stories of parents taking this leaner check to use with their children and in their communities and use these results to advocate for better reading support in the schools. One parent commented "I did not know that I can also test learners even when I do not know how to read and write."

CLA has moved beyond M and E and beyond SHRP. Spreading the CLA culture and increasing team skills, the SHRP team worked with another RTI implemented governance program to undertake a work planning visioning exercise and worked with the MoES to develop an "evidence to action" visioning workbook for early grade reading sustainability planning. A former M and E manager is now working at a DFID funded education program in charge of leading learning efforts there. RTI has hosted CLA summits around the world and Uganda will be hosting one such summit in May, 2019 where many of our education and reading CLA efforts will be showcased.

5. Development Results: How has using a CLA approach contributed to your development outcomes? What evidence can you provide? If it's too early to tell, what effects do you expect to see in the future?

CLA has helped the program ensure that: teacher training was improve reading instruction; books were being used more effectively in the classroom; and that learners were more likely to be reading.

Research undertaken in 2018, spearheaded by the training team, to compare large residential teacher training with smaller, non-residential training found the smaller trainings were more likely to train the right teachers, teachers were more likely to attend and the trainings cost less. As a result, training has shifted to the smaller, non-residential venues – this past January, 30% of teachers were trained in these smaller non-residential settings.

Keeping trained teachers in the classroom: After finding untrained teachers in program classrooms, research was conducted that showed that teachers were being transferred out of program schools and most of these transfers were being made by the district. After discussing the implications with district officials and providing them with names of trained teachers, transfers went down in program schools: 4% of transfers in program schools compared to 10% in control schools.

Increasing Reading Achievement: After very low reading outcomes in one region at the end of Primary 2, the M&E team and MoES officials conducted field research to find underlying causes. A complex set of issues surfaced including high teacher transfers and low teacher morale. But one key finding gleaned during reading lesson observations was that teachers were not guiding leaners to read on their own or in small groups but simply repeating words that were written on the board. In response, the program began emphasizing how teachers could guide and support individual reading in the classroom – retooling training and teacher support to reflect this. At the end of Primary 3, program learners in the region were reading more than twice as many words per minute as control.

6. What factors enabled your CLA approach and what obstacles did you encounter? How would you advise others to navigate the challenges you faced?

CLA is a culture, a way of doing business and needs to permeate throughout programs and processes. SHRP was fortunate to have very supportive USAID counterparts. In fact, USAID/Uganda was a leader in CLA for the Agency and we benefited from CLA training and discussions in country. The program also benefited from supportive COPs and program staff who believed that M and E was central to successful programming and that a high priority should be placed on planning and strategizing. Funds for research were never denied – though in most cases, research was folded into other program work at no extra cost. Another enabling factor is strong M and E staff who see themselves as program "animators" and who recognize the M and E function as supportive, yes, but also strategic and catalytic – helping find those learning moments and finding time for reflection.

Despite the pervasive learning orientation from the onset, teams did not always take action to adapt to challenges uncovered in monitoring and evaluative efforts. With CLA institutionalized and in regular use (including after action debriefs and deliberate pause and reflect moments), the development of the learning agenda came to the forefront to push learning and adaptation even further. As learning agenda discussions progressed, we saw what a powerful tool it could be. First, to bring partners and technical teams into research and learning (to increase ownership and use of results), and also as a communication and coordination tool. Partners combine ideas, energy and resources to identify and solve challenges through research and learning. It also incorporates and track MoES research needs and priorities. This is a crucial step in promoting learning to action -- ensuring the right people are involved in defining the learning and in undertaking the learning.

Advice we continually remind ourselves of and would encourage other teams to follow: include as many voices, the right voices,as early as you can. No one likes to be handed disconnected "learning" with the expectation that they do something with it. It comes back to the old saying "go fast alone, go far together".

7. Did your CLA approach contribute to self-reliance? If so, how?

Our collective approach was rooted in the notion of self-reliance starting from the onset – working with and through existing Ministry of Education systems. Uganda's capacity to manage its own development journey is below average – hampered by, among other factors, low educational quality. So, in the larger sense, SHRP supported the journey to self-reliance by promoting educational quality. More specifically, the programmatic focus on putting the MoES in the lead of the early grade reading reform efforts and at the center of learning was also journey to self-reliance forward.

Ministries (and affiliated institutions) are made up of people with priorities, skills, and interests. We have examples of how committed individuals and organizations worked to institutionalize locally-led data generation and utilization. To support national reading reform efforts, the Uganda National Examinations Board (UNEB) undertook their own Early Grade Reading Assessment and the National Curriculum Development Center (NCDC) staff explored a lack of reading progress in one region, which provided key insights into what was happening (or not happening) during reading lessons, with implications nationwide (and beyond).