

Cutting-edge classrooms

Tata Interactive Systems is targeting schools in India through an innovative, interactive educational programme that addresses the learning needs of exceptional students as well as average learners

Sanjaya Sharma, chief executive officer of Tata Interactive Systems (TIS), has an interesting fact to share about the 230 business development managers (BDMs) who work on its Classedge initiative: all of them were recruited “in the cloud”, through web-based mechanisms. After a two-week training at the company’s head office in Mumbai, the BDMs spread out across India, carrying a unique learning solution to schools — staying in touch with the head office only remotely, by logging onto an online sales customer relationship management platform. “This has to be the first such sales team in the cloud,” Mr Sharma says.

That, though, is only one unique aspect of Classedge. Its 400-member team of content creators is another. The multidisciplinary team, comprising software professionals, animators and teachers, is second only to

the 450-strong team that creates content for TIS’s traditional business of exporting instructional content. “Our export team is the largest content team in the world, so this must be the second-largest,” says Mr Sharma.

GAINING AN EDGE

These two exceptional teams are pulling out all the stops to help TIS gain an edge in the highly competitive schools segment of the domestic learning business. The Classedge content team aims to complete designing the content for classes from kindergarten to grade X by November, after painstakingly mapping the syllabus

for each educational board (the Indian Certificate of Secondary Examination [ICSE], the Central Board for Secondary Education [CBSE] and the state boards); content for grade XI and XII will be ready by the beginning of the next academic year (June-July 2012). The BDMs, meanwhile, are on a mission to cover 150 cities across the country before the year-end, persuading schools to switch to a new way of teaching and learning.

None of these efforts have been in vain, if the response from the schools is any indication. Within a few months of its launch in February 2011, the e-learning programme has met with an enthusiastic response not just from big cities, but from smaller cities and towns as well. “We have seen response from tier 1 to tier 4 cities, from every nook and corner of the country. From cities and towns in the north — we ▶▶



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Sanjaya Sharma, chief executive officer, Tata Interactive Systems



Classedge is bringing an interesting and interactive method of teaching to classrooms in different parts of India

have just implemented Classedge in Bhopal’s prestigious Champion School — to far-flung places in south India, we have witnessed demand from everywhere,” says Mr Sharma. “And it’s not just English medium schools that are approaching us, even regional language schools now see value in adopting our method of teaching.”

According to Mr Sharma, all segments within the school environment, including management, principals, teachers, students and parents, have shown a keen interest in Classedge, and schools have shown little hesitation in bearing the small additional cost — which roughly works out to ₹7,000-8,000 per month, per class, depending on the class strength — involved in implementing the programme. Schools realise that it is a small price to pay

for the huge difference it makes to their students’ education.

THE ROLL-OUT

By September, Classedge had won over 200 schools with its offering of an innovative and comprehensive educational solution designed to help teachers deliver high-quality instructions, with an effective blend of classroom activities and interactive multimedia demonstrations. Of these, 50 schools had already implemented the learning programme by October. “Right now, we are rolling the elephant out of the door,” says Mr Sharma of the initial phase of implementing the programme.

The roll-out itself involves several aspects, from creating awareness for the product to walking that extra mile to help interested schools set up the

infrastructure required to run an e-learning programme of this kind. TIS provides schools signing up for Classedge with necessary software and hardware, including PCs in the classrooms and staff rooms, projectors, uninterrupted power supply units, and internet connectivity to access Classedge as well as to keep the content updated.

Once the infrastructure is set up, there is an elaborate implementation programme which includes an intensive teacher training exercise, where the end-users of the product are made familiar with the teaching modules as well as the technology used to deliver these. An Edgecentre is set up at the school to enable teachers to access the content and prepare for their classes. A trained, full-time Edgecentre coordinator



Classedge has been developed as a solution that can help schools

is present on-site for a year-and-a-half to support teachers through three semesters of implementation. Two sessions of Teachedge, a proprietary teacher training service of TIS, in an academic year serve as refresher courses for teachers.

LESSONS IN LEARNING

Notwithstanding all the attention to detail and the diligent content creation process, TIS was still a tad surprised when the actual implementation started. “We did not completely understand the extent of the requirement,” explains Mr Sharma, adding that matching the syllabus to the requirements of each educational board was quite a challenge. On the other hand, it also pointed to the huge scope for growth in the schools segment, vindicating the company’s decision to foray into this business.

Having spent two decades creating and exporting content for companies and educational institutions in markets such as the UK, the US and Germany, the move to tap the promising

domestic market seemed the most logical thing to do. “We had developed a core competency in instructional design, having created content for international users for several years,” says Mr Sharma. “Around three years ago, it became quite clear to us that the Indian school education system was ready for technology-aided learning; digital classrooms looked set to become the trend in the years ahead.”

That’s how, in early 2010, the company approached Tata Industries with its plans to enter the domestic schools segment; around Christmas that year, the board approved the plan with an initial investment of ₹1 billion. Considering the competitive environment in the segment, TIS knew early on that it had to have a clear and unique proposition to make a significant impact. “Every player in the market offers multimedia learning programmes, but Classedge is different in that it offers the ‘lesson plan’ approach, which guides teachers in planning an activity-based and interactive

class around each topic in the syllabus.”

Based on the Multiple Learning Experiences Model — an instructional framework developed by TIS — Classedge is designed to engage students in a learning process that seeks to enhance their understanding of concepts and also encourages them to develop their social and thinking skills. Importantly, it addresses the learning needs of the exceptional student as well as the average learner. In addition to being able to hold students’ attention for a longer time, teachers enjoy the choice and flexibility offered by a multidisciplinary, multi-activity approach, which also allows them to monitor learning and comprehension in an effective manner.

THE ROAD AHEAD

With implementation underway in several schools across the country and with more schools set to sign up over the coming months, the Classedge team has a packed schedule ahead. The plan is to roll out the programme across 1,000 schools by the summer of 2012, in a phased manner; Classedge is expected to break even in three years — a target that does not perturb TIS, given the sheer size of the Indian education sector.

“India’s supplemental education segment represents a \$15-billion market opportunity over the next decade,” points out Mr Sharma, adding that the market for technology-enabled education has witnessed double-digit growth in recent years. Learning, then, does make eminent sense. □

— Sangeeta Menon