

Experiential Learning for Environmental Education: A Case Study on the School for Social Transformation by The Ignite Foundation^{1,2,3}

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Abstract: The School for Social Transformation, organized by The Ignite Foundation, is an experiential learning program designed for young Indians aged 18-35. With three learning phases—an 8-week online preparatory phase, a 9-day experiential learning journey, and a 6-month mentorship period—The Ignite Foundation has conducted six editions so far, hosted in Kerala, Rajasthan, and Himachal Pradesh.

In response to increasing environmental and climate challenges, the program incorporates environmental and climate change as one of its themes. The fifth and sixth editions of the program specifically focused on climate change and environmental sustainability.

This case study analyzes the program's objectives, methodologies, and outcomes, with a particular focus on its experiential learning approach. The program includes workshops on leadership and community engagement, environmental projects, and ongoing mentorship support.

The study assesses the impact of the program on participants and their communities, examining project outcomes and the development of leadership skills related to environmental issues. It also evaluates the effectiveness of experiential learning in environmental education and explores the feasibility of applying similar models in other contexts. Insights from this case study offer a framework for advancing environmental education through practical, action-oriented strategies.

Keywords: Experiential Learning, Environmental Education, Climate Leadership

For the ClimateEd conference, we will be presenting the offline learning component of the School for Social Transformation. The learning methodology involves experiential learning, community engagement and Design thinking for social change.

Name of the Initiative

Winter School on Environment and Climate Change

Aims and Objectives

The Winter School on Environment and Climate Change aims to equip youth and young adults with the knowledge, skills, and motivation to address climate challenges and promote sustainability. Its objectives are:

1. **Environment and Climate Education:** Raise awareness about climate change, its impacts, and the importance of mitigation and adaptation strategies.
2. **Climate Leadership and Social Entrepreneurship:** Cultivate leadership skills and introduce social entrepreneurship as a means to develop innovative and sustainable solutions aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
3. **Community Engagement:** Encourage active participation in local and tribal communities in Kerala through volunteer initiatives and hands-on projects, fostering collaboration and mutual learning.
4. **Individual Transformation:** Inspire participants to become informed, responsible citizens with fresh perspectives and a commitment to social and environmental change.
5. **Home Community Impact:** Enable participants to implement climate action projects in their communities, driving localized efforts for sustainability and transformation.

Background

The **School for Social Transformation** was conceived to address the leadership gap in India. In 2023, India stands as a nation with a demographic advantage in an aging world. As of 2022, the median age in India is a youthful 28 years, presenting a significant opportunity for shaping the future. However, amid this demographic advantage, India faces a critical challenge: a shortage of skilled workers. Research indicates that less than half of the country's youth graduating from educational institutions possess employable skills.

While the focus often centers on the lack of a skilled workforce, there is a parallel crisis in leadership. At **Team Ignite India**, we recognize this leadership gap as a pressing issue. Our society faces complex challenges that require collective global action to transform the world into a more equitable, peaceful, and sustainable place for all.

In a country like India, where half of the population is under 25 and two-thirds are under 35, with projections to become the world's largest workforce by 2027, comprising a billion individuals aged 15 to 64, it is crucial to nurture changemakers and social entrepreneurs, particularly from indigenous communities, small towns, and rural areas. True change, it is believed, must come from within the community.

It is recognized that formal education has limitations in addressing this leadership gap and in promoting social entrepreneurship and changemaking. The traditional education system often overlooks the development of leadership skills required to tackle complex social issues. In this context, **Ignite India** initiated the **School for Social Transformation** to fill this leadership void by nurturing a generation of social change leaders who can guide India toward a more inclusive and sustainable future.

In the 5th and 6th editions of the School for Social Transformation, the focus has shifted towards fostering youth leadership in climate action, mitigation, and adaptation. This change is driven by the increasing frequency of extreme climate events in Kerala, such as the devastating 2018 and 2019 floods, rising sea levels, and unpredictable monsoons. Recognizing the urgency of these challenges, these editions are designed to equip young people with the knowledge and skills to address region-specific environmental issues and become active agents of change in building climate resilience.

Description of project/activity

The **School for Social Transformation** is an experiential leadership development program designed for aspiring changemakers aged 18-35, with the goal of inspiring and empowering them to become effective leaders in their communities.



The program comprises a comprehensive learning journey that nurtures personal growth, leadership abilities, and a deep understanding of community challenges.

Pathway to Impact



1) Online Preparatory Period (Online):

The program begins with a 4-8 week online preparatory phase, where participants engage in

workshops, reflective exercises, and foundational training. This period focuses on areas such as social change, active citizenship, personal development, and the impact individuals can have on their communities.

2) Winter School (Offline):

The second phase is a 9-day immersive learning experience in Kerala. During this time, participants deepen their self-awareness and leadership skills while gaining a comprehensive understanding of local community challenges. This phase includes collaborative activities, cultural exchanges, and discussions that foster the spirit of changemaking and social entrepreneurship. It is designed to inspire participants and equip them with the tools to take meaningful action for transformative change.

3) Community Action Project (At Home Community):

The program culminates in a 6-month mentorship and community engagement phase, during which participants receive one-on-one guidance, peer feedback, and resources to help them design and implement a meaningful action project in their respective communities. This phase ensures that participants can apply what they have learned and create tangible, sustainable impact in their local contexts.

Activity in Focus: Winter School- Experiential learning hosted at a community organization

A school that takes students or co-travellers outside the classroom, where models and values of alternative education are integrated to provide a holistic learning experience to youth who otherwise lack such opportunities. A school not for children, but for young changemakers above 18 years of age.

On top of mountains, on the salt fields, on the beaches, in the middle of the sound of the crickets, by hearing the songs of the wind, a circle of trust has been created. We call this process the co-creation of learning.

Day-wise focus and learning methodology:

9-Day Schedule for School for Social Transformation

Day 1: ...and they come together to create a better world

On Day 1, participants come together after an online engagement and selection process. The objective is to build trust and foster personal connections among the group. The activities include a welcome session titled "*Welcome to the Tribe*", the *River of Life* exercise to reflect on life milestones, and *Theatre of the Oppressed* to break barriers. The methodology involves experiential learning through group activities and reflective exercises to encourage self-awareness and connection.

Day 2: A Journey to SELF

On Day 2, the focus shifts to exploring personal values and leadership traits. The objective is to help participants identify their core values and envision their leadership potential. Activities include a workshop on *Values and Leadership*, a reflection exercise called *Personal Vision Mapping*, and an *Evening Circle* for sharing stories of impact. The methodology combines facilitated workshops, guided reflections, and peer-to-peer storytelling to deepen self-awareness.

Day 3: From SELF to Society

Day 3 emphasizes the transition from personal growth to understanding societal connections. The objective is to enhance mindfulness, empathy, and emotional resilience. Activities include a session on *Mindfulness and Resilience*, a workshop on *Empathy in Action*, and an exercise called *Future Self Visualization*. The methodology incorporates mindfulness techniques, empathy exercises, and visualization practices to develop emotional resilience and social connection.

Day 4: Social Change and Active Citizenship

On Day 4, participants explore local development challenges and envision impactful solutions. The objective is to understand development issues and the role of active citizenship. Activities include a field visit to local climate action initiatives, participation in the *community projects and initiatives* and a discussion on *Decoding Development*. The methodology involves on-ground learning, interactive discussions, and creative vision presentations.

Day 5: Sustainability, Sustainable Development, and Global Citizenship

Day 5 focuses on sustainability and active citizenship in the context of global development. The objective is to strengthen understanding of rights, responsibilities, and sustainable development practices. Activities include sessions on *Active Citizenship* and *Perspectives of Development*, a workshop on *Rights, Duties, and Responsibilities*, and a *Problem Tree Analysis*. The methodology features participatory workshops and collaborative problem analysis techniques.

Day 6: The World We Want to See—Dreamers Festival

Day 6 inspires participants to envision a sustainable and equitable future. The objective is to explore advocacy and mobilization for societal change. Activities include an exercise on *Exploring Power Structures and Advocacy*, analysis of successful grassroots movements, and a reflection session titled *My Role in Society*. The methodology leverages case study analysis, group discussions, and personal reflections to foster visionary thinking. A festival of Dreams, Dreamers Festival is the highlight of the day.

Day 7: Designing Social Change—Action at Home

On Day 7, participants focus on identifying community challenges and prototyping solutions. The objective is to employ design thinking to drive social impact. Activities include a session on *Design Thinking for Social Impact*, a group activity for problem identification and stakeholder analysis, and a workshop on *Ideating Solutions*. The methodology integrates design thinking practices and stakeholder mapping exercises to create actionable solutions.

Day 8: Leading Social Change—We're Disrupters, Leaders, and Social Entrepreneurs

Day 8 is dedicated to prototyping and refining solutions for community impact. The objective is to develop and iterate action plans with mentorship support. Activities include *Prototyping Action Plans and Solutions*, mentorship-driven feedback sessions, and preparation for solution presentations. The methodology emphasizes iterative prototyping, mentor-led guidance, and collaborative refinement.

Day 9: Let's Change the World—Solutions Festival

The final day celebrates the journey of participants as changemakers. The objective is to present solutions and commit to future action. Activities include the *Solutions Festival*, a reflection session on *Commitment to Action*, and a closing ceremony titled *Celebrating the Journey*. The methodology involves public presentations, reflective exercises, and

celebratory activities to mark the completion of the program.

Theory of Change (ToC)

The Winter School on Climate Action provides young people with climate and environmental education, equipping them with the knowledge and skills to identify pressing climate concerns. Through workshops, hands-on projects, and mentorship, participants develop engagement plans and implement short-term initiatives addressing local environmental challenges. With a supportive ecosystem, including experts, policymakers, and social entrepreneurs, these projects can evolve into long-term climate-focused projects, Organizations or social enterprises. This process fosters a culture of innovation and sustainability, enabling young leaders to scale their impact. In the long run, the program strengthens leadership and cultivates changemakers who drive systemic solutions in climate action, mitigation, and adaptation.



Learnings and challenges

Key Findings:

1. **Micro-Level Impact:** Local-level community actions by participants have shown significant potential in giving awareness on climate challenges.
2. **Engagement:** Hands-on activities like beach cleanups, bird watching, biodiversity campaigns and awareness campaigns effectively inspire participants and communities alike.

Learnings:

1. **Leadership Development:** Experiential learning fosters leadership skills and encourages participants to take ownership of climate action.

2. **Collaboration:** Community-driven approaches amplify the impact of individual efforts.

Challenges:

1. **Ecosystem Constraints:** Building social enterprises around climate solutions requires additional ecosystem support.
2. **Sustained Engagement:** Keeping participants motivated during the extended community action phase needs continuous mentoring and resources.

Contribution

The Winter School contributes to climate education by:

The outcome of the Winter School can be assessed at multiple levels: host community, home community, and participant level.

During the latest edition held in Varkala in the Thiruvananthapuram district of Kerala, the host community changes included a Responsible Tourism campaign in Varkala Cliff Beach, community space rejuvenation, beach cleanup campaign, climate education programs in NSS camps in nearby schools, and the BottlesUp campaign, where plastic bottles of students were replaced by steel bottles.

The home community refers to where the participants come from. For this edition of the Winter School, participants came from different parts of Kerala, and community engagement was mandatory to be invited to the program. The engagement activities included biodiversity awareness programs, nature walks for youth, birdwatching for students of Kerala University, and climate anxiety listening spaces, to name a few.

At the participant level, the program provided an opportunity to learn more about self and society, reflect on life so far, and plan for the future. This was based on the belief that social transformation is an extension of building leadership and fostering social change. The participants' learning was supported by an LMS designed specifically for this purpose, where a four-module course was offered on development, sustainability, and climate action.

Post Winter School, 15 climate-related projects are in the process of being implemented across Kerala.

Annexure

- [SST - Beneficiary Information Document](#)
- [Community Action Plan Document of the 5th edition](#)
- [Impact Report of the 1st Edition of SST](#)
- [Activity Report & Impact Stories](#)

- [Article in Impactpreneur: Experiential Learning for Sustainable Development](#)