



Granny Cloud Tales

A story from each year

2009 - 2019

Suneeta Kulkarni

The Granny Cloud has been an independent, self-supporting entity for the greater part of its 10 year existence. Suneeta Kulkarni has led and nurtured The Granny Cloud since its inception in 2009 during the Hyderabad and Shirgaon SOLE Project, as well as during the School in the Cloud Project. She has been involved, from the very beginning, in every tiny aspect of The Granny Cloud, - recruiting, interviewing, and supporting new (and old) grannies; supporting centres and coordinators and interacting with the children everywhere. And in all this, she is ably supported by a Core Team of Distinguished Grannies. And of course many other people have chipped in from time to time with all kinds of support. To all of them, and most of all to Sugata starting the very idea itself, a big Thank You!

Sometimes in person, sometimes online, Suneeta has been privy to the many incidents - the breakthroughs and the challenges, that are an ongoing part of The Granny Cloud functioning. This unique perspective, from near and from afar, is what makes it possible for her to pen the Granny Cloud Tales.

The Tales included here are just meant to be a teaser. Hopefully there can be a regular book someday. In the meanwhile, if you wish to you can request access to the protected blog.

If you wish to know more about The Granny Cloud, or read some more Granny Cloud Tales, or be involved in some meaningful way, do visit our website:www.thegrannycloud.org OR our public Facebook page: The Granny Cloud OR write to us at info@thegrannycloud.org

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2009-2019

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In the beginning...

The year - 2008. The first of the Labs built as part of the SOLE OGEF project in Hyderabad had become operational in April. And in the very first months, it had become painfully obvious that the SOLE approach was not going to - could not - work. There was nothing inherently wrong with the approach. Sugata was already using it quite effectively in the UK, Europe, and elsewhere. So why not here? Well, actually, there were several critical differences. Despite going to so called 'English medium' schools, the ground reality was that the children had very little English fluency and this placed tremendous limitations on their reading comprehension. And back then, almost all the material on the Internet was in English!

So there we were - with brand new, state of the art equipment in specially designed Labs with specially designed furniture and we were up against a major road block; one that hit at the core of the approach. But Sugata is nothing if not innovative. So when I pointed out this hurdle, he suggested using the 'grandmother' approach. He had used the friendly presence of an adult to encourage children in another of his experiments with good results so it was worth a shot.

But this was different. This time the presence was not going to be in person - on the ground. It was going to be a '*remote presence*' - eMediators over Skype! And so began our first tentative trials towards the latter half of 2008 as we tested the feasibility of such an interaction. There were two musts - children in front of a computer with a webcam connected to the internet and an eMediator with a similar set up at the other end - anywhere in the world.

So began the idea of The Granny Cloud. By early 2009, several more labs had opened in Hyderabad, and an additional one in Maharashtra was slated to open in May. The need to comprehend English to use the resources available on the internet continued to become more and more obvious as I persisted in my observations of the children through every passing month. It was a whirlwind, roller coaster of a ride those few months before the SOME [Self Organized Mediation Environments] was finally launched. Sugata's appeal for eMediators in the Guardian brought in a deluge of applications. About 40 [of the over 200 applications] went on to join the team as I spent long hours orienting each individual Granny. We referred to them as eMediators but the media had dubbed them 'Grannies' and the name was beginning to stick...

May 2009 rolled in and we were all set for a double opening - a brand new lab and sessions with a brand new team of eMediators. The beginning of The Granny Cloud...

Come join me as I travel down Memory Lane...

But perhaps, I should add just one more thing...

It has been very hard to select just 10 of the many Granny Cloud Tales I have already written and shared with the Granny Community. Many tales are still waiting to be written. But then, this is meant to be a teaser... an appetizer. The stories included here are because they share something typical about our journey with the children; a bit about the kinds of settings we operate in, something about the strategies we have found useful; a glimpse of the bond that develops between the children and the Grannies; a little about the challenges we have faced

along the way and the insights that have emerged as we faced those challenges head on. And finally, a view of the ways in which the Granny Cloud makes a difference.

We hope you will share your thoughts with us and perhaps in the near future we can share many more of these stories with you. Write to us at: info@thegrannycloud.org

You can also visit our website: www.thegrannycloud.org and our public Facebook page: The Granny Cloud.



And a big Thank You!

**To all our coordinators who do their best to ensure that children don't miss a session.
Despite our challenges with connectivity....**

2009 - Kind Eyes & Soft Cheeks

The Granny Cloud had just taken shape. And we'd got it going in the SOLEs in Hyderabad as well. The tiny SOLE room stood right at the front of the school, on the busy main road. It was a hot June day in 2009, and the little ones had trooped in for their turn with a Granny.

It didn't matter that the SOLE adjoined the noisy, dusty, busy main road. The children were in a world of their own. Just them and their Granny. Sue's gentle voice had them entranced. Just a simple story; yet the children listened with sparkling, wide eyes. I watched them lap it up as I stood unobtrusively in my usual position near the wall.



And then I noticed him... the little boy in the front. Stroking the screen, or rather Sue's image on the screen; again, and again, and again.

After the session, I couldn't contain my curiosity, so I asked him what he was doing. He smiled. "She has such kind eyes - such soft cheeks. I was petting her!"



Being connected to another person via the internet, that too in real time, is one of the greatest wonders of our present day world. And it's here to stay, though it will undoubtedly, continue to evolve and the devices and applications, software and platforms we use to make that connection will keep changing. We've seen that happening right before our eyes since The Granny Cloud began, a decade ago.

Yet as someone firmly rooted in child development and with a special fondness for the field of ECCE [Early Childhood Care and Education], one of the things I've deplored about this technological experience is the limits on sensorial experiences. Fortunately, it facilitates going way beyond "seeing" a text book, and "hearing" a teacher's voice. Because of the internet, the children get to 'see' a waterfall, and 'hear' what it sounds like, but what about "feeling" that water as it runs off your back, or its "taste" as you swallow it? Or wondering what the flowers at the other end of the world, in a Granny's garden, "smell" like?

So more than a tiny part of me dreams of the children being able to have tactile experiences as well. And it has always been at the back of my mind since the initial Granny sessions when children wondered and talked about the feel of melting snow, or what the sun felt like when it was below freezing point.

We have quite a way to go before we get there. But in the meantime - with a good, stable connection?

"She has such kind eyes - such soft cheeks. I was petting her!" That's how real it can get!

Note: Some Granny sessions are endearing, other insightful. Some are both. This little incident is one of my favourite moments in the Granny-Children interactions I've experienced over the years... and one that I share with many new Grannies. It just so brings alive the very best that can happen when technology supports the interaction.

2010 - One sheet of paper ...

It was the evening of 12th November 2010. As darkness fell, the children at this little village in Maharashtra, India gathered around for a special session with Val. The BBC was doing a spot on Sugata through their 'Culture Show' and wanted to film the children from the Granny's end of things. Val is one of our distinguished Grannies and she has been there from Day One! The clearest ever diction and deliberately slowly paced verbalizations are just a few strategies that Val uses to make it easy for children completely unfamiliar with the English language to catch on and understand what is being said. Add facial expression and the images and objects she shows as she speaks and you begin to understand why she is one of my all-time favourite Grannies; especially for children having their first exposure, or for the really young ones. But it doesn't stop there. Val was among the very first to introduce craft activities alongside of stories and conversation as a staple part of Granny sessions.



And this day was no different. Being in a village and a government aided School, this was one of the few SOLE labs that had plenty of space; but the children themselves came from homes that had access to relatively limited resources. And they typically did not have paper, colours, cello

tape etc. around - not even in the school. So when Val, in preparation for the session, asked if they would have paper; I told her the children could be requested to bring some from home.

There was much that happened in the session. Filming was going on so they went through many different activities, from the photographs taken on walks that Val often shared in sessions, to her 'Hat' and 'Odd One Out' Games, to a couple of books including Val reading them the story of 'Jack & the Beanstalk' followed by a demonstration of making a beanstalk.

The children and Val were brand new to each other and they had been a bit shy about joining in on the "Fee fi, fo fum" bits but they were enthusiastic as they spread out their sheet of newspaper and chattered away as they made beanstalks too.

Then Val took another sheet of paper and started making a ladder. And the children?

They just opened out and unfolded their beanstalks, smoothed over their sheet of paper and began making their ladders. And far away as the filming continued, the crew probably had no idea that that was all that the children had - *one sheet of paper*.

Just one sheet of paper...

Note: It is often difficult for Grannies (especially new ones), or other folks interested in The Granny Cloud to fathom the extent of the lack of resources at many of the centres. Though the situation has changed to an extent over the years, ensuring that some specific material is available during a session often needs to be thought of beforehand.

In this anecdote, the children had come in during their holidays, in the evening and stayed past 8:30 pm, especially for this session and that was a tall order. Their homes were not in walking distance of the school and in these remote parts there was no public transport available for them to return home at that time of the night. Thanks to the teachers, and several folks from neighbouring villages, the children were dropped off to their homes to anxiously waiting parents....

2011 - Different, different but just the same... [Weddings & Other celebrations]

What could be remotely similar between a wedding set in Manchester UK, at the Town Hall [no less!] with a ceremony that looked straight out of a picture storybook and a wedding celebrated in a tiny hamlet in rural Maharashtra, India with a riot of colours and chaos and the intermingling of a priest chanting mantras with the conversation of guests that is so typical of many Indian weddings?!!

Well, if you were one of the girls from Rameshwarwadi who held on to every word as Jackie described her daughter's wedding, back in 2011, you would know!

The Granny Cloud Centre at Rameshwarwadi has been our tiniest one. Just the one desktop computer with an internet connection, it had been started with the support of a local NGO and the local citizens; one of whom had offered the use of a room in his house for this activity.

So, come Tuesday and Friday evenings and the room would be opened up for the neighbouring children as soon as Sachin got home from work!



Minimal lighting, and 'make do furniture' [Just one old wooden table really!]. With the desktop computer sitting on top of it. That was all this little centre could boast of... The children dragged up whatever stools or chairs they could find around Sachin's house or sometimes just stood around the computer as they engaged in conversation with Jackie [on Tuesdays] and Belinda [on Fridays]. The 'Rameshwarwadi Duo' as we often referred to them.

Your daughter or son getting married is an exciting event and Jackie's joy was both understandable and palpable. And though the boys weren't too keen on the idea [and soon disappeared!], the girls plied Jackie [and later, me] with questions about the wedding and eagerly lapped up the photos she showed them. The stately Town Hall where the wedding took place, the (relatively) limited and composed wedding guests, the bride's flowing white dress... All these were a novelty. It all seemed ethereal and dreamlike to these young girls watching the 'slideshow' of wedding pictures unfold.

And then one of them began to recount her sister's wedding and tell of the rituals surrounding it, describing the bright yellow sari her sister had worn for the wedding ceremony...

It was an experience that stayed with them, leaving a deep impression. The impact of a chat with a Granny often shows well after a session and I am often the lucky recipient of the children's insight. So when I visited them a few weeks later, they excitedly spoke of what Jackie had told and shown them. Well, I'm a sucker for weddings too, so I'd already had Jackie share the wedding pictures with me. So I knew only too well what the girls were referring to.



But it wasn't just the pictures they were fascinated by. What they wanted to share was their insight. As they put together what Jackie had shown them and what they had attempted to tell her about weddings in tiny Rameshwarwadi, they had realized something really important. "Suneetatai - sarkhach ahel!" [Suneetatai, it's the same!] And it was.

No matter how different these wedding ceremonies looked, they had the same foundation. The same dreams for a loved one, the same joy being expressed on this festive occasion, the same hopes for a happy future, the same challenge in letting go as their daughter/sister/friend moved on to another stage of life.

Weddings are just weddings, and people are the same. All the world over.

Note: Over the years, many different stories highlighted this insight over and over again. Children and Grannies alike ... recognizing that "People are just People". No matter how different the outer trappings are - the way we dress, the way we speak, what we eat, how we pray [or not], how big [or small] our homes are - we all have the same hopes, dreams, and emotions. And when children [and adults] realize that - a bond develops. As does trust. I often [only half] jokingly remark on how I don't really care if the children pick up English or other skills. If only we could learn to accept each other, trust each other... the world would be one step closer to peace and becoming a better place...

2012 - The Grand Tour

When Grannies and children come together, they go off on all kinds of 'journeys'. You really never know where the children will take you...

But one thing is for sure. Even the littlest ones figure out very quickly that a laptop has mobility. And they make the most of it. And way back in 2012, at one of our earliest and longest lasting centres in Varanasi, they only had the use of the coordinator's laptop for their Granny sessions, so that's all that they had seen.

June was happily engaged in conversation with the little ones. Over and over again, we have noticed that the children are quite intrigued by the Grannies, their families, and their homes. This time they decided to do something about it. Just a little differently. They wanted 'The Grand Tour'.

So they asked June to show them around her home. It wasn't enough to just point the webcam in a different direction. She was expected to walk around with her laptop as they navigated their way through the different spots in the house. June entered into this activity quite enthusiastically and was happy to have the children lead her on.



As you can imagine, it lent itself to quite a conversation and several new words were added to the children's vocabulary as they went from room to room and looked at different objects. It was quite hard for them to imagine June's house. It was certainly a far cry from the tiny one or

two room homes they lived in, in a Varanasi slum. But they did know of one essential space in any home. The Kitchen! So that is where June was finally requested to take them.

And on reaching the kitchen, there was another interesting object in front of them. A fridge! Much to June's embarrassment, the children had her open it so they could see inside. June is a good sport so she acceded to their request. And she shared, as we talked about it later, "Suneeta, if I had only known they would want to see inside, I would have kept some interesting things in there!"

But that is the crux of this kind of experience. June didn't need to put in anything special. For these children, anything June had in there was rather different from the food they saw in their homes. And *that* made it interesting...

Grannies often ask me what the children will be interested in, where and how they should start. My answer? "Everything! You might be surprised. Just go with the flow. Even "The Grand Tour!"
☺

Note:

There were several reasons for including this tale. Not only did it happen in one of our longest lasting [and still active] independent - self-initiated & self-funded centres, it was in an urban though severely disadvantaged setting.

Even more importantly it demonstrates a key element of our approach. Much of what happens in Granny sessions is not only 'child centred'; it is 'child driven'. Letting children take the lead, creating the free and supportive environment in which they can explore is an often understated aim.

It is this that lays the foundation for their developing self-confidence and their ability to question, to venture out into the unknown...

2013 - A sense of disbelief... & empathy

From the basic goal of increasing English language fluency - mainly conversation and reading comprehension, the *Granny Cloud* took off in its very first week of existence towards many other 'unplanned' objectives. One of the most important of these was leaving children with a sense of wonder as they saw a world far from where they were, a world they had not imagined visiting; not even in their dreams...

This was not surprising; given that the children interacted with Grannies from many different countries and even seemingly innocuous house tours and peeks out of Granny windows made visible delightful novelties and exposed them to a lifestyle dramatically different from their own. Whether it was birds feasting on 'bird cake' or the round of cheese on the refrigerator shelf; whether it was the vast expanse of green with not a person in sight or the bustling crowds at King's Cross - all of it showed the children a different world.

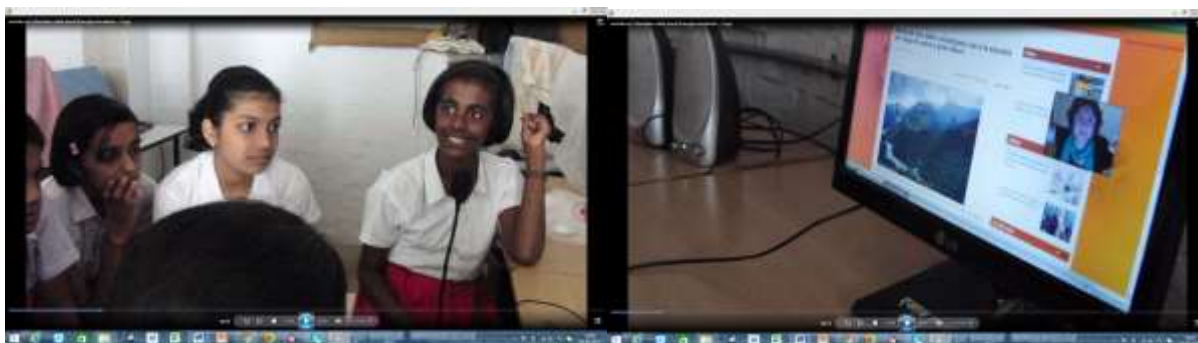
More often than not, what they saw at the Granny's end indicated a life filled with what they considered comforts, even luxuries. And while they did not feel jealous or even envious; they marvelled at the unending things to look at.

But every once in a while; a Granny is able to show them life at the other end of the comfort spectrum ...

It is true that many of the children, at many of the *Granny Cloud Centres* have a hard time and a long journey just getting to school and they make do with very little. But helping them realize that there were many other places in the world where children faced even greater hardships than them is not just an eye opener but leaves them with a healthy respect for the opportunities they have to change their lives.

And so it was on this relatively cool August morning in 2013 at a centre in a semirural town in Maharashtra. *Granny Cloud* sessions had been recently set up at the school and a group of Grade 7 children eagerly crowded around one of the working computers in their 'put together' lab for a session with Natalia. They had already experienced the joy of interacting with her on a couple of previous occasions, and loved hearing her infectious laugh. They explored ideas together and figured out how to express their thoughts in English. And they managed quite well - despite the children's limited fluency.

Today was no exception. Natalia had a special video clip to share with them. It showed Colombian children crossing rivers and mountains by cables as they made their arduous way to school, school bags slung over their backs. The children watched wide eyed - in disbelief that this was routine for these Colombian children. And it seemed fun - an adventure. Several voiced that thought - "Majja!" [Fun!]



And then just as quickly reality descended as one of the girls broke into that thought and pointed out that it wasn't just fun... it was 'HARD'... Imagine having to travel like that everyday...



Those children finished school a year ago. They haven't forgotten Natalia and they haven't forgotten the Colombian children. Hopefully they will connect again. In the meanwhile... it was just one little session but they understood the concept of 'relativity'...

Note: Just as important as it is for children to 'drive' the sessions; it is important for Grannies to aim to widen their world view. To create opportunities for the children to question their assumptions about the world outside of their immediate locations... Not with a sense of "How sad" or "How amazing"; but with a sense of "Oh! I hadn't thought about that..." and "Hmmm, I wonder what that is like..." It is one of the most important goals of The Granny Cloud.

2014 - The Monkeys did it

Across locations - and it doesn't matter whether it's urban India or an isolated part of Greenland, connectivity is one of the biggest challenges faced by The Granny Cloud. Although the children who used the 'Hole in the Wall' kiosks coped and even exhilarated in being able to connect with the world beyond with a dial up connection; we did get spoilt by technological advances over the years. And having an adequate and stable connection makes a huge impact to what can happen in a Granny session.

One of the centres where we had Granny sessions for close on 2 years was located in a school in a village on the border of Karnataka and Telangana. The drive from the closest airport and urban centre took over 2-3 hours and it was a lovely drive, scenic and serene. At the destination was this sprawling campus spread over several acres. There was a day school as also a hostel for orphans and children from very poor homes. Most the children who came in for the day came from villages as far off as 20 kms and were from farming communities that just about eked out a living.

While the campus appeared sparse in terms of material resources, there was a well-planned and implemented curriculum which included vocational skills like carpentry and tailoring workshops alongside of the classrooms where much of the academic part took place, and an expansive play area. Ducks waddled across the path leading to a small pond and the children looked happy. Meal times were busy with everyone in long rows as they sat cross legged on the special porch adjacent to the kitchen.



Granny sessions took place in the small library with the one computer which had been connected with a great deal of effort.

The room next door had 3-4 old desk top computers but none of these were connected to the Internet. The only other Internet connection was in the Principal's office in the building across the path and several wires went over it to ensure the connection in the library on the other side of the path. And it was an always uncertain connection.

The school itself was 'big' and we connected with Grades 8 to 10, with children from the Primary grades added on as we extended our efforts. So many Grannies valiantly kept up the effort to interact with the children. But every now and then - "Now" more often than "Then" there would be no connection. And the Grannies would wait - wait to be connected, wait for information about the ground situation, wait for connectivity issues to be resolved. Available Internet services using a data card were limited and it wasn't a possible solution in that location. The wired connection was all we could depend on. Frantic phone calls and several emails from our end would be attempted before we would finally get news that the Internet connection was down.

The frequent reason? The monkeys! Dancing around the wires was part of their natural play.



Yet it meant that connectivity was disrupted. Not just for an hour or a day but a week - even a fortnight. It meant a long wait till a technician could arrive from the city and do the much needed repair. Only to have the wires give way again in another few days. Combined with minimal information from the school it was a frustrating situation and finally, mutually, the Granny Cloud closed down interaction at Rayalpad after a couple of years.

Yet to this day, every so often, the faces of the eager children glide across my eyes and I wonder if the situation would be any different today...

Note: Internet connectivity remains our #1 challenge even today. We face this problem irrespective of whether it is a well-resourced and relatively 'rich' centre or a lab in a remote island location. Sometimes the geographical location and related remoteness leads to minimal access to facilities, especially when the connection breaks down or is disrupted. Sometimes weather conditions are extreme enough to cause these disruptions. Getting it back and running can often be delayed. Advances in fibre optic Technology and special sea cables seem to hold out a possible answer in some of the remotest villages/islands, yet it involves a very long wait. In some locations it has meant the erection of a special tower and modem and continuing the exploration of different technologies. In other, even urban areas, the challenge was in getting a stable wired connection in what was essentially an unauthorised slum area. Data cards and dongles helped overcome that challenge. And in every one of these situations, these alternatives became possible only when funding, usually through supportive external organizations was available.

Yet there is always hope... Today, there are days when everything fails, but the coordinators don't give up and still manage to connect using the data packs on their mobile phones! As we go into the future, I am sure that there will be still other technological advances that ensure high speed stable connections. And we will be able to have an unbroken interaction with the children irrespective of where they are. Strategies will emerge that allow us to take a session way ahead because we no longer have to keep compensating for a bad connection. Children who have achieved a fair degree of language fluency and computer familiarity will actually be able to have SOLE sessions with the Grannies over Skype or Hangouts or similar other platforms, because they no longer have to worry about the connection.

I do hope that Governments and people from industries and scientists are listening. Together, we can all make a difference and I look forward to the day when the children will no longer need to tell me - "The monkeys did it!"



2015 - They are watching... And learning!

It was a warm (as it usually is!) afternoon in July 2015 at our centre in Phaltan. The children of Grade 6 were in the lab grappling with a question that had come up in a Granny session a few days before. It was about whether oranges could grow at the North Pole. The children were relatively new to the lab. Although the specially designed lab had opened up in December 2014, the Grade 6 children were having their first moments of a 'mini SOLE session'. Granny sessions at Phaltan had only been offered to Grade 6 and 7, since July 2013, at a time when there was no lab. So this group of children was also very new to interactions with Grannies. With the new lab built as part of the School in the Cloud project we had forged ahead in an attempt to include all the children from Grade 1 to Grade 8. It was challenging because this had placed an enormous load on The Granny Cloud with its limited numbers as well as the related challenge of lab availability with so many children wanting and needing to use it. We were still in the process of finding Grannies for various groups.

But to return to the story about their search...

Now you might say that the question was not a difficult one. And you would be right. But consider this. The lab was new, the children had been in the lab on only one previous occasion, and computers connected to the Internet were a new thing for them. In fact they had minimal familiarity with computers as well. And the language? Of course! These were children who studied in Marathi, spoke in Marathi, and pretty much heard only Marathi around them. And the question? Well, that had been deliberately [This was to prevent them 'copy-pasting' the question into Google!] posed in Marathi! They didn't know what the words were in English. They were particularly stumped by the word 'ugavane' (grow)... or how they were supposed to find out. But they were excited to be in the lab. The buzz since the lab had opened in December 2014 had not abated. Their interactions with the Grannies was a new experience. And they had heard so much about all the activities that went on in the lab. And they wanted to be a part of it.

Just a couple of days earlier, during their very first experience in the lab, Grade 6 had shown a tendency to not want to share. Not surprising given their unfamiliarity with both the lab as well as Granny sessions. They sat in 'neat groups and 'stuck' to their own groups, had shielded their computer screens to prevent other children or groups reading off from their screens; they had seated themselves in positions that made it difficult for others to move around.



But today was a different day. They had realised even from that one experience that it was not a 'competition'. They had realised that they could ALL learn together. And it showed in their behaviour!

Of course, this did not mean that their search skills or fluency in English had dramatically increased. So they were quite challenged by the question - specially the word 'grow'. But previous school experiences had made them quite resourceful. They asked each other with no success. Still unfazed, a couple of them decided they should go check out the dictionary in the school library. They were still unfamiliar with the idea of online dictionaries. So they ran off and returned with the dictionary they had borrowed from the school library and found the Marathi word 'ugavane' and the word for it in English. Now they had a sense of what they were looking for...



All this while the 'veterans' of the Granny Cloud (with 2 years of Granny sessions under their belt, and the experience of 3 or 4 SOLE sessions over those 2 years), watched from the lab window adjoining the playground. They were more than a little envious of Grade 6 because Grade 6 [unlike them] now had Granny sessions...

But how were Grade 6 trying to make sense of all the English links that were located? Accessing material in English and trying to comprehend it seemed too enormous a task. As did using Google to ask the questions they had, but only knew how to phrase in Marathi. They had heard about Google Translate from the older groups. But they did not have a clue about how to use it...

Looking through the window, the 'veterans from Grade 8' were finally unable to contain themselves and began giving instructions. When that didn't work one of them reached in. With the keyboard held out by one of the Grade 6 girls conveniently within reach; she demonstrated how to 'write' in the Google translate box. A short while later many of the children in the room, even at other computers, could be seen going back and forth between Marathi and English. Several steps further into finding an answer...



But there was one element in all this that made me particularly happy. Grade 8 had showed them the first bit of how to use the online resource but stopped way short of giving or telling them the answer. And certainly did not actually do it for them...

Grade 6 had certainly asked. Grade 8's response? "Find out for yourselves!"

They had experienced the Grannies doing this numerous times. Balancing between providing support and encouraging discovery - A perfect transfer of Granny skills!

Note: Although the initial hope had been that Grannies would be able to run SOLE sessions over skype, the reality had dawned on us rather early, that that was not really feasible. The children's lack of readiness as far as computer skills as well language, added to the challenges placed by technology and the absence of the Granny in person - on the ground had made us realize that we were more effective with a general interaction through which we helped raise confidence levels, enabled curiosity and a questioning stance. So rather than attempting full-fledged SOLE sessions, we have over the years focused on what we often refer to as 'mini SOLEs'. Where children can look up something relatively tiny, experience 'success' and share that with a Granny, all in the short span of a single Granny session. And in locations where there are opportunities in labs where equipment/and 'connected' computers are available, the children often engage in additional exploration, in their own time, and it goes even further. It is these observations that convince us of the difference we make as Grannies.

2016 - Going the extra mile.... Actually light years!

Bringing the Stars down to Earth

Some stories happen over a few moments or at most hours. Others unfold over months, even years. Today's story is one of the latter kinds...

But first, a diversion...

Our centre at Panchgani. It was one of the earliest, self-funded Granny Cloud centres, and was set up back in May 2013. This was during the 'lean' period. The original SOLE project funded through Newcastle University had come to an end in December 2009. The apathy and lack of will combined with possibly not seeing any real value in the SOLEs, and of course minimal resources had brought all the specially designed SOLE labs to a halt. There were very few Granny sessions happening. Sporadically, erratically, irregularly, sessions continued in just a couple of locations. So we had numerous Grannies but very few labs or centres to Skype them in to. Demoralized Grannies began to drop out of the initiative. The option of disbanding the Granny Cloud had always existed since the end of the Hyderabad SOLE Project. Yet it seemed too good an idea to drop. After all it didn't really have to have funding. All of us Grannies were volunteers. All we needed - the bare minimum at the children's end to be able to have this interaction - was one computer connected to the internet. And of course, we needed someone with the children who believed in the value of this interaction.

The media in India had never really covered The Granny Cloud so information about it spread mainly by word of mouth. And gradually a few interested educators and community workers got in touch about having the Grannies interact with the children at their school or their organisation or even in the community. While a teacher at Shirgaon valiantly tried to keep the lab and Granny sessions alive, there were other citizens in the community who helped bring it to Rameshwarwadi. The farsighted coordinator at GLC in Varanasi ensured that it was also a part of the Granny Cloud...

And then there was Panchgani...

It was all because of the Head of a primary school at Panchgani. Soma had an outlook that crossed a rigid educational orientation. She saw how this could well apply to her children. But there was a catch. This wasn't a poor school! [And we typically only connected with 'disadvantaged' settings. Here, the children came mainly from well to do homes, including from rural areas. However, when they came to school for the first time they had little or no English at their disposal. But it was an English Medium school so even language was not a huge challenge after a year or so at school...

Did that mean they wouldn't benefit from interaction with the Grannies? Of course not! Look at the many SOLEs around the world advancing to even greater achievements because they not only have the material resources, but also highly trained teachers and educators spurring them on to discoveries. And we had Grannies to spare! In fact we were losing them because there were no children available to connect to!

And despite its many privileges (the location and scenic view even from the classrooms being just one of them!), there were many challenges. Its very location made Internet connectivity difficult and many a session took place in the school lobby or a covered porch. These were the only place where we could get an adequate signal!



And there were many children who came from the rural areas. From well off but not necessarily educated homes. And they were so little. AND they were living in a residential School far away from home with no 'Mummy' to run home to when school ended. That took care of the 'disadvantaged' setting as far as I was concerned.

So with the staunch support of the coordinators we got the Granny sessions going. And as we connected with grades 1 to 4 several Grannies jumped in to connect for 'regular' sessions. Not just from the UK, but even from France as several Grannies joined the cluster over the course of those first few months. Much email went back and forth between the Grannies and the teachers as they discussed possibilities of topics that might be interesting to the children and shared resource material. So many stories...

Today's story is about reaching for the stars...

Denise was amongst the earliest to connect with our Panchgani centre. She too engaged in email with the children's teacher, discussing different ideas and possibilities. Meeting the same children week after week helped forge a very special bond. And they were able to continue with a discussion that had lit a spark and see it all the way through. Denise and the children from Grade 3 spent the term talking about the universe and galaxies. They even sang songs about the stars and constellations. And they drew pictures!



Then Denise thought it would be such an adventure if they could officially name one of those many stars. The collaborative effort with all the children participating and they had picked on a name! "The New Era Rosy".

And in a classic example of how many Grannies take their commitment seriously and go, not just two steps, but many miles further, Denise followed up on this with the 'Online Star Registry' and got all the paper work taken care of!

The icing on the cake, with a cherry on the top? She visited the children in 2016 and presented the children with their very own star!



Note:

There are many ongoing debates in the Granny Cloud. One of these debates is around the kind of locations we reach out to - in terms of the disadvantages, the lack of resources, the intellectual as well as material poverty that the children live in. A second debate is about whether sessions should be 'Regular' ones [the same Granny with the same group - week after week, sometimes even year after year!] or 'One Off' sessions where, which Granny turns up for the session is as much of a surprise as which children might be present. And no guarantees about sessions taking place! Both these debates rear their head every so often and both applied to the centre at Panchgani. As with any debate, there are many sides and perspectives. This story highlights the what can happen when the interaction is a 'regular' one and close bonds are formed... Grannies and children - together. Scaling great heights.

Yet these debates continue on The Granny Cloud and I hope they always do. It's what ensures we continue to evolve...

2017 - Who will talk to my children about Picasso?

When I wrote this tale, a mini-series on Picasso was being telecast on National Geographic. Each time I settled down to watch the weekly episode, I was reminded of a conversation Edna had with one of the coordinators at the Granny Cloud centre at Diksha about a session in November 2017.

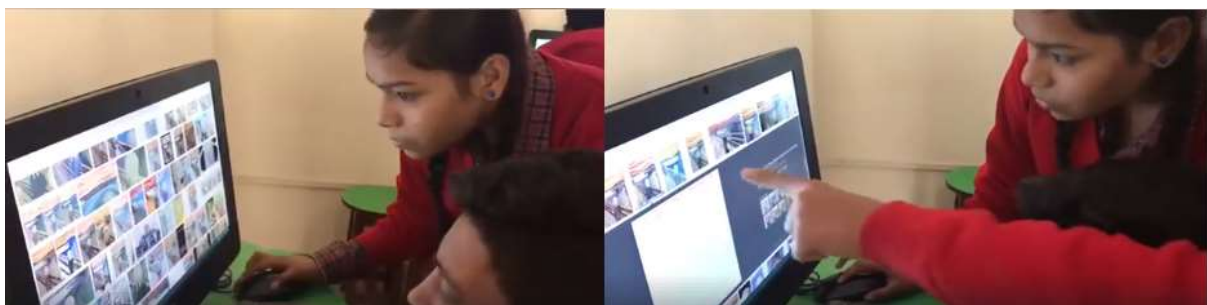
Every centre is unique. The children are different, the resources available at the centre are different, the coordinator's capacities and competencies are different. Some centres nestle in the midst of a throbbing urban area, others are situated in the remotest of locations and just reaching them physically is a special kind of challenge. Some centres have well established funding, others struggle to stay alive on a month to month basis. Some operate using the regional language, others have a head start in communicating with the Grannies - English being the medium of their instruction at school.

But then there are the similarities. And the biggest being that ALL children need Grannies! They need these warm, encouraging folks in their life to enable them to feel a sense of self-worth, to gently challenge conclusions they arrive at in the course of a search, to throw open for them the doors to the world outside, to sow in them the seeds of future possibilities; to bring home to them their role in their communities; to give them that moment (and more) of sheer delight and fun!

With the very limited capacities of a small volunteer group, The Granny Cloud is always (sometimes overtly, sometimes silently) questioning where best to use our limited resources. And it remains a tussle. Knowing that we can't reach even the tiniest fraction of children who need us.... It is painful. And so with what logic do we spend our meagre resources on centres and children that have at least the basics?

Every so often, we consider pulling out of a centre so we can focus and divert our Grannies to a centre that needs them even more. And every so often we stop and reconsider because it doesn't end there. Because the impact of the interaction between Grannies and children often goes well beyond the sessions and Grannies are thrilled when this is shared by the coordinators...

And this impact was underscored when the coordinator at one of our Haryana centres shared what the children had got up to after the day's session. Edna had shown them some stuff on Picasso and they had viewed some of his works. AND the Grade 9/10 children had continued to chat about art and famous artists, spontaneously searching for more - AFTER the session! As you can imagine it made Edna's day... [And mine!]. As Edna commented, *"It's one thing to have fun in the session but it adds a dimension to know what happens after it's over."*





And yet once again, I realized how much the Grannies were needed... As the coordinator said to Edna - "Who will talk to my children about Picasso?"

Note: The debate about 'who to reach out to?', and 'for how long?'; 'what kinds of activities should we engage in?' - are questions we ask ourselves over and over again in The Granny Cloud. Not only when we take on a new centre or group, but pretty much every session. And an underlying question is about 'impact'. Are we making any difference? Is what we do of any use...?

And just like in this anecdote... we have tales to share that tell us that our efforts are not in vain. We do get through - in different ways... and we open the windows to the world beyond.

2018 - "Observant" - A new word for the day

Every so often a session comes along that makes me laugh and spreads a warm glow as it stays on in my memory. What happened at Phaltan in January 2018 is likely to be such a one. At very first glance it seemed just cute, but its real strength came through as I kept remembering it on the drive back to Pune.

But I am getting ahead of myself! The second batch (all 10 of them) of Melanie's group came in and took their seats around the big screen. Seats that had just been vacated by Melanie's first group of fifth graders. In some groups, the really active kids are right up front, in other groups - right at the back, as it was with this second group. They got through their regular routine (and it no longer takes them more than a couple of minutes) of coming up close to the webcam, typing in their name and saying "Hello" and "How do you do?" to Melanie individually, with the odd one sharing some special news.



Then they began with an activity Melanie had used with the first group as well - 'Similar and Different'. The children had been given the challenge to be 'observant' - to see carefully. It was their new word for the day. Melanie brought out all kinds of things - two pictures, two objects e.g. pencils and finger puppets (elephants were of course included, being Melanie's favourite animal!) and more.... The children covered a range of similarities and differences. From colour to size, to which specific animal, the length of their tails, whether a pencil had an eraser or not and so on. All these things were observed and commented on.



Then Melanie turned to herself and the children asking them to see if they could point to similarities and differences among them. Of course they could! And they raised their hands to

be invited to speak. And there were some really active children who seemed to have their hands up most of the time. They were so eager to speak!



They even included differences they just knew about... And indicated these in full sentences. "You are in London, we are in Phaltan". "You are in morning, we are in afternoon".... before returning to specific things they could "see". And I had a hard time containing my own grin as I heard one of the kids at the back point out a similarity - " You have a beautiful smile, we have beautiful smiles". Awwwww! Of course they did, every single one of them! And they had heard Melanie comment on that many, many times.

But that wasn't the end. Similarities and differences continued to be indicated, and their lack of inhibitions and absence of false ideas about politeness shone through as I heard them point out a difference - "You are old, we are young!" Melanie and I had such a good laugh over that one as well.

Cute? Yes! But that isn't all. There were traces of many hours of interaction with this group. It was evident in their eagerness to participate, and in their patience to await their turn. It was evident in the 'order' that had been gently created so that each one would be heard. And it was evident in their use of sentences (not individual words being 'barked' at Granny!). And it was also evident in their reasoned conclusions as the session continued and they watched and reflected on a clip of astronaut Tim Peake speaking with school children in the UK.

They were being observant AND reflective, and they were expressing every bit of it. Just a glimpse of what The Granny Cloud can achieve...

Note: One of the biggest challenges of The Granny Cloud [apart from connectivity] is the fact that all interaction happens through 'remote presence'. Not being 'on the ground' with the children creates difficult situations in which Grannies must often hope for the best, especially when there is no coordinator on hand to help at the children's end. Because it can get chaotic - to say the least. And there is such a thing as 'optimal chaos'. Too much of it and not much learning happens.

But there is also a degree of 'order', an order that comes about through the use of imaginative strategies that are woven into regular sessions. These strategies ensure that ALL children in a session get a chance - to express themselves and to be heard. It doesn't happen over one session or even two. But it happens. It happens because the Grannies are ultimately role models and the children absorb all that they do and say - very carefully. It's one of the reasons, not just anyone can be a Granny!

2019 - Braving the weather

Note: For this final tale in the 'Teaser', the note comes at the beginning. I had a really hard decision trying to figure out what to include and what to leave out as I went about selecting the stories - one to mark each year since The Granny Cloud began. And I realised I hadn't written one this year - 2019. And there are so many possibilities already!

So I thought, why not put in something that cuts across ALL these 10 years and has provided fodder for so much interaction. As I browsed through many thousands of posts, emails, conversations, and photos there is one topic that showed up unfailingly. You guessed right. The weather! So here you have it. The final story in our teaser - our constant companion - the weather...

So this tale - to mark 2019 - the Year that marks 10 years of The Granny Cloud is actually not a story but a series of images and hosts of 'not so random' remarks, messages, and posts that have gone back and forth between Grannies, children and coordinators over the years. Memories of a topic that highlights a challenge we have faced from Day 1 - but that has also provided opportunities for discussion in many a Granny session. When nothing else seems to work (and often even as a starting point) there is always the weather...

31st March 2019

Summer is approaching at a galloping place where I live in India. It is still only the end of March and the temperature has already climbed to a steep 41 degrees celsius by day. As I sit in the middle of the night waiting to connect with one of our newest centres in far off Ontario, Canada, I need the breeze of the fan to make it tolerable. The temperature at the other end is a striking contrast. They have just had a blizzard the previous week and are still battling temperatures of minus 15 degrees Celsius. Of course that's my take on it - 'battling'... For them it is as usual as the 40 degrees and more at my end, was for me.

And I thought back to some of our earliest sessions, even trial ones where Grannies demonstrated the wearing of winter wear with fur-lined hoods to children in hot Hyderabad; when children in Shirgaon and Grannies struck deals with each other for 'couriered bottles of sunshine' in exchange for a little snow. The weather has been our constant companion ever since. A quick browse through the posts and messages used to convey 'session status' highlights how often the weather has been the 'culprit' - responsible in so many ways [hot, cold or raining] for keeping children away from the centres and Labs. It's been the weather that has often been responsible for listless, perfunctory participation in sessions held in the midst of 'killing heat'; for children needing to leave early because of bad weather conditions; of aborted or cancelled sessions because the weather played havoc with internet connectivity.

But The Granny Cloud is nothing if not persistent, and over the years has faced these frustrations with a shrug of the shoulders and a "Oh well, there is always next time..." In many places, they have used alternative, asynchronous strategies like text and video messages, sometimes Linoit or Padlet canvases to share ideas and experiences in between 'real time' interactions. All to ensure that the human connection - the bond between themselves and children - continued to grow...

Every so often, it has been a source of great amusement as I come across discrete queries about what should be considered 'hot' or 'cold'. Grannies wondering why children were bundled

up in cardigans and monkey caps saying it was cold when (and by most Granny standards) it was a warm 18 degrees celsius. And then, as I continue to browse through the many, many posts, I come across one where a Granny confesses that she can't imagine what it's like to function in minus 5°celsius (or worse) and being amazed at the children in a remote Greenland location sharing quite matter-of-factly that they were having rather mild weather that day!



But it is precisely because of this diversity, these seasonal variations, and of course the personal experiences and perspectives on this constant in our lives that there have been so many learning moments. For Grannies and children alike. I continue to be amazed at the kind (and number) of sessions that directly or indirectly address this issue as we all seek to understand what it's about.

Sometimes it is the starting point to the day's conversation; sometimes it is the main focus of the discussion. Sometimes it crops up as a factor in planning decisions in projects that children engage in... The weather is a constant. Some children explore cropping patterns and the possibility of certain fruits growing in specific climate conditions. Some children explore urban planning strategy measures that might be useful as they go about establishing hypothetical cities over several weeks of focused interaction. Other children talk about how it makes them feel and share what they to do to make themselves more comfortable.

And through it all, Grannies and children begin to get a sense of open windows with no glass through which the cold air comes in unrestricted, and bare feet on cold concrete floors in places with no central heating; others begin to get a sense of the time involved in getting ready to step

outside in inclement weather and temperatures well below freezing, with wind chill added to the mix.



It provides opportunities for understanding different ways of life - how hunting still makes sense in some locations and isn't at all feasible in others. It provides opportunities for conversations about diets and Agriculture, as well as individual and collective responsibility for climate change.

Most importantly, it provides perspective. And a genuine understanding of 'relativity'. And as with almost everything else in the granny cloud, a challenge is turned into an opportunity...

As we say 'Goodbye' - it's not actually Goodbye. It's - 'See you soon!' [or "Yete" - "Aavjo" - "Aaschi" in some of the Indian languages] ... as we look forward to meeting you again through the Granny Cloud Tales!

Suneeta

