MindLeaps

THE VIRTUAL ACADEMY

Initial Findings & Testimonies

APRIL-AUGUST 2020

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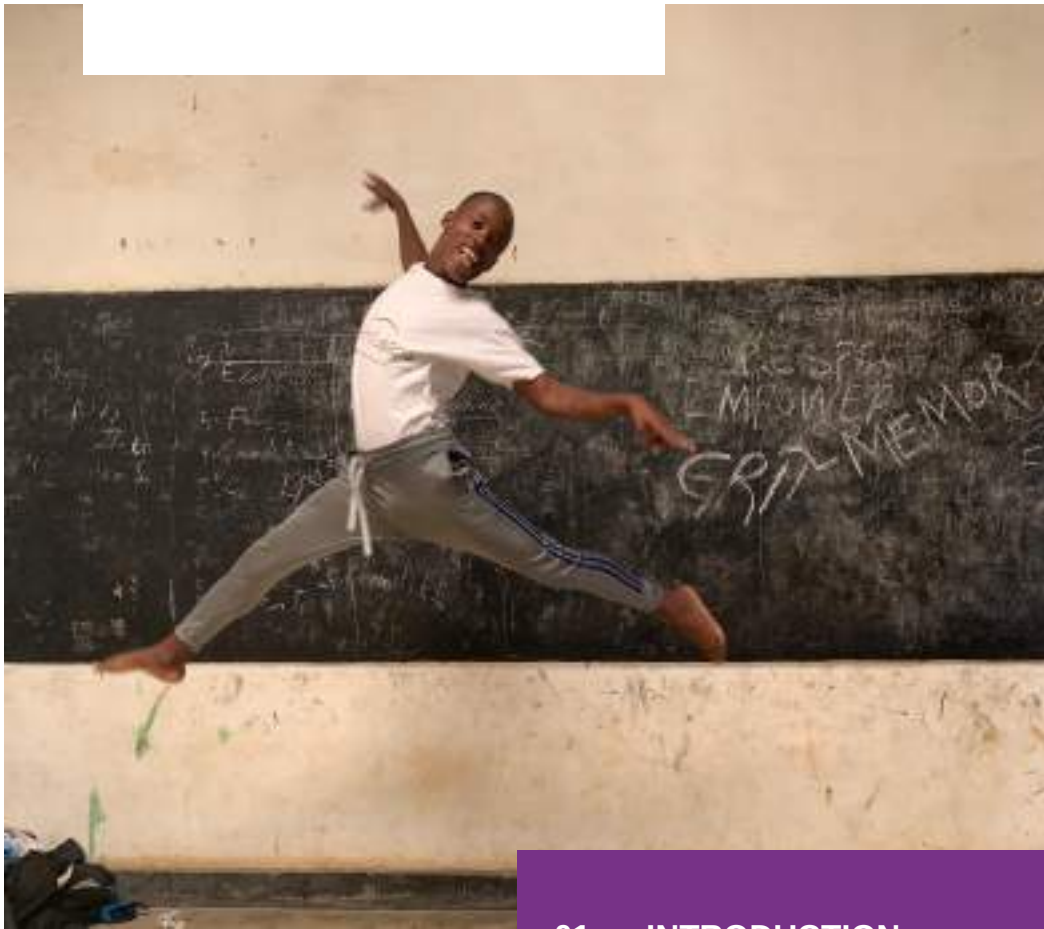
INTRODUCTION:

WHY THE VIRTUAL ACADEMY?

The Virtual Academy is one of MindLeaps' newest projects, providing a multifaceted educational experience through virtual platforms during Covid-19. The curriculum uses a combination of innovative approaches that combine skill building, digital learning, and socio-emotional learning, to build capacity and equip MindLeaps trainers with the knowledge they can use in everyday life to better themselves and their communities. The course is unique within virtual learning because it has developed a platform readily accessible 24/7 and fostered a digital safe space through WhatsApp and Google. The Virtual Academy is embodying the mission of MindLeaps and its youth employability objectives in a totally digital way, meeting the long-term goals of MindLeaps' 7 key cognitive and socio-emotional skills. The Virtual Academy is discovering a powerful way to attract vulnerable youth in non-threatening ways, to foster socio-emotional development, opening doors to education and employability in their futures.

We've received feedback from our trainers participating in the Virtual Academy program in Uganda. Their stories attest to the Virtual Academy's initial success and support growth within two skill sets: hard skills and soft skills.
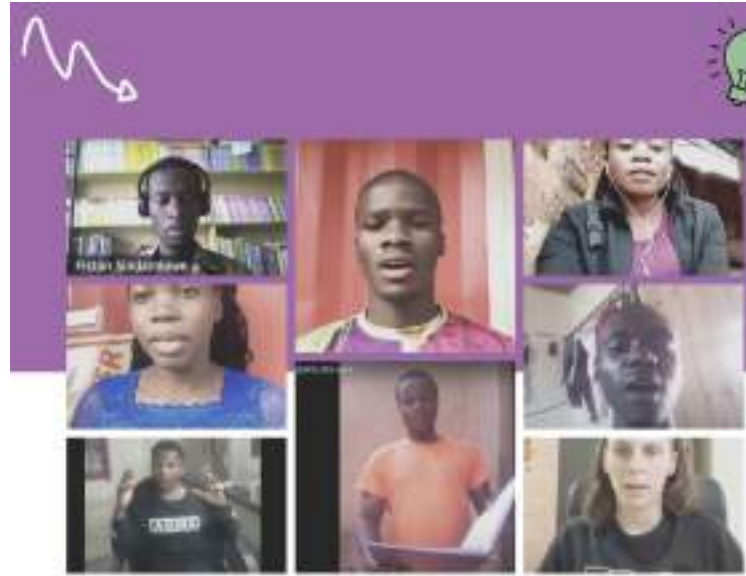
HARD SKILLS:

- Digital Skills
- Business Entrepreneurship Skills

SOFT SKILLS:

- Community
- Hope
- Long-Term Vision

HARD SKILLS:

Digital Skills & Business Entrepreneurship Skills

Digital Skills:

"Technology is the new normal. We live in a large world that is dominated by technology, therefore we must embrace it", says MindLeaps' Uganda Country Director, Martha Peace.

What are digital skills?

- Using Web communication: Zoom and Skype
- Facilitating dialogue & instruction: Whatsapp
- Navigating Google Platforms: Google Sheets, Forms, Drive, Gmail

Digital skills have become a necessity in today's day in age, particularly for youth to remain competitive in the global market. Community economic development is now synonymous with digital literacy and the ability to communicate across multiple platforms. One of the first steps in launching the Virtual Academy was a training for the participants, facilitated by MindLeaps Staff, on how to use a variety of digital platforms.

Martha believes, *"The Virtual Academy is a chance for youth to explore different ways of communication, different platforms of messaging like Zoom, Google Platforms, and email. For many, this was their first time using Zoom. We actually had to teach them how to mute the microphone and how to make a video. But these are things that are exciting to them. This technology advancement is teaching our trainers that the world is changing and if you're conversant in communication, especially using modern technology, then you're open to many other opportunities in life."*

Students in Rwanda presenting their final Business Pitches (July 2020)

Digital Skills:

YVES

Lead Trainer, Oruchinga Settlement, Uganda

Yves can attest to this. He is one of the lead trainers in Oruchinga Refugee Settlement and became involved with MindLeaps after a conversation with Martha about the problems faced by the youth around him in Oruchinga. Yves was then selected to complete the first MindLeaps training in Oruchinga in 2019 and has learned most of his dance skills, as well as now digital skills, through MindLeaps. Yves believes the goal of the Virtual Academy is to help the youth become self-reliant in their life and to make their communities better places, and by using technology they can begin to do this. "I think technology is playing a big role in the success of the Virtual Academy. *Without smartphones we could not get access to any of this."*

Working with MindLeaps has made Yves more self-reliant as he's learned to manage his own digital skills, as well as leading instruction of Virtual Academy assignments to his fellow trainers in Oruchinga through these digital platforms. Throughout the rest of the Virtual Academy course, students will be expected to appropriately use all of these digital skills and platforms to expand upon their projects and transfer this knowledge to their communities.

BUSINESS ENTREPRENEURSHIP SKILLS:

In the Business Entrepreneurship Unit of the Virtual Academy, students learned a base knowledge of skills on how to create income-generating projects specific to their communities. They received Powerpoints and instructive videos via WhatsApp and Google on fundamental topics. At the end of the unit, each student presented their research and business model into a 5-minute pitch via Zoom for fellow students, staff, and investors to hear about. The course lasted 7 weeks and active engagement among participants nearly doubled through "digital hand raises" (written messages, audio messages, vidos, photos, emojis) within the duration of the unit.

> **What are business entrepreneurship skills?**
> - Business Canvas Model template to test & improve individual business models
> - Identifying Profit & Revenue
> - Identifying Key Partners & Key Resources

Before the Virtual Academy, MindLeaps trainer Yves didn't have knowledge of something like business entrepreneurship. *"I didn't know I could create a job from the problems that are around me, faced by people. I didn't know that could be an opportunity for me."* Yves states that now he is really confident with himself, and he can really start a business and know how to manage it and make it successful. He is hoping that after the lockdown he can start from somewhere and work on the business idea he came up with through the Virtual Academy. Martha expressed that the personality and character of the trainers in Uganda, such as that of Yves and the others, has also contributed to successful results in the Virtual Academy. *"They are so committed to learning new things and have a thirst for knowledge. In the WhatsApp group, their levels of education vary. Some haven't even sat primary school. But they've created a safe space to express their ideas."*


Martha closes by stating, *"I believe that acquiring the skills and base knowledge needed to start a business and succeed is always important."* She is aware that not all of the youth, for example in Oruchinga, will transfer their newfound skills into a venture that will immediately give them money, but when the time comes, they will have a base knowledge of business and technology. This can only contribute positively to their success in the future.

ANNET & ZANNY

Kampala Participants

Virtual Academy student Annet has been working with MindLeaps since they partnered with a traditional dance troupe in 2018. Annet is from Uganda and after graduating high school two years ago, she currently resides in Kampala. In addition to her passion for dance, she was excited to learn about business entrepreneurship, in particular the Business Canvas Model which is a tool to help describe how an organization creates, delivers, and captures value. When asked how important the skills in the "Business Entrepreneurship" course will be to her future Annet responded, *"I've already put these skills in action. By finding the pain points in my community, I was able to begin my small business, by using the knowledge I'm getting right now as we speak. I opened up and I'm expecting to expand it in the future."*

Zanny can also testify to the impact of business entrepreneurship skills in her life. Before she began the Virtual Academy, Zanny said, *" I had a dream of becoming a very big business lady but I never knew anything about business."* After the completion of only the first course Zanny expressed a specific interest in introducing a business of reusable charcoal in her community, to help with the environmental footprint. She said that the business entrepreneurship course has helped her recognize the challenges that one can face when trying to open up a business, like identifying profit, revenue, and loss, topics she never before considered.
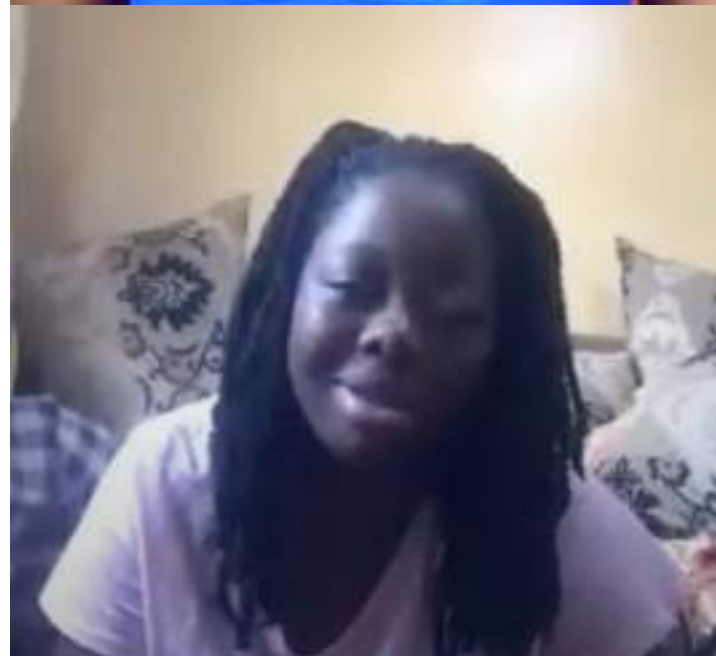
Virtual Academy Uganda Students Annet, top, and Zanny, bottom, presenting their business proposals via Zoom to MindLeaps stakeholders.

SOFT SKILLS:

Community, Hope, and Long-Term Vision

Community:

As the trainers moved along through their first course on business entrepreneurship, it became evident that the WhatsApp group was accomplishing much more than just providing a platform to learn new skills. It was building a unique virtual community for youth who have been taken away from their daily routines and now isolated in their homes, due to a strict lockdown put in place in Uganda.

> **What is Community?** *A digital safe space that is always open for youth to express themselves, find someone to listen, and be inspired to learn and think about their futures.*

Between text messages, audio recordings, and videos, the participants have been able to use technology effectively in order to build a safe space, one of which replicates our in-person dance classes. This digital community is powerful because it is accessible 24/7, unlike when our studio dance doors close and youth may be left to struggle back on the streets. We're noticing that this digital safe space is now expanding its role, to keep kids both socially safe and protecting them as well.

"How do youth feel being part of a community?"
- Focused on academic achievement
- Provides a routine schedule and stability
- It's exciting & lively
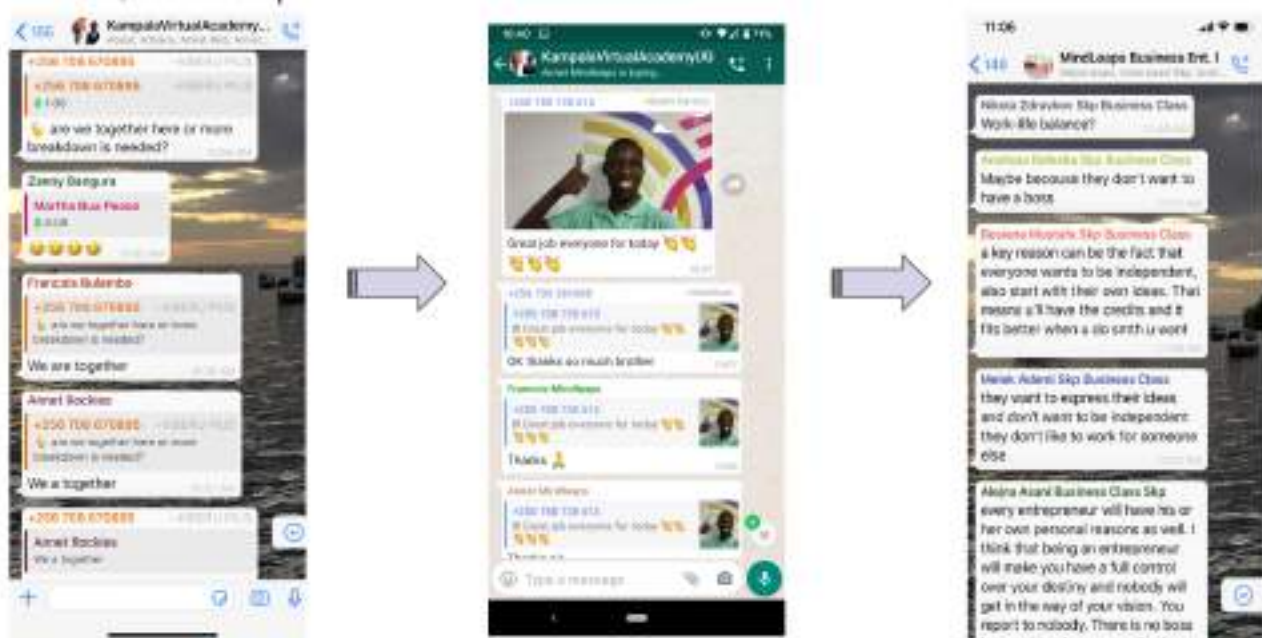
WhatsApp groups in Uganda & North Macedonia fostering a sense of community and support

FRANCOIS

Kampala Participant

For Francois, a student participating in MindLeaps' Virtual Academy, this growth was evident. Francois came to Uganda in 2012 as a refugee, fleeing his home country, the DRC, because of war. Facing many challenges as a refugee in Kampala and grappling with past trauma, Francois believes that joining MindLeaps in 2017 lifted him out of his negative thoughts, strengthening in him a positive attitude and appreciation for people of different backgrounds and communities.

When asked how the Virtual Academy WhatsApp group has served as a good community for Francois and helped him stay positive during Covid-19, he stated that the topics he is being introduced to in the group are directly contributing to his academic success because they're things he wants to achieve in his daily life. *"The Virtual Academy has kept me very positive and focused on my dreams. It has shown me you can be in very difficult moments but there is always a solution. Virtual Academy has brought a solution to my life, and I know to other people in that group as well, because we are all alive and we are all happy whenever we meet there. We have fun together, we laugh sometimes, which is really good."*

Hope:

As the Virtual Academy has progressed and students have become more comfortable within their virtual communities, this has contributed to a newfound sense of hope among our MindLeaps youth. Among MindLeaps' youth are some of the most vulnerable within the community, including refugee populations and those who struggle with mental health.

Bringing to Mindleaps an extensive knowledge of mental health work & vulnerable populations, Martha expresses a gratefulness to the Virtual Academy's ability to build a routine in this time of isolation and a gap in formal education because of Covid-19. Martha vocalized, *"Imagine if we didn't have the Virtual Academy to keep them occupied and give them something to think about? Relapses don't only happen for the children we serve but if any of us are redundant in our daily lives we lose hope, especially when there is nothing fruitful in our day."* She believes that by creating a solution like the Virtual Academy, MindLeaps can work to minimize feelings of hopelessness, redundancy, and even dangerous feelings present in some of these vulnerable youth.


Martha (top left) bringing a positive energy to our students every day within their virtual communities.

Hope:

This sense of hopelessness has troubled Francois in the past, as he has learned to grapple with his background as a refugee fleeing his home country. As Francois spoke from a rigid lockdown in Uganda he expressed, *"At this moment, I'm feeling so special because many people outside are not getting what I'm getting. They're stuck at home because of quarantine. But me, it's as if I'm doing my normal routine because at 4pm I know I have to enter the WhatsApp group for classes. It's as if it [Virtual Academy] has brought a good harmony to my life, especially during this period. I know many people from outside would like to have something like this."*

Zanny, an 18 year-old Congolese refugee who now lives in Kampala, is another MindLeaps student who has attributed the work of Virtual Academy towards bringing hope to her future. When the question was asked to Zanny: *"Think about yourself before you started the Virtual Academy...and now think of yourself participating and involved in this project. Have you noticed yourself change or grow at all during this time?"* Zanny responded, *"I have noticed something has changed in me cause I never use to send voice message to anyone but now when we're in the WhatsApp group i try to do that."* Zanny identified her confidence level as a "0" before starting the Virtual Academy but now she says, "I give myself at least a 3."

Zanny's short-term impact of engaging through audio messages and video presentations in the Virtual Academy is providing a more confident sense of hope for her in regards to her future. She is also taking more time to perfect her English language skills with friends, something she felt discouraged by before. Zanny's hope and confidence in herself has now folded over into her community as she is working on introducing a business of reusable charcoal, something she never knew how to accomplish in the past. She believes the Virtual Academy has given her a combined boost of hope and knowledge, to put her plans into action and work towards her future dreams.
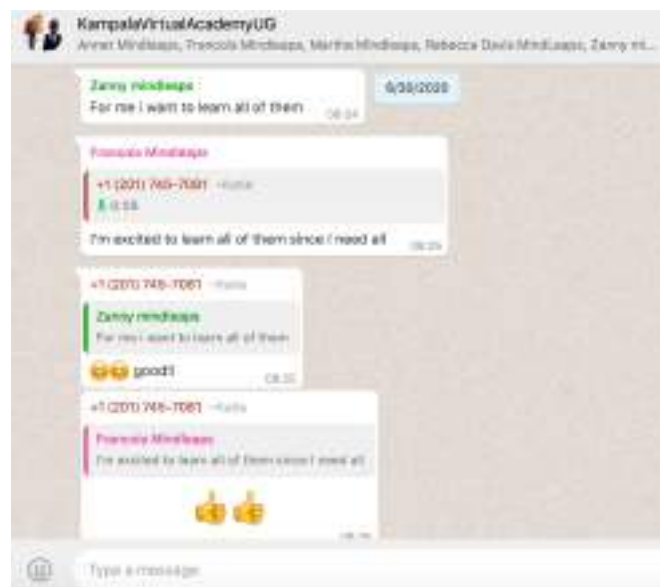
Zanny & Francois engaging in the routine two-hour/day WhatsApp discussions, fostering positivity in their lives throughout the rigid lockdown in Uganda.

Long-Term Vision:

What has surprised us in the Virtual Academy is how quickly these youth have grasped both hard and soft skills. Some of the youth have created plans and scheduled meetings to launch their businesses after the lockdown, while others have even begun to implement their work into their own communities.

MindLeaps' youth long-term visions:
- Establish a reusable charcoal business
- Engage youth & use social media to build an affordable event-planning business
- Create an ESL program for refugees
- Photography/videography training to further MindLeaps' community based approach

Martha believes that Virtual Academy was established with the goal of *"capacity building and equipping trainers with knowledge they could use in everyday life, helping them understand they are broader than just dance teachers."* Ronnie, a Virtual Academy student in Uganda, has been inspired by the multifaceted nature of the program and is now looking to expand his passions beyond dance. He will begin to lead training sessions in editing and photography to fellow Virtual Academy participants and community members, to further the goal of long-term capacity building in his own community.

Trainers like Yves and Zanny who are staying motivated by their long-term goals of opening their business after the lockdown and Annet, who has already used the Business Entrepreneurship material to open hers, are true testimonies of MindLeaps' mission. These long-term visions from our youth fall under MindLeaps' framework of Youth Employability and tie into its overarching goal of focusing on 7 key cognitive and socio-emotional skills to promote academic success, employability, and a successful future.

MindLeaps students Ronnie, top, and Yves, bottom, talking about their long-term visions in Uganda

Appendix:

The Virtual Academy consists of a 5 course curriculum: Business Entrepreneurship, Project Management/Budgeting, Child Development, Communication, and Inclusion. Each unit is organized to last 4-5 weeks and classes meet every day, Monday-Friday, for about two hours a day. WhatsApp serves as the main mode of instruction and source of discussions, supplemented with presentations via Zoom and exercises/attendance submitted via Google Platforms. Around 173 youth, present in 13 WhatsApp groups, are currently participating in the Academy's curriculum in 4 countries: Uganda, Guinea, Rwanda, and North Macedonia. Programming will expand to Mauritania in August of 2020, raising enrollment to 229 youth.

We measure *"total active engagement"* of the students participating in the WhatsApp groups through a numerical formula of material consisting of:
- Text messages
- Audio messages
- Videos/Photos
- Emojis

Throughout all of the Academy's 13 groups, from April 2020 to July 2020, we have seen an overall increase from an average of 16 messages to 429 messages sent per student. We are currently in the process of developing new measurement tools that collect quantitative information on developmental senses in themes like community, hope, and long-term vision, as we already do with data application Traker. We look forward to continuing to observe and track the progress of the Virtual Academy and its positive impact through the remaining units.