

What Comes Around, Goes Around

By Ashish Gupta '06

Service can be hard. The initial hurdle of the new lifestyle, a shift from urban USA to rural India, passes soon enough. However, along with it passes the idealism of giving two years to serve India, the country of my roots. The struggle that does remain is finding the inner drive that keeps you going, the motivation which keeps you searching for ways to make this experience worthwhile for the people I chose to serve.

My two years of service in India is in the rural town of Bagar in Rajasthan, where I am looking for ways in which computer technology could be utilized to make a positive impact in people's lives. In the initial months, after spending a little time interacting with the community, I realized that the attitude behind the benefits of computers in Bagar was largely limited to "if I teach my son computers, maybe he can find a job in the big city". The first thing needed was to get the community to realize that there are in fact potential applications of computers in their own lives. To raise this awareness, I decided to target high-school students who already had some exposure to computers, and start a class where I would further their knowledge of computers. My hypothesis was that by presenting the course in a project-based banner, it could get the students thinking about the applications of computers.

It was decidedly another bout of lack of motivation gripping me during these early months. It was the week before winter break when I finally got the word out about the class, and the looming wait of another two-three weeks was causing a further dip in the motivation levels. During the break, however, a kid named Ashok visited me and asked if he could join the class. Excited about the prospect, I promptly interviewed him, and promptly had to let him down gently "sorry kid, you need to at least know how to put spaces between words to get into this class". He insisted on at least coming and learning typing during the winter break though. I didn't see any sense in curbing the kid's enthusiasm though, so I let him come for those couple of weeks.

If nothing else, Ashok was remarkably diligent. He came on time everyday, and was heads down just typing. After a day or two, I wanted to see if I could do something a little more constructive for him (and myself) than just supervise him while he practiced typing. I looked on the Internet for some typing software, and tried out 10-12 different programs. I finally selected two of them for Ashok to try out.

His progress from then on was nothing short of remarkable. This kid went from not knowing the spacebar to touch typing the entire keyboard in just 4 to 5 days, with less than an hour a day of practice. That was the turning point for me. Seeing him succeed, and his enthusiasm for learning, really helped shore up my motivation levels. Thus far the opportunity for change had been an intellectual exercise "at that point, I had just proved to myself that change could happen, and it could happen rapidly.

This motivation completely changed the way I approached my project from then on. Right after school re-started, I started recruiting at the schools with enthusiasm. I could even see the change in my 'spiel' for the class – the tone changed from 'hey, why don't you come and join this class, and here are the details', to, 'hey, think of what computers can do? Give me a chance to get you excited about it. Lets figure out how we as Bagar can reap the same benefits that SO many people are the world are using?'

And enthusiasm seems to be infectious. Granted, I am working with children who already had some exposure to computers, but there have been instances that truly inspire me to do more. One example was when I was visiting one of the student's mothers. All of a sudden, she asked me, 'Ashish, what are you teaching to these kids in your class?' When I hesitantly inquired as to why she was asking, she told me that her son completely refused to leave town to attend any of the family weddings, just so he could make it to all the computer classes. Another instance was when I casually mentioned that I would talk about the inner workings of computer hardware only on a Sunday (normally a holiday), because it would sidetrack too much from the course objective. The very next Sunday, four students showed up for the extra lesson. The reason why it was even more remarkable was because it was also the festival of Holi.

In many ways, inspiration and enthusiasm are the currency of the 'service' world. What I have come to realize is that once obtained, inspiration and enthusiasm are rarely limited to one's self – what comes around, goes around.