



STANFORD
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF BUSINESS

STANFORD SOCIAL INNOVATION *review*

What's Next

Turn on the TV, Class

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Gage, a PBG technical support team leader, did the latter after hearing a radio announcement that anyone who texts can receive wireless AMBER Alerts simply by registering at www.wirelessamberalerts.org. “The company had just distributed company cell phones to all employees, so I thought, what a great way to get Amber Alerts out there,” Gage says. “My manager jumped on board right away, and from there it went really quickly.”

Gage reports that PBG employees, each set up to receive AMBER Alerts from five ZIP codes, have already begun receiving the text messages—and that makes him proud, given the greater likelihood that children will be recovered if located within three hours of their abduction. Indeed, according to the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, AMBER Alerts, also broadcast on local television and radio stations as well as highway signs, have helped recover more than 400 abducted children in the United States since the program’s inception in 1997. ■

EDUCATION

Turn on the TV, Class

► Randy Wang has boldly gone where many have yet to tread: He’s using decidedly unsexy technology to help India’s poor children get a decent education.

The nonprofit he cofounded, Digital StudyHall (DSH), films the best Indian teachers (usually from middle-class schools) as they conduct classes, burns the lessons onto DVDs, and then mails the DVDs to poor urban and rural schools. If the schools don’t have DVD players, DSH provides them, along with 19-inch TVs and lead-acid bat-

teries to back up intermittent electricity. Recipient teachers, often nominally educated and trained, then simply play the lessons, regularly hitting the stop button to amplify and personalize the material.

Wang came up with his “light tech” approach after attending the 2003 TED conference and hearing John Wood, founder of Room to Read, describe how he sometimes used yaks to deliver books to remote school libraries. Wang also knew that high-tech approaches to improving education—such as wiring schools for Internet connectivity—have often failed. Poor schools don’t have the funds or expertise to sustain complex systems, and students won’t magically edify themselves if teachers plunk them in front of the Internet, Wang says. Wasn’t there something between a yak and the Internet, he wondered?

DSH’s formula has several benefits. Through DSH, poor students can experience great teachers’ instruction—a rarity in India, Wang says. Teachers in poor schools can improve by emulating the model teaching they see, or polish already good performances in the hopes of being filmed. When teachers don’t show up—which is often the case in poor, state-run schools—older students can take the helm and present the DSH lesson. The student substitutes might even choose teaching as their profession and fill perennially short-staffed schools.

Filming “hubs” have opened in schools located in Lucknow, Kolkata, Pune, and Dhaka, India, so that classes can be filmed in regional languages. Schools are cooperating, in large part, because their teachers feel honored to be chosen for filming. But there’s also the universal thrill of seeing oneself



Rakhi Panjwani, a teacher at the Prerna School in Lucknow, India, elaborates on a recorded English lesson.

on film; the relatively high extra pay (\$10 to \$12 an hour); and the chance to help the poor, a moral imperative in India. “Gandhi is very much revered by everyone,” Wang explains.

Thirty schools serving about 3,000 students have signed up for DSH, and the effects have been dramatic. According to a recent six-month evaluation of four member schools (conducted by DSH and Glynda Hull, a professor at the University of California, Berkeley, Graduate School of Education), DSH schoolchildren scored 381 percent higher in math than their counterparts in a non-DSH control school, students participated more in class, and local teachers demonstrated significant improvement in their grasp of subject matter and in their teaching skills.

Wang, along with his co-

founder, Urvashi Sahni (a principal at the private Study Hall School in Lucknow), hope to accomplish even more. This summer they opened an afternoon school in the village of Kannar, entirely run by 16- and 17-year-old students. “The school is free and no one has to come, but after just a few months we have 80 kids showing up,” Wang reports.

In the near future, DSH wants to serve more poor urban schools and add an intensive six-month program to help children who have dropped out of school reenter the educational system. Eventually, DSH would like to make every course—not just the present English, math, and science—available to every Indian student, as per the United Nations’ Millennium Development Goal of universal primary education.

It’s worth a shot, Wang says. “We don’t know if this will work, let’s be honest. But we can convince ourselves that even if it doesn’t work out, it’s a worthwhile pursuit.” ■