

**Project Title:** The impact of evolving technology in maintaining socialized cultural learning

**Country:** India

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### **Summary**

There is a fast growing gap between the elderly and other generations in India because of technology. This project took the first step in bridging that gap and maintaining socialized cultural learning and improving the welfare of the elderly to reduce isolation and mental illnesses.

### **Project Description**

In high school, I taught my grandfather some computers so we could stay connected and prevent loneliness after my grandmother's demise. Seeing the joy that brought him, I knew several others in India were facing the same issue which leads to a larger disruption of peace like the lack of knowledge being passed through generations, mental illnesses, and misinformation. To solve this large problem, I broke it down into a hands-on approach with the elderly generation (age 60+) and their children (age 40+) to help them understand and be more empathetic to their parents. This meant hosting a lot of workshops for people of different age groups, while focusing on three levels of improvement: independence, learning, and reconnecting.

**Independence workshops for the elderly** focused on learning how to set their own alarms and reminders for medicines, increasing font size on their phone, enabling hearing aids on their devices, how to use the magnifying glass on their phone, sending emails, seeing photos, and how to search for help online. All this was to make them more self-reliant rather than feeling stuck and having to ask for help constantly.

**Independence workshops for the middle aged** included creating a password bank for themselves and for their parents, creating an organized document with family recipes, speech to text, creating e-cards and iCloud compatibility with parents. This showed them that there was still much to learn and they can do their part in making the elderly feel like they are still in control as well as not feel burdened to help them.

**Learning workshops** were for all ages and was about understanding a little about technology through a word bank that I created to understand when to use words like Wi-Fi, internet, Google, restart, and how to ask for help for the same. We even touched on concepts like fake news, misinformation, and mental health to raise awareness of the same and remove the taboo against it. I made all these terms into a fun game of bingo to increase the chances of them remembering the words and as a memory exercise that reduces the chances or effects of old age psychiatric illnesses like dementia. I even gave incentives of gifts which would be useful in their day to day to encourage learning with a fun competitive spirit.

**Reconnecting workshops** were also for all ages and sometimes were encouraged to be conducted with the elderly and middle aged from the same family sitting together. This included activities like making e-cards and videos and sending them to a loved one, how to take and send a selfie, having a shared family recipe guide and adding to it together remotely, creating regular ways to connect like weekly calls and shared photo albums, playing music together, and more.

India is a country of different cultures and heritage that is passed down through generations especially when living communally. An unfortunate impact of technology growing fast is breaking that link but makes it the perfect place for people to also want to bridge that gap. I was born and brought up in India and know how much people value relationships and would be willing to mend them. I was able to leverage the elderly that I know, speak the local language, and knew what the needs are in practice rather than just on paper. I was able to contact some of the organizations I had worked with previously and did not need to build a rapport again before they trusted me to host workshops. However, having local knowledge also made me underestimate the effort it would take. People were less tech-savvy than I thought, especially in the target audience of old age homes – many did not even have smart phones. This resulted in a change of focus from elderly in retirement homes to those still living with families but are lonely and wanting to learn but have no one to teach them. I did still include retirement homes but focused more on improving mental health through games and activities like dancing, craft, singing, and even talking over a meal together.

Peers and those still in school who I hoped to leverage to help with workshops were not as eager for such patience-requiring work and were just going back to schools and colleges after Covid and did not have as much time as I hoped. This meant I personally hosted a lot of workshops virtually and leveraged other middle aged people to help out since they understood the depth of the problem better. Another initiative I had planned was a hackathon grant competition where teams would create a product to help the cultural learning pass through generations and I would support the winner's product to reality. After talking to my

digital wellness focused community called LookUp.India that I helped found a few years ago, we noticed that this would be a lot more fruitful a few months down the line since colleges had just restarted this summer after two years. I have kept the planned grant money aside to host the hackathon at the end of this year through my peers there. Till then, we are planning the event and will advertise it to raise excitement. I also decided to expand the scope of the workshops and travelled to the neighboring state of Karnataka for other workshops where the Covid restrictions made in person training possible. To make the project more sustainable, I passed on my workshop structures and trained Tarini Swaroop, a high schooler also passionate about this issue in Hyderabad. We are continuing to meet biweekly even after I left India for the next 6 months so I can support her and the continuation of the project in any way I can. Another initiative I added was for sustainability of the project as well as raising awareness towards this issue. I recorded a lot of the elderly I worked with giving advice to the youth. The people I interviewed have been abandoned by their children and were not able to pass their knowledge to anybody and seemed to not have closure because of the same. They enjoyed thinking about what they would say and a 96 year old lady even cried thinking about her children while recording! I then compiled the video footage with other fun activities they partook in and it became an advertisement for supporting the old age home that I worked with. I circulated the video amongst youth in India over WhatsApp and it became a bridge for the imparted wisdom from the elderly in a format the youth enjoyed. I hope to send out this video every few months to different groups of people so the awareness stays active and more donations can reach them. I also hope to continue my efforts whenever I visit home in the future and even virtually whenever possible.

### Reflection

I define peace as people connecting with one another and growing together. This could mean good international relations between countries, mutual understanding between religions, or even empathy between generations. This makes my project to increase digital literacy between generations contribute to peace on three levels: **personally** people are learning and reducing mental illnesses, **societally** the generations are connecting and familial relations are improving, and **nationally** there is a continuation of culture and heritage and prevention of misinformation. **Short term** this means people are happier, there is a healthier home environment, and lesser disparity in the generations. **Long term** this reduces loneliness, mental illnesses, psychiatric disorders, lack of self-esteem and keeps India's rich heritage going.

I touched on some of the challenges earlier that made me change paths which occurred by talking to locals and understanding the root of the problem. However, there were more challenges that occurred that I learned to spontaneously react to. Some elderly were fixed in their ways and had opinions on what they wanted to learn or do. All plans had to be tentative and change with the group and showed me that part of the generational gap was some people's reluctance to learn. However, once they started learning they raised brilliant points while asking questions that made me ponder how certain technologies work and why their user experience is the way it is. Seeing how so many people had lived their lives without smartphones, I was encouraged to reduce my usage and have better digital wellness, using technology to my advantage rather than replacing every day needs. This meant doing simple calculations in my head instead of the calculator or seeing the value of written rather than typed notes as the elderly I taught started drawing button symbols that they were learning. I also learned the value of taking breaks and not cramming information for better processing as I was required to be patient with the terminology bank and do only a few words in a day. I always thought I was passionate about this generational issue but I underestimated the amount of empathy the elderly needed and deserved. During a workshop, somebody had a minor stroke and had to be taken to the hospital which sensitized me to just how fragile an audience I was dealing with. Hands-on workshops is a first step in bridging the gap but the entire tech industry has to change to accommodate this group and prevent a marginalization cycle for every future generation. This project challenged me to think about this problem of socialized cultural learning on a global scale and inspires me as a software engineer to take charge on developing products that keep accessibility in mind. It made me realise how important preparation is before implementation and how now, before the next technology boom, is the right time to incorporate tech-marginalized groups into the target audience.

### Personal Statement

I truly believe that change starts when someone has the will to create change. However, a passion often requires a push or a means to make a difference. Davis Peace Prize does exactly that - it inspires and encourages people to see the change others have created and contribute their own time and effort for a better future. – Aadhya Kochoa