Changing Lives of Tibetan Refugee Kids through Digital Literacy
India
Grinnell College, Grinnell, IA
Divyansh Singh – India – Grinnell College

Section I

The goal of this project was to promote literacy in the Tibetan Refugee Community by at least partially bridging the digital divide between the refugee kids and the local population by updating the infrastructure of the computer labs at Upper TCV Day School, Dharamshala. Dharamshala is a quaint remote town located in the Himalayas in North India and is the seat of the Tibetan government in exile and several thousand Tibetan refugees. Having worked with the community in New Delhi before coming to college (particularly in the digital literacy sector), I was extremely eager to get more opportunities to support and help such an enterprising community. However, as a student, such opportunities come rare, more so when you’re living abroad. I consider myself extremely lucky for having won the Davis Project for Peace which gave me another chance to work with the community. The current issue faced by the Tibetan Refugee Community (and several other refugee communities across the world) is the lack of access to proper, up-to-date education. While governments across the world are making efforts to provide the basic amenities and education to them, it’s far from adequate, especially in a developing country like India. In the past, as an educator at one of the Tibetan Refugee schools in New Delhi, one of the most obvious points of difference I noticed between the kids there and the local schools is the sheer lack of digital awareness. This difference was even more pronounced at a remote school located up in the Himalayas, and therefore my project attempted to respond to a very important issue. While the funding for the project was mostly covered by the grant, the overall expenditure slightly exceeded the funding, the extra costs were happily borne by my family. One of the best things about working with the Tibetan Community in McLeodganj was the school was isolated, secluded and situated in the lap of Himalayas. The entire work experience in itself was a lesson in simplicity and making the best of limited resources. After walking into the Tibetan settlement, one feels like they’ve been transported to Tibet itself, with traditional Tibetan delicacies being sold on the streets, women donning ethnic Tibetan outfits tending to little flower gardens in the village plot, monks clad in red robes (Lamas) heading to the monastery for their evening prayers, fragrant incense burning at the temple, all tied in beautifully by constant chants of “Om” all through the village, almost like a rejuvenation therapy for all five senses. However, the very idea of setting up the project (let alone the execution) almost seemed impossible in the beginning. There were so many roadblocks on the way that it almost seems miraculous that the project was eventually carried out, that too in-person. I had won the prize in early 2020 and was supposed to work on the project over the summer, however the funding was delayed by an entire year due to the pandemic. When I eventually did receive the green signal for the project in 2021 along with all the resources, unfortunately there was a travel ban between the US and India and I was told that if I were to carry out the project, it would need to be done remotely over the summer. However, the second wave of COVID had hit India so badly that it was impossible to carry out the work even remotely, because of the complete lockdown and the associated risks. The scariest part of this entire ordeal was that if the COVID situation did not improve in India by the end of the summer, I would not be allowed to work on the project after that and return the resources. So the best option for me was to wait until things get better at any point during the summer and hope that I get a chance to work on the project. Thankfully, the travel ban was lifted during the last month of summer and I was able to go back to India and successfully implement the project. After landing at New Delhi, I stayed in mandatory quarantine for some days until my RT-PCR results arrived and until I had figured out my travel situation to McLeodganj. While my McLeodganj was one of the most fulfilling projects I have ever undertaken, it was also
probably one of the most accelerated. One of the biggest reasons to travel to India with such limited
time (as opposed to carrying out the project remotely) was to ensure the proper usage of funds.
Mismanagement of funds, especially in a developing country, can be a real issue unless one is directly
involved in a project hands on. After having several meetings with the Education Direction (Mr. Sonam),
the Program Coordinator (Mrs. Lobsang Tsomo) and the School Principal(Mrs. Nawang Lhamo) at
McLeodganj, it was determined that the school that was most in need of new computers was Upper TCV
School, Dharamshala (the old Tibetan Refugee School in India). It was also the school where the
implementation of the project would maximize the number of students benefiting from it. The initial
plan was to change the backup batteries for the computer labs (because power outage is a frequent
issue up in the mountains), but bad weather conditions coupled with lack of time made us realize that
maybe the replacement of the super old computers instead would be a better idea. In addition to
adding new computers to the High School Computer Lab, computers were also replaced in the Middle
School Laboratory, the Junior Section Library and the Principal’s office. There was a strong feeling of
solidarity between the refugee communities and the local residents at McLeodganj which seemed like a
huge learning lesson to populations all across the world. Even though we almost made a total of 20 trips
between the mountain and the valley to get all the computer supplies, the kindness of strangers and
people’s willingness to get involved in a charitable cause made everything seem way easier than it
actually was. Throughout the course of the project, we were also firmly committed to the idea of social
justice and affirmative action in all walks of life (as is the practise in Grinnell college) and we tried our
best to incorporate that into the whole enterprise. We got all our computers and related accessories
from local vendors and all the machines in the high school lab were set up by the refugee girls who
actually went to the school. Peace to me is simply the absence of fear and overall harmony, be it within
yourself or between you and the society. It can literally be the most subjective thing in the world. To
someone struggling from depression, it could mean being able to simply exist and survive the everyday
activities of life. To some, it might mean being able to return to one’s homeland without the fear of
persecution or cultural invasion. Peace is, in a way, a planned execution of one’s ideas in the present
and the future to ensure safety and security. At Upper TCV, there was a beautiful poster that possibly
explains this idea in the simplest and the most concise way possible. It said that if one were to plan for a
year, sow rice; if the planning was for a decade, plant trees but if the planning was to be done for a
lifetime, one should educate kids. With this project, I was trying to aim for the last one. It is only with
the execution of our plans that we can truly achieve peace, and I am incredibly grateful to Davis for
giving me the opportunity to do so.