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Jake Hanin
Colby College

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TEACHING THE TEACHERS

By *Jake Hanin '07*

I went to the region of Kalimpong in January with 25 other Colby students as part of the College's first-ever Jan Plan course in India. Our mission was only vaguely defined: in the Himalayan northeast region of the country was a Christian school named Gandhi Ashram, where the very poorest children learn to speak English and play the violin and where we would teach for a month. Few of us had traveled to India before, few of us had taught.

What was expected of us? We had hardly a clue.

At the scholastic heart of our Jan Plan course was the theory of a "contact zone"—a place (first articulated by the linguist and culture scholar Mary Louise Pratt) where cultures take part in a mutual exchange. We read articles about pedagogy and the effects of globalization. We read Gandhi. We read about Gandhi. The arduous three-day trip from home to Kalimpong was an extended, group brainstorm of logistical and educational game plans. As we made our passage to India, we were very determined to be teachers, for once, instead of students.

As we stepped off the plane in Delhi it occurred to me how conspicuous we were. With our luggage and clothing (not to mention our big white bus with its "tourist" decal) we were physically very noticeable. What seemed most out of place, however, were our iPods and digital cameras, the laptops and recording equipment—the high-priced stuff we toted around in some of the world's most penniless places.

For me these digital commodities connote the worst aspects of American consumer culture (rapacity, homogeneity, superficiality, elitism), and I felt uncomfortable parading our emblems of wealth around people who owned virtually nothing. Even now it strikes me as significantly ironic to have spent so much money (program cost \$2,800) to visit an area of such extreme poverty.

Though I had planned to teach poetry and art to high school students, the Gandhi Ashram needed help with younger pupils. I found myself standing nervously that first day in a room full of third graders who either couldn't understand me,



Jake Hanin '07 with students at Gandhi Ashram, a school in northeast India.

didn't like me, or simply didn't know what to make of my strange questions ("Does anyone know what 'Little Miss Muffet sat on a tuffet' means?" "What are 'curds and whey' anyway?").

Still, I was hypersensitive to their non-Western frame of reference. In defining a noun I referred to local places, labeled chalkboard stick-figures with Indian names, and tried to draw only animals found on the steep hills of Kalimpong. I was careful not to assume my students had TVs or computers (almost none did), CD players, bikes, or any of the other childhood luxuries I took for granted. I labored to make myself intelligible to students whose education had been so different from my own.

I found, though, that I couldn't control what I taught my students. That is to say, I couldn't guarantee that what they learned from me was what I intended.

In teaching the parts of speech I was mostly a failure. The kids weren't interested in what I wanted to teach them; they were interested only in me and what made me strange: my backwards hat, my baggy shorts, my beard, my chalk drawings, my songs, my basketball dribbling, my Frisbee throwing. I communicated best with the children where we exchanged peculiarities. They taught me to say "mero dari" ("my beard"), and I taught them to say, "What's up, dude?" Where there was difference there was a chance to learn.

The "contact zone" ultimately came to resemble summer camp. We Colby counselors were most effective as teachers when we abandoned teaching completely and tried to make the

Gandhi Ashram a place for enjoyment instead, where learning became the result of our shared experience and not the reason for it.

As I let go of my misgivings about globalization, I noticed my teaching became less like enforcing and more like accepting. I stopped hiding my camera and feeling embarrassed about iPods because my cultural anxiety, I realized, was essentially dishonest. Part of who I am is what I do, and part of what I do involves expensive technological stuff. Rather than censor myself, I decided to let the students judge me for themselves.

What they took from their experience with me is impossible to know and, more importantly, completely out of my control. The ultimate value of the experience for me (and I think the point of a Jan Plan India course) lies only in what I took away from them.

Every day I observed the difference, for example, between the poverty of cities and the peaceful, sustainable simplicity of a Himalayan hillside. Every day I noted how remarkable my third graders (some of whom spoke three or four languages) really were, and that there is an essential sameness in all kids, with their easy contentment and sanguine energy. These are lessons I was fortunate enough to learn as their student. I like to think that this was a substantial gain on my part—in perspective if nothing else.

And to apprehend this fact made the whole exercise worthwhile.

For more information and photos on the Gandhi Ashram Jan Plan, go online to www.colby.edu/mag, keyword India