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The Last Page: Teaching the Teachers

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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 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, didn’t like me, or simply didn’t know what to make of my strange questions (“Does anyone know what ‘curds and whey’ 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.

And to apprehend this fact made the whole experience worthwhile.

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