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Kids dial India for online tutoring

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Twice a week, 14-year-old Princeton John sits in front of the computer in his Glenview home, puts on a headset and gets ready for an hourlong tutoring session.

What's different compared with scores of other online lessons offered is that Princeton's tutor is not even on this continent. She's 7,000 miles away -- working in the middle of the night -- in a suburb outside Cochin, India.

For Princeton, a freshman at Glenbrook South High School, the quirk of having a tutor many time zones away faded long ago.

"I never think about it," he said. "It doesn't matter at all."

Internet tutoring, or e-tutoring, is yet another example of how modern communications, and an abundance of educated, low-wage Asians, are broadening the boundaries of outsourcing and working their way into the minutiae of American life, from replacing your lost credit card to reading your CT scan to helping revive your crashed computer.

Indian tutors offer a key perk compared with U.S.-based tutors -- they're often much cheaper. Thousands of Indian teachers help U.S. students in math, science or English for about \$15 to \$20 an hour, a fraction of the \$40 to \$100 that private tutoring costs here.

"India has very good teachers, especially in math and science. Also, these subjects are culture-free, so it is comparatively easy for Indian teachers to teach them," says Kiran Karnik, who heads India's National Association of Software and Service Companies.

Solving problems

Princeton has been using an e-tutor for two years, starting when he was a student at Springman Middle School in Glenview. His father, Piusten, learned about it through a friend whose cousin launched the Growing Stars program, which is based in Cochin and Fremont, Calif.

Piusten credits the extra sessions with helping his son turn B's into A's. "When we went for parent-teacher conferences, we told the math teacher about it, and she was very happy, too," he said.

Princeton's 12-year-old sister, Priscilla, also uses Growing Stars. So do about 20 of Princeton's friends and relatives.

Princeton's tutor's name is Koyampurath Namitha. She arrives for work in India around 4:30 a.m., grabs a cup of coffee and joins more than two dozen colleagues, each settling into a cubicle with a computer and earphones.

"Hello Princeton, how are you? How was your test?" she asks.

"Hello, yeah . . . I'm good," Princeton replies. "It was good."

The chitchat ends quickly and a geometry worksheet pops up on Princeton's computer screen. Teacher and pupil speak to one another, type messages and use digital "pencils" to work on problems. Princeton scrawls on something that looks like a hyped-up mouse pad and it shows up on Namitha's screen. He can also use a scanner to send assignments or textbook pages he needs help understanding.

Indian firms have benefitted from the growing U.S. government-financed tutoring industry, which had revenues last year of nearly \$2 billion. The growth stems partly from the No Child Left Behind law, which requires schools to test kids in math and reading every year from third through eighth grades.

Steve Golden, who co-founded Chicago-based Mindspring.com, an online education firm, does not use live tutors for his company. Instead, students log on and complete automated lessons. Live tutors would be a benefit to certain students, he said, and he's open to all ways to expand the service, including overseas tutors.

Less-threatening environment

"It's not just India. There's Malaysia and a number of different areas beginning to offer tutors via the Internet," Golden said.

New York-based Brainfuse, which provides online tutoring to hundreds of Chicago Public Schools students, employs about 900 tutors during peak months, mostly retired teachers and grad students. Most are U.S.-based, but there are some expatriates overseas.

Alec Ross, Brainfuse's regional director, said the idea of hiring foreign tutors is "still an issue we have not completely resolved."

"We will be happy to consider the possibility of using these call center-type arrangements if we could be very comfortable with issues of both tutor quality and the dependability of technology," Ross said.

Wherever the tutor, some criticize e-tutoring's lack of face-to-face contact. But that can go both ways. Ross says students have said e-tutors offer a shy or struggling student a less-threatening environment to ask questions.

"There's no one in the back of the classroom laughing because they're raising their hand," he said.

Princeton prefers an online tutor.

"If I talk back to that person, they won't do anything to me," he says, laughing. "This way is much better."

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