

“Micro-blogging for Peace”

India

University of California, Berkeley

Usree Bhattacharya, India, University of California, Berkeley

Section I

The project, “*Micro-blogging for Peace*” was conceived for the purpose of creating a literacy platform for young children at an *anathashram* (orphanage) in a satellite town of New Delhi, India, to enable the children to “micro-blog” through a multilingual, multi-media, and communal “micro-blogspace.” The multi-aspectual online environment was created so that the underserved children could articulate their *own* message of peace, through the multilingual affordances of a site which celebrated their own rich linguistic diversity; allowed them to push through constraints imposed by traditional text-derived literacy practices and forms of learning; and developed, cultivated, and nurtured a sense of communality, a *belonging-in-the-world*.

As I think back and attempt to summarize how the project unfolded in actuality, I am overwhelmed by a sense of gratitude, promise, and *collective* accomplishment. We did not manage to accomplish *exactly* what we set out to do: however, I believe that the true worth of the project did not lie in the mundane details of the tangible goals and targets we reached or did not; it lies in the ineffable value of building a powerful sense of community, of being connected to the world in ways we had not imagined before, of learning to speak to the world in new ways. What we began with was *potential*, and we end on the beautiful note of *promise*.

There were several difficulties we faced which had not been anticipated. The heat (which hovered between 110 and 120 degrees Fahrenheit), unrelieved by a delayed monsoon, during peak summer months precluded the community visits we had planned (the fear of possible dehydration and heat stroke made administrators weary). We also had no electricity for 8-10 hours a day; and since there was no generator, we could not utilize the computer during the (scheduled and unscheduled) power cuts. The DSL connection was also frustratingly slow, and did not work for days at a time. There was also some internal resistance on the part of local administrators, some of whom were either upset that the project did not entail any *personal* profit for them, unconvinced that the children were “capable” of acquiring any new skills or skeptical of the long-term sustainability of the project. Many children also left for home for some weeks, and the month of July made the children increasingly busy with unit tests at the start of the new academic year. I had also not expected that the children would find self-expressing to be such a difficult task. Having been raised in an academic environment in which rote learning and mechanical, formulaic writing practices are privileged over comprehension and creative expression, it was heartbreaking to learn that my children—whom I have observed for over two years now—“froze up” when I asked them to write freely in their own voices. The lack of a pre-configured template or rigid structure to their creative expression (apart from the constraints imposed by the media or the goals of the project) confused them, for “*no one had really wanted to hear them before*” (as Viplab, 10, said). In having spent their academic lives writing for others, they had not really learnt to write for themselves.

The key to the success of the project was *adaptation*. When the computers didn’t work, we took to pen and paper. When the searing heat confined us to the *ashram*, we connected to the world through narrative and the sharing of life experiences. When words would not “flow” because they had never been asked to “express themselves” before, we talked about what self-expression meant, and why it was important. We also began video-blogging (“vlogging”) because it was less dependent on Internet time, and the children also found it easier to express themselves on camera than in text-based blogging.

A total of twenty-three children (between four and thirteen years) at the orphanage benefitted most from the project. Their parents/guardians are unable to provide for them, and have, out of agonizing necessity and abject poverty, “given them up” to the orphanage. Most children hail from slums in the outskirts of North

Delhi, an area notorious for high levels of violent crime, unemployment, and poverty. Most of the children speak Bengali and Hindi, and know English (from school) and Sanskrit (from devotional prayers/language classes). A majority of the funds were funneled to provide for computers, furniture (desks, chairs, bookshelves), stationary and books. In order to sustain and expand the project beyond the summer, I also helped establish a computer lab at the local (extremely under-resourced) village school that my children attend. The lab will help provide computer-based instruction for over 200 students (all hailing from families living below the poverty line). An assistant will continue computer and language tutoring at the orphanage over the coming year, and the village school has committed to computer-aided instruction for its students with the help of an MCA-certified computer teacher. In the long term, I think the greatest take-away from the project will be: the empowerment of self-expression, the development of computer and language skills (which will open up possibilities for the future for the children), and, most importantly, a growing sense of *citizenship* in the world.

Section II

a. I think of “peace” as fundamentally predicated on the notion of human compassion and understanding. It is community; it is hope. It is brotherhood, faith in our humanity. It is self-expression and a willingness to listen. It is as much empathy as sympathy; an acknowledgement that our world is a shared, communal landscape in the human drama. Peace is the assimilation of the “I” in “We.” It is not an *erasure* of our differences, but their endless celebration. Peace does not mean the end of disagreements, but, rather, a respectful commitment to try to understand unshared perspectives. My own international travel experiences (I grew up in India, but have spent a year or more in Holland, New York, Canada, Indonesia, and California) make me think of the world as a beautifully complex symphony of voices. The problem is that we don’t always stop to listen, to appreciate it; we are not always attuned to the magical harmony of the world.

Through this project I discovered how the affordances of social networking media (like blogs) offer us spaces to dialog with the world outside of our intimate (and sometimes limited) spaces, enabling us to quickly take our world to others as we bring the world to us. My children were fascinated with the fact that we had an audience from as far away as in America; they basked in the warmth of knowing that there were others beyond the ashram confines, beyond the city limits, beyond our nation’s borders, who were *listening*, who *cared*. This knowledge not only made them aware of a world they had never previously even imagined, but connected it to them in ways that facilitated dialog. These children, through the micro-blogs, were authoring their worlds in a new voice.

I am reminded of the proverbial Indian *frog-in-the-well* story; the frog grows up in the confines of a well, thinking that the well is the entire world. And then one day, taken outside it, it discovers the infinite possibility of the world without. We were all – my kids and I – transformed by this experience, and humbled by the new vistas that opened up before us as we textually and audio-visually crafted a window into our world. It is my hope, it is our hope, that the success of this project inspires other low-threshold micro-blogging projects across India, providing a platform to showcase silenced voices through new literacy technologies and new media, empowering children and adults who struggle for self-expression in under-resourced and under-privileged areas.

b. The project “Micro-blogging for peace” saw the emergence of a new, global, textually mediated *matrix of interactions* for the children; it gave them a new confidence in their own voice (through the medium of new technologies) as much as it taught them to listen to others beyond the local interactions that they engage in. The dialog afforded by the open, networked environment of the blogs made them participants in the larger world, not mere interlocutors in the local spaces that circumscribe their world. The world without, in the course of the summer, became the world *within*.

