

Tutoring assistance is just a click - and a world - away



Beyond call centers: Online services with staff in India are working with metro-area kids.

By **THOMAS LEE**, Star Tribune, February 7, 2008

With a bowl of apple slices and her trusty No. 2 pencil on standby, Sigrid Brost stared intently at the computer screen Wednesday and mulled over a math problem.

45/9+6=11. Where should she place the parentheses?

"Well, 45 divided by 9 is 5," said Brost, an 11-year-old Edina student.

"Right..." boomed a slightly accented voice from her Mac.

"And 5 plus 6 is 11!" Brost declared triumphantly, scribbling the parentheses around 45/9.

"Yes, that is correct," the voice said.

It's common for students like Brost to get extra help with their homework from a tutor. But in this case, the voice on her computer belongs to Harmeet Kaur, a graduate student in Delhi, India. Twice a week for about an hour, Kaur coaches Brost on everything from long division and percentages to fractions and decimal points.

Tutor and student speak through Skype, an Internet phone service. A pen-like device and software allows both Brost and Kaur to literally write out problems on the computer screen. TutorCo, a Minnetonka-based startup company that provides the online tutoring service, can store the work and even e-mail it to Brost's parents.

Communicating with a stranger on another continent might seem a roundabout way of getting help with school work. Education experts, after all, say remote tutoring can never supplant the benefits of personal one-on-one coaching. But Brost, who seemed more comfortable navigating the computer than converting percentages to decimals, doesn't mind.

"Actually, I like it better when I don't have to see them," said the shy fifth-grader.

Thanks to technology and lower communication costs, online tutoring has become a booming industry. Since the enactment of No Child Left Behind, a federal law that ties school funding to test performance, parents and school districts are increasingly relying on private tutoring to supplement classroom instruction, experts say. Private tutoring companies are poised to generate more than \$1 billion in revenue this school year with online tutoring driving much of that growth, said Laurence Bloom, an analyst with Outsell Inc., a California-based market research firm.

Remote tutoring at lower cost

And India, a country whose students are known for their math and science acumen, increasingly is providing the tutors. India-based firms like TutorVista and Career Launcher and American companies founded by Indian expatriates, including Growing Stars and StudyLofts.com, already tutor thousands of American students a year.

TutorCo is the brainchild of Sumit Dhawan, who moved from India to the United States in 1998 to earn a MBA from Indiana University. Dhawan, who now works at General Mills, said he noticed a shortage of math and science tutors, especially at the high school level.

Working with his wife and a partner in India, Dhawan launched TutorCo in January 2007. The company, which operates in affluent towns including Wayzata, Minnetonka and Eden Prairie, tutored 65 students last year and hopes to reach 250 students this year. TutorCo, which focuses on math and science, eventually plans to expand into reading and SAT/ACT and Advanced Placement test preparation. Dhawan also envisions working with teachers to jointly develop lesson plans and after-school tutoring sessions.

Dhawan said TutorCo's biggest selling points are convenience and brain power. Students, especially those who participate in extracurricular activities, can receive tutoring at night, which is morning in India. The company employs 20 tutors, all with advanced degrees in math and science and some with teaching experience. Dhawan claims that 80 percent of students tutored by TutorCo for at least two months saw their grades improve by at least one letter grade.

And of course, there is the lower cost. TutorCo charges \$149 a month for an unlimited number of sessions. For a student who takes eight sessions, that comes out to less than \$20 an hour, Dhawan said. By contrast, Sylvan Learning Center, a well-known private tutoring firm, charges up to \$50 an hour plus \$199 for an assessment test.

John Brost, an information technology manager at Cargill, said he spent \$2,000 over four months on private tutoring for son Carl and daughter Sigrid. He said he had no problem with Indian tutors coaching his kids over the Internet.

"They speak the King's English better than we do," Brost joked. And the results speak for themselves, he said. Carl and Sigrid now test above the district average for their age groups.

Outsourcing controversial

But remote tutoring has its limitations, experts say.

"The vast majority of students need ... personal attention and advocacy," said Steve Peha, president of Teaching That Makes Sense, an education consulting group in North Carolina. "It will always be better having someone sit next to you. I don't think anybody would dispute that."

At a time when American companies regularly outsource information technology, accounting and call centers to India, outsourcing something as local as education might hit a sensitive spot, Dhawan acknowledged.

"I think it might bother me," said Dr. St. John Delany, a professor of education at Pace University in New York. "We have a lot of good, knowledgeable individuals here. I don't see why we don't look to the U.S. because we live in the U.S."

Isaac Cheifetz, founder of Minneapolis-based consulting firm Open Technologies and an authority on outsourcing, said remote tutoring offers the benefits of cultural exchanges and access to some of the world's best minds. But if it expands, there could be unintended consequences, in which some critical professions such as teaching start to lose their value, he said.

"Education today is where information technology was 10 or 15 years ago," Cheifetz said.

Dhawan disagrees. His service supplements, but does not replace, teaching.

"All [Americans] care about is the end result," he said. "If they see the results are there, they couldn't care less how it is being delivered."

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