

The school of tomorrow

Ashish Rajpal, educational entrepreneur and CEO of iDiscoveri talks about other forms of experiential learning

DIVYA KUMAR



MINUTE-BY-MINUTE Plans for class-room learning

Every year Ashish Rajpal teaches science for fourth or fifth standard students at a school in Delhi. Not exactly business as usual for an MBA and the managing director of a company. But then teaching is Rajpal's business at iDiscoveri and it was a similar stint of teaching fourth graders that laid the foundations of his popular XSEED programme a few years ago.

"I came back after doing my M.Ed. at Harvard University eight years ago, with this crazy mission to change education in India," says Rajpal, an MBA from XLRI. "Given that we have six million poorly trained teachers in India, I dove right into teacher training, but found that in itself did not change classroom practice or help the children."

That's when Rajpal himself started teaching science at a Delhi school. "And I found it's incredibly tough to teach 45 children in a crowded classroom!" he says. "I realised that all this theoretical nonsense we'd been feeding the teachers meant nothing in a real-world situation. We needed something that worked in the classroom."

The result was that iDiscoveri began to create minute-by-minute plans for the teacher to follow in class, including group work, experiments and other forms of experiential learning. And so XSEED was born. "Today we've created over 8,000 lesson plans across all subjects for nursery to seventh standard, and XSEED reaches 450 schools across the country," says Rajpal. "We're hoping that number will reach 1,000 by next summer."

About a hundred of those schools are right here in Tamil Nadu, which is one of XSEED's flagship states. "Although we started in 2002 in Delhi, we found that the South was far more receptive to our ideas," he says. "So we decided to focus on Southern states, and picked Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh."

Rajpal describes the programme of getting into the schools, and doing not just lesson plans, but also teacher training and quarterly assessments of students as a "sort of stock market report. But then that's Rajpal for you — a mixture of starry-eyed idealism and businesslike pragmatism.

"I am an idealist at heart — I'd have to have been, to give up my well-paying corporate job in Paris, uproot my family and go do my M.Ed. at the age of 31," he says. "But my corporate experience for 10 years has also shaped me. Ideas aren't enough — you have to make it work."

He recalls how he applied in secret to Harvard, inspired by the birth of his children. And once there, he was "like a greedy hog", making the most of the opportunities before him. "Intellectually, those were the best years of my life — I was getting to hang out with legends such as Howard Gardner and David Perkins," he says.

To ensure these ideals aren't lost, iDiscoveri launched The School of Tomorrow conference here in Chennai last year, with the second, bigger edition around the corner (see box). Then there's the leadership programme for young adults Rajpal's working on, along with supplementary programmes to meet different needs of students and a national network of XSEED centres. And, he's considering diversifying to teaching English as well. It's all in a day's work for this educational entrepreneur.

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The second annual edition of iDiscoveri's The School of Tomorrow conference will be held on December 7, 2010 simultaneously in Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai and Hyderabad, using Internet and video-conferencing technology.

It will feature several high-profile speakers, including writer and columnist Gurucharan Das, who will give the India Education Address, and leading American educationists Peter Senge of Massachusetts Institute of Technology and David Perkins of Harvard University, who will present the International Keynote Address.

In addition, there will be a micro-panel of educationists discussing issues of classroom and school practices and a macro-panel of leaders from the corporate sector discussing society's expectations from education.

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