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Homework Help, From a World Away

Web Joins Students, Cheap Overseas Tutors

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It was almost 3 a.m., Alex Del Monte recalled, and he was cramming like crazy. He gulped can after can of Red Bull to stay awake, but the George Washington University sophomore knew he would flunk his Statistics 52 exam later that day if he didn't call his tutor for help.

But so late at night? Not a problem if your tutor works 8,500 miles away and 9 1/2 hours ahead in Bangalore, India.

In an hour-long session that cost just \$18, the Indian tutor, who said his name was Mike, spent an hour walking Del Monte through such esoteric concepts as confidence intervals and alpha divisions, Del Monte recalled. He got an A on the final exam. "Mike helped me unscramble everything in my mind," the 20-year-old said.

Thousands of U.S. students such as Del Monte are increasingly relying on overseas tutors to boost their grades and SAT scores. The tutors, who communicate with students over the Internet, are inexpensive and available around the clock, making education the newest industry to be outsourced to other countries.

Tutoring companies figure: If low-paid workers in China and India can sew your clothes, process your medical bills and answer your computer questions, why can't they teach your children, too?

But educational outsourcing has sparked a fierce response from teachers and other critics who argue that some companies are using unqualified overseas tutors to increase their profit margins.

"We don't believe that education should become a business of outsourcing," said Rob Weil, deputy director of educational issues at the American Federation of Teachers. "When you start talking about overseas people teaching children, it just doesn't seem right to me."

To 15-year-old Amita Achutuni, though, tutoring on the Internet just makes sense. On a recent Monday afternoon, the Potomac resident kicked off her shoes and logged into her home computer. Then she put on her headset.

"Hi, Amita!" a woman with an Indian accent said cheerfully. "How are you doing?"

The voice belonged to Lekha Kamalasan, a \$20-an-hour tutor who helps Amita with her geometry homework during twice-a-week, one-hour sessions. Using an electronic white board and a copy of Amita's textbook, Kamalasan guides her through the nuances of cross-multiplication, triangle similarity and assorted geometry proofs.

Amita is one of 400 students enrolled with Growing Stars, a California-based company whose 50

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tutors, most of them with master's degrees, work in an office in Cochin, India. Although her Indian-born mother was worried at first that Amita might not be able to understand the tutor's accent, she urged her daughter to try the service, which was much cheaper than the \$80-an-hour private tutors her older son once used.

"I didn't want to do it at first because I thought it would be weird," said Amita, a freshman at Wootton High School. "But it really doesn't make a difference. I just can't see her face."

The overseas tutors work hard to seem as American as possible. Kamalasan, who has master's degrees in business administration and mathematics, went through two weeks of accent reduction and cultural training. She learned for the first time about baseball and ice skating and had to memorize strange-sounding American holidays. And when she signed off with Amita, she said, "Good night!" even though it was just the start of her graveyard shift in India, running from 1:30 a.m. to 9:30 a.m.

But Kamalasan, 33, doesn't mind because she makes \$300 a month, double what she made as a high school teacher. "This is a very good salary," she said.

The U.S. demand for overseas tutors is creating a thriving industry in Asia. About 80 percent of India's \$5 million online tutoring industry is focused on students in the United States, according to Educomp Solutions, a New Delhi tutoring company.

When Studyloft.com, a Chicago-based tutoring company with more than 6,000 clients, advertised in Bangalore for tutors with master's degrees, more than 500 people applied for 38 spots, according to Bikram Roy, the firm's founder and chief executive. "There is just a huge hotbed of talent there in math and science," he said. "India has the best tutors -- the best teachers -- in the world."

But some tutoring companies worry that outsourcing could be bad for business. Francesco Lecciso, a director of New York-based Brainfuse Online Tutoring, said only 70 of the firm's 1,000 tutors live abroad, in India and Chile.

"It's used as a pejorative weapon by our competitors," he said. "It's such a hot-button political issue."

Educational outsourcing has become even more contentious as companies try to tap into the millions of dollars available under the No Child Left Behind Act to firms that provide remedial tutoring. Both Studyloft.com and Growing Stars hope to qualify for those funds.

Teachers unions are vigorously lobbying for legislation that would make it more difficult for overseas tutors to receive No Child Left Behind funds. Weil, of the American Federation of Teachers, said after-school tutors should be required to pass the same rigorous certification process as public school teachers.

"Quality control doesn't end at 3 o'clock when the school bell rings," he said. "If you need a highly qualified teacher in school at 2:59, you should have a qualified teacher as a tutor after school at 3:01."

Some companies are thinking of educational outsourcing on a much broader scale than just tutoring. The Kentucky Community and Technical College System is outsourcing the grading of some papers to Smarthinking, a District-based online tutoring company that works with 70,000 students at 300 schools across the country and has both tutors in the United States and abroad.

"Essentially we are acting as the teaching assistant," said Burck Smith, the firm's chief executive and co-founder. "We can do better service, more consistent service, and at a better price."

Smith says he believes that eventually schools will outsource their office hours, review sessions and other aspects of instruction to teachers that might be located anywhere in the world. Right now, about 20 percent of Smarthinking's 500 tutors are in countries such as India, the Philippines, Chile, South Africa and Israel.

"This is no different than what happens in any industry. Labor gets stratified," Smith said. "And that leads to the democratization of education, because the lower prices for tutoring means the rich and poor can access the same services."

But when Alex Del Monte called up his Studyloft.com tutor right before his exam last semester, he didn't ponder any grand theories about outsourcing. He just wanted help. "All I know is that the tutor's name is Mike and that he helped me ace my test," he said.

Actually, the tutor's name is Mahakali Murthy, but like many Studyloft.com tutors, he uses a fake name to seem more American. Del Monte has used the service about every other week this semester, and he vowed that he would finish his studying well before finals this month.

"But realistically," he laughed, "I'll most likely be up again at 2 a.m., calling my Indian tutor for help."

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