

ELST Volunteer Reports

Summer 2008

In the summer of 2008 the Cambridge University English Language Studies for Tibetans organised twelve volunteer teaching placements for Cambridge University students in South Asia and Mongolia. The project was generously supported by the Cambridge ELST charity, the Cambridge Active Community Grant and the Cambridge Commonwealth Trust among others.

The following placements took place between June and September of the year 2008:

Kathmandu, Nepal: 3 Volunteers
Delhi, India: 2 Volunteers
Dharamshala, India: 3 Volunteers
Ladakh, India: 3 Volunteers
Ulaanbaator, Mongolia: 1 Volunteer

The individual reports for these placements form the remainder of this document. We the ELST Volunteers of 2008 would like to extend our heartfelt thanks to all who supported us through these extraordinary experiences. We hope you enjoy reading our accounts of the same.

ELST

Project Report 2008

Project Location: Boudhanath, Kathmandu, Nepal

Institution Name: Manjughosha Academy, School

Dates of Project: 26/07/08-10/09/08

The suburb of Boudhanath on the outskirts of Kathmandu is on the ancient trade route from Tibet and has become home for thousands of Tibetan refugees. The Buddhist stupa dominates the skyline and is one of the largest in the world. Manjughosha Academy is a school Tibetan school in Boudhanath, set up and ran by a Tibetan woman, exiled from Tibet at the age of 9. The school consists of roughly 200 pupils between the ages of 4 and 19, 160 of which are boarders at the school. Many of the children are from remote Himalayan villages several days journey from Kathmandu.

Two ELST volunteers from Cambridge were placed at Manjughosha Academy and were to be covering the lessons of the headmistress and her husband who were away visiting family for the first few weeks of our stay. We divided the classes between us and I became responsible for class 3 and class 9's English lessons. The children are taught Tibetan, Nepali and English right from nursery class so their standard of English was very high. We were given the children's usual English textbooks to follow. We used these as a guideline for the topics we would cover, however tried to incorporate lots of other methods of teaching so as to make the most of being native English speakers, and try and inspire the children in their studies. With class 9 we did lots of debating and conversation practice, and with class 3, singing, word games, and poster displays for the wall.

After class we were able to take the boarders on small trips, which they got very excited about since staffing at the school was quite short and boarders rarely got the opportunity to leave the premises. We took the class 3 and 8 children in small groups to a local reading room where the children had access to a wide range of fact and fictional books and we were able to listen to all the children read individually. In addition we took class 9 to Pashupatinath, a large Hindu temple, and Kopan Monastery, on the outskirts of Kathmandu.

Seeing what Doma, the headmistress had achieved in setting up this school, and how the children looked up to her and her colleagues was really inspiring. I had an amazing time staying in Boudhanath and learnt a lot about Nepal and Tibet. The project was really rewarding for both me and the students at Manjughosha and I am really grateful for ELST for enabling it to happen.

ELST

Project Report 2008

Project Location: Boudhanath, Nepal
Institution Name: Manjughoksha Academy
Dates of Project: 09/07/08-19/08/08

The Manjughoksha Academy was established in 1995 by a group of like-minded teachers (who saw a need for establishing a school for Tibetans and others who have a close cultural and religious link with Tibetans). It is run by a Tibetan husband and wife team, who wish to support to Tibetans in Nepal. Most of its students are boarders, who come from Tibetan refugee families in Nepal, although there are day scholars who live in Kathmandu or its suburbs. The school is for children from nursery (ages ~3/4) to class 10 (age~16), although due to children starting school at various ages, there is often a range in the classes. The school has a strong focus on the English language; in fact students must speak English at all times in school, even when communicating with teachers and with each other. Most of the teachers are Tibetan, or have links with the Tibetan community and, unlike normal Nepali schools; Tibetan as well as Nepali is taught. Students have long, 6 day weeks and boarders have a full schedule from 6am-10pm, depending on their age.

I was at the school with a fellow ELST volunteer. The school receives foreign volunteers (especially from Switzerland) throughout the year. I regularly taught classes 3 and 10 throughout the week (this is because the principle and his wife were visiting their children America for a few weeks). I also took other lessons, when teachers were away (which happened on most days), such as science, history and social studies. I also joined in with sport lessons during and after school. I played with the children before and after school, as well as during the lunch break. They especially enjoyed learning ballroom and latin dancing, and showing me their Bollywood moves. I took children on trips around Boudhanath and to the reading room, set up by Joann El Nemr, two times a week, enabling them to read to me in English (which they loved) and, for the boarders, this was one of the few occasions they were allowed out of the school compound.

Although the school has basic facilities, such as outside toilets (not unusual for Nepal), I found the sense of community extraordinary. The children were disciplined (mostly), shared everything, supported and respected each other, as well as the teachers. I found this lovely to experience – it was very moving at times! I was welcomed with open arms by the principle, his wife and sister (all teachers at the school). They showed me around Kathmandu, took me out for a meal, helped me organise a trek and took me on a pro-Tibet protest. This placement enabled me to help the Tibetan community in Nepal, as well as making me much more humble in and appreciative of my life.



My favourite class: class 10 outside the dining hall.

ELST

Project Report 2008

Project Location: Boudhanath, Kathmandu, Nepal

Institution Name: Manasarovar Academy

Dates of Project: 6th July – 15th August 2008

Manasarovar Academy is in Boudha, a Tibetan suburb of Kathmandu. It is a Tibetan school with 283 pupils, predominantly Tibetan, ranging in age from 3-11, with some older children who had started late. I taught for 4 or 5 days each week, though through my stay I progressively spend more time at the school (living five minutes away) as I grew closer to the children and teachers.

Primarily, I was there to teach English, and did so in different ways with the different age groups. Most days I taught Class II, III, IV and V, with approximately 30, 30, 20 and 15 children respectively (reflecting the growth of the school, founded nine years ago). I enjoyed replenishing the song collection of the early age-groups (kindergarten classes), and writing letters with the older ones. The improvement in some of the children's English was remarkable. Although their normal lessons are conducted in English, it is a sort of hybrid language that often the children and teachers understood better than me. More than anything, talking with the children outside lessons improved their spoken English. Most rewarding was studying global warming with Class V, the oldest group. At the end of the topic, we staged a mock UN Earth Summit with pairs of children representing different countries.

Outside the classroom, I ran sports classes two mornings each week, played frisbee with the boarders in the evening, helped out with homework, and selected a suitable film to hire and bring in to watch on the television with boarders at the weekend. I even, to their great amusement, attempted to learn some national dance.

The Tibetan story is a sad and violent one, as testified to by the protests I witnessed outside the Chinese embassy, staged to coincide with the opening of the Olympic games, and aimed to project the Tibetans' cause into the eyes of the global media. I heard first-hand of atrocities from the headmistress, who set up the school to provide a first-class education that at the same time helps to preserve the threatened Tibetan culture. It was an honour to be able to contribute to providing this education, and I felt a great sense of loss when leaving the school. ELST does a valuable job in helping to send volunteers to Manasarovar Academy.



(L) Me with Tashi Nobu, the cheekiest boy in the school, (Middle) Playing 'Captain's Coming' with Class II, (R) MA's Birthday

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Project Report 2008

Project Location: Delhi, India

Institution Name: Empowering the Vision

Dates of Project: 31/07/08- 12/09/08

On arrival in India on July 31st I checked in at the Tibetan Youth Hostel, Rohini, Delhi which was also the building in which I taught. It is a hostel for Tibetan students studying at Delhi University and functions in a similar way to a Cambridge College, providing them with accommodation, food and study facilities. I had agreed with the project co-ordinators at Empowering the Vision Project, a Tibetan organisation based in South Delhi, to begin classes on Monday 11th of August. This gave me the opportunity to travel to Shimla in Himachal Pradesh before returning to Delhi to meet the students and take some introductory classes before starting in proper on 11/08/08.

During the weeks I was volunteering in Delhi I taught a wide range of classes. The majority of the teaching was done in the afternoon and evening and consisted of three to four hour long advanced English language lessons. In addition to this I took a morning class of computing students who had only recently arrived in India from Tibet. This was a mixed age and ability class and required a very different approach from the evening advanced classes. It demanded a more structured curriculum which included basic English conversation practice and points of grammar as well as creative writing and speaking exercises. I also gave bi-weekly individual French lessons to two students, English conversation lessons to a Buddhist monk affiliated with the hostel and two Italian grammar classes to the former director of the hostel.

For three weeks I was accompanied by another ELST volunteer with whom I shared the teaching during this period of time. A third volunteer also came to stay in the hostel for two weeks, during which she also took classes. For one week we conducted a careers workshop and each took lessons on interview technique and writing CVs and covering letters. We travelled at weekends to Jaipur and Agra and visited monuments such as the Taj Mahal, the abandoned city of Fatehpur Sikri and Amber fort. We made the most of a gap in the middle of every week day, visiting many places of interest in Delhi. After the others left I travelled to Varanasi and spent two days looking around before returning for my final week of teaching. During this last week the Dalai Lama and his family and entourage were staying in the hostel and I was able to attend a ceremony for his departure which was a great honour. On the final day of teaching I arranged for the fifty English students to perform Bob Dylan's 'Mr Tambourine Man' for the project co-ordinators and the management of the hostel and distributed certificates to all who had completed the course.

I felt that the project was a great success and it was a great privilege to be able to stay in such a beautiful building and be welcomed into the Tibetan student community. I very much enjoyed meeting and teaching students of my own age and learned a lot about the culture of Tibet as well as about the particular situation of the Tibetan community in India. I was greatly impressed by the political commitment of the students and by their intelligent approach to their troubled situation. I felt that my presence was appreciated by them and was told by many of the students that they had benefited from daily contact with an English person of their own age with whom they could talk in an informal manner. I would like to thank the ELST Committee for their generous support for this project.

ELST

Project Report 2008

Project Location: Delhi, India

Institution Name: Empowering the Vision

Dates of Project: 12/08/08 – 08/09/08

This summer the Cambridge ELST charity awarded me with a bursary towards a teaching project in India during August and September of 2008. During this time I worked for the 'Empowering the Vision Project'. This is an NGO based in New Delhi that aims to support and empower young exiled Tibetans. The charity's goal is to provide young Tibetans with the opportunity and training to allow them to take their place in the community with confidence and dynamism.

I held lessons with young Tibetans aged between 16 and 35 of various ability levels. Separate lessons were scheduled for beginners English speaking and writing skills; advanced English speaking and writing skills; interview technique; CV and covering letters; basic business knowledge; career guidance; and British culture.

I hope that the young people benefited from these lessons and that they felt that their knowledge and skills were developed. I awarded them all with 'English Language for Tibetans' certificates, of varying levels, because I assessed them all to have completed the necessary work to have made a noticeable improvement. I know that one student subsequently chose to apply to London Metropolitan University after completing the courses provided by Empowering the Vision.

I also gained a huge amount from my experience. I learnt techniques for teaching adults. I also learnt a huge amount about Tibetan culture. This highlights one of the most challenging aspects of the project. I heard deeply personal, and moving, accounts of young Tibetans' pursuit of freedom by leaving their family in order to live in India in hopes of a better life.

Overall I had an incredibly enjoyable and fulfilling experience. I thoroughly enjoy teaching and that is why I am now working in an Education Centre providing educational opportunity for children aged 4-14! Secondly, I really enjoyed meeting some incredibly inspirational young Tibetans and hope to eventually pursue a career completing similar projects abroad whilst working within the educational and/or development sector.



ENVISION beginners group 2008



ENVISION advanced group 2008

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Project Report 2008

Project Location: (1) Upper Sukkar, nr. Phatepur; (2) Mcleod Ganj, both situated in Himachal Pradesh, India

Institution Name: ESTrust, Tibet Multi-Education Centre private pupils

Dates of Project: 07/07/08-09/08/08

Mcleod Ganj, Dharamsala is a small village nestling right in the foothills of the Himalayas, and is home to both the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan Government-in-exile. This was my home for the five weeks in which I was volunteering on the ELST scheme.

For the first two weeks, I volunteered, along with another ELST volunteer, in a boarding school for Tibetan adult refugees called ESTrust situated in a small village an hour away from Mcleod Ganj. It was set up by a Swedish couple to provide further education for pupils who showed the most promise on leaving the nearby Tibet-Transit-School. The aim is to teach the pupils to a standard by which they can take the Cambridge First Certificate Exam, and upon receiving this most of the students return to Tibet and teach English or work for NGOs or in the tourist industry.

I would teach either the three-hour morning or afternoon sessions, or sometimes both, to classes of four to six pupils. The aim was to improve their confidence in speaking, so I would organise roleplays, games and discussions, and also worked on creative-writing and essay skills. In addition, I would often have a one-to-one conversation class in the evening with one of the pupils. We stayed overnight at the school during the week, so had a chance to get to know the pupils, and hear about their lives in Tibet and India.

After two weeks teaching at Upper Sukkar, we spent the remainder of our time in Mcleod Ganj teaching private pupils. We taught conversation to Kunchok, a Buddhist monk who lived at the Dalai Lama's temple. We practiced conversation on several topics and reading articles, as well as working through an exercise book which we selected to be of a suitable level. We also taught Gadan, who had just retired as karate instructor for the Indian Special Friend Force. He was soon to move to Canada to live with his family, and so we practised conversation and everyday vocabulary which would be helpful in his daily life there.

By the end of our time teaching each of our pupils, their confidence in speak seemed to have grown, and it was really great to meet and work with such welcoming and interesting people. In addition, living among Tibetans at the time of the Beijing Olympics was exciting, and we had the opportunity to take part in protests, and learn a lot about the Tibetan political situation. I would like to thank ELST for enabling me to take part in this project.

Our ESTrust pupils



with Kunchok



ELST

Project Report 2008

Project Location: Mcloed Ganj, Himachal Pradesh, India

Institution Name: Save Exiled Tibetan Scholars Association
Multi-Education Centre and the ES Trust School/ private tutoring

Dates of Project: 8/07/2008 – 19/07/2008

The Multi-Education Centre aims to preserve Tibetan culture and provide learning opportunities for the most marginalised students in their community in a resourceful and coherent learning framework. They help teach languages for vocational use while nurturing the dignity and sense of self-worth of all the students. They empower people to achieve their goals and overcome their inhibitions.

On the whole, there were approximately 5 other volunteers, from different parts around the world, volunteering during the same period in which I was teaching. Given my strong English and law educational background, my lessons primarily involved strengthening the grammar, punctuation, debating and essay-writing skills of the students.

The abilities of students varied from the level of the group they were placed in. This ranged from basic to intermediate skills in the disciplines mentioned, however, I personally felt that all the students demonstrated marked potential and it was rewarding teaching incredibly enthusiastic and dedicated students.

Arguably one of the most enjoyable aspects of the teaching programme we delivered was in relation to the debating exercises. The students demonstrated a keen and informed interest on topical issues such as the death penalty, inequality and all managed to develop their ability to argue as the weeks progressed. It must be added that the stronger students developed intelligible arguments involving the use of statistics, while all students managed to orate their arguments with gradual confidence.

Perhaps the most rewarding aspects of my placement was developing inter-personal relationships with students from diverse and adverse backgrounds. I was personally inspired by the stories my students told me of the hardship they faced in settling into a new country in exile from Tibet. Indeed, I think I learned more than the students on this placement! My kindest regards to you for enabling me to participate in such a rewarding experience.



ELST

Project Report 2008

Project Location: Ladakh, Jammu & Kashmir, India

Institution Name: Students Educational and Cultural Movement of Ladakh

Dates of Project: 26/07/08-10/09/08

The Buddhist Kingdom of Ladakh is set in the medieval high Indus valley, one of the world's highest and most isolated inhabited areas. The Student's Educational and Cultural Movement of Ladakh (SECMOL) is an innovative NGO originally set up to address the problem of the high proportion (circa 80%) of Ladakhi school leavers who do not graduate with any qualifications. This is achieved by selecting around 40 students who have recently left school and providing them with a year at the SECMOL campus on the banks of the Indus. Here they have access to a supportive community, functional academic facilities (such as the well stocked library) and tuition from foreign volunteers. At the end of the year they can retake their school exams- a high proportion will qualify opening the door to further study and rewarding careers.

There were a few volunteers at SECMOL last summer, due to my physics background I quickly became the primary maths teacher. This was challenging as the starting level was basic, and the target standard very high! However we made steady progress and by the end of the project the majority had a good understanding of negative numbers and fraction manipulation. I instigated an advanced class for the high flyers; as a result two very able students made major advances and became proficient in basic algebra. This I feel was the project's greatest accomplishment and the one in which I took the most satisfaction. In addition to maths lessons I assisted in English, science and English conversation, usually around 5 hours of teaching a day. I played an active role in SECMOL's communal system where day-to-day tasks are performed by residents rather than employees; this includes the maintenance of SECMOL's environmental facilities such as its private solar power facility and irrigation network.

Observing the resilience of the Ladakhis to their harsh environment and their determination to succeed despite difficult circumstances and poor infrastructure was most uplifting. The project was most rewarding both for me and also for the students, thank you for enabling it to happen.



SECMOL's school trip summer 2008



SECMOL student with careers poster

ELST

Project Report 2008

Project Location: Ladakh, Jammu & Kashmir, India

Institution Name: Ladakh Nuns' Association and Youth Opportunity Trust

Asia

Dates of Project: 30/06/08-12/08/08 at LNA, 14/08/08-01/09/08 at YOTA

The Ladakh Nuns' Association is run by the Venerable Dr. Tsering Palmo, who founded the organisation in response to the poor conditions the nuns of the region lived in. Before the creation of the LNA, Ladakhi nuns were mostly treated as workers with shaved heads by their families, living a life of hard labour rather than of learning and spirituality as they desired. Thanks to the LNA, this has changed, and the nuns now have nunneries in which they can live and study, and in turn teach others in the community to improve education and women's rights. The nuns mainly teach each other, and so their English is of varying levels, but they are all very eager to learn.

Along with another ELST volunteer, I lived at the LNA nunnery and spent six weeks learning about the lives of the nuns and getting to know them, while teaching daily. We each took six hours of classes per day, some individual and some groups, of all levels. Alongside the teaching time, we also spent countless hours handwriting worksheets and planning lessons, knitting with the older nuns, and playing games with the children. On top of English lessons, we also taught the young nuns maths, and had arts and crafts lessons for everyone. Possibly the hardest part of the teaching was building their confidence, as to begin with we found that even those with a good level of English were reluctant to use it. It was incredibly rewarding to see how much happier they were to use their English as our lessons progressed. Although we did travel around the area during weekends, most of our time was spent with the nuns, and by the time we had to leave we both felt we had formed a real bond with them, and grown to see the nunnery as a home.

Youth Opportunity Trust Asia, based in Delhi, runs a large SOS Tibetan Youth Hostel where young Tibetan refugees live while studying in Delhi. Though I only spent 2 weeks teaching there alongside two other ELST volunteers, I really felt the classes were appreciated by the students. On the whole their English was of a good standard, but they lacked skills such as CV and letter writing which will be essential for their new life in India. We therefore focused our lessons on formal English and practical skills, and all the students seemed very happy to have the chance to learn.

I would like to thank you for giving me this utterly incomparable opportunity.

ELST

Project Report 2008

Project Location: Ladakh, Jammu & Kashmir, India

Institution Name: Ladakh Nuns' Association

Dates of project: 02/07/08 – 14/08/08

The Ladakh Nuns' Association (LNA) was founded by the Venerable Dr. Palmo in order to ensure that Buddhist nuns in Ladakh could receive the education and opportunities that they were not being given in the past. Often communities in Ladakh are remote, so the LNA office in Leh provides a base from which women can attend courses in the town. These range from studies at local schools for younger nuns, to Philosophy and Medicine courses for older nuns run through the LNA itself. The LNA provides a supportive and protective environment for the women to live in, ensuring that they can continue their spiritual practice, whilst winning the recognition of their right to do so from the local community.

Another ELST volunteer and I were both teaching English to the nuns who were living at the LNA office, as well as some additional students from a local hostel. We soon realised that we were going to be teaching a very wide range of abilities; in some classes I would be teaching the alphabet, whilst in others I would be having a debate about human cloning. We divided the students up into four ability levels and each taught five to six hours a day, with individual sessions for the most advanced students. All the women seemed to benefit in some way from the classes, although the more advanced students undoubtedly made the greatest progress in terms of language skills; in a short time they could very quickly pick up a wide range of vocabulary and ideas. The beginners also improved linguistically, but with them I feel that the greatest change was in their confidence. When I first arrived many of the nuns were hesitant to speak out in class or in day-to-day situations, but by the end of our stay everyone was chatting to us at the same time over dinner and no one would walk past you in the corridor without first asking you how you were and what you were doing.

I feel privileged to have been able to live with such kind women. In the LNA I took part in the daily rhythms of their life; waking, eating, washing, cooking (occasionally and badly!), and sometimes attending their prayers. It felt like a very natural way to get to know a community and I hope that my classes gave something back to them for all the hospitality they showed to me.



ELST

Project Report 2008

Project Location: Ulaanbaator, Mongolia

Institution Name: Asral NGO

Dates of Project: 09/07/08-04/08/08

Asral NGO is a Buddhist community centre set up in 2001 by Panchen Otrul Rinpoche. The centre aims to prevent the disintegration of families, the root cause of children becoming street-children by providing direct support and assistance necessary to overcome poverty. The projects currently running include 'Made in Mongolia' felt clothing and toy production, which provides employment for women in the surrounding area, English teaching and the vegetable garden, which aims to educate and encourage Mongolians to grow their own vegetables, which is not so easy when ground temperatures can reach -30. Asral has a sister organisation in Ireland, where Rinpoche spends most of the year. This direct link to Europe is undoubtedly the reason why so many westerners are on site, and as they come they bring expertise and funding which is vital for Asral to continue service.

I turned up just in time for the holiday English teaching to begin. I was one of three teachers (Laura and Shane were affiliated with Irish centre). I taught two different age groups, 6 to 14 year olds, and 14 and above for a total of 3 hours each day. The proficiency of students was wide ranging even within the same class and so it was a challenge to keep them all amused at the same time. For many it became clear that much of what they had learned was in the form of songs and rhymes, very little of which was actually understood! I covered many topics over the four weeks, but throughout, the grammatical focus was on sentence structure, verb tenses and the use of articles! As well as this, greater emphasis was put on actually speaking rather than writing the language and the best time to make this happen was during team games, of which there were many.

The class made some progress over the short period and certainly had some fun, which I thought was just as important. I couldn't help but be amazed by the warmth, positive attitude and generosity of all the students I met. They were a joy to teach and I will miss them. I was glad to leave some knowledge behind as I left UB but it was as much of a learning experience for me as it was for the students. I can't say I made much progress with their language but I did make an effort to find their place in history and how this has made them what they are today. Mongolians are probably the toughest people on earth and it only takes watching a 30km horse race, where the participants' average about 10 years of age, to understand what extraordinary hardship these people are prepared to put themselves through. However, throughout my time in Mongolia, I was amazed by how these people, who have so little, will go out of their way to provide a service or show kindness to people they have never met. Thank you ELST for showing me the way providing the means for this to happen.