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A Classroom Revolutionary

September 29, 2014



Suneet Tuli and Veena Rawat, O.C., Ph.D. Photo: ICFC

By Penny Bertrand

How might a tablet computer for \$37.99 revolutionize the provision of education in India where over 361 million children are not enrolled in school?

On a recent blustery Sunday afternoon, guests of the India Canada Friendship Circle gathered in the Rockcliffe Park Community Hall to listen to renowned Canadian entrepreneur Suneet Tuli, founder and CEO of DataWind Ltd, speak about his affordable device, the Aakash/UbiSlate tablet.

Freshly arrived from a trip to Delhi, Suneet first reviewed the challenges of the current Indian education system where, particularly in the rural areas, the drop-out rate is extremely high and the quality of instruction often low.

He pointed out that to wait for the proper training, selection and support of teachers is to lose the opportunity to educate a full generation of the least advantaged Indian children.

Suneet spoke about his vision for an education system centred on computer-based learning, classrooms where each child is equipped with a tablet – a ‘personal learning tool’ – on which has been loaded the best available teaching videos, educational applications and an interactive capacity.

Calling this the “flipped classroom,” he envisions the teacher becoming a coach. Rather than relying on the traditional lecture, the teacher makes use of the technology to individually monitor the progress of the students and provide additional support or challenges as required.

This only works of course if the computer is affordable.

The Aakash tablet has been priced in consideration of the average low income salary in India, \$200 per month. How is such a low cost possible? It is quite doable if that is your goal. Other companies could also produce similar affordable devices, but why would they when the North American market will happily pay much higher costs resulting in greater profits.

Suneet stressed that he is not competing with the big companies for the North American market, but rather maintaining his focus on the developing world where his device is most needed. His primary objective is India, his second biggest market is currently Mexico and he is now working with NGOs in Niger and Rwanda.

The award winning tablet has been lauded as a huge breakthrough by no less than the UN Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon. Forbes magazine recognized him as a “classroom revolutionary” and he is a sought after speaker at international forums dealing with social innovation.

The company just went public and he will no doubt continue his daunting travel schedule. Yet Mr. Tuli is a serene man. As the time for his next flight neared he graciously continued to answer questions from the very interested ICFC audience.

The India Canada Friendship Circle is a non-profit organization that encourages dialogue on India in a harmonious environment. The next lecture will take place on November 16, details available at www.icfc.ws



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