

TEACHING METHOD

A hole-in-the-wall approach to learning

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Rarely does a psychology experiment translate into a successful commercial venture.

Ritu Dangwal, a psychologist with **Hole-in-the-Wall Educational Ltd** (HiWEL), is a raconteur of several—often unusual—accounts of semi-schooled children who have imbibed computer skills without any adult intervention. “All we did was carve a rectangular hole in a wall in a slum nearby, place a computer, install a camera. Then we watched,” she recounts.

Within a month, children who lived nearby had learned how to juggle around files and folders, open websites and play pre-loaded games.

“They referred to folders as *almirahs*, the cursor was a *sui* (needle), and the hourglass was *Shivji ka dumroo* (Lord Shiva’s hand-held drum),” she says. “But when tested, they could execute specific tasks like fish out specific programmes and surf the Disney website.”

Dangwal credits Sugata Mitra, chief scientist emeritus at **NIIT Ltd** and now a professor at UK’s Newcastle University, with the “discovery” of Hole-in-the-Wall. Mitra, she says, tested his ideas about unsupervised learning and computers in Delhi’s Kalkaji area in 1999. Buoyed by the results, he set up computers at Shivpuri in Madhya Pradesh and Madantusi in Uttar Pradesh.

Mitra couldn’t be immediately contacted for comment.

In 2001, **International Finance Corp.** joined hands with NIIT to formally set up HiWEL. Today, several such computer nooks, called learning stations, have sprouted in Delhi and as far away as Africa.

Geetha Devi, principal of Kalkaji government school, which

MANTHAN AWARD

Nominee Profile

Hole-in-the-Wall Education Ltd

hosted the first learning station, says students started paying more attention in class due to the initiative. “Quite surprisingly, backbenchers started moving up the rows,” she says. “They became more interactive.”

Zenaab, 18, who was among the first users of the learning stations, credits it for moulding her into a confident student. “I was eight years old when I started playing with this... I feel I’ve learned a lot and don’t feel intimidated by other students.”

Dangwal reasons that, more than computer literacy, it was the teaching methodology that made an impact. Typically 20-30 children would flock around the computer; a few would take the initiative and start fiddling with the controls. Then whatever they learned would be passed on to others who’d test their skills later, she reasons. “Basically, they learnt self-organization and sharing information—and that’s the success of this technique.”