

Gaurav and the garbage mountain

A Case Study on the Role of Disorienting Experiences to Help Shift Perspectives

Teach For India assigned its incoming fellows to work for one day in the same job as the parents of one of their students. An incoming teaching fellow in 2009, Gaurav Singh was assigned to work alongside a family whose job was sorting garbage. Today, Gaurav is founder and CEO of a successful teacher-development program called 321 Education.

Consider his reflection on his experience sorting garbage and its influence on the “lens” through which he saw his students, himself, his community and the challenges he would face as a teacher.

What they would do is take piles and bags of garbage and go through all of it and sort it into different categories (paper, metal, glass, etc) which would then be sold to different vendors... It was a very difficult, disorienting experience. The moment you enter, there's **an extremely strong stench, nauseating almost**, and then you're in a huge room that's just piled up to the ceiling with garbage. You have to just pick up a bag and start sorting, and you have no way of knowing what you're handling. I have this very vivid memory of putting my hand in the bag and not knowing what will come out—whether it'll be dry or wet. If it's wet, what might it be?

As I start doing the work, it's shocking, it's disorienting, and my thoughts gear towards, **“Why would someone do this?”** This is very difficult, demeaning work in some ways. The pay isn't great and it's back-breaking work because you have to do it for 8-10 hours a day. As I'm doing the work, a lot of my thoughts are “Why would someone do this?,” “Why don't they do something else?,” and “I'm sure there are other things to do.” These thoughts were playing in my head as I was doing the work.



After about 4-5 hours in, something sort of changes. It's hot—the heat of the Indian summer. I've been doing it for so many hours. Every part of my body is aching. There is no place to sit and relax. There's no real break. I'm trying to keep up with the people working **and then, my mind goes blank**. All those intellectual thoughts I was thinking—why and how, they all just go away, and the only thing I'm focusing on is how to finish this bag and go to the next bag, how do I finish my bags and how do I go quickly. This goes on for the next 2,3,4 hours of my shift where basically I'm not thinking of anything. All my focus just goes to finishing these bags and getting through this activity, and all thoughts and everything have gone out.

Later, when we come back, we do a reflection. After some time, **the lesson of the experience for me dawns on me**. I was able to first think of all those things—why and how, because it came from my background of having a choice in life. The privilege and choices that I had in life allowed me to question this. Just a few hours of that work, all of that went out of the window and my only thought was how to get through this bag which means there was no ability left to think of anything else, to think of options, to think of alternatives, to think of different ways of doing it because it was just so demanding, physically demanding and numbing, in a sense.

Then, it struck me that people doing this work and these kinds of work were not doing it after having compared various options or choices. It was essentially that that's where they were born and the absolute crushing reality of their lives meant that they had no chance to think, consider, explore all things that were inherent to me, which I then understood came because of my background, because of



the options and choices that I had in life, because of my mother and all of those things. But if reality had been different, **if I had been born where my community was born**, I realized that there was a very high chance that I would be doing exactly the work they were doing, and I would have no time or chance or even ability to think through other alternatives. And so, what became clear was a lot of what I was seeing in front of me—the poverty the challenges were a function of the system that

the people have found themselves in and when you're in such a strong and pervasive system, it almost seems like there's no escape, and there's no ability to escape. That's the systemic nature of the problems we're treating.

It's not just about what happens inside the classroom but these realities are really what makes our children's lives, and it influences everything from their aspirations to their beliefs to what they think they can do or can't do, what they should do or not do. And until I understand those things deeply, I'll never be able to serve my students as well as I can. That **really started my journey** of looking at some of the bigger and more systemic aspects of the problem that we were dealing with, and how they impact everything that happens around us and especially for our students.