

VOLUNTEERING WITH PRATHAM

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This semester, I was lucky enough to work with Pratham for my service learning class as part of a study abroad program in Delhi. Coming from a university in upstate New York, India was initially a bit overwhelming for me. Although eye-opening in many ways, living in this city is a huge adjustment for any outsider. My study abroad program offered me a wide range of classes, but I still felt like I was trapped in a cultural bubble with other American students. In order to really be grounded in Delhi, I felt the need to get into something outside my coursework.

My course in Service Learning put me in touch with Pratham, where I expected to spend the semester working doing photography and publicity for their outreach department. Instead, I was connected with another volunteer with whom I worked on a short film about Pratham's teachers. This meant I was able to visit



several learning centers, where I spoke to both students and teachers about their experiences with Pratham. While I greatly enjoyed learning the details of filmmaking, my visits to the field were some of the most influential experiences in Delhi for me. As I've repeatedly learned, Pratham's organizational reach throughout India is incredibly expansive, and the effects of their efforts on primary education have been hugely successful. The importance of education cannot be overemphasized, as many of the teachers we interviewed told us. Their simple and thoughtful dedication in regards to their work, and their obvious personal and caring relationships with the children, were truly inspirational. In my class, we spoke a lot about the different aspects of voluntary action and empowerment, and the problems that come with different approaches to development. The case of education is difficult, because the effects are long-term, and because the direct beneficiaries – the students – are often overshadowed by the goal of boosting enrollment numbers and passing graduation exams. Pratham's innovative approach is not necessarily more advanced or complex, but rather simple and direct: giving students the individual attention they need and assessing them by their ability. Because of this, the students I encountered were happy to be in school, and had created their own community there. I feel grateful to have worked with Pratham and hope to be able to volunteer again!

