

This article about Horizon appeared in Digital Review of Asia Pacific 2005/2006 edition
<http://www.digital-review.org/> Article was written by Nalaka Gunawardene

Taking rural Sri Lanka to new horizons

Mahavillachchiya is no different from the 14,000 other villages in Sri Lanka. Located in the Anuradhapura district 240 km away from the capital, Colombo, this hamlet is home to a few hundred people, all engaged in subsistence farming. Only a few houses have electricity, and none have a telephone. It is beyond the signal range of mobile phone networks.

Yet, Mahavillachchiya is today known far and wide in the global village. A Google search results in over 50 hits. Through the sheer efforts of a school teacher and his students, the village has placed itself on the global Internet map. More interestingly, it has produced some of the finest writers, digital photographers, web editors, web developers, graphic designers, programmers and computer technicians in Sri Lanka. The oldest is 17 years old and the youngest only 7. Together, they have developed the first website in Sri Lanka that is designed entirely by the children, located at <http://www.horizonlanka.com>.

The man behind this success is Nandasiri Wanninayake (Wanni). He was appointed to teach English in his own village in 1997 and was paid about US\$30 per month. Wanni found the students' knowledge of English extremely poor. Many could not even utter a complete sentence. He took it upon himself as a challenge to develop methods to teach his students to use English in practical situations. Within a short period, a few of his students began to excel in their studies and produced their first handwritten magazine "Horizon". It was photocopied and sent to foreign diplomatic missions in the faraway capital.

In response, the US Embassy donated a second-hand 486 computer and printer. Neither Wanni nor his students had ever seen a computer, let alone use one. But Wanni soon mastered the machine on his own and taught his students as well. Around this time, a journalist visited Mahavillachchiya and wrote an article on the efforts of this enterprising young man. Having read the article on the Web, a Sri Lankan expatriate working in Japan helped Wanni and his team to produce the first website for the "Horizon School". This was the forerunner to the comprehensive and graphics-rich website they have today.

Today, Mahavillachchiya has a small computer centre, used by the students not only to learn computer skills but also to design websites for international clients. In addition, several students have PCs at home. A scheme named Digital Butterflies was started to encourage students to save money. When they have saved Rs 5,000 (US\$50), Wanni finds a donor who will match that amount – just enough to buy a second-hand computer. The money earned from designing websites and graphics goes to a common account, which is used to develop the computer centre. Apart from being computer experts, all are now fluent in English. In July 2003, they presented their work at the annual sessions of the Computer Society of Sri Lanka.

Several reasons make this a unique experience in Sri Lanka. It is a genuine and successful attempt to bridge the digital divide and to overcome the English-language barrier. It was initiated from the village, not from the city. It has changed the lives and improved the prospects of a few dozen children. The youths at the village now have more career options than just to join the military (for men) or become garment factory workers (for women). They have marketable skills, confidence and, above all, an entrepreneurial spirit at a young age. Apart from initial equipment donations, no donor or government funds have supported this initiative – which is perhaps why it continues to thrive when donor-driven ICT projects die off after a while.

Source: Karunaratne, Sunanda (2003). 'Anagatha Sri Lankawe Digital Salakuna' (The Digital Hallmark of Future Sri Lanka).
Wijeya Pariganaka, November 2003. Wijeya Newspapers Limited, Colombo..