***Everyone belongs to many different communities and/or groups defined by (among other things) shared geography, religion, ethnicity, income, cuisine, interest, race, ideology, or intellectual heritage. Choose one of the communities to which you belong, and describe that community and your place within it. \* 300 words***

As a beginner in competitive programming, simple sort and string matching algorithms were foreign to me. I’d come up with irregular solutions to problems because of my lack of knowledge, only to be met with failure. Not wanting to be ridiculed by my peers for my simple mistakes, I became hesitant in speaking out and asking questions. This only fueled my already low self-esteem and made me question if I even belonged in the Kokocoder club.

Vale showed me that I did. As my mentor, he was creative, knowledgeable and understanding. Whenever I felt puzzled by one of the coding problems, he’d always tell me, “Just think of any solution and try it. You can always optimize it later.” Every weekend as I go through codeforces problems, he’d encourage me to voice out my solutions no matter how ridiculous, explain my thought process , and allow the environment to be conducive to debates. His philosophy slowly became more evident as I solved more problems and I was improving both mentally and technically. His outlook in approaching problems encouraged me to be more daring and think more differently.

This created a rippling effect in my school studies. I became keen in pursuing knowledge from outside sources – the internet and courses – no longer confined by just my school’s textbook. I also became more active in class discussions, asking questions, clarifications and voicing out my opinions without fear of ridicule.

My time with Vale has taught me a valuable lesson: Don’t be afraid to look stupid and ask questions. The best answers sometimes start from the most ridiculous solutions and questions.

The mindset I gained in Kokocoder club will support me to inch closer to my goal as a programmer as I continue to pursue knowledge at University of Michigan and beyond.