

**Peacebuilding through Empowerment, Computer Literacy, and Khmer Rouge Education
Battambang Province, Cambodia
Gettysburg College
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Summary

"Peace-building through Empowerment, Computer Literacy Training and Khmer Rouge Education" aims to address the issue of digital education disparities among Cambodia's rural youth, age 10 to 17, in Battambang Province, Cambodia, through one month of intensive computer literacy training and Khmer Rouge awareness research. With more than 60 students from the local community completing the training, the project has two components: 3 weeks of computer training introducing students to hardware, software, online research tools, digital communication, and file organization; and the additional 1 week focused on Khmer Rouge education using online research tools and cellular applications.

Project Description

Recovering from genocide and violence which happened just a few decades ago, Cambodia still struggles to raise itself out of poverty. About 18 percent of Cambodians live below the poverty line, which is estimated to be US\$2.70 capita per day.¹ In rural areas especially, approximately 55% of adolescents will drop out of school because of poverty.² Most adolescents, especially young girls, start working in garment factories, farming, and tourism as servers. According to UNICEF Cambodia, while poverty is a main problem facing child education, lack of proper resources, teaching standards and attending school irregularly make students fall behind, lose hope, and finally drop out altogether.³ Large numbers of underprivileged boys and girls in remote areas remain out of school, and education disparity makes children from rural areas struggle to go to and stay in school. These factors prevent youth from reaching their full potential. Growing up, my friends and I struggled to have access to basic education, and it has always been my dream to make education accessible and an inspiration to young Cambodians.

In this fast-developing world, students need not only traditional learning environments, but knowledge of digital technology. I know from personal experience that computer and other digital devices are not available in Cambodia's rural community until recently. The intensive training component of this project introduced students to computers and comprehensive digital knowledge through hands-on research (on Khmer Rouge) and collaborative work. Using digital tools to promote Khmer rouge education was a strategy to allow students to incorporate their recently acquired skills into a real-world practice while grasping on the knowledge of Cambodian history of genocide that is still impacting the way people think and act today.

My host site, Youth for Peace (YFP) Cambodia is a peacebuilding initiative that aims to promote social justice and peace through active youth participation in the community and Khmer Rouge education. I chose this partner because their mission and activities align with my objectives regarding education and peace-learning. Most importantly, YFP showed great interest and full support of my proposal. Because YFP works directly with young Cambodians in the community on many empowerment and literacy projects, it has a good reputation and relationships with the locals; thus, YFP was tremendously helpful with establishing the credibility of my project. YFP's local connections helped with my initial outreach, trust-building, publicity, and the on-going support from the children's families. The community trust and respect for the project enabled this first cohort of the training to register approximately 70 local students.

Throughout the summer, there were many instances where I needed to make a subtle change in my project implementation. First, during my initial outreach to students for a focus group conversation, the turnout was good, but students were reluctant and shy to speak about their concerns; therefore, I had to change the way I asked questions and even change the questions. Second, the number of students who registered surpassed the project goal. Not wanting to turn the students away, I made additional training sessions available. The project and the curriculum were originally designed for secondary school students; however, some middle-school students expressed a great interest in doing the program. I agreed to have them in a separate session. Because the middle school children have different learning abilities from secondary school students, I had to make some changes to lessons plans and activities for younger participants. Third, I expected that daily training schedule may not go as planned, and that was what happened. I had to be flexible and keep in mind that the learning outcomes and students' understanding of

¹ World Bank, "The World Bank in Cambodia", (2020)

² UNICEF Cambodia, "Education: for every child, quality education and life skills", (2018)

³ UNICEF Cambodia, "Education"

the material was more important than keeping to the schedule. Despite some changes of plan and constant improvised training, I was able to maintain the objectives and students' learning goals through the program. Additionally, there were other occasions where a plan related to local travel and meeting community partners needed to be changed because of weather or local partner urgent business. Though this project came with challenges, these experiences taught me to be flexible, patient, and always adaptable to unforeseen circumstances.

Besides the Project for Peace grant, I applied for US\$2,000 from SHE-CAN's Make a Change project. Both funding sources allowed additional support my summer project and the continuation of this legacy to the next generation by funding high school students' Computer Literacy projects for their local communities, particularly reaching out to younger students. This is on-going effort to support rural school children in their journey to learn about technology and reach their full potential in their educational journey.

Reflection

To me, peace is when everyone has human rights and the life they have dreamt of regardless of their race, social class, or background. Recent history of civil war and genocide has left Cambodia with many scars and struggles, and the country had to build from zero. More than 20 years after the Paris Peace Agreement, general peace is restored in Cambodia. However, society at large, especially those communities in the countryside, still face a lot of struggles -- one of which is educational disparity among young Cambodians.

Through this summer project, a group of young Cambodians were able to have access to a learning experience they have never had before (computer training), came together and had conversation about our recent history of genocide, understand the experiences of our elders and reconcile with the past through joining different events hosted by YFP, and learning more about the topic using digital tools and various resource on the internet.

In the short term, this project contributed to 60+ students' primary understanding of computers through intensive training experiences and created an awareness of Khmer Rouge history while encouraging them to have dialogue with elders about the Khmer Rouge time. Long term, the sustainability of this project is made possible by the partner organization which will continue to contribute to community learning, and students' constant exposure to digital knowledge, helping students reach their full potential, and contribute to the eradication of education disparity in Samrong Khnong community in Battambang Province. The computers purchased for the project and the creation of the curriculum will serve as primary tools in helping YFP continue the project for the next cohorts over the years to come.

While the project received support and recognition from the local community in promoting education and accessing the digital information, some underlying issue such as family dynamics, financial struggles, and traditional belief were some of the challenges I faced implementing the process. There was one instance where one of the students, despite his enthusiasm in learning, dropped out of the class after 3 days because his family wanted him to use the time to "go look after cows in the field." Financial struggle and family dynamics play an important role in students' access to education because even though the public school and this summer program are free, children are expected to help with earning money for the family, including going to the field, taking care of farm animals, or engaging in other domestic work. For example, one day while I was walking around the YFP office, a girl came up to me and asked for money. I asked her name and if she goes to school. After a few minutes, I gave her a snack I was saving for myself. A week later, when my training program started, she came to the office to register for the program with a group of her friends. I was so delighted she came. She is a bright young kid who loves to study, and the experience of her begging allowed me to understand the struggle her family faces. She was able to go to school, and I am hopeful that she will continue to high school or college, following her dream of higher education.

Though made aware of these dilemmas, there was not much I could do as these issues are embedded deep into the culture, society, and economics. I understand that to work on large-scale causes such as changing education in Cambodia, I first must start from something small and meaningful for a specific community. Seeing the curiosity and enthusiasm the children have for education and for this summer project inspires me to always have faith in humanity and commit to working together for a better community.

Personal Statement

"Spreading love and inspiration is one of the best ways to reach young people and shift their perspective from the negativities or struggle they have into the opportunity to dream of a future they want for themselves and their next generation." Theary Heang