“We may think of peace as the absence of war, that if the great powers would reduce their weapons arsenals, we could have peace. But if we look deeply into the weapons, we will see our own minds - our own prejudices, fears, and ignorance.” - Thich Nhat Hanh

The goal of this project was to create a fully functioning library to support the educational endeavors of Cambodian women college students. By providing these students with a library and teaching them the research and computer skills necessary to use it, I hope they will continue to use the library to enhance their education and to go on to contribute to peace in their country.

The project benefits current and future female students who live in the dormitories provided by the Harpswell Foundation, a project partner. The effect of this project will expand as these students graduate from university and take this knowledge and skills back to their home communities. The students will use the knowledge and skills learned in the library to develop their own future in the development of peace in Cambodia. To develop the library, the students and I bought books in English and Khmer, and a computer that we used to create a web-based catalog system, and a website. I used the library space to teach leadership, current events, and technology classes. As a culmination, we provided each student with a library tool-kit that included books, reading accessories and directions for how to use the library and catalog system.

The Cambodian students I worked with were an integral part of developing the project. Many of them were from rural farming villages and had never been to the city before coming to university. Three paid student interns worked with me to buy the books and enter data into the computer. They were crucial for the promotion of student engagement with the project. This was an opportunity for them to deepen their computer and technology skills while taking an active leadership role in their own education. They were not receiving the project, but creating it alongside me.

Despite the excellent work of the interns, an unexpected difficulty was the busy schedules of the students and my own limited time in Cambodia. While I was there, many of the students were preparing for final exams and had limited time to participate in activities related to the library. With only two months to develop the library, much of my time was spent in front of the computer cataloging books. This reduced my hands-on time with the students and limited my ability to focus on necessary unplanned additions to the project, like the current events classes and English lessons. As the project leader, I believe that it was my primary responsibility to work with the students— I wanted to include their voices, and to create a project that would build meaningful peace in their lives. I had expected to work more with the students than with the partner organization itself. I learned that in order to create a more sustainable project for the students, I would need to work with the organization that housed the project to ensure the continuation of our work. This has opened my eyes to the politics of development projects and has taught me that compromise and flexibility are key skills for projects like this.

After completing all of the goals of the initial project, I had some unused funds and created a cultural and international events fund to add to the international dimension of the project. This fund will provide students transportation and entry fees to the many cultural events in Phnom Penh. This fund will allow the students the unique opportunity to participate in such events and access international perspectives and customs to benefit their international education. By providing access to Phnom Penh’s development community, the fund will encourage useful opportunities for networking. The fund will be monitored by the Harpswell Foundation that also provided the space to house the project’s library.

The partnering organization and I worked together to ensure that the sustainability of this project and its long-term impact are in the hands of the students. Each student was trained to use and administer the library. As new students arrive, the older students will teach them librarian skills. As a self-governed
space, it is the responsibility of the students to ensure the organization of the library and to build respect for the books as educational tools. The students who access this library are using this responsibility to construct a more peaceful and just Cambodia. Their capabilities and dedication to the future of Cambodia ensure that the educational aspect of this project will continue for generations to come.

Section II

Peace is more than the absence of violence—peace is the culture of harmony that encourages the constructive interplay of difference. This library project contributes to peace by enhancing the education of Cambodian women university students. Women’s education in particular contributes to the culture of peace by working for the empowerment of women so that they can participate at all levels of society to create a more equal world.

In the short term, this project has encouraged a love of reading and critical thinking in these students. They have also learned computer skills and gained stronger English language skills. I hope that the have come to see my presence and that of the Harpswell Foundation leaders as a complex relationship rather than one-sided in which they are solely dependent recipients. I do not think that the students should see development aid as mere generosity but an opportunity for their active engagement.

Through the completion of this project, I have gained a realistic view of the world of non-profit and foundation work. I have come to understand how ideas for “development” are actualized, implemented, reworked, and carried out. I have realized the importance of truly engaging the so-called “recipients” of a project so that it is not imposed from one, or dominated from an outside person or organization.

In the long term, this project will open physical and intellectual spheres for the students to work toward the liberation of themselves from sexism, classism and colonial forms of globalization. Encouraging critical thought and education is a crucial but sensitive issue. The education the students receive through the library will continue to benefit Cambodia as they obtain the service and governmental jobs that they strive towards. They will be motivated to question the national and global politics that affect their lives, seek further knowledge, and become lifelong players in the building and rebuilding of Cambodia. I recently received the following e-mail from a group of the students with whom I worked.

“You know today your library is so famous. Many people come and sign up for the books. I’m really appreciate for your Library Project. This project bring me to the new world. The world full with peace, imagination, and many kinds of knowledge. It also remind me to remember about you. The one who give a good place for all of us. I really love this library and I will care about it and continue to show the way to us this library to all the new girls. More girls have come to our dorm. They are so smart and strong. I told about you because they want to know who prepare this library…”

The students’ message teaches me that the impact of our shared experience with this project will continue. The powerful moments of intercultural exchange have continued to bring both the students and me to new questions and thoughts that will enhance our understandings of the world. I am so grateful for this opportunity. As a result of this project, I have, more than ever, come to understand my own privilege at my college and in the world.

Quote: “In the long term, this project will open physical and intellectual spheres for these Cambodian women to work toward the liberation of themselves from sexism, classism and colonial forms of globalization giving them access to all levels of society and creating a more equal and peaceful world.” – Darah Tabrum
Empowering Women for Peace and Prosperity: Loving Libraries, Learning Peace
Cambodia
Agnes Scott College
Darah Tabrum, USA, Agnes Scott College Student

Darah Tabrum with Cambodian women college students participating in the Loving Libraries, Learning Peace Project– Phnom Penh, Summer 2010

Cambodian women college students enjoying their new library & books – Phnom Penh, Summer 2010

Photo Page for Project for Peace 2010
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