

# Psychology Teachers in Cambodia

April 01, 2008

*Journal entry, December 21st, 2006: I arrived in Phnom Penh with bruises on my arm from juggling heavy cargo all the way from Maine. Happily, every one of the three checked pieces of luggage arrived successfully, along with what I lugged through the six airports along the way. My backpack included a brand new laptop computer and as many books as I could fit inside. I carried a new printer in its box which I didn't dare leave to the baggage handlers. The printer wasn't heavy, but lifting it in and out of overhead bins, carting it along the aisles of the airplanes and through the airports — well, I looked like a battered victim of travel upon arrival! That was my entrance...my return to Cambodia. But it was with great joy that I arrived at the Psychology Department at the Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP) to bring these gifts. The only remaining question would be whether the separate shipment of books would arrive before I left so that I would be able to pay the customs "fees" that would likely be associated with the gift and not leave heavy fees for my Cambodian colleagues.*

My arrival at RUPP was made possible by an APS Teaching Fund grant. The grant allowed me to travel to Phnom Penh to bring teaching materials and offer teacher training between December 19, 2006, and January 9, 2007, for the only psychology department in Cambodia. By carrying as much as I could with me and shipping some more, I was able to bring nearly one-thousand dollars' worth of new psychology books as well as the computer, printer and other educational supplies. The new computer became the department's third computer to be shared by all 13 faculty members and their students. I even made sure to purchase lots of printer paper and ink cartridges to support these gifts, for these are hard to afford with a typical Cambodian professor's salary, around \$50 per month. Limited funds are only one challenge here, for most of the teachers in the department also have limited teaching experience and some have difficulty navigating materials in English. To put it simply, they are hungry to improve their understanding of the material they are trying to teach.

I delivered teaching workshops for the faculty — a welcome opportunity indeed. I taught a two-day intensive workshop on developmental psychology, attended by both teachers and upper-level undergraduate students. We covered many topics, including research methods in developmental psychology, prenatal development, infancy, theories of attachment and Erikson's psychosocial theory of development. I also offered a workshop on stress, health psychology and positive psychology to an upper-level class and I was able to follow up on some research collaborations with colleagues in the department (Lahar, 2004). As a Fulbright Senior Specialist in 2006, I facilitated the department in its first stab at (or even exposure to) strategic planning. Strategic planning is a new concept for Cambodian culture. Evaluating programs in any way is new — so the idea of students evaluating their professors or classes is a true challenge for Cambodian higher education — it just hasn't been done. Yet we were able to set clear departmental goals, and they were preparing for their first student evaluations during my visit. All of this was combined with a beautiful Christmas day on the beach, and the chance to work with a nongovernmental organization just getting off the ground that assists poor children who can not afford to go to school. And in the end, the day before I departed, that shipment of texts arrived and I was able to deliver them to the department "fee" free. With thanks to APS.

I returned to RUPP again last summer to work with my psychology colleagues. The agenda included a few more workshops, some more strategic planning, and a lot of curricular planning for a Master's degree program. They asked specifically for workshops on teaching introductory psychology. Many of the topics in introductory texts were not familiar topics for the teachers in the department and they wanted to learn about the topics that they should teach. We worked hard, as they always do at the university in Cambodia.

Overall, the last few years have proven fruitful for the department. The Cambodian Ministry of Education recently approved plans for the first Master's degree in Psychology to be offered in the country, a number of international scholars visited the department to work on curriculum and training, and the head of the department was able to visit the USA for the first time.

With the generous support from a group of American psychologists, Ms. Nhong Hema, the head of the psychology department at RUPP, traveled to the USA in August 2007, attended the APA convention, and visited a number of institutions and clinics on both coasts of the USA. While on the East coast, Hema was able to meet with researchers and clinicians in the Boston area. My colleagues at the Memory and Cognition lab at Brandeis University hosted one of these visits. They learned about the state of psychological training and research in Cambodia and they also shared with Hema current research from their lab. They followed up her visit with a donation of some books and a laptop computer a few months later. When that laptop arrived at the department, this upped the total number of working computers to five. Thus, there are five computers shared by the thirteen faculty members and over 200 undergraduates. The idea of a computer lab to teach statistics is a dream that is still far away. At present, one computer has Internet access in the department thanks to donations from the Mary Knoll organization. Yes, that computer is in high demand!

It is easy to see how support of various types can aid the productivity and teaching in Cambodia where the infrastructure was devastated only 30 years ago. Unfortunately, along with the buildings, books and materials that were destroyed by the Khmer Rouge, most educated people in Cambodia at that time either fled or were killed. Every department at the university lacks teachers with advanced degrees. The goal of increasing teaching and research capacity is found in every corner of higher education in Cambodia.

Psychologists are especially needed in this country recovering from the trauma of war and genocide and experiencing high rates of associated mental health issues. Cambodia has one of Asia's poorest economies with an alarming rates of prostitution, sex trafficking and domestic violence; perhaps the highest HIV infection rate in Southeast Asia; an ever growing drug problem; and rampant domestic violence.

It takes a special person to want to be a teacher in Cambodia. Teachers in Cambodia make a salary of about 40 or 50 dollars a month, even at the largest university in the country. Despite this poor pay, there are many eager students who want to give back to their country and develop the skills to teach. The department of psychology at RUPP has both current faculty members and many students who are hungry to learn more, and to be able to further psychology in the country. Right now, with a new Master's program ready to go, the clear need is for teachers who are able to teach graduate level courses in psychology. At present, no teachers in the department hold a PhD degree, and many do not have a Master's degree in the field. In fact, some of the teachers in the department will be students in the new

graduate program. But this problem remains: who will teach it?

It is this disconnect between the extreme desire to learn by so many and the limited options that still stands out today in Cambodia. Many of us want to help, but it will take some truly dedicated individuals who have the time to provide quality training in Cambodia. The hunt is on for graduate level instructors who want to teach some eager students in Phnom Penh.

This note from Hema Nhong in a recent email message speaks clearly (March, 2008):

“How long you will stay in Cambodia? I think the longer the better for us. We have a lot of excellent students who are eager to learn and need help.”

Another way to increase expertise is to send Cambodian students to graduate programs abroad. Many students from the department of psychology would flourish in graduate programs outside of Cambodia but it is nearly impossible for a Cambodian student to find the funding to manage studying abroad. Few institutions recognize a university degree from Cambodia. Furthermore, the student must have good command of a second language. In essence, a number of social and economic pressures make study abroad difficult — and it will take time for this to change.

This summer I will return to RUPP and support them in a review and update of their strategic plan. I will bring my backpack full of books, and along with others, over time, watch as the teachers study in graduate programs, build their teaching skills, and continue to give back to their country every day.

If you would like to visit the Department of Psychology at the Royal University of Phnom Penh, please contact Cindy Lahar ([clahar@yccc.edu](mailto:clahar@yccc.edu)) or Nhong Hema at ([longkhy@online.com](mailto:longkhy@online.com)). ?

## **References**

Lahar, C.J. (2004, December). Building research capacity: Volunteerism may be key to post-war recovery in Cambodia. *APS Observer*, 17(12), 16-19.