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Challenging Assumptions
Looking In, Looking Out

The teaching tourist

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The last thing many teachers think they want to do on vacation is teach. Surprisingly, however, volunteer teaching in underdeveloped countries can be a very unusual and refreshing holiday experience, something that can make any vacation richer and more satisfying. This paper shows how short-term volunteer teaching can benefit not only the learner but also the teacher.

教師の中で、自分の休暇中に教育に係る活動をしたいと思っている人は多くないでしょう。しかし意外にも、休暇中に開発途上国でボランティア教育活動に携わるによりいつもとは違う新鮮な体験が得られ、また休暇自体が興味深く満足感のあるものとなります。本論文では、学習者だけでなく教師にとっての短期ボランティア教育活動における利点について述べます。

Planning a week-long trip to Cambodia, I spent some time researching the popular sightseeing destinations: Angkor Wat, of course; the Killing Fields; the Royal Palace; the Phnom Penh riverside. I checked websites with hotel reviews and found what looked like a great place in the capital directly behind the Silver Pagoda. I marked promising restaurants and unusual local dishes (fried tarantulas!) in my guidebook. Eventually I was confident that I'd discovered everything worth doing or eating and was ready to go.

Then my wife threw a monkey wrench in the works. She said, "Why don't we do some volunteer teaching for a couple days?"

I was not enthused. I work full-time at a large university, teaching the standard array of Reading, Writing, and Communication classes. I've been doing this sort of thing for twelve years, more or less, and while I like teaching, like it a lot even, I had no desire to do it on vacation. "Let's not," I said.

"I found an interesting organization on the Internet, though." An NGO, it was run by a Japanese non-profit and offered various types of classes to young people in Phnom Penh. She could teach Japanese, and I could teach English. "It sounds like they really need people," she said.

This is the part of the story where the narrator tells you about his change of heart. I didn't have one. Yes, I knew how poor Cambodia was. Yes, I knew what a noble thing volunteering was. Small (1999) writes about how good foreigners have it in Japan and how "it's natural to want to give something in return" (14). To be honest, this didn't really occur to me. I just wanted to take a trip.

I managed to talk my wife out of the volunteering idea. We went to Cambodia, the weather was perfect, and we had a great time. The only problem we had, if you could call it that, was that we somehow managed to do everything we wanted to do much faster than I anticipated. The Cambodian people were friendly and helpful, it was easy to get around, and we had none of the usual travel delays. As a result, we ended up with a free day on our schedule, which gave my wife another opportunity.

"Why don't we stop by that NGO? Remember, that one I was telling you about?"

I remembered. I no longer had any other plans, which meant I no longer had any good excuses. I reluctantly agreed. My wife called (it's always good to call first), and we were told to drop by anytime.

The NGO was not near anything touristy in Phnom Penh. It was an unassuming complex of two buildings across from each other on a side street south of the Royal University. There were classes in progress when we arrived in the late morning; we saw thirty or so students crowded into a dark room near the entrance, listening intently to a Cambodian Japanese instructor. We walked up an even darker flight of stairs to the main office. The staff was welcoming but in a rush—there were classes starting in ten minutes. Could we help out with those?

There were short forms to fill out, and we were both asked to make a small contribution: four dollars each. There were several other native Japanese volunteers but no native English-speaking ones; the way I understood it, they'd never had a native English-speaking volunteer before. I met the teacher for the 11:30 class: a middle-aged Cambodian man. He had an ancient, well-used copy of *New Headway*, which was the class textbook. He showed me the chapter the students were studying that week and asked me to read the tapescript to start things off. There was no time to prepare; we were already late.

I hadn't wanted to teach on my vacation because that's what I do for a living, but I had never taught a class like this. There were eighteen students in a small room with open windows; traffic noise made it difficult for me to hear the students in the back. Many of them did not have books or paper for notes; some of them did not even have pencils. I had a pen and a whiteboard but no eraser; one of the students gave me a tissue to clean up my scribbles. It dawned on me that the regular teacher never used the whiteboard; the pens were too expensive. I'd been given one because the staff knew I'd expect it; this was partly what my four-dollar contribution was being used for, to help me, not the students. (I had also been given a bottle of water, but the Cambodian teacher had not.)

We spent half of the class on the textbook. It was much too hard for the students, who were mostly false-beginners, and the conversation for the day was laughably inappropriate for Cambodia, concerning a British woman and a Swedish woman discussing insulation and dark winter nights. Despite this, every student in the room was attentive, many of them

moving their lips and shadowing me as I spoke. After this part of the lesson was over, they asked me questions. I was expecting “Are you married?” or “Do you have a family?” The first question I got was, “How big is the economy of the United States?” Apparently, I was the one with things to learn.

Immediately after this class was over, another one began in another classroom upstairs, on the roof. There were thirty-one students in this group, and they were a step-up, level-wise, from the previous one. We spent some time on stative verbs, then had a discussion on life in Phnom Penh. They wanted to know my impressions of the city. What did I think of the people? What did I think of the traffic? When I found out they were all from the provinces, I asked them the same questions. One student, nineteen years old, spoke at length about corruption in Phnom Penh and unsavory police practices. Other students nodded and added comments. It was fascinating, and before I knew it, the class was finished.

I had two more classes that day, a grammar class and a newspaper discussion class. There were forty students in the former and more than sixty in the latter; word had spread that a native-speaking teacher was present. I had to shout to make myself heard. By now, however, I was energized. Even before the argument about Iraq and the discussion about Vietnam and its influence in Cambodia, I knew I was onto something special.

This is the part of the story where the narrator explains how he quit his job and decided to volunteer full time. This didn’t happen. I realized, however, that in my previous travels, I’d never really interacted with the people of the country I was visiting. I’d seen famous places, and I’d eaten

local food, but I’d hardly ever *talked* to anyone. Now those trips seemed incomplete and superficial. I’d learned names this time. I’d heard stories. I learned more interesting things about Cambodia in four hours at this NGO than I’d learned in a week as a regular tourist. This was the students’ gift to me; helping them make progress toward their language learning goals was my gift to them. It was an unequal exchange; I got the better end of the deal.

The NGO I visited is hardly unique. There are schools and organizations throughout the world (see the list below for places to start) that need volunteer teachers. You don’t have to dedicate a year of your life to them (though you could if you wanted to); volunteer for a day or week. Work a little teaching into your next planned vacation. Not because there are poor people out there who need your skills. Not because volunteering is a good and noble thing, either. I knew about those arguments before I went to Cambodia. You knew about them before you started reading this article. Sadly, they seldom make any difference.

This is the part of the story where the narrator explains that he knew all about giving. What he didn’t know was what he could get.

This *did* happen.

Volunteering can help *you*. Work a little teaching into your next planned vacation. It might result in the best trip you’ve ever had.

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References

Small, J. (1999). "English for charity: teaching for humanitarian purposes." *Global Issues in Education Newsletter* 36: 14-15. [Online] Available: <jalt.org/global/newsletter/36charity.htm>

Appendix

*Volunteering websites**

Cambodia NGO: <www.cambodia.npo-jp.net/en/index.html> (Contact in Japanese advised.)

C.A.N.H.E.L.P Thailand: <canhelpthailand.blogspot.com>
<www.canhelp.npo-jp.net>

Global Volunteer Network: <www.volunteer.org.nz>

Idealist.org: <www.idealist.org>

Teachers Helping Teachers: <http://www.geocities.com/yamataro670/tht>

Volunteer Educational Network: <vensite.org>

*All websites verified as active as of March 30, 2008. All organizations NOT verified as currently accepting volunteers or right for you. Please do your own research before proceeding!