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## Teaching and Learning in Cambodia A Story of Transformation

By Kwo-Zong Wang, Volunteer  
Cambodia Team

The sun is setting in Angkley Village.

"You should ask more questions," he says; "you must have more." I am lying in a hammock. A soft breeze cools the small of my back, and I admire the flow of rainwater collecting in a giant clay vase. I realize I do not have any more questions.

My interpreter is Robin, a city kid who spent his early years in a rural settlement similar to Angkley Village. Robin has his foot in two worlds: Phnom Penh, the chaotic, bustling, yet charming-in-its-own-way capital of Cambodia, and the quiet rural villages that have remained mostly unchanged for generations. The contrast could not be more severe, yet Robin considers himself the most qualified individual to guide the uninitiated foreign English teacher. He proactively and patiently explains everything from the color of the dirt to the socioeconomic conditions of Cambodia.

Robin's expositions along with my own observations have crowded out the questions for now; it's a lot to take in. Nothing in Cambodia seems overly surprising. In the months prior to arriving, I had done an academic study of the country. But there is a clear dichotomy between learned knowledge and real-life experience. It was as if my mind believed something my soul did not understand.

The household lamp, powered by a car battery, turns off, ushering in the night.

We rise at first light.

Over a simple breakfast of rice and fried egg, Robin and I speak to our generous host, Mr. Nip, a man I have come to respect immensely. Some time ago he took the initiative to persuade his fellow villagers, using their hands and simple tools, to construct the first-ever dirt road into Chouk City. He also funded the construction of a local community center by taking on a two-thousand-dollar loan, which at the time he was not sure he could repay. Mr. Nip also teaches at



the community center. He does all this with a smile and a soft, polite laugh. He is universally respected and liked.

As Robin and I walk to the community center, with fresh coconuts in hand since the water is unclean, Robin says to me, gravely, "Mr. Nip teaches them because if he doesn't, no one will. The children, they love to learn." This morning, the fields are flooded by sheets of rain that continues to fall. The winding networks of hand-built dirt paths are now no more than rivers of wet clay. And yet, the children, soaked to the bone, stream in; some of them have walked five kilometers for my lessons.

For various reasons, the class sizes fluctuate, but between the morning and afternoon sessions, we routinely see thirty to sixty students, ages five to fourteen. Teaching English to such a large group of children of varied ages and experiences is impressively difficult. But the kids love to learn, and our tasks are never compounded by disciplinary issues. Regardless of age, the children sit cross-legged on the hard floor, notebooks and pencils in hand. Robin whispers into my ear, "Where there is too much education, there is not enough motivation. Where there is not enough education, there is too much motivation."

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I respond, “When did you become a philosopher?” We laugh, but I know he is right.

The children love our presence in the village—even more so since we have been helping with the road construction. Consequently, they come by the house bearing gifts of unwashed fruits and vegetables, foods that my online training cautioned me against eating. I marvel at their handiness—climbing coconut trees, hacking objects with machetes, tying knots, and walking miles in the dark. These are tasks that I would never expect from eight-year-olds.

They are like little supermen and superwomen, but it’s also sad to think that without education and progress, they will be conducting the same tasks when they are forty.

A recent college graduate myself, I have long realized that the importance of knowledge and technical ability pales in comparison to one’s willingness to learn and the realization of one’s own potential. Suddenly I am so happy that these children are the most motivated learners I have had the privilege of meeting.

It’s my last day in Angkley Village. Mr. Nip and a friend take us on a tour of the

public schools. We ride on the backs of small, four-stroke Honda motorcycles. True to its reputation, the rainy season has unleashed six hours of nonstop downpour, and our vehicles slide and zigzag comically along the flooded dirt roads. The grimy, old schools we visit are the products of community leaders working in conjunction with NGOs, the central government seemingly absent.

Our visit to a secondary school leaves an impression on me. It feels stifling, and the students’ faces are filled with boredom, changing quickly to suspicion as they see a foreigner walking through the area. Where have their motivation and energy gone? No doubt these young adults once approached learning with the zeal and excitement I have seen in my own students. Through the years, something must have killed those admirable traits.

I will never forget the principal we meet before leaving. With a lazy wave of his hand, he beckons our group into his office. The man has a bureaucratic, self-important air about him. Throughout the



Robin teaching in the evening

ten-minute conversation he completely ignores Mr. Nip. When we leave, I ask Robin for clarification. He says, “You are from America. I am from the city. Mr. Nip is from the village and the poor. This is how it happens here.”

As we finish our visit, my feelings become very conflicted. I feel guilty for leaving, because teaching

the children has recharged my motivation to stay longer. But my dear friend with whom I have traveled to Cambodia has fallen ill and is in Phnom Penh. My concern for her is a major reason for my desire to depart. And then sometimes I think I want to leave Cambodia, with all of its beautiful people and ugly issues, behind.

To say that my time in Cambodia was transformative would cheapen the entire experience, invoking oft-used and oft-abused tourist lingo. Rather, I would prefer to say, “I hope they learned as much from me as I did from them.”

## God’s Work in Our Lives A Story of Transformation

By Stephen Tsang, Volunteer Cambodia Team

Since my retirement, I have had the desire to share the knowledge and experiences that God has given me. However, I was not certain whether they would be useful in international development work.



When God gave me my first assignment overseas to lead a study on savings groups in Cambodia, I stepped forward with faith that He would use me to fulfill His will. As part of this study experience, I traveled to many rural communities within Cambodia, and I was touched by the work ethic of the people, their positive and joyful attitude toward life, and their approach to strive onward despite their economic conditions.

The results and recommendations of my study have been shared with World Renew Cambodia staff, their local partners, and the wider community of World Renew around the world. Many of the recommendations are being implemented. Throughout this assignment, I have witnessed how God has led me to make a small contribution to help World Renew achieve its broader objectives. I also realize that God will use anyone’s skills to further His work if a person is willing to serve Him in whatever capacity He chooses.

## Prayers for Cambodia

- We give thanks for a joyful and refreshing staff family retreat in Kep. Seventy-one staff members with their families enjoyed three days of fun, nature, and fellowship at Kep beach, Kep National Park, and a pepper farm.
- We give thanks for rewarding planning meetings held in July. Partners developed detailed plans and budgets for next year. World Renew staff celebrated their progress on strategic and operational plans and made plans for the following year.
- Pray that our work to promote immersion trips will bear fruit. Pray that within the coming year at least two groups from North America will be transformed through their visit to Cambodia and through their experience of World Renew’s work in poor rural Cambodian villages.
- Pray for the connections Kathleen will be making as she spends the month of September sharing about our work with churches, friends, and other supporters in North America. Pray that the visits will build stronger bonds between Cambodia and North America.
- Pray for wisdom and discernment as we seek to tailor our work with churches to the capacities of our individual church partners.
- Pray that we may find the right health experts as we recruit to improve our work in water, sanitation, and nutrition.