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## The Individual as Context

The path that led me to my work in Cambodia started in my Grade 11 English course. My teacher, Evelyn Schoahs, was one of those teachers that come along once in a lifetime—creative, passionate, and inspirational. And even now, after 18 years as an English teacher myself, she is still my gold standard for teaching excellence. In her lessons, English was not just writing essays, but using the language to learn and experience the world, and this resulted in me leaving my small Canadian hometown to pursue an undergraduate degree in international affairs and history at the American University of Paris, in France. Instead of pursuing graduate studies in Paris, I headed off for Japan to teach English for a year, where I ended up working at a cram school helping Japanese high school students prepare for their university entrance exams in Fuji, Shizuoka, where Mt. Fuji towers over the industrial city. Intrigued with language and culture, I decided to remain in Japan and earned my first graduate degree in Japanese language and society, which concentrated on Japan’s use of its Overseas Development Assistance in Southeast Asia. I then went on to complete my second graduate degree in applied linguistics with a TESOL specialization from the University of New England in 2013.

As with many language teachers in Japan, I had to work my way through the ranks, from teaching at private language schools, in the corporate world, and then finally at university. It was during my transition from the corporate world to the university system where I met my Japanese husband and settled down in Kawasaki, Kanagawa, just a 20-minute train ride from downtown Tokyo. For the past 10 years, I have taught English for academic purposes and intercultural communication courses at universities in Yokohama and Tokyo.

My first time in Siem Reap, Cambodia, came about as a request from my younger sister to make a road trip to see Angkor Wat while she was visiting me in Japan during my university winter break in February 2007. Though Angkor Wat was the most magnificent temple I had ever visited in my world travels, the most profound experience was time spent with the “temple kids”—children who live

in the surrounding villages and spend their free time playing around the ancient ruins. We spent much of our sightseeing time giving “English lessons”; we would start out with chatting to just one child, and then others would join in with an endless amount of questions about grammar and life outside of Cambodia. I had never come across “students” who had such curiosity and motivation about their studies.

As soon as I returned to Japan, I started looking for volunteer organizations as a way to get back to Cambodia during my university’s summer break. I returned to Siem Reap in August 2007 for a 1-month placement through a UK organization that sent me to a nongovernmental organization (NGO)—a non-profit entity independent of the government and not in the private sector—that provided English lessons to disadvantaged children in Trapeang Sess, a small village on the outskirts of Siem Reap. During my placement, I taught both English and Japanese language lessons in a small shack with palm-thatched walls and dirt floors. For most classes, there were usually 40 students of varying ages squeezed along planks of wood nailed together as rows of “desks.” The single ceiling fan did little to abate the 35°C afternoon heat, and the single florescent light fixture provided almost no lighting for evening lessons. The only resources available for teaching were a run-down whiteboard and a few whiteboard markers. Some of the students had the school’s designated textbook, a copied out-of-date edition of *British Headway*, but many of them had to share with other students. On my last day during my Japanese lesson, I noticed one of the Cambodian teachers peering through the classroom’s glassless window. He was intrigued and a little bewildered that a tall, blonde woman was teaching Japanese. Since I did not have a ride back into town that day, he offered to give me a ride on the back of his motorbike. As thanks, I invited him to dinner, and from that night onward, Toun Shally became the brother I never had, and then later the cofounder and managing director of our own NGO school in his village. He fondly calls me “sis” and I use “Shal” with him. At school, however, we address each other as “Teacher Nicole” and “Teacher Shally” in line with Cambodian practices.

From 2008 to 2009, I returned to the same NGO during my university breaks to run teacher training programs for the school’s six teachers. I had realized that during my first volunteer placement I did not contribute to the long-term benefit of the school. I did teach creative and localized lessons with minimal resources, but I did not pass on how to do this to the Cambodian teaching staff. My experience was more about me than the needs of the organization—a common short-sightedness among volunteers in developing countries (Takeda, 2012). Nevertheless, the school’s director and teaching staff were initially enthusiastic about the first training program in August 2008, but training sessions were randomly cancelled and a few of the teachers did not attend team teaching sessions or did not show up for their teaching evaluations and feedback sessions. When I returned for the second teacher training program in February 2009, only two of the teachers could use the communicative approach in their lessons; the

others had reverted back to teaching through grammar translation. I expressed my frustration to Toun, who had participated in the training programs. He had similar sentiments about the lack of professionalism at the school. By the end of March 2009, we decided to start our own language school together and spent the remaining part of the year setting up the school in accordance with Cambodia's NGO laws and carrying out needs assessment research to develop a localized English as a foreign language curriculum. Our school, the Bayon English Academy, was officially recognized as an NGO in January 2010 and then opened its doors 7 months later for its first day of classes on September 6.

Every day at the school is unpredictable. There are days that are incredibly frustrating in which making a "good" decision is not an option and choosing the least harmful "bad" decision is my only option. There are also days that can bring me sheer heartache because there is no solution to a problem, so I have to accept the situation and just hope for the best. And finally, there are days where there is so much to do, but I cannot even manage to cross one single task off my list. Needless to say, patience, ingenuity, and a bit of luck are essential to get through each day in Cambodia. However, I do have moments when I step back from the chaos and notice the effect my life has had on my Cambodian "children" and the even bigger effect they have had on me. These are my moments of hope when I believe my students are on their way to building a better life for themselves. To say the least, my sister's road trip started me on a journey that has made me realize all teachers have the potential to create learning that can change the lives of their students, their families, and their communities for the better.