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Developing the Genocide Education Project in Cambodia

How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world.

Anne Frank

After thirty years of inadequate education in Cambodia about the genocide that took place from 1975-1979, the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam), in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sports, succeeded in establishing a national curriculum to incorporate this critical, dark period of history into all Cambodian public schools through teaching historian Kamboly Dy's textbook, *A History of Democratic Kampuchea 1975-1979* to grades nine through twelve (Chea 2). Beyond the classroom, DC-Cam holds public educational forums where students, villagers, and teachers receive copies of the book, participate in a lesson, listen to survivors tell their stories and ask questions about the time period. The textbook and the forum are incredible innovations to genocide education in Cambodia, and there is an ongoing mission by DC-Cam and the Ministry of Education to continuously improve this field (DC-Cam 1). The textbook, although immensely informative, is the first of its kind and could be developed even more if a different selection of images and captions were used throughout the book, while the public education forum could have a greater effect on the listeners—and a more beneficial experience for the speakers (the victims)—if it were structured in a manner more sensitive to the needs of both the speakers and the listeners.

Teaching this period of history confronts unique challenges. The educational material for teaching the Cambodian genocide must reach a complex balance: the perpetrators cannot be

portrayed as monsters because it is vital that students understand that ordinary people are capable of levels of violence. As James Waller said in his article, “Perpetrators of Genocide,” “ultimately, being aware of our own capacity for evil—and the evolutionary, individual, social and situational constraints that foster it—is the best safeguard we can have against future genocide” (22). Therefore, learning how to combat the evil instead of denying, or ignoring its existence will benefit younger generations. Furthermore, it is imperative that students do not begin to vilify their parents or their friends’ parents who were members of the Khmer Rouge because this could lead to more conflicts within communities. On June 7 in the Kandal province, USC students interviewed Say Nam, a recently widowed woman who was a KR soldier and married to a high-ranking KR soldier who worked in Tuol Sleng. She expressed that once the community learned about her husband’s past, they would tell him that “has blood on his hands” and he stopped going to community gatherings. She expressed that she does not want her children to learn about the genocide and instead only wants them to learn skills to make them good workers. This interview exemplified the reason that genocide education needs to be careful in how the material is presented.

Nevertheless, teachings that censor the truth, even in an effort to protect the listeners, prevent the students from knowing about their history and also serve as an injustice to the victims; thus, this is not the best way to teach the material either. In his journal article, “The Teaching of the Holocaust Dilemmas and Considerations,” C. Schatzker addresses this very difficulty: “The problem is how to present the truth without causing dangerous mental consequences—how to impress without traumatizing” (222). Genocide education materials must provide a balance that teaches the whole truth in an undamaging manner.

The balance can best be attained after examining different ways of teaching. In the 1980s, propaganda texts inserted by the Vietnamese installed communist government did not adhere to

this balance. Instead, the texts portrayed the Khmer Rouge “with such graphic ferocity that some children grew up thinking they were actual monsters” (Kinetz 3). By not coinciding with Waller’s assertion that it is necessary to “understand the ordinariness of extraordinary evil” (22), the propaganda texts of the 1980s were used until 1991 and slowed down any reconciliation within the country that was still suffering in a civil war (Kinetz 3). In a country where members of the perpetrating side are now government officials, members of the community, and ordinary fathers of the younger generations, these people cannot be historically documented as non-humans.

Kevin Matthews of UCLA Today relays some of the struggles genocide education in Cambodia as expressed by Youk Chhang, the director of DC-Cam:

“Chhang estimates that between 20-30 percent of the young students sitting in classrooms are children of the Khmer Rouge. ‘So now you have the classroom [where there are] children on both sides, and now you have the teachers on both sides. ... How would you teach this thing?’” (1).

In an informal interview USC students had with Kamboly Dy on June 4, 2011, the author of the textbook explained that, in order to “prevent dissemination of anger, hatred, among children,” teachers must participate in training sessions so that they are able to formally teach the material. Furthermore, according to a New York Times article from 2007, Kamboly Dy “had to carefully select words to explain certain past events” (Munthit 1) in order to prevent political uproars. Despite Dy’s efforts, Sorn Samnang, president of the government-run Royal Academy still scrutinized the book: “Although it contained useful information, he said the book could affect the many still living people involved with the Khmer Rouge mentioned in the work” (Munthit 1). Evidently, the younger generations must be educated in a way that teaches them the truth about the past while furthering reconciliation efforts, instead of in a way that vilifies a large

percent of the country's population, and the government, thus creating more problems for the future. Therefore, Khamboly Dy—in his interview with the USC students—said that he chose pictures in his book that would “humanize the Khmer Rouge”:

Usually they [Cambodian children] refer to the Khmer Rouge as monster or devil, but they are human beings who inflicted suffering on their own people, its not devils, its not monsters, so I want to humanize the Khmer Rouge by not putting too many cruel photos in the textbooks, and also the text describes the crimes committed by the Khmer Rouge already, so the photo can speak different stories. And also, this text is for students, and I don't want them to be surprised by the bloody photos, throat cutting, for example, that is too cruel for them to be included in the textbooks.

While Khamboly Dy's efforts to humanize the Khmer Rouge are vital to genocide education, there is not a fair balance in the textbook of the humanized pictures of the KR, and those depicting the atrocities. He argues that the pictures speak different stories, but pictures should supplement the stories they explain as evidence of the text. The pictures of the KR acting as ordinary people should be in chapters or in sections that detail that the KR were in fact, ordinary people. In a book entitled, *Teaching and Learning: Lessons From Psychology*, Richard Fox argues that “pupils also need to be able to move between different representations of the same concepts” (288)—thus, pictures that show one story alongside a passage that details another point is not as productive as Dy intends. While the atrocities are detailed explicitly throughout the chapters, the students learning about an unbelievable period in this history still need as many mediums as possible to make it more believable. In her book entitled *On Photography*, Susan Sontag stresses the importance of pictures: “Photographs furnish evidence. Something we hear about, but doubt, seems proved when we're shown a photograph of it” (Sontag 5). When

teaching a topic as inconceivable as a genocide, students need access to as much evidence as they can obtain to begin to believe the gravity of it

Since the atrocities are difficult to believe, the textbooks need to provide adequate pictures to aid in the students' learning. In Y.K. Singh's *Teaching of Social Studies*, she details the "qualities of a good picture" which include them being "accurate and truthful" with captions that "ensure their effectiveness" (265). While the actual text in *A History of Democratic Kampuchea 1975-1979* is explicitly honest when explaining the horrid time period in Cambodia from 1975-1979, the pictures that should support this are not as straightforward.

The textbook begins with the picture on the right. The caption on this picture reads, "A Khmer Rouge cadre carrying fruits in his *krama* (a traditional checkered scarf that can be used for various purposes)." While the *krama* can be used as a scarf, hat, etc., during the Khmer Rouge times, the *kramas* of the KR served as symbols of power (Locard 87). According to an interview USC students had in Phnom Penh with Chum Mey, a survivor of S-21, the *kramas* of the prisoners, on the other hand, were used to blindfold, handcuff, and bind them together in security prisons. The caption that says the scarf was used for "various purposes" does not teach the whole story, and it does not do justice to the victims who were imprisoned.



A Khmer Rouge cadre carrying fruits in his *krama*
(a traditional checkered scarf that can be used for various purposes).
(Documentation Center of Cambodia Archives)

Similarly, the picture on the right from the Teacher's Guidebook (28) for teaching the textbook does not have a caption that exactly depicts what is happening. The caption reads, "During the evacuation of Phnom Penh, a woman and her children set on the road with their belongings." In the picture, there are soldiers in the background holding guns, while the look of the woman and her child express immense



During the evacuation of Phnom Penh, a woman and her children set out on the road with their belongings. Photo by Roland Neveu. Source: *The Fall of Phnom Penh*: 17 April 1975.

sadness and fright. While the chapter details the terrible forced evacuations, the caption of this picture implies a willingness to leave, and a lack of intensity in the situation. It is important that the captions and the pictures have equal weight in explaining the text. According to *Photojournalism: the Professionals' Approach, Volume 1*, Jean Kerrick, a professor of journalism, "conducted research to determine the influence of captions on readers' interpretations of pictures. Captions, she found, can at least modify and sometimes change the meaning of a picture [...] a caption can change the viewer's interpretation of the same picture from one extreme to another" (220). Therefore, while the text explicitly details the evacuations, and while the picture seems to show the tragedy in the relocations, the caption can completely affect the way a reader interprets the scene and thus should be changed to improve the teaching of the subject.

In addition to changing captions to fit the actions the pictures illustrate, different pictures should be included in *A History of Democratic Kampuchea 1975-1979* that bring life to the victims. In the same way that Khamboly Dy described his wishes to use pictures to humanize the perpetrators, the victims need to be humanized as well. Although not characterized as monsters like the KR, descriptions of the victims' lives without pictures makes it seem as though they are

just another number in the overall death count, another victim of torture, another skeleton. While many unique, personal accounts are told in the textbook, pictures of different people should be shown as well. In the interview, Dy mentioned that he did not want to include cruel, bloody photos of victims in fear of traumatizing the students. If this is the case, there are many other pictures that will portray the truth without traumatizing.

The picture on the right is shown many times in the Tuol Sleng museum. It does not traumatize a viewer, but instead never leaves his or her memory. The sleeping baby captures the innocence of those who were killed in the prisons. Pictures of the victims do not have to be violent, but they should not be omitted from the history textbooks altogether. In the Tuol Sleng chapter, there is not one picture of anything related to a victim of Tuol Sleng. All of the pictures in this chapter are of Khmer Rouge members



sitting around, even smiling, which actually dehumanizes them further in the context of the chapter. Furthermore, not every student has the opportunity to go to the Tuol Sleng Museum and see weapons used and the rooms where people were tortured. For this reason, a picture of the room or of the devices used could help the students imagine what happened. As Oostendorp concludes in his study *The Construction of Mental Representations during Reading*, “illustrations supplementing a text can promote the memorization of the content of the text and its comprehension” (179). Thus, while there should be pictures that humanize the Khmer Rouge and an explanation about the perpetrators as ordinary people, not monsters, there should also be a different selection of pictures and captions in the textbook that show the victims and the

sufferings as truths, not just stories, to help the learners with their comprehension on this difficult topic.

Students who attend the public education forum have the opportunity to hear different survivor stories that help makes the text more realistic. However, the structure of these forums does not optimize their learning abilities, and the pre and post forum surveys can be improved to further better DC-Cam's genocide education project. For example, on June 4, there were approximately 270 participants in this forum: 20 villagers, 240 students, and 10 teachers (DC-Cam 1). All of these participants were in one room from the hours of 8am until 12pm. According to USC students who attended the forum, while the students in the front half of the room seemed to be engaged in the lesson, the back half did not seem to be on task as demonstrated by their talking and laughing while a victim was in front of the group, telling her story with tears rolling down her cheeks. This does not suggest that the students in the back of the classroom are insensitive to the stories; it does suggest, however, that their physical distance from the survivor impacted their emotional connection with her story. Richard Gula, a professor of moral theology, researched empathy and concluded, "seeing tears fall from another's eyes causes tears to well up in our own. Empathy is at work here. First we notice people are suffering and then we try to understand their suffering more deeply" (Gula 131). Therefore, since the students sitting in the back of the forum could not hear or see her as well as the other students, they did not feel the same empathy as did the front half of the room. The older villagers who were seated at the front of the forum encouraged the lack of respect; they, too, were laughing and talking as the survivor told her story. The older villagers should be informed of their dual role in the forum—while they came to learn, they are also setting the example.

In order to improve the public educational forum so that more students can optimize their learning, there should be more rooms that hold fewer participants. In a journal entitled, *Review of*

Educational Research, J. D. Finn's article, "The "Why's" of Class Size: Student Behavior in Small Classes" highlights the learning advantages of smaller class sizes:

When a student is not engaged in learning, she or he is less likely to acquire the material presented. When antisocial behavior disrupts the teacher or other students, learning is impeded for the entire class. This article summarizes research and theory showing that one aspect of classroom organization (class size) can significantly affect student engagement and, in turn, academic achievement. 324

While the public educational forum is not a class, it is still a means of educating participants about a topic they may know very little about. For this reason, it should use all of the resources it can to enhance the participants engagement and receptivity to the material.

Ideally, the participants will walk into the pagoda and be separated from their friends and go into different smaller rooms where they will have fewer distractions that disengage them from learning. Each room will have a different survivor who is able to tell his or her story multiple times thus allowing him or her to have time in each room to tell his or her story, answer questions, and then tell the story to the next room. This way, students can be exposed to multiple survivor stories in one session, in a more intimate setting that fosters empathy. In the June 4 forum, the USC students reported that the woman started to cry as she asked participants in the room to stop laughing. This behavior by participants is unacceptable; the amount of courage and trauma the woman has to deal with when telling her story to a room full of strangers should be greatly respected. However, the students were in a physical environment that did not promote engagement and so they were not paying close attention to the speaker. The smaller classes will also be easier for people who are working with the forum to monitor disrespect.

Another way to improve the students' receptivity is to give them a couple of minutes for a break. After sitting in the same spot for three or more hours, students become restless: "rest

break should be incorporated into the daily schedule [...] even older students also need stretch breaks to eliminate boredom or to break lapses into daydreaming” (Lokanadha 181). A break will also give students time to reflect and talk to one another about their learning, which stimulates their minds for questions they may have not thought about. Overall, adjusting the format of the public education forum by having smaller class sizes, separating friends, and making time for breaks can greatly help the participants’ absorb the material.

DC-Cam uses surveys to further develop their genocide education efforts; rephrasing some of the questions can improve the helpfulness of the survey and consequently the successes of future forums. Surveys should stay away from leading questions that hint at having one correct answer. According to *Introduction to Psychology*, “surveys can be biased because people may not answer questions truthfully, may give socially acceptable answers, or may feel pressured to answer in certain ways.” Knowing this, survey questions should be carefully phrased in a way that welcomes all answers. In DC-Cam’s pre-forum survey, there are questions that do not give the students many options for answers. For example, question number three, “Do you believe the DK regime was as horrible as the stories you’ve heard or read about? Yes or No. Explain why or why not” is a question that would pressure a student to answer in a manner that he or she thinks is socially acceptable: “leading questions produce biased responses” (Krizan 272). If the question were more open ended, and rephrased in a way such as, “how would you describe conditions under the KR regime? Is it difficult to believe stories you’ve heard or read about? Why or why not” then the student would not feel as pressured to answer and maybe results would vary thus enhancing research. Similarly, the sixth question, “if one of your friends is a son/daughter of a perpetrator, would you discriminate against him or her? Yes or No. Explain why or why not” could be less accusatory if rephrased into, “if you learn that your friend is the child of a perpetrator, how does that change the way you view him/her?” The same question is being

asked, but the slight change of wording will not pressure the student to feel as though there is a correct answer.

This feeling of judgment that prevents honest answers can also be alleviated if there is a more detailed disclaimer about confidentiality in the beginning of the survey that encourages honest answers and constructive criticism about the forum. In *The Psychology of Survey Response*, Dr. Roger Tourangeau concludes, “concerns about disclosure may lead some individuals to withhold information entirely, affecting response rates to surveys” (287). Even though the survey begins with “Your answers and any personal information you provide will be solely used for educational and research purposes of improving the genocide education project” (DC-Cam 1) students may still fear that any response that is not socially acceptable may affect them. In addition to rewriting the disclaimer so that it urges people to contribute constructive criticism, different students should be informally interviewed with these questions and more. The questions should be prefaced with a confidentiality disclaimer and followed by sincere questions about how to improve the genocide education project. Interviewing the students who are sitting in the back and who appear less attentive, could probably offer insight into how to engage the seemingly disinterested. By improving the surveys and other methods of receiving suggestions for improvement, the genocide education project can continue to develop in unparalleled ways.

DC-Cam and the Ministry of Education in Cambodia have started an extraordinary project. By including the textbook in the curriculum, and through teaching the material in public education forums, they are beginning to stop the pattern of quieting history. Generations will no longer grow up ignorant of the atrocities that their ancestors experienced. When I spoke to the director of DC-Cam, Youk Chhang, in June of 2011 about the genocide education project, and offered suggestions for improvement on behalf of my classmates, he did not ignore my ideas or state the flaws in my plans. Instead, he motivated me to continue thinking of ways to help.

Including pictures that illustrate the victims' perspective, along with relevant, honest captions to aid in learners' comprehension represents one manner of improvement. Changing the setting of the public educational forums to enhance the participants' receptivity and empathy with the material, while editing the survey questions to provoke more meaningful answers is another method. The suggestions are not results of criticisms, but instead results of inspiration. When Youk looked at me with eager eyes, pointed to the textbook and announced, "this is only the first edition, you can help us make it better," I knew I had found my research topic.

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