

at Angkor Wat

Dr. Steven Van Zoost

So there I was at Angkor Wat in Cambodia, drawing with a beggar. He looked to be about seven – or eight-years-old. He was one in a group of kids that was milling among the tourists. Some were collecting discarded water bottles that they could exchange for candies. One boy carried a baby. A local guide told me that 80 per cent of Cambodians live in rural places and earn an average of \$40 a month. Thirty per cent of Cambodians live on less than 60 cents per day. The Canadian dollar goes a long way here. More than a million tourists a year tread through Siem Reap rejuvenating their weary feet with cheap foot massages, soaking their feet in tanks with nibbling piranhas, and skirting around the city in tuk-tuks or on the backs of elephants. The small boy in front of me had nothing to sell. He did not speak English. He smiled and waited.

Some languages are universal. With a small pad of hotel note-paper and an NSTU pen (you know – the one with the highlighter on the other end), I started to outline the silhouette shape of the peaks of the UNESCO site of Angkor Wat. I intentionally left out pertinent details. I handed the pen to the boy, and so began our joint drawing. More smiles as the boy added curly hair to a picture he drew of me.

Perhaps our smiles hid the deep differences in our economic statuses. I'm not suggesting that our smiles were not genuine – I just can't claim to know what thoughts were behind his smile. Perhaps he only thought of drawing details in the picture. Maybe he thought I'd pay him for his drawing. Maybe he thought I was ridiculously funny. Maybe he thought he was. I have no idea. I can tell you that behind my smile were complicated emotional responses to his simple sketches in front of me.

Regretfully, this was not my first encounter with

people far less financially fortunate than me. In truth, my first such recollection comes from my rural elementary school days. School is probably when most kids face their own differences. And school is probably where kids watch how teachers respond to such differences. As I watched this small Cambodian boy draw, I felt the teacher in me scrambling to respond to the differences between the two of us.

I am no expert in addressing the wide-scale effects of poverty. I have plenty of experiences in the slums of India, the favelas of Brazil, the informal settlements of South Africa, the sewer-dwellers of Mongolia...and the list, regretfully, goes on. I am embarrassed to admit that the notion of ending poverty is intangible for me to grasp during the constant shuffle of classes in and out my classroom door. Thankfully, some people and organizations have taken on this task. Still, I have to do something; I can't ignore that poverty walks through my classroom door too.



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There is a well-used food bank in the community. My school has a breakfast program and the guidance counsellors are quietly helping students who can't access food for dinners at home. A teacher downstairs gratefully passes along winter jackets and boots to kids who she knows need them. But what is going on within my classroom? How can teachers respond to the issues that arise from poverty?

Teachers have much more to offer than their monetary responses to the concerns of poverty. For sure, our monetary contributions within our communities are needed. For sure, our volunteering within our communities is important. For sure, our responses to students in our classrooms living in poverty is critical.

I try to shift my thinking towards things that I can do for the students in front of me. For one, I tend to focus on another aspect of students lives. This is not to ignore their living conditions but to draw attention to what it is that I see in them as individuals rather than see in their situations. This may be as trite as a common interest in a movie character or as profound as an admiration for his or her self-understanding. Regardless, it is a genuine connection. This is not always easy, of course. I work at it. If I were completely frank with you, I'd tell you that I try and do this with all of my students and recognize that some students benefit from the connections that they have with their teachers more than other students. Of course, as I have claimed before, we are largely unaware of our influence.

We have a lot of influence over the kinds of representations that we put on offer to students in our classrooms. To some extent, we offer commentary about monetary values in our attire. Our jewellery, brand name clothing, and the personal technologies that we use at lunch can convey messages of financial success. Don't get me wrong: I am not unfashionable in my classroom. I am just conscious that students pay attention to what teachers value.

Teachers also convey their thinking about economic injustices, financial inequities and poverty in the kind of role models that are made available to students in our classrooms. Fiction and non-fiction both provide opportunities for students to think about their own lives in relation to others and to consider social responsibilities within and beyond our province.

There are more subtle ways of thinking about poverty and pedagogy. For example, we need to be sensitive to school tasks that require students to set goals or think too far beyond their immediate futures. For students who are worried about their next meal, asking them to think about setting goals for the end of the month may be beyond their day-to-day scope of thinking. In this way, schooling can become strangely disconnected from students' lives. Such tasks can thereby advantage kids who have experiences and environments that are conducive to planning, and disadvantage those who are unfamiliar or unable to look too far into their future.

My lucid ramblings about teaching in northeast Canada are seemingly a world away from Southeast Asia and the beggar boy drawing in front of me. I don't know anything about his life beyond this brief encounter. What difference can I possibly make in his day? A dollar goes a long way in Cambodia...will education too? I know we all face these kinds of questions and wonder what we have to offer. How will you respond to students who are living in poverty? How will you respond to a kid begging on the street? I decide to leave him with my NSTU pen, even when he follows me, offering to return it as he thought I had forgotten it. He offers me one of our drawings and I accept. Some languages are universal; his kindness, for example.

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