

## External Evaluator's Report on the Project: *Cambodia's Cultural Heritage in the Modern World*

### *Introduction*

The Fulbright-Hays Study Abroad Program awarded the Middlesex Community College (MCC) an 18-month grant for a project with two important objectives: (1) to deepen and expand connections between Cambodian arts and cultural traditions with curricula at MCC and the Lowell Public Schools (LPS); and (2) to foster an appreciation of Cambodian classical and folk art forms and support strategies for sustaining these traditions among the general Lowell community and in the local region. Lowell is a "gateway" community for many refugees entering into the US and therefore houses a large variety of ethnic and national groups. It has the second largest number of Cambodians in the US, with Cambodian students representing a sizeable percentage of the LPS system and more than half at the Stoklosa Middle School. MCC is building on an earlier Fulbright-Hays grant in 2013 that brought its faculty members and teachers of LPS to Cambodia. This experience has been useful in the preparation and the formulation of the present project.

### *The Director and the Participants*

The Project Director was Dona Cady, Dean of Global Education of Middlesex Community College (MCC). She was assisted by Marge Rack (MCC, art), Project Manager, Phala Chea, Curriculum Specialist of the Lowell Public Schools, and Yary Livan, NEA 2015 National Heritage Fellow.

The participants were from the faculty of Middlesex Community College and the Lowell Public School system. Those from MCC were Stacie Hargis (business), Marge Rack (art), Joe Eiler (graphic design), Kerriane Pearson Gamache (English and humanities), Lara Kradinova (English composition and literature), Darlene Furdock (English language learners and developmental English). From the LPS system were Lynne Barker (art, Stoklosa Middle School), Janet Kozo (math, Stoklosa), Ann Carpenter (science, Stoklosa), Jacqui Miller (art, Pyne Arts School), Rita McLaughlin (music, Murkland Elementary).

### *Pre-Visit Program for Participants*

To prepare the participants for their projects in Cambodia, there was a Pre-Visit Program, which included 20 hours of instruction in Khmer (Cambodian), eight hours of master classes, and discussion of the logistics of the planned visit to Cambodia. The master classes were in Cambodian classical and folk music and in ceramics, topics that were appropriate to many of the interests of the group. Films and readings that focused on sociocultural and historical issues in Cambodia were also an important part of the pre-visit preparation.

An integral part of the program was the participation of local and visiting academics to assist participants to prepare for their in-country visit. There was valuable multimedia training in techniques for recording one to three-minute videos on smart phones, inputting e-portfolio daily journal entries, and photo-sharing as part of the curriculum development projects. Judy Ledgerwood from Northern Illinois University, an anthropologist specializing in Cambodian, gave lectures to introduce participants to the culture and society of Cambodia. During a three-day orientation and workshop, Southeast Asian historians, Leonard and Barbara Andaya, from the University of Hawai'i at Manoa, spoke on various aspects of Southeast Asian and Cambodian history. At this Orientation the Fulbright External Evaluator (Leonard Andaya) met with the Project Director (Dona Cady) and the participants to discuss the individual projects and Fulbright expectations.

This was a well-planned pre-visit program and was regarded as very useful by the participants.

### *Itinerary in Cambodia*

The in-country program was full for the entire trip, which began on 5 July and ended on 3 August 2016. All hotels were paid for in advance, and arrangements for group dinners were made so that the participants would not be burdened by such mundane concerns. This enabled them to focus fully on their projects in a program that was organized well in advance by the Project Director, Dona Cady, and her team.

The program included some language instruction initially and then sporadically throughout the trip; tour of important sites, such as the world famous Angkor, a few of the other Angkorian and Pre-Angkorian temples, and the Tuol Seng Museum of the killing fields; and visits to a number of cultural sites such as the Artisans d'Angkor, Cambodia Living Arts, and Kampong Chhnang where traditional arts were practiced. At these cultural sites, master artists spoke to the group or provided more formal lectures. In a number of these visits, talks were arranged with local scholars, artists, or NGOs to provide depth to the subjects of interest to the group. Because members of the group had different concerns, some time was given at different places for the group to disperse and pursue their individual projects.

The visits to sites where traditional arts and crafts were practiced proved highly popular among the group, which had a very strong art and literature component. In this regard the program was well-planned so that each individual member could attempt to obtain the necessary information for his/her project. Allowing the participants some opportunity to fend for themselves in markets or in arranging their own dinners provided some respite from the rigor of the schedule, and one Sunday was left entirely free for the members to determine how they would use the day. Exploring on their own and perhaps even trying their language skills was something that would have resulted from this "free time" in the program.

In short, the program was well-organized to expose the participants to the rich history and culture of Cambodia while enabling the participants to gather material for their individual projects.

### *Participant Reports*

Most of the participants were interested in some aspect of Cambodian arts and crafts, and their reports reflect their satisfaction with meeting with master artists and in observing the manner in which these traditions are maintained. Jacqui Miller, a ceramicist, expressed her delight in throwing a cooking pot on a log in Kampong Chhnang, the pottery village, and working in loading the kiln. Photographing textile designs also provided the images that she hoped to incorporate in teaching her students to create Cambodian-inspired tiles. Another ceramicist, Lynne Barker, found in Cambodia that she could not simply focus on one medium but extended her inquiry into a variety of other art forms, all of which she hoped to use creatively in encouraging her students to participate in Cambodian arts. Marge Rack, the Program Manager, also worked with the master ceramicists in Kampong Chhnang and documented the tradition, which has already appeared in print. It is her hope to be able to transmit this knowledge to students to learn more about Cambodian traditional ornamentation. Finally, Joe Eiler witnessed the making of palm-sugar by an ordinary Cambodian and observed the importance of pepper in the lives of the people. With this knowledge he has established a context in which to challenge his graphic design students to create the packaging of these two items to reflect the origin of the products.

A second group of participants was interested in the literary traditions in Cambodia as a way to infuse more Cambodian works into their literature courses. Kerri Gamache had hoped to use Khmer and Buddhist literature in translation for her class but found this too ambitious. Instead, she was inspired by the localization of Hindu-Buddhist art in Cambodia and thus created a module on iconoclasm. Interest

in iconoclasm extended to her inclusion of another module on the Buddha's life and to protest art as subjects that students can become engaged in her class. Another participant interested in literature, Larisa Kradinova, went to Cambodia hoping to examine Cambodian localizations of some of the major Indian epics. She realized quickly that this was far too ambitious and decided instead to focus on one of the most beloved and well-known of the epics, the *Ramayana*, known in Khmer as *Reamker*. By observing how stories of the *Reamker* were used, she has decided to examine the modern variations of the epic in different forms, such as the anime, action movies, and TV series, and see how they convey this traditional tale to make it more modern and acceptable. By incorporating these modern forms into her literature class, she believes that this will make the students more interested in the original text from which these forms evolved. Darlene Furdock's project was to meet educators and to purchase works in English on Cambodian history and on the genocide of the Pol Pot years. Eventually, however, she decided to avoid the idea of genocide as a topic but instead focus on Khmer "healing" literature in English translation for her classes.

A third group had interests in the arts but eventually focused on establishing links with the Cambridge Cambodia School (CCS) near Phnom Penh. Janet Koza wanted initially to study Cambodian music and dance in order to create a group of teachers to teach students to play an instrument in the pinpeat ensemble. This is still important and will be channeled now into the cultural club. Her more important project is establishing an ongoing relationship with the Cambridge Cambodia School, which she has done with Lynne Barker. Stacie Hargis has become involved by creating a plan to enable students in the sister school of Stoklosa Middle School in Lowell to create Cambodian-inspired items to sell in the school store to benefit both of the sister schools. Stacie's involvement was part of her project in Cambodia, where she documented mini case studies about social enterprises and entrepreneurs to provide material for her business courses. Her experiences in Cambodia would also directly influence her interest in assisting with business plans for the Cambodian art community in Lowell. Another valuable project associated with this sister school relationship was the decision to create a garden at CCS to provide wholesome food for the students. Ann Carpenter also modified her project in order to devote some time to helping to improve the water supply for the school.

What was remarkable about the reports was the consensus that the trip was well-planned and well-executed, and that the group proved to be pleasantly compatible. Even the challenges faced at times by a daunting schedule did not result in resentment or complaints. Nevertheless, the group had some suggestions for improvements based on their experiences. Two of the most common suggestions were (1) more free time for rest, reflection, and individual projects; and (2) more language and cultural study to be done in-country. One individual commented that it was helpful to keep a diary, which could then be consulted with the photos after returning home. This would help in recalling the experiences, since there was so much happening within a short period of time. Trying to provide input daily on the Program's wordpress site proved a challenge to the participants because of wi-fi issues.

#### *Post Trip Developments and the Future*

One important measure of the success of a Fulbright-Hays Study Abroad Program is the positive impact that it has had not only on the participants but to others. By this measure, this project has been a great success.

Since returning, the participants have met with the Project Director, Project Manager, and the Curriculum Specialist in seven, two-hour monthly meetings. Their discussions have focused on ways to support the development of curriculum at MCC and the LPS aimed at encouraging the appreciation of Cambodia's cultural heritage among Cambodian youth; sustain Cambodian arts in the US through

cultural and educational activities using Lowell as an asset in this development; and continue to build relationships with institutions in Cambodia, such as the Royal University of Fine Arts, the American University in Phnom Penh and NGOs; and to facilitate community projects to share the outcome of the project. Then from September 2016 to March 2017 there was a series of meetings on the various issues concerned with the visit to Cambodia, reactions, and sharing of ideas. These two-hour sessions began with the public screening of the film *A River Changes Course* on social and environmental issues by the Cambodian director, Kalyanee Mam.

The culmination of the project was a two-day Conference on Cambodian Culture and the Arts, from 31 March to 1 April 2017. On 31 March there was a general discussion on the reports presented by the participants to the External Evaluator. The expectations of the participants and the reshaping of their individual projects were an important part of the discussion. Equally important was the focus on the whole program itself, suggestions for improvements, and how the outcome of the research conducted for this project could be sustained. After the conclusion of this two-hour meeting, the group attended a community function in which two of the participants along with their students had organized some of the many photos taken in Cambodia for sale to support the program on Cambodia in the Arts Program. The exhibition was held in a gallery cum café space, and was well attended by the community. In addition to being a financial success raising over \$1,100 for Cambodian Living Arts and the Khmer Magical Music Bus, the event clearly demonstrated the determination of many in the group to transform their experiences in Cambodia to meaningful results among the Cambodian community in Lowell in particular and the general population in general.

Unfortunately, the last day of the conference was cancelled because of a snow storm, and so the actual public presentations of the participants and the guest speaker and evaluator's public lecture had to be cancelled. Nevertheless, the presentations were taped for the benefit of the evaluator and community, and the power point of the public lecture was shared among the project participants.

#### *Final Comments*

Without a doubt this group could be considered to be among the successes of the Fulbright-Hays Study Abroad programs. For some groups, returning home from abroad meant the end of the project. In this particular project, however, the post-trip planning was exemplary. The project director, manager, and curriculum specialist organized a series of meetings to enable the participants to continue to think about their projects and specifically how they would be implemented. These meetings were obviously successful, for in my meetings with the participants in March, 2017, I could see that there was a confidence and clarity among the participants about how they would be infusing Cambodian literature into their teaching, or using their experiences with the various masters of Cambodian arts and crafts to create programs for students, or finding ways to assist and sustain relationships with sister institutions in Cambodia. Equally important was seeking ways of having the Cambodian and general community in Lowell and surrounding areas share in the findings of the group. I was here at the "pop-up" exhibition of photos held in the gallery, where a large number of people came and contributed to the Cambodia Living Arts Program, which was the named beneficiary of the event. Two of the participants, Kerri Gamache and Stacie Hargis, combined their talents to stage this event.

Other participants that I had the opportunity to talk to have already begun to implement some of their plans. Jacqui Miller has made her students create tiles with Cambodian designs, which will be used to ornament the Cambodian Cultural Center in Lowell. Students working with Joe Eiler have created original packaging of Cambodian products, thus highlighting the value of this type of activity. Lynne Barker and Janet Koza have cooperated to encourage students to make Cambodian artwork to be sold

using an entrepreneurial model created by Stacie Hargis and facilitated by her entrepreneurship students. Rita McLaughlin is using the cds, dvds, and recordings that she has made of Cambodian performers to enable her Cambodian students to examine their own identities as Americans and Cambodians. Marge Rack has been negotiating with the Freer and Sackler Museum in Washington, DC, the Cartier Foundation in Paris, and the Massachusetts Cultural Council of Traditional Arts to host a traveling ceramics exhibition on Cambodian pottery which she will curate. The curriculum changes emphasizing cultural competency suggested by the participants have been facilitated by Phala Chea, the curriculum specialist of the LPS, so that they would be shared with other teachers. In this way the knowledge and experience of the participants would reach others and help to expand the reach of this project. This is just the beginning, and the participants see their involvement as an ongoing project. The trip to Cambodia was merely the foundation upon which the participants could then create the pathways for the transmission of their knowledge and inspiration to their students and to the community at large. A website <https://mccfulbright2016.org/> was created in order to share the findings of the group with individuals and organizations not only in their Lowell community but throughout the nation.

I would like to end by praising the work of Project Director Dona Cady, who combined organizational skills, inspiration, and unbounded energy to shepherd this project from its inception to the present. Her leadership was cited by the participants as the major reason for the overwhelming success of the Program. She is to be congratulated for a job very well done.

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