

Teaching to Build Trust, Connections & Friendship

Taunggyi, Shan State, Myanmar

Lewis & Clark College

Sam Shugart & Katie Schirmer USA. Nway Khine, Myanmar. Irada Yeap, Thailand, Lewis & Clark College

Section 1

The goal of our project was to bring a religiously divided community together in the classroom, which would create lasting friendships and connections among students. By bringing students together in a shared classroom environment to learn English, we were able to create a safe setting for students to develop a better understanding of themselves and each other. In addition to \$2,500 donated from the President's office, our team received additional \$700 donations from friends and family.

We ran into several unanticipated difficulties, but were able to implement our proposed program with only a few modifications. By far the biggest challenge we encountered was the tense political situation inside Myanmar. We had worked hard to lay the groundwork and ensured that our project got approval from the local community members, and had the support of key stakeholders in the months before starting the program. However, two weeks before our program started, there was a major outbreak of ethnic violence in the third largest city, Mandalay, that left two dead and many injured. When combined with the upcoming elections next year, and the fact that this was the first time this type of educational program was being implemented in Taunggyi, many of our key stakeholders were concerned. Because of this concern, we decided to focus our resources on one class of 25 students, bringing in students from Christian, Buddhist, and Muslim orphanages, as well as several students of varying religions. Our classes went very well, we partnered with a local teacher to help design the curriculum and teach.

The students were aged 10-14 and had varying levels of English ability. We tested them individually during our first lesson and moved forward with basic English lessons covering subjects such as basic sentence structure, dialogues, and professions. We structured half of our classes around active learning in which students had to use English to communicate with each other during class activities and games. We also focused on numbering students to ensure that there was always a mix of different students in each group. Although this took a bit of prompting at first, we found this encouraged them to interact with people they would not normally talk to, and ultimately helped them to learn from each other and improve each other's English.

We also succeeded in taking our class on the two field trips we had planned. During the first trip we took our class to the Taunggyi zoo and worked in small groups to fill out a worksheet describing the different animals. The students really enjoyed their time and got to use the English they had just learned, even if we did have problems with different English skill levels. For our second trip, we took the class to Inle Lake, one of Myanmar's largest lakes and the most important tourist destinations. We worked with our community contacts to arrange a tour for our class that would emphasize the importance of the environment and sustainable development. Our class attended a lecture at Inle Speaks, a community organization dedicated to preserving the lake, and then took a boat tour to meet different farmers, fishers, textile workers and other stakeholders throughout the area. Throughout the day the students were avidly taking notes and asking questions. For many of them, this was the first time they had been outside of Taunggyi and their excitement to be in such a different environment was contagious.

In the final weeks after our second field trip we combined our teaching activities with a project that we hoped would challenge the students. We divided them into small groups and had them create posters based on their experiences on the Inle Trip. In their posters, students created pictures, poems, and

word maps of the different concepts they learned about in Inle. Seeing our students put together the connections between concepts such as environmental stewardship, tourism, and community job creation, was a fascinating and rewarding experience. Each group gave presentations on their posters to the class and displayed the posters at our closing ceremony.

Our closing ceremony was well received by the community and was attended by several leaders such as the Minister of Religious Affairs and Electricity of the Shan State and other local community leaders. In contrast to the opening ceremony, the students voluntarily participated in performances and speeches that demonstrated their skills outside of the classroom. Key figures in the community, including the various religious leaders, praised the program for emphasizing education as an important aspect to development. All the groups united behind the idea of giving children education in a shared space.

We worked with our community partners to create a fund totaling \$5,954 that ensures our program will continue for years to come and developed accountability measures to make sure that the funds would be used correctly. This is noted under the miscellaneous section of the budget. Because we were able to save much more than we had anticipated, we were able to leave behind a large portion of our project funding as “seed money” for local staff to continue what we have begun with this project. In addition to the funds we left behind, several community leaders pledged donations if the fund becomes low in the future. We believe that the combination of our teacher community leaders, the interfaith civil society organizations that supported us, and the support of the community leaders that attended our closing ceremony will ensure that our program will continue for years to come.

Section II

We believe that to live in peace is to live in social harmony with others while having the opportunity to grow; ultimately reaching one’s full potential. By fostering mutual cooperation and providing shared learning experiences, we believe that we can help people to achieve a better future while changing their perceptions of others. From helping each other with a difficult speaking exercise, to filling out worksheets on field trips, the students all had a great time learning together. In the short term, we feel that seeing our students learn and grow together brought the different religious groups we worked with in the interfaith network closer together. In the long term, we hope that our program will help change community leader’s mindsets, and shape the next generation of students who will speak up for peace.

Our group was a little concerned venturing into Myanmar, given its current instability. However, we were welcomed by kind, generous, and warmhearted people who place an emphasis on community, rather than the importance of the individual. We learned how trust and relationship building is the backbone of life, and how this slows the pace of life, but adds authenticity to every encounter.

“We hope this opportunity will help provide new friendships and opportunities for a new generation as Myanmar continues to grow as a country” -Sam Shugart

“Myanmar has touched my heart in a forever way, and opened my mind to a way of perceiving the world I never knew existed.” -Katie Schirmer

“Kids in Myanmar have a lot of potential. At the start, most of them even had difficulty pronouncing “father” correctly, but by the end they surprised me with how far they had come.” - Nway Khine

“The people local and the students that we worked with on the project in Myanmar have shown us their utmost kindness, generosity and willingness to learn. I will cherish this experience for years to come.” - Irada Yeap