My heart sank when I saw what he intended to do. He clambered on his knees barefoot into the crude brick cell and quickly grabbed a pair of rusty leg irons. He was animated and wild, excited to be telling a stranger his story for, what, the thousandth time in the last 30 years? Every ounce of me wanted to stop him, beg him to stand up and take those shackles off, to get as far away from here as we possibly could. But I kept rolling, kept recording Chum Mey as he shared what happened to him in Tuol Sleng Prison, buildings of interrogation and torture, last stop before the Khmer Rouge’s Killing Fields during Pol Pot’s insane regime of the 1970s. Chum Mey is one of only two living Tuol Sleng survivors. He returns to the former prison almost every day to sell copies of his biography, and this was too important to him, too important to my students, so I kept recording. During my trip to Cambodia, I saw the most amazing jungle temples that literally took my breath away, walked on silver floors to witness a spectacularly enormous jade Buddha, and laughed with smiling children living in stone-aged village conditions. But it was Chum Mey and this tiny prison cell that will forever stay with me. He embodies the spirit of Cambodia, surviving all that was hellish and unthinkable, now hopeful and optimistic about his country’s future. I want my students to evaluate the ethics of the past, to analyze the causes of a society’s collapse, and to predict the rebirth of a third-world country, but most importantly, I want my students to see just how strong the human spirit can be.

In July I spent 10 days in Phnom Penh and Siem Reap, Cambodia. I learned that Cambodia is complicated, that the world is complicated. I wanted so badly to walk away with a rational understanding of what went wrong during the Khmer Rouge regime and decades-long ensuing civil war. I wanted so badly to find reassurances that Cambodia would find a happy ending. But some answers are elusive and only lead to more questions. How can members of the Khmer Rouge currently be part of an elected government? How can a government sit idly by while its children suffer from the effects of unsafe water? Can a society re-establish itself through an unsustainable reliance on NGOs and nonprofits? I didn’t get what I wanted out of my trip to Cambodia. I got more; I got what I needed instead – a reminder that students need to explore messy questions and find meaning in the process, not in some mythic final answer.

Lessons from the Killing Fields

Susan Morrison
Chattanooga Program

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Professional and Personal Growth

- Triggered a global awareness and allowed me to make connections to my small-town students and people half a world away. Children, for example, are the same everywhere. We are all connected in some way, and at the least, the economy.
- Helped create connections to literature and the ancient world as well as literature and the current world. I had no idea how important the Hindu epic Ramayana, a story I teach in World Literatures, is to parts of present-day Asia.
- Witnessed connections between rhetoric and policy to on-the-ground activism and change. I spoke with a manager of a Siem Reap nonprofit and traveled in the field with them to look at their attempts at building safe water wells and distributing water filters.
- Reminded of connections between values and ethics and how those connections snap when contrasted with the need to survive. I spoke with one of my translators, the sweetest, happiest man, about his life during the civil war – a time when he lost school friends to ammo dump explosions and helped sharpen bamboo poles for government jungle traps.
- Reminded me just how important education is to developing countries, and how important it should be to the United States.

Benefits to Students and School Community

- Students have access to my interviews, photographs, texts, and even contacts to complete research projects. The first-person and primary source availability is a huge asset.
- Students can use information on living conditions, employment, education, etc. in Cambodia as a case study for the third world, and as an example of a neophyte “democracy.” The exposure will be valuable across contents because we can explore social and natural sciences as well as touch on a few humanities.
- I would love to find a way to bring Chum Mey to the U.S. He wants more than anything to tell his story to young people and worries that the world will forget about the Khmer Rouge. I may contact UTC’s Asian Studies department or possibly Lee College and the City of Cleveland, which recently sister-cited with Phnom Penh.
- I can’t wait to teach the Ramayana again and show its depictions in ancient temples and in current pop culture.
- Students also have access to fellow students, through my contacts, in Cambodia, both college-aged and elementary.

Works in Progress

- While working on a unit about the U.S. economy, my students researched and completed a PBL on employment. Students had to examine problems and create viable solutions to spur job growth in this country while exploring the conditions and practices of U.S.-owned factories overseas.
- When we get to my ethics unit, we’re going to expand the genocide research and see if we can find commonalities in atrocities in recent history. Students struggle with the debate between individual safety and freedom versus the common good. I wonder if their rationalizations of torture will change after they hear a first-person account, my interview with Chum Mey.
- In a cumulative project, students will have to decide what the role of government should be in society. It’s a big question and one that has been debated since America’s birth. I plan on bringing in interviews and photographs of current conditions in Cambodia, from the impoverished inner city Phnom Penh to the country villages that have no roads, electricity, healthcare, plumbing, or civil services. Who bears the greatest responsibility – the individual, the government, or the business sector?