

# International Engagement Through Experiential Learning

## Southeast Asian Case Studies

By Namji Kim Steinemann and Gwen Johnson

Our world today is defined by rapid and pervasive connections, whether in our globally interlinked economic systems and financial networks, the movement of goods and services, or the interactions of people and communities. Technological advances are further facilitating and expanding these connections, providing multiple platforms for sharing information, ideas, and innovations while collapsing boundaries and distances. Technology is also changing the ways we think about friendship, culture, community, citizenship, and even teaching and learning.

These “real-time” as well as digital global interactions afforded by technology can serve as powerful points of access for cross-cultural experiential education. They can stimulate curiosity about the world and promote international collaboration and hands-on learning that go beyond just knowledge acquisition and information exchange. They also foster intercultural dialogue while creating opportunities for engaging new ideas and learning new skills, including challenging long-held assumptions and seeing the world (as well as oneself) through multiple perspectives.

At the same time, in today’s fast-paced, highly interconnected world, where communication and interactions are possible with a mouse click or (for those with means and/or opportunity) only a plane ride away, this quick and easy “always-on” access invites instant gratification. Encounters can become more like “cultural tourism” than meaningful ways of learning cross-culturally. Effective global experiential learning opportunities demand proactive strategies by educators to ensure that in-depth learning, reflection, critical and creative thinking, and application of knowledge and skills in a new context are not being compromised.

In the past decade, we have had the privilege to work together and across cultures with hundreds of high school students and many more

hundreds of teachers from across the United States and in the Asia Pacific region on programs that tap into as well as multiply and magnify the potential of these global connections to foster international engagement through experiential learning. In this article, we highlight our work on the East-West Center’s AsiaPacificEd Program for Schools that involved direct, “face-to-face” exchanges between US and Southeast Asian teachers and students, as well as an online exchange that was designed to (re)connect our network of teacher-alumni and their students with one another and with others in classrooms across the Asia-Pacific region for mutual sharing and collaboration.

Embedded in all AsiaPacificEd programs are strategies and approaches that embody the key ideas of D.A. Kolb’s experiential learning cycle model: (1) building knowledge, understanding, and skills through a process of inquiry and direct experiences; (2) encouraging reflection while supporting critical thinking and multiple perspectives; (3) deepening participants’ knowledge and understanding of key concepts and contexts—whether the focus is about cultures of other countries, events, or developments in world history or issues of common concern as they relate to local, regional, and global interests; and (4) empowering learners through personal action on projects that foster collaboration and benefit people and communities (including other teachers, students, and schools).<sup>1</sup> Programs also emphasize people-to-people interactions with local people in their own communities, with the overall approach that supports going beyond education about a place or a topic to participants learning from as well as with one another. Often, US and Asian teachers collaborate in exploring common curricular topics and sharing best teaching practices. Students work with their peers to accomplish shared goals.

Measuring our participants’ satisfaction with our programs has been a relatively easy task, for their evaluations and feedback have been consistently positive, with many describing their program participation as a “once-in-a-lifetime experience” or “the best professional development experience in my entire teaching career.” However, as anyone who has organized experiential immersion programs knows, measuring outcomes that validate deeper learning and sustaining participants’ continued engagement requires time and effort. Resources for follow-up work are often not adequately covered, if at all, by project funds. Still, we celebrate many little (and sometimes bigger) successes of our participants who come away transformed by their experiences.

“As a result of my participation in this program, I have been changed. I’m not sure how to quantify it, but a change within me has occurred,” noted Phil Wendel, a teacher from Atlanta, Georgia, about his participation in a five-week travel seminar in Thailand and Cambodia. Wendel added:

*Although I have always considered myself open-minded, this program has exposed me to experiences that have awakened my thoughts toward a world that I never knew existed. The Khmer and Thai culture, mindset, thought system, values, beliefs, etc., have all been presented to me through this experience in a way*



Southeast Asia Youth Leadership Program (SEAYLP) participants working on their Green Action Project plan. Funding for SEAYLP was provided by the US Department of State. Photo by Namji Steinemann.



Youth community action project plan. Photo by Namji Steinemann.

*that has changed how I view the world . . . and view my relation to it. Additionally, through this experience I have become more interested in presenting global education opportunities for the students that I am entrusted with on a daily basis.*

Eridafithri (who, like most Indonesians, uses only one name) commented after her participation in a Best Practice institute, which brought teachers from Southeast Asia to the United States to work with their American counterparts. "This program was transformative. It opened up my view of learning across cultures, and it broadened my knowledge about education in general and teaching and learning in particular." She went on to share her surprise and pleasure in finding how well her students responded to the new teaching methods she applied when she got home:

*I have applied techniques from the Best Practice institute, and my students have responded very well to the lessons. They seem more motivated to learn and are more active. When I lead them through "critical thinking" exercises, they are more curious and ask a lot of questions. When I taught a lesson using the materials from the institute's "multiple intelligence" session, they responded enthusiastically by telling me, "You know what we want. We love this!" This sounded extraordinary to me, since they were not attentive students before!*

Our youth programs channel the idealism of youth to foster positive change and adopt the idea that civic learning requires connections between civic knowledge and skills and their application in community settings. Furthermore, they are illustrative of how experiential international learning can spark a catalyzing experience, which takes participants to a new level of understanding, civic responsibility, and personal commitment. A case in point: The 2006 program plan "The Role of Youth in Building Disaster-Resilient Communities" was developed shortly after the 2004 tsunami. The exchange, which consisted of twenty-five Americans traveling to southern Thailand and the same number of people from southern Thailand traveling to the US, took place several months after Hurricane Katrina. The follow-up action plan, devised by youth participants themselves, was a public policy report that identified avenues for and advocated youth engagement and responsibilities in building safe and resilient communities through education, disaster planning, and preparation in homes, schools, and communities.

Both groups saw, and in some cases experienced up-close, the devastation wrought by the two natural disasters. The experiential learning component, as well as the follow-up project, took on a much

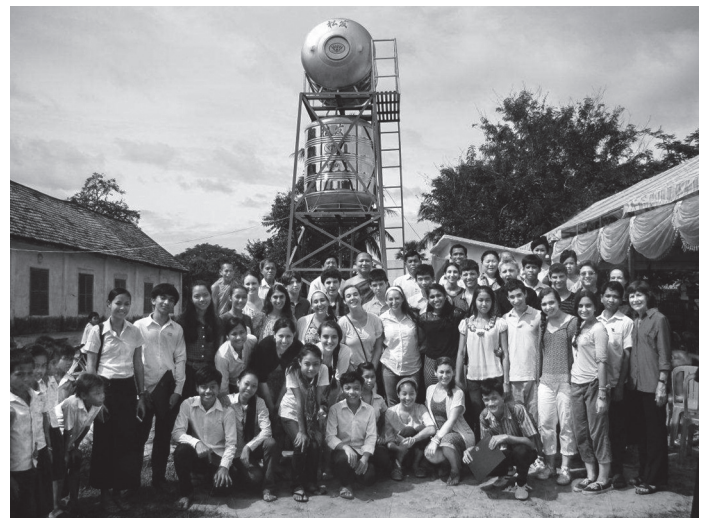
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Cambodian and American students sharing knowledge and culture. Photo by Namji Steinemann.



Indonesian and US teachers discussing common challenges and best practices in teaching. Photo by Bryan Smith.



Happy faces after completing the water tank project in Takeo, Cambodia. Photo by Kosal Virak.

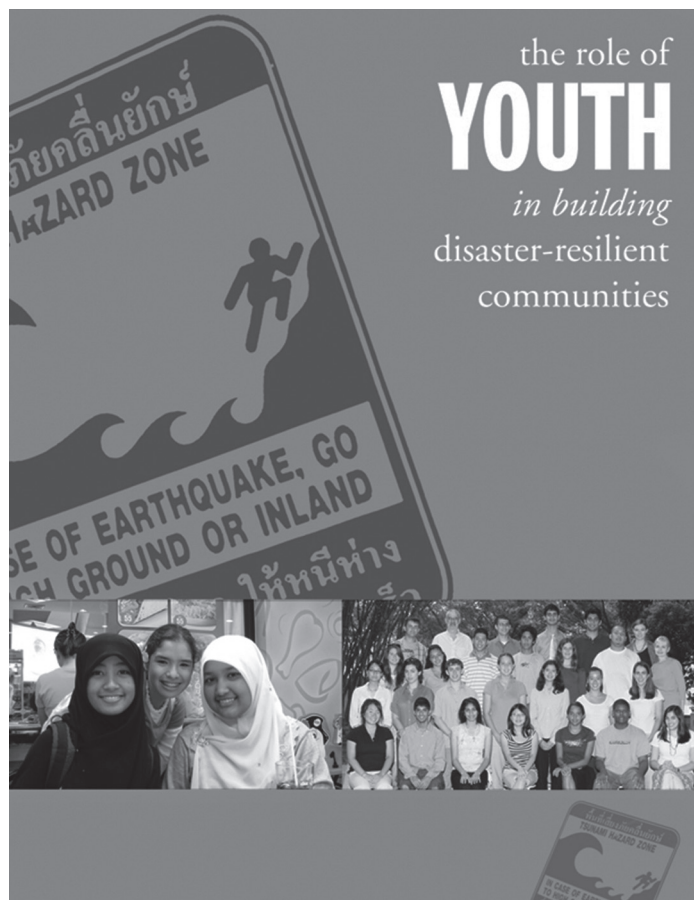




US teachers with students and teachers from SMP Kristen Rehoboth and Pesantren Darul Qu'ran (Ambon, Indonesia). Photo by Namji Steinemann.



Learning about the daily life of Cambodian monks through an immersive experience. Photo by Namji Steinemann.



Cover of a "call to action" report produced by youth. Cover design by Michael Pinto.

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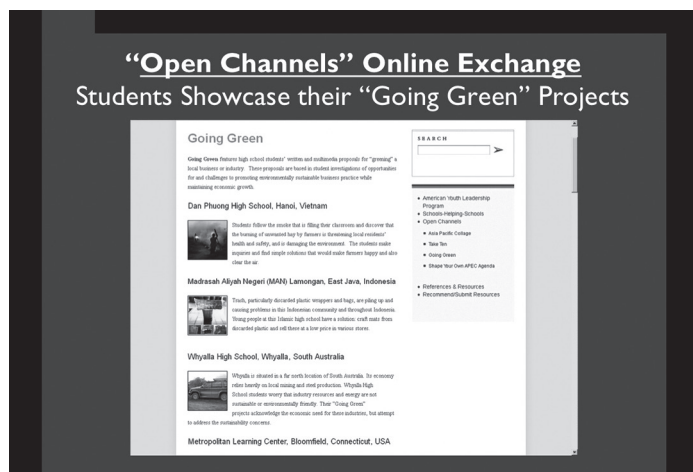
more personal sense of importance and urgency. As one American student noted after a meeting with Thai government officials responsible for tsunami recovery, participants were stimulated to meaningfully consider both disasters:

*After much probing from us about how Thailand was recovering from the tsunami, the translator felt inclined to remind us that we had had a disaster ourselves in America, from which we were having greater difficulty recovering. She had not fully understood the intent of our inquiries, but I understood her position: We had come to Thailand to learn from a nation recovering from a debilitating natural disaster, and she was questioning whether we were completely aware of our circumstances at home . . . So many experiences on that trip altered my thinking . . . It's a smaller world than we can imagine, and it includes more people whose needs we ought to consider and keep close to our hearts.*

The above reflections explore the personal connections made that go beyond the day-to-day factual knowledge of experiencing another culture—those intangible moments when you feel you have crossed the invisible bridge and have connected with "others" in a personal way. It is this recognition of shared humanity that is one of the hallmarks of authentic experiential learning, and it is also what helped engender a sense of shared learning and linkages for Wendy Lockard, a teacher at St. Jerome School in Fort Lauderdale, Florida: "We discovered the similarities in our lives and how we all want to have a positive impact on the lives of our students."

Lockard was one of several dozen American teachers who welcomed Indonesian Muslim educators into their classrooms and homes as part of their participation in Partnership for Schools (P4S) Leading Change. The objectives of this US State Department-sponsored exchange were to enhance American awareness and understanding of Indonesia's Islamic culture and to improve Indonesian perception of the United States through meaningful interactions and collaboration. The program enabled forty-five Muslim educators from thirty-one

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Screenshot of East-West Center's "Open Channels" APEC online exchange.

*pesantren* (private Islamic boarding schools) throughout Indonesia to travel to the United States for twenty days to work with Lockard and other US teachers. The two groups first “met” online before coming together at the East-West Center for cross-cultural learning and preparation for host school immersion. Then, Indonesian educators traveled in small teams to twenty US schools in twelve states, where they lived with host families.<sup>2</sup>

Through activities at host schools, Indonesian and American educators built professional and personal ties as they shared ideas about “what works” in teaching and learning and how to address the challenges of educating youth for responsible life, work, and citizenship. When the Indonesian participants reconvened in Honolulu to discuss the program's impact and their plans for integrating P4S experiences into their work, Rusydi Sulaiman, the curriculum adviser at Al Islam Kemuja in South Sumatra, noted how his P4S participation made him “. . . more conscious of the value of reaching across cultural and other barriers, such as religion.” He added, “My American host school's mission is to support each student's individual development, enabling the student to be an effective contributor in a democratic society within an interdependent world. I hope to apply these ideals in my *pesantren*.” Ahmad Sulahoudin, a teacher from *Pesantren Madinnatunajah* in Banten, reflected on his experience: “I believe we have started something good toward building a better relationship between Americans and Indonesians. The connection that we have made is like a ‘bridge’ to fostering mutual understanding and cooperation among communities in the US and Indonesia.”

Homestay immersion served as an important bridge to understanding and experiencing daily life with host families and peers in a personal and meaningful way. For both Americans and Indonesians, these up-close interactions helped personalize the images of “the other” and did much to dispel prevailing stereotypes on both sides. “This program helped erase prejudice and closed-mindedness that stemmed from a lack of knowledge that we had about each other,” explained Grace Chao, a teacher from Connections Public Charter School in Hilo, Hawai'i. Lockard added, “Their experiences in our school, our homes,

and our community generated understanding and appreciation. . . We now share a friendship that transcends distance and difference.”

Besides providing participants with a greater degree of accessibility, reliability, and balance, our approach also emphasizes the habit of examining and considering diverse perspectives or points of view (about cultural experiences and realities of everyday life and particularly understanding critical or controversial events and issues). Participants are encouraged to look beyond the “neat package” scenario so often applied to studies of other cultures.

“There is a big difference between knowing a country and culture ‘by the book’ as opposed to what you observe just living with real people every day,” Amy Tsang, a Scarsdale junior at the time of her program participation, noted after her weeklong homestay with a family in Krabi, Thailand. She went on:

*For example, our crash course introduction to Thai culture stressed the sacredness of the king and Buddhism and for us to be mindful of our head and feet, recommendations that I took very seriously. . . . Some of this I actually saw, such as reverence of the king. However, Thais, like Americans, as individuals do not always behave strictly according to what is defined as a whole country's social values. My Buddhist host sister opted out of going to temple in favor of sleeping in (though I still tagged along with my host parents), and my host family was not at all shy in showing their emotions or sharing their opinions. I felt like the more my host family and I got comfortable around each other, the more they acted like themselves, with all their quirks, around me and around each other.*

Thematically relevant community service projects, administered as part of AsiaPacificEd's Schools-Helping-Schools initiative, are integral to all youth programs and are accomplished through local in-country collaboration, EWC coordination, American participants (especially student alumni) fundraising for the projects in their schools, and shared on-site student and local community engagement to complete the projects. In Cambodia, for example, US and Cambodian participants have worked together to plant trees in a fishing village along the Tonle Sap Lake to prevent erosion during the monsoon season, distributed clay water filters to more than 200 lakeside families to help provide clean drinking water, constructed a bicycle shelter, and planted trees at a local school. They also built an organic garden at a nearby children's home to promote green practices, laid bricks for a new elementary school in Pursat Province, and helped monks haul dirt to reinforce temple foundations in Kampong Chhannng Province. Most recently, the 2013 youth program participants helped install a 1,500-liter water tank with a water pump and filtration system to provide clean drinking water for some 700 local schoolchildren and their families in Takeo Province, with the funds raised by the 2012 alumni and students at their schools. Now, the 2013 group is raising funds to support a new project to be implemented by the next group, thereby encouraging sustained engagement with people and communities, even from a distance, and connections among participants and between different cohort groups.

Another way that AsiaPacificEd promotes connections and linkages is through online programming, which has included follow-up weblog discussions, webinars, and technology-enabled exchanges. Open Channels was one such online classroom exchange, launched to coincide with the APEC Leaders Week gathering in Honolulu in November 2011. Participating teachers used APEC-themed teaching units to engage students in discussing aspects of international trade and sustainable practices and, in the case of elementary schools, considering various ways different communities in the APEC region are connected to one another. The online exchange featured a showcase



of students' projects and a discussion forum where students commented, asked questions, and responded to one another's projects. The exchange involved more than 1,400 K-12 students from forty-eight schools in eight APEC nations, including Thailand, Indonesia, Singapore, and Viet Nam.

Generally many youth participants need time to process their learning and to find the appropriate voice to express the transformative nature of their experience. For teachers, having other colleagues who have shared the same or similar experiences has provided opportunities for mutual support and ongoing collaboration. For students, having one or more interested teacher(s) to guide and support them through their reflection process has been invaluable. At Scarsdale High School, for example, the students who have participated in EWC programs have met regularly to plan follow-on activities, which have included group presentations for peers, as well as for teachers and district leaders; individual projects, such as writing a newspaper article for the school or local community newspaper; speaking to a social studies class; and planning events for a Schools-Helping-Schools fundraiser to support new community projects. These activities have also provided opportunities for leadership and for students to be active role models in the school community, for there is a new sense of self-confidence, along with leadership qualities, that were not evident earlier in many of the participants.

It is often difficult to measure the depth of the impact of an experiential cross-cultural immersion program on any one participant. Still, when teachers and students express enthusiasm about the programs they completed, write with passion about the people they have met, and show continued interest in global issues, we can discern their high motivation for cross-cultural learning. We also can sense participant attitudinal changes toward people from other cultures.

Authentic experiential learning opportunities help foster new perspectives, challenge long-held assumptions and misconceptions, and promote shared learning and personal connections between and among participants. When combined with a cross-cultural exchange, they provide hands-on, real-world experiences and knowledge of the nuances of a new culture, as well as a new understanding of local and global issues that link diverse communities. For teachers, engaging in this process and bringing these experiences back into the classroom using best-practice curricular models will go a long way in encouraging students to think globally and participate locally, thus completing the circular path of experiential learning. ■

## NOTES

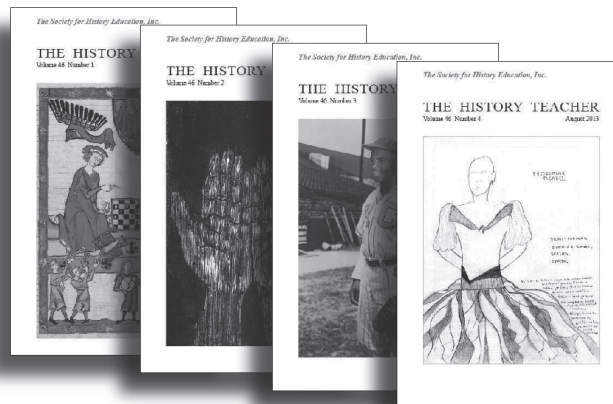
1. See Saul McLeod, "Kolb-Learning Styles," *Simply Psychology*, last modified 2013, <http://tinyurl.com/kak46ok> and "Kolb's Theory of Experiential Learning," *YouTube*, last modified September 30, 2012, <http://tinyurl.com/krgd8qk>.
2. The material on the Partnership for Youth (P4S) Leading Change appeared in an East-West Center newsletter in 2008.

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