

Literacy Camp

Our lessons learned



Rationale

PEPY began working in Chanleas Dai commune in 2006, following a partnership project to fund the construction of a primary school building. The school was constructed through a partnership with American Assistance for Cambodia (AAfC). At that time AAfC also ran programs providing English and Computer classes at schools it funded. These classes ran outside the normal school day, and were supplementary to the government program. Through AAfC, PEPY began these classes at Chanleas Dai, first working through AAfC and later running the program directly. Through these programs PEPY realized that many children in primary school had very low Khmer literacy levels. Many could barely read and write their own name. To address this, PEPY introduced a focus on Khmer Literacy to complement its English/Computer programming.

In 2007 the PEPY team tested every child attending primary school in Chanleas Dai. Focusing on children in grades 4,5, and 6, the children were then divided into small groups dependent on their level – not on their age or their school grade. These groups (around 15 students per group) were then offered additional literacy classes 3 days per week. If students wanted to attend English and computer classes (which were very popular) then they also had to attend Khmer classes. PEPY hired teachers to teach these classes and scheduled the classes during the day when students had free time. These classes continued for around a year, and made a significant difference to the literacy levels of the students. The program was run with the support of the primary school.

During this time, the PEPY team was also developing the school library (you can read the Lessons Learned report for that project here) and was also trying to find ways to build the capacity of the government school teachers in their literacy teaching, rather than just directly teaching students. As part of this shift of focus from students to teachers, PEPY began an annual “Literacy Camp”. (Our later projects included Classroom Libraries, which you can read more about on our website)

The Literacy Camps were planned as mini educational summer camps for students to attend in the August/September holidays. However, they were designed mainly for teacher training purposes, to introduce teachers to new ways of introducing literacy, and particularly books, into their classrooms.

Program development and transition

The first PEPY Literacy Camp was piloted in September 2008 at Chanleas Dai Primary School and ran for two weeks. Teachers from throughout Chanleas Dai commune were invited to attend. In this first week, teachers created activities together and had training on literacy from PEPY staff and hired trainers. Students were then tested to determine their level, and they entered a five-day camp doing activities tailored to their level, but focused around reading and writing. The camp also included an optional day trip to see Angkor Wat.

Following positive feedback from the Chanleas Dai school principal and the teachers involved, PEPY ran the Literacy Camp again in 2009.

In 2010, the camp extended to an additional school, as the number of children was too great to host in just one school. In 2011, Math was added to the camps curriculum as this was identified as another key need for student learning. The PEPY team also included the use of XO laptops in some parts of the camp, mainly for older children. The XOs were a strong learning incentive for the older children, and also provided a different way of interacting with literacy and math concepts.

Teachers worked in pairs and were strategically put together to pair less experienced educators with those that had received more training. We also introduced systems of peer observation and feedback that was shared during lunch time and each day after the camp. Peer-observation of teaching enabled greater sharing of various techniques, what worked well, what did not work well.

In 2011, PEPY changed strategic direction to work with young people at high school and university level, and so teacher training and primary literacy was no longer a key focus area for the organization. As a result, PEPY held the final Literacy Camp in 2012.

Literacy Camp methodology

Background to the model

The methodology for the Literacy Camp evolved over the years of implementation. The key objectives were as follows:

1. Teachers have improved ability to teach literacy and encourage a reading culture
2. Teachers have the opportunity to share with each other their experiences and knowledge relevant to teaching literacy
3. Teachers have a greater awareness of the Child Friendly School policy and how that relates to teaching style and technique
4. Teachers have improved skill in preparing and developing literacy teaching methods
5. Teachers have the opportunity to practice new classroom management, teaching skills, and use new resources.
6. Teachers understand how to use play activities to promote learning
7. Teachers have a stronger motivation to make use of their Classroom Library
(see PEPY's Classroom Libraries Lessons Learned for more details about this project)

Camp preparation

As we learned very quickly during our first pilot year of Literacy Camp, preparation is key! We found the critical parts of planning a camp to be:

- Announcements to Department of Education (DoE) and Commune chief (invitation to attend the final ceremony and any other days of the day)
- Application form for students and teachers. The student form included details such as Name, Age, Grade Level, Village, School attended, as well as the deadline to return the form, and the dates of the camp.
- Student placement test. It was important to consider both how to train the teachers to conduct this test, as well as how best to ascertain the students' literacy level.
- Materials and activity books for teachers to use as a resource during their teaching.

Teacher training

The teacher training section of the camp usually lasted five or six days. In general, the trainings had two focuses, Child Friendly methodologies and Classroom Library methodologies. There was also time at the end for the teachers to design their own lesson plans and materials to be used during the camp.

Examples of the topics covered during this time:

- Using questions
- Using games and play for learning
- Using available resources to enrich classroom environments
- Developing reading

- Developing writing
- Assessment/ Students portfolio
- Teacher reflection (self-assessment)

Other key components of the training section were:

- Introductory icebreaker. This to include teachers' experience, why they came to the camp, and their strengths and weaknesses
- Feedback from the teachers. We asked the participants every day what they thought was the most useful and what they thought could have been left out
- Breaks. We made sure to take long breaks in the middle of the day when it's too hot to work.
- Team building. Take time to have fun with soccer games, singing songs, or field trips.
- Discussion and the trade of ideas between participants.

We found that encouraging the teachers to work in groups was much more effective as it gave them opportunity to share their ideas and developed their confidence.

We used trainers from the Provincial Teacher Training College, however we also strategically paired stronger and weaker teachers together in the classroom, and used strategies of peer evaluation and feedback. The most important parts of this program's success related to having strong training that included active and experiential learning.

Student testing

Working with the teachers to effectively test the students was a critical part of Literacy Camp. First, we trained the teachers on the testing rubric, including having a "practice" group of students to test so that we could check teachers understanding by seeing what level they placed the students in after the test. During the actual testing, all students were given an identity number to make sure they could be easily matched with their test score. Teachers worked in pairs in each classroom to test the students to make sure there was consistency in the testing and to give each other support. We encouraged the teachers to make sure this felt like an "informal" test to the students. We did not want the students to feel scared, or it would be difficult to get a good sense of their ability. Teachers were encouraged to make the students feel relaxed and at ease. In addition, we found it was important to reassure the teachers that they would not be criticized if the students they were testing did not perform well. It was important to stress that the testing was to place the students in the correct level, not as a judgment on the students' or teachers' ability.

Once the testing was complete, the papers were graded twice by two different teachers, and then inconsistencies in grading were discussed. The teachers then divided the students into levels according to their performance in the test. To do this, teachers voted on which level each student should be in, and then discussed any difference of opinion. Over the years, although this process was developed and honed, the PEPY team actually found that oral testing in general worked better than written testing.

Camp levels and classroom set up

Once the students are tested, the teachers and staff prepared the classrooms for the students to attend. The PEPY team assigned each level an animal, and included pictures of that animal above the classroom door, and gave each student a paper headband or badge of that animal to wear. This meant students associated themselves with a certain animal group, rather than a top level or bottom level. The animals were chosen to avoid any sense of hierarchy – for example it was never clear if an elephant was higher than a rhino. This was to avoid less able children feeling demotivated by their

grouping. Desks were arranged in circles, or not used at all, to help provide a different atmosphere to normal school lessons.

Camp activities

During the training week, the PEPY teacher trainers and the government teachers planned their activities for the second week of the camp. The focus was on games-based learning and active learning styles. You can download a pack of sample literacy activities that were compiled from PEPY literacy activities here. Here is one sample activity as an example:

Activity time: 20 minutes

Materials needed: Chalkboard, chalk, paper, pencil

Level: Advanced

Objective: To practice reading, understanding and creative writing

Teacher writes a very basic story on the board. Students rewrite the story but make it more interesting with adjectives and action.

EXAMPLE: Joe went to the store to buy bread, but he came home without any.

Answer: Joe went to the store because his mother needed bread to make sandwiches. On the way to the store he got caught in the rain so he went into a house nearby. The house was haunted and Joe got very scared so he ran away. Joe ran all the way back to his house. His mother was angry because Joe did not have the bread and his clothes were very muddy.

Resources

PEPY covered the cost of basic materials for use in the camp, such as paper, pencil, chalk, markers. However, the team did not provide any resources that would not usually be found in the school classrooms. We did not want to train the teachers on using resources that they would not ordinarily have access to. In addition, the teacher training also focused on effective use of resources, as well as incorporating resources from outside the classroom into classroom activities. For example, teachers could play letter-bingo with the students, and collect stones from outside to use as bingo chips.

Team teaching

The idea of Literacy Camp was that teachers taught in pairs – or even in groups of three or four with the students. This not only enabled them to have more direct interaction with the students, but also allowed them to support each other's teaching, and learn from their different teaching styles and ideas. Teachers were encouraged to give each other feedback on the classes, and discuss what went well and what needed improving.

Challenges

What is a camp?

Summer Camps don't exist in Cambodia. When school finishes for the holidays, school finishes, and it is only once the official term starts that students and teachers begin to trickle back through the doors. In the first year of the Literacy Camp, it was very difficult to communicate what a "camp" was, and why it might be a fun and interesting thing to do. We searched for a word in Khmer would capture the right meaning and settled on "titvi amnang" which roughly translates into reading festival, or reading celebration. However, we still struggled to explain the idea that the camp was studying, but not school, fun, but not chaotic, encouraging reading and writing, but not pushing students. It took something of a leap of faith from the Chanleas Dai principal and the teachers who attended to accept our ideas. Thankfully, they were prepared to trust us and the success of the first camp cemented the concept in people's minds, making it much easier to communicate in subsequent years.

It's not like school

Classroom settings in Cambodia are very formal, and disassociated from play or outside activities. At first, it was difficult to encourage teachers to test out activity-based methods, as it was so different from the teaching style they were used to. In addition, basic activities such as encouraging the students to ask questions, come up to the board, and work in groups, were in the first year of the camps quite challenging for teachers.

Testing

Ensuring that the testing process for the children was well-organized, and that a successful rubric was used and well understood by all teachers was definitely a challenge. As the volume of students increased year-on-year the organizational component become increasingly important.

Late-comers

The PEPY team also found that some students would join mid-way through the camp, having been encouraged by their friends to come along. As teachers wanted to include all students who were keen to learn, this meant they had to test the new students, try and fit them into the appropriate grade, and then also ensure they could catch up with their peers in the class. This was a good practice for teachers in terms of managing different levels of students, but it was a challenge nonetheless.

Paying teachers

In the first years of the camp, PEPY paid the teachers attending the training \$20 per day to attend the camp (total \$100 for 5 days). The team realized this was too high in comparison to salaries and prices in the area and reduced the amount substantially the next year, and then gradually a little more each subsequent year. The reduction of this fee was understandably unpopular with the teachers, who wanted to be paid more to attend the training. PEPY was committed to developing a commitment to quality of education and so was reluctant to motivate teachers through money. However, this issue was a problem each year when planning the camp with principals and teachers.

Flooding

The PEPY team had a strong rationale in holding the camps in September: in August the students and teachers might be busy doing other things. During the April holidays, Khmer New year celebrations take over, and it's also far too hot for any decent learning. In September it's much cooler, there are few distracting holiday celebrations and students and teachers are getting ready to start school again and so they are more prepared to attend. However, this time of year can have very heavy rains and flooding. This can make it impossible for students and teachers to physically get to the school, and while heavy rain doesn't stop classes, it does prevent teachers conducting play activities outside and using the resources around them.

Evaluation

During the years in which PEPY organized Literacy Camps, the PEPY team was also implementing a range of other literacy activities with teachers and students. As such, it is difficult to properly evaluate the effect of Literacy Camp on the ability of the students and teachers, as they were benefitting from other projects at the same time. In addition, much of the successes brought about by Literacy Camp are very difficult to measure. It's difficult to demonstrate how a teacher's courage and confidence increases, and the manner in which students develop an excitement to learn.

Sustainability

PEPY's Literacy Camp was not an economically sustainable project. While the costs were relatively low in comparison to number of teachers and students who benefitted, there was still no way that the schools could run the project without PEPY funds in the future. However, the PEPY team actually found that after 5 consecutive years of running the camp, the need actually decreased. What was at the start a new, exciting activity, after a few years became less interesting to teachers and students – many of whom had attended multiple years and were familiar with the activities. While there was of course room to keep developing the scope of the camp, the Literacy Camp as it was originally designed did not need to continue indefinitely.

Impact

Participation

PEPY's Literacy Camp reached over 700 students and 79 teachers. The camp was open to primary school students in Chanleas Dai commune who had completed grade 2. Following the pilot year, Literacy Camp saw a sharp increase in the number of student participants, as well as an increase in the number of teachers. Some of these teachers were also community teachers (i.e. part time / supply teachers) who were invited to join the camp. The decline in numbers in 2012 was in part due to reducing the number of schools back down to two, and also the increase in seasonal migration to Thailand which began to affect participation across all PEPY projects.

Year	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
Students	204	421	700	759	415
Teachers	43	54	75	79	59
Schools	1	1	2	3	2

NB. The numbers in this table are not cumulative. The same students and teachers would often attend one or two years of Literacy Camp in a row – for example, most of the children who attended in 2010 also attended in 2011. The biggest reach for the Literacy Camp was 759 students in 2011.

Uninhibited discussion

In the first year of Literacy Camp the PEPY trainers spend the first day of the camp slowly pressing the teachers to share their ideas. This was something new and challenging for the teachers. The following year, our team was delighted to facilitate training sessions with the teachers that were lively, energetic and full of laughter and uninhibited discussion.

Child Friendly Schools

The government of Cambodia adopted a Child Friendly Schools (CFS) policy in 2007. Child Friendly School are those that operate in the best interests of the child. As mentioned in the CFS policy, the learning environments of Child Friendly Schools are characterized by equity, balance, freedom, solidarity, non-violence and a concern for physical, mental and emotional health.”¹ All schools in Cambodia are supposed to be aware of this policy, and strive to develop their schools in this way. When PEPY first started Literacy Camp, we conducted interviews with 8 principals in the area, only half of them claimed they understood the idea of Child Friendly School policies, and less than 25% said that these policies were implemented in their classroom. The teacher training part of Literacy Camp had a strong focus on the ideas behind Child Friendly Schools, and as a result the teachers understand the purpose of the policy, and their role in implementing it in the classroom.

Parent support and participation

At the end of each camp, PEPY organized a presentation for the students to showcase their work to their families and other community members. This became a very popular event, as it was rare that

¹ See National Education Partnership [website](#) for more details on Child Friendly Schools

parents were really involved, or had an understanding of what their children learnt in school. By 2010, the “graduation” ceremonies were attracting over 300 adults. PEPY team member Sung Chan Ratana commented that year that the reaction of parents, teachers, and community members was the biggest difference in comparison to the previous years: ‘Parents are surprised at the change in their children. They tell me that they are more confident, that they wonder about everything and ask more questions—they are very proud, and understand the importance of education.’

Active learning

One of the key elements for the PEPY team about Literacy Camp, was to try and demonstrate to students – and to teachers – that learning could be animated, dynamic and fun. Over 7 years working with Chanleas Dai primary school we saw a substantial shift in the attitude and learning atmosphere within the school. What were originally quiet classrooms filled with students who never spoke but merely copied from the board became places of life, activity, color and excitement. Teachers would sometimes take their class outside to learn or read books, alphabets and number charts brighten the walls, and students would read books in their break times. While once more PEPY cannot attribute this change solely to the Literacy Camp, as we were conducting many other programs there at the time, the infectious energy of a week-long camp with the students, and the feeling of “it’s not really school” definitely made a difference in changing the way the teachers and the students approached learning. Once something is fun once, it’s more easy to see how it can be fun a second time.

Lessons learned

Planning planning planning

As with any event-based activity, planning is key. PEPY's Literacy Camp in 2009 benefitted hugely from the lessons we learned about the important of proper planning in 2008! Preparing a strong testing rubric, mapping out all the various teacher training activities well in advance, ensuring lunches and snacks were timely and well-organized all contributed to the more efficient and therefore effective camp.

Feedback sessions

Incorporating opportunities for teachers to reflect on the activities (both in the training week and the teaching week) and discuss what was successful and what needed more improvement was really important in helping them improve their lessons and teaching techniques. We added more time for this into the schedule in later years.

Testing

While the testing was important to be able to group the students into levels, it was actually a crucial teacher training activity. Having 2 teachers grade each test and discuss differences, and discuss student placement in levels was important in helping them understand how literacy skills developed, how to evaluate them, and how to improve them.

Using local resources

Initially, PEPY used resources in the camp that weren't ordinarily available to the teachers. For example, in the first year PEPY included XO laptops (part of a PEPY extra-curricular class) in the camp. However, in later years we found that working to support teachers develop resources from the materials they had around them both inside and outside the classroom was far more useful.

Showcase student work

As discussed above, giving the opportunity for the students to demonstrate to their families what they had achieved was not only motivating for the students, but was also a great way to promote the value of education to their parents and other community members. In later years the PEPY team developed this further by including a cultural parade around the villages as part of the presentation. Students used arts and crafts materials to replicate native attire worn by minority tribes in Ratanakiri province in northeast Cambodia.

Integration with school curriculum

The goal of the Literacy Camps was really to promote a more active style of teaching and learning, and so the activities planned and practiced were not designed in-line with the government school curriculum. While it is important for the camp NOT to feel like school, it would perhaps be possible to include curriculum points that the teachers or students found particularly difficult as part of the camp, in order to support their ongoing development during the school year. This would involve feedback

from teachers and students before the start of the camp, and then more careful planning of how to include these ideas in the style of the camp.

Paying teachers

As discussed in the “Challenges” section, the payment of teachers for the Literacy Camp was an ongoing concern. If implementing the camp in another school area, the PEPY team would recommend conducting careful research into appropriate compensation for the teachers to avoid having to change it in future years.

