



You don't have to be a writer or a teacher to lead creative writing workshops in Cambodia – all you need is a sense of adventure and a love for language. We spoke to the team from **Writing Through** about how you can get involved.

BY KATIE ROBERTS

Tell us how your work in Cambodia evolved.

Sue: I visited Cambodia for the first time with my son and my husband in 2006 to volunteer in Phnom Penh and Kep; it turned out to be a life-changing experience for me. When we returned to London, where we were living at the time, I finished the novel I was working on. Then I was free to change tack and write about Cambodia around the themes of how you survive after a trauma, and how locals interact with Westerners who come to “help”.

I could see a need for more conceptual thinking skills – to help people to identify their thoughts and empower them to express those thoughts through writing; this isn't possible within a rote learning-based education system. I'd given creativity workshops over the years, so I prepared one to present in Cambodia.

I introduced the idea to a contact at the NGO Anjali House, which was founded by photojournalists and has an arts element within its educational programme. It was a good match. I visited Cambodia over the following seven years to deliver that workshop.

Was there a trigger moment for the launch of Writing Through?

Sue: In 2014, a person involved with the French NGO Enfants du Mekong (Children of the Mekong) heard me speak at a university in London where I was a writer-in-residence. To cut a long story short, they engaged me to deliver my creative writing workshop at Banteay Chhmar, a village on the Thai-Cambodian border. Afterwards, I met the NGO leaders in Paris and told them that the children couldn't think because they had no access to the arts. They agreed, and asked me to run my creative writing workshops at all their schools.

It was then that I decided to start an organisation. With the support of my family, I set the wheels in motion and Writing Through was incorporated as a charity in the US in 2015. Our goals are to teach language fluency, conceptual thought and self-esteem through creative writing, and to train Cambodian teachers to carry on this work.

From left: Martha Scarborough (outgoing Singapore Coordinator), Jess Blackledge (Cambodia Coordinator), Sue Guiney (Founder and CEO), and Patty Bierley (incoming Singapore Coordinator)

How do you work with NGOs?

Jess: NGOs engage us to facilitate workshops at their schools. They value this unique programme but can't provide it themselves – and there is a huge demand for it. Children of the Mekong has officially adopted us as a branch of its programming; we also work with Caring for Cambodia, another well-known NGO. I live and work in Siem Reap, coordinating the programme and delivering workshops.

What is the student demographic?

Patty: Students range in age from nine to 25 years, and they are generally keen and enthusiastic; upon completion of the workshop, they're encouraged to come again. We work with the most at-risk communities – the poorest of the poor. Some isolated, rural schools have no electricity, just a simple battery-operated fan. Attitudes are very traditional, and often they don't share the basic assumption that education is worth pursuing. We want them to know that it's worth their time.

Tell us what you're doing in Singapore.

Martha: We currently work with the Humanitarian Organisation for Migrant Economics (HOME) and have run three writing workshops for the foreign domestic helpers who stay temporarily at the HOME shelter; it meets their goal of making this time enriching and useful. Unlike in Cambodia, we don't need a translator. Our focus is on higher thinking and conceptual skills – working in metaphors, for example. Our primary aim is to use creativity as a tool to increase conceptual thinking skills that lead to critical thinking skills. It's an opportunity for students to take ownership of their own thoughts – what comes from within.

Where do you find your volunteers?

Martha: The majority are recruited from Singapore; it's a mix of Singaporeans and expats. Since our training session in April we have trained around 40 facilitators.



Inside a Cambodia workshop

Most schools are located in the Siem Reap area. Workshops run for 1.5 hours a day, and at the end of the week students present their work in front of an audience. Facilitators work with students in class and help with the editing and typing of the magazine that they produce. The workshops are a safe and fun environment where students and facilitators work together to start thinking in new ways. Each class has around 15 students and an English teacher who acts as the translator. Every student receives a certificate and a copy of the magazine to keep and show to their friends.



Martha: Attitude is important. The students have had hard lives, and facilitators must relate to them respectfully and with appreciation.

Patty: We ask that volunteers commit to one week a year, and understand that this is on a self-support basis. You pay for your own flights, accommodation and food – it's part of the contribution to Writing Through.

What are your plans?

Sue: As well as increasing our facilitator numbers, I'm continually looking at funding, raising awareness and new partnership opportunities. In terms of growth, we are only limited by the size of the volunteer pool. In 2015, we won an International Freedom Through Literacy Award – a big achievement in our first year. Also, a publisher in London has offered to collate an anthology of student poems, and a photographer in the US is keen to visit Cambodia and shoot images for a coffee-table book to illustrate the stories of Writing Through. We're also talking to other NGOs about delivering the workshop at more schools. It's definitely an exciting time – the organisation is flourishing! *ε*

It's an unusual opportunity – people can volunteer in Singapore or Cambodia. Part of the challenge in Singapore is the turnover of expats who relocate – we need to continually train volunteers so as to keep up with demand.

What are you looking for in a volunteer?

Sue: No prior skills are needed; every volunteer is taught our approach and receives a written manual outlining every day of the workshop. Volunteers must take a one-day course and then shadow a five-day workshop (in Cambodia or Singapore). A sense of delight in the language is important, but it's OK if English isn't your first language; some of our most experienced facilitators are not native speakers.

Interested? To find out how you can get involved, visit writingthrough.org.