IT'S NOT EASY GETTING

THE WORK DONE

The Teaching Day
David Barnes (Czech Republic)

It's not wise to worry too much about teaching. My students were an extremely interesting bunch with very informed opinions about most things. Get them talking about their country as they like to moan, especially about politicians (justifiably so).

In my staffroom, lessons would often be allowed to run late for the benefit of hot wine, becherovka, slivovitz, peach vodka, open sandwiches (*chlebicky*), fruit teas and Turkish coffee. I don't condone this behaviour, but I didn't object to it strongly at the time.

If one finds oneself teaching grammar a good book full of games is invaluable. It's really rewarding when a class likes what you're doing and enjoys a game. Private teaching is a good way to meet people. I taught a wide range of people, from bank employees to engineers to fifteen-year-old schoolgirls. For the bank employees, a 5:15am start was necessary; and in the winter, a long trudge through the snow.

Pack Some Patience
Liselotte Wolters (Uganda)

Here in Uganda, you certainly learn how to do everything two gears slower. Why hurry? If you come two hours late to work, work will still be there.

Scolar, one of the lab staff, comes back a week late from a month's leave.

'Why are you a week late, Scolar?' I ask.

'I had some problems.' (The standard answer here.)

'What kind of problems?'

. . . Silence. . . .

'Can I have three days off next week?' Scolar asks.

'Why do you want three days off after five weeks of leave?'

'Well, I have some things to do.'

'What kind of things?' I ask.

. . . Silence. . . .

Before I left home, a friend advised me to take a suitcase full of patience with me. I did, unfortunately the suitcase was empty very quickly. But well, with time you get used to everything, even to having patience.

Travelling by public transport requires a lot of patience. You get in a *matatu* (minibus) – officially there is space for fourteen passengers but, don't worry – it will easily fit twenty-six. You drive around for about an hour until the matatu is full (*really* full). Halfway you have to get into another matatu and drive around another hour till that matatu is full full. You stop several times because people want to do their shopping, and nothing is so easy as just asking the matatu driver to stop in front of the shop, do your shopping and continue the journey. Don't worry about the fact that twenty-five other passengers are waiting for you, because they will ask the driver to stop one mile further on to do their shopping.

But, in the end you will reach your destination.

Rural Students

Rob Palmer (Ghana)

There I was, five days after leaving London in cold January, standing in a dusty African village surrounded by a crowd of small faces beaming up at me screaming 'obruni' (white-man), while I silently questioned my sanity for asking BUNAC to find me 'somewhere rural, remote and by myself'.

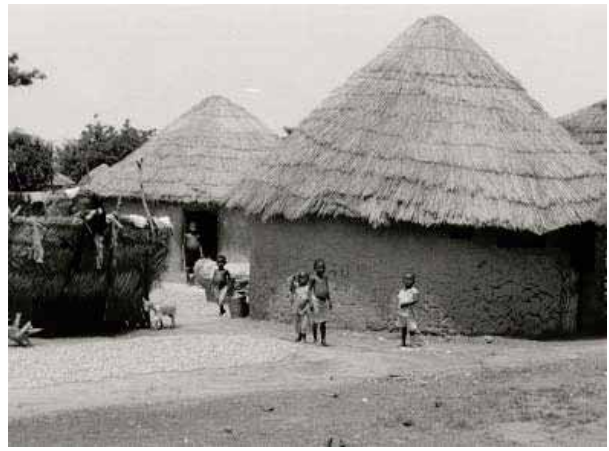
However, when I was met by two of the girls with, 'Hello, my name is Happy, this is my friend Comfort, you are welcome to Ghana,' it was difficult to feel anything but optimistic about my stay in this tiny village despite having no water, electricity, being one and a half hours from the nearest hint of civilisation and the proud owner/user of my very own maggot-pit, cockroach-infested toilet. It would be a long eleven months. Or so I thought.

I ended up working for a Ghanaian government poverty reduction initiative, called ICCES (Integrated Community Centres for Employable Skills), which had the aim of empowering the rural youth with employable skills to make them small-scale entrepreneurs in their own communities.

Yet I soon found there to be some sort of gross miscommunication, as I found myself being introduced as a 'rural micro-project development co-ordinator', with the whole community having great expectations about my presence. So it was that I started to take on this role, spending the first week visiting surrounding communities, meeting the chiefs, elders and fetish priests of these settlements. At first it was all a bit daunting, until I was introduced to the custom of taking one 'tot' of neat moonshine spirit, *akperteshie*, with each village chief.

It was such a valuable project, I knew I had to do everything I could to live up to their expectations. About half the youth attending the training centre had previously dropped out of junior secondary school (before the age of sixteen)

and many were totally illiterate. Without this centre they would have no chance to gain skills with which to construct a better life for themselves. During the time I was there we managed to build up the trainee number from just seven in January to eighty-five by the time I left in November, raising over £11,000 in funding from Ghana and the UK.



Village in Ghana

My job essentially involved managing the centre – accounts, planning, some teaching, fundraising, marketing and selling products that we made (such as coffins), raising awareness of the scheme, visiting local NGOs, government officials and traditional leaders. You have to be willing to turn your hand to anything, but really anything is possible as long as you believe it is. One day I found myself teaching fifty girls dressmaking theory, another I was talking to one of the Cabinet Ministers about the project's potential for Ghana.

At first there was a big problem with attendance of the trainees, as many either had to help their family to farm or were not used to attending every day, not having been in education for many years. I found a cunning way to make sure the students attended all the classes. The villagers believe that the forest is inhabited by the 'little people' (the *mmoatia*), who are apparently like red, hairy dwarfs. All the villagers are afraid of them. So, perhaps unethically or unkindly, I realised I could use this local belief to my advantage. I told my students that the *mmoatia* had told me they would take away any students not in class. Attendance rates increased after that time.

However, you really do have to make allowances for the students being late or absent. The difference between English kids and Ghanaian kids is immense. When I was their age I came home from school, put my feet up and watched *The Three Muskahounds* while eating Sunpat peanut butter sandwiches before I ate a large dinner. They end school, go back to their mud-stick hut, weed the farms, fetch water, wash clothes, pound *fufu*, collect firewood and do any household chores. Some will go out hawking to earn some small money. Many work as shoe-shiners for 30p a day and can be heard coming from afar by the tap-tap they make with a stick on their wooden shoebox. They often try to shine your shoes not understanding why you don't want black shoe polish on your trainers. Others start to pick bits off your shoes, then look hopefully up at you and say, 'I have glue.'

Becoming a 'Responsible Adult'

Heidi Fitch (Canada)

I knew that I wanted to do something constructive and beneficial during my transitional year. I didn't let my severe deafness affect the things I wanted to do. I wanted to explore and discover a new country at the same time, and I accomplished that by volunteering in Canada.

I went on a six-month caring placement and didn't really have any expectations. Upon my arrival at the small university town of Antigonish, Nova Scotia, I was overwhelmed by the prospect of being away from home for so long. It was a bonus that everyone at l'Arche community project made efforts to make me feel welcome, although it was hard knowing that everyone I knew was continuing their lives on the other side of the pond. I knew I would be taking care of six mentally-disabled adults and I told myself that I would be willing to take what would be thrown at me.

Before long, I got pretty accustomed to the routines. There's me thinking, 'Whoah, I've never had to feel so responsible before!'

My role as an assistant involved preparing and serving meals, helping with morning and evening routines, refilling medications, and cleaning. I thought, 'learning the basics of managing a home sure will be useful!'

But most important of all was spending time with the core members of the community. They have Down's Syndrome to different extents, so all have different needs. They are not capable of getting along by themselves, so need assistance in their daily activities, as well as help learning to be a little independent – it was quite challenging at times. Some of the core members have psychological problems and that tended to be quite draining.

We always seemed to be celebrating something – anniversaries, birthdays, going aways – you name it. L'Arche encouraged me to learn about different things, about the people and myself through them, and it helped me feel comfortable with my identity. Looking back, it's pretty amazing to think how things like that can change your perspective on life totally. Despite my hearing loss, I coped really well and had a fantastic time. I feel that I came back to Britain with more self-confidence and 'different eyes'.

VIP Treatment

Eva and Bernard Batchelor (Cameroon)

Our flight to the Far North Province was the most bizarre farce you could ever imagine. Two football teams from the south were playing two teams from the north in Ngaoundere and Garuoa. The football teams were allowed to get on the plane first, leaving forty-two people (half the capacity of the Boeing 737) unable to get a seat. This caused a mini riot at the airport – people were shouting, pushing and climbing over barriers and along the conveyor belts. The packed plane was on the runway and all the airport officials had disappeared.

After a while the Cam Air staff reappeared with a solution – the plane would fly north to Ngaoundere and Garuoa and then return to Yaoundé to pick up the travellers to Chad and Maruoa (where we were going) and fly north again. However, there were passengers sitting on the plane from Douala who were expecting to go to Chad and Maruoa. They were told to get off and wait in the departure lounge and the people without seats going to Garuoa and Ngaoundere were told to get on the plane. This left seventy very disgruntled passengers, including us, to wait three hours for the plane to return. When it did eventually return all the passengers who boarded at Ngaoundere and were expecting to travel to Douala in the south had to get off and wait in the departure lounge in Yaoundé while the plane took all the rest of us north.

There was no food or drink on the flight as the first group of passengers had consumed it all, and the three-hour internal flight turned into an eleven-hour journey at a temperature of nearly 100°F.

Once we arrived in Maruoa we settled down to enjoy the purpose of our visit, to work with the people in the villages. The Paramount Chief of one of the villages had arranged for his Fantasia of Horses for us (a horse spectacular). He had arranged this once before for us on one of our visits but due to the death of one of the government officials it had to be cancelled. This time we had the full display.

We were seated in the VIP area in front of the Chief's Palace with two rows of local chiefs and dignitaries seated in front of us on mats and the Paramount Chief's many wives behind us. A small group of musicians and drummers set a noisy atmosphere. In the distance at the far end of the village square came a phalanx of fifteen charging horsemen, their Arab clothing billowing behind. Their eight-foot spears were lowered for the charge and they only stopped about two feet from the front row of chiefs. The noise and dust from the horses, the crowds shouting and ululating wives made the whole atmosphere electric.

The whole village population came out to watch – even the children had run out of school to come to watch as well. There followed a variety of displays – individual charges, horses dancing to the music, in fact anything we asked for. By the end the horses were very hot and lathered up. This was yet another wonderful experience for us to remember, especially the opening charge, which was so emotional and dramatic as the horses appeared out of a cloud of dust.

We revisited a small, very destitute village which had no clean water and spent some time there with our Plan International colleagues. We took a sample of water from their calabash and there were worms swimming around in it. They took us into their house and they were delighted that we were taking an interest in their acute problems. None of the children in the village go to school and the adults are illiterate. As this was our second visit we took the camera and were able to take pictures of the inside of the houses and general views of the village.

It was clean but unbelievably basic – no water, one straw hut for the whole family and animals, no medical services, no personal hygiene facilities, a staple diet of millet and minimal clothing. Life at this level is a daily struggle for survival. To have been able to share for a short time these people's lives highlighted for

us the greed and selfishness of our western culture – poverty is an insidious trap from which there sometimes seems there is no escape.

While we were there we were guests of honour at an inter-village football match organised by the trainers of our project. Cameroonians take their sport seriously and unfortunately the referee was misguided enough to award a penalty in the second half. At this point a riot broke out, fists were flying and knives appeared. The local pastor kept apologising to us, our driver and vehicle quickly disappeared to collect up the visiting team to take them to safety in their own village. When it came back we had to take one of the players with a knife wound to the local hospital. We never knew whether the penalty was awarded to the home or away team. The return match is when we go back at Christmas.

Learning to Teach

Holly Twiname (China)

The work is going well, as I feel more and more like a teacher. My students are still not coming out with any profound questions, and it gets a little tedious when a student turns around and asks me whether I like Chinese food for the 174th time.

The other day I bought a tape entitled *English Excellent Songs* (which I hoped I could use to teach my students some easy to sing along to songs). Aside from the spelling, the contents of the tape are a far cry from what the cover says. According to the cover, there is supposed to be a selection of songs by various artists – Bryan Adams, Lionel Richie, Stevie Wonder, Whitney Houston, etc. Instead, there are two people – a man for all the male artists, and a woman for all the female artists, the accompanying instruments being reduced to a synthesiser. Obviously two karaoke-happy people taking it a bit too far. (I should have known that something was amiss when I saw the words to *Yesterday Once More* under the title *Sealed with a Kiss.*)

After months of trying to set up a reading room/self-access centre at college (where students can come and read, work and chat in English), today I was finally given the key to a room. Success! Or so I thought. I went and saw the room, and it was just great – exactly what I wanted. The Dean of the English Department took me to have a look, and then dropped into the conversation that they were going to tear down the building. So, within the first minute of seeing this room, I was already having to deal with the fact that soon it wasn't even going to be there. But, having been in China for some time now, I have developed a bit of a die-hard spirit, and ten minutes later, the Dean and I were in the Vice-President's office trying to dissuade him of this ludicrous idea, based mostly on the premise that it obstructs the view of a grander building.

Life continues at a slightly slower pace, following the ridiculous amounts of teaching I was doing up until last week for various reasons. The other foreign teacher had to leave suddenly about three weeks ago due to her father falling very seriously ill. So now it's just my little foreign face in these parts.

Holly teaching

The teaching continues, in a somewhat hectic manner, with seventy students on average in a class. It's not too bad, especially after I found a small classroom which the students can squeeze into with no desks. This is better in terms of classroom dynamics (and much easier on my voice). Now that my hours have been so dramatically reduced, I am being invited by high schools around Zhoukou (in the countryside) to give lectures to their students. This started following a visit I made to a high school last term where I gave a so-called 'lecture' – to all 2,000 students in one go. It seems other schools now want me to visit them too.

On Friday I went to another school, (about thirty minutes from Zhoukou) and gave a similar lecture to the entire school – which, much to my surprise turned out to be over 4,000. (The last school was only half that.) I was given a microphone and my voice was projected over loudspeakers. I stood in the middle of this crowd of students and talked about why English was important and how they could improve it. It was so much fun asking them a question and hearing the roar produced by the chorus of their response. Then, to finish off we sang a song. The most significant thing about the whole experience, for most of them, will have been seeing a foreigner for the first time. Apparently, even some passers-by had also joined the crowd to have a look, and I even had to sign autographs at the end – my only claim to fame being that I am a foreigner.

Birth in Bangladesh

Nancy MacKeith (Bangladesh)

I worked in Bangladesh for two years as a volunteer in the Jahural Islam Medical College Hospital (JIMCH) three hours north-east from Dhaka. I chose the placement out of the selection offered me because I read that when my future boss set up the nursing school at JIMCH she arranged that the female nursing students wore shalwar kameez (loose top and trousers) instead of saris as uniform. I thought that indicated a progressive frame of mind. This was a good guess, she was humorous and supportive about cultural differences and she helped me define a role for myself. I have never met a volunteer who actually did the job they came out to do and I was no exception.

I prepared myself as much as possible for my new working situation by reading about maternal health in Bangladesh but it still was very shocking when


Clinic in Bangladesh

I got there. Bangladesh has one of the highest maternal mortality rates in the world – 4.4 per thousand live births. Women are disadvantaged from childhood in their share of household food and access to medical care. An additional hazard when they become pregnant is their high risk of suicide or homicide, particularly if they are young and unmarried. I found Therese Blanchet's anthropological writings on childbearing in Bangladesh very relevant.

Soon after I arrived some medical students and their lecturer in community medicine wanted to do a community survey on maternal health, and I thought this would be a better setting for midwifery teaching. The system that eventually became the routine was that there were clinics in people's houses arranged by field workers. I would go out in one rickshaw and the safe motherhood project doctor in another, each of us with a student. We did the same job of examination advice and referral if called for and had a midwifery student each. On one day a week we would have a safe motherhood meeting where we would discuss any problems and I would teach the field workers about antenatal care. We began to say at the clinics that we would come out to people in labour and this slowly began to happen. We found we were usually called when there was a problem but this might become less likely. On a couple of occasions the mother just needed to be catheterised. If she needed more than we could provide we could negotiate on behalf of the women for permission from her husband and the 'guardian' (decision-maker of the community) and get her to hospital.

It was a real privilege to go into people's houses, observe their ways of having a baby and to be of some use, and the students could experience decision-making in reality.

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Six years after I first flew out to Bangladesh and four years after I left, I returned as part of my current work on breast-feeding. There was the same worrying descent in the aeroplane as the rainy season was at its height. The whole country seemed to be flooded and I could not imagine where we were going to land.

Although my work visit was short, I managed to get in a visit to JIMCH for twenty-four hours. I found my boss and the other staff very well. They in turn were delighted with my appearance. 'Nancy, you are so fat!'

The students from my time had jobs in the hospital, and others had got work in other good NGO hospitals or gone on to do nursing BSc degrees.

My boss showed me the record that has been kept since I started the scheme of visiting people at home in labour. They have information on who went to the house, what they found and the decisions made, as well as outcomes for mother and baby.

It was amazing to see that things I had had a part in were still going on, and I felt very privileged to have had such a good experience.