

FINDING A VOICE

Writing Through is a Cambodian NGO that's unlocking the capacity for conceptual thinking through poetry and storytelling in an education system where creativity is not encouraged



“Sue, I was thinking: Could pain be a bridge?” asks a Cambodian student in one of Sue Guiney’s poetry and storytelling workshops. “We were asking questions [about] what a bridge is,” says Guiney. “I wanted to say, ‘My work here is done.’ Of course it is – it’s all about connections. That was amazing.”

Guiney is a writer who founded Writing Through in Cambodia two and a half years ago, and it has since expanded to Vietnam and Singapore. The program uses poetry and storytelling in an attempt to unlock the capacity for creative, conceptual thinking and break the constraints of an education system based around rote learning.

It is these small lightbulb moments that make the impact of the project speak for itself.

“Writing Through is a workshop that seems on the outside to be about learning English,” says Guiney. “This isn’t even about self-esteem. It’s about how do you think in a new way, how do you teach someone to think – to think conceptually?”

Guiney explains that by holding the workshops in English as opposed to Khmer, the students are forced into a new realm of risk-taking and discomfort needed for that creative spark. “If you’re working in a language that is not your own, in a form that is not your own, you can’t fall back on the tropes of your society,” she says. “And [when] you’re asked to come up with a metaphor that is new, you have to come up with something new. It’s very, very hard.”

At the end of each course, students are expected to stand up on their own and present their work at the final

1 Sue Guiney, founder of Writing Through
2 A Writing Through student shares her work with the class

big event, the ultimate test of nerves. “It’s petrifying for them,” she says. “But after they’ve done it, that sense of self-esteem and accomplishment they carry will pertain to everything else they do.”

Since its inception, the programme has reached around 1,200 students and amassed over 1,700 poems and stories. Writing Through embeds itself with local NGOs for a week at a time, running the workshops often for children from low-income homes, former street kids or victims of drug abuse or domestic violence.



Last year, the organisation launched the Literacy in Language and Thinking programme in collaboration with Phnom Penh’s University of Puthisastra, an intensive mandatory course for all foundation-level students that Guiney says is the first of its kind in the country.

And while the workshops encourage students to keep a distance between themselves and their work – to write in the third person or to make up characters, for example – some kids need to tell their stories.

“There was this one kid who told a story about his life, and you couldn’t believe that happened,” Guiney says. “[He said], this is my story. I want the world to know that this is what happened to me... We are literally giving people their voice, allowing people to say who they are and what they’re thinking, and saying it in a language that isn’t their own – that’s extraordinary.” – *Cristyn Lloyd*