

What an amazing month of rich and varied experiences. Every twist and turn, every meeting and every day brought a new experience. They all came from a wide range of unexpected sources. I suppose that's not really surprising, as my head had been focused totally on the Samata school.



Samata school.

The school was founded and set-up by Uttam Sanjel. His aim was to provide an education opportunity for children who had been sent to Kathmandu, from outlying districts, to stay with families and work at carpet weaving. These children often ended up on the streets, engaged in begging, prostitution or glue sniffing. Samata means equality, and Uttam wanted to demonstrate equality to these disadvantaged children and particularly to girls, in this male orientated society, and to children brought up in differing belief systems.

Preparation for the trip.

To help us get a flavour of volunteering, People and Places provided us with reports that previous volunteers had written about their experiences in Nepal. These were rather varied in style and content. But, all reflected on what a great time the volunteers had.

I was not sure of what I would be asked to do, but I intellectualized a mind-set of being open-minded and prepared to do whatever was asked of me. I secretly hoped that I would not be asked to stand in front of a class teaching for 28 days.

When my Project Profile came, it suggested that I should work with the senior students and their teachers, English, Maths and Painting. Suddenly my open-minded, flexibility took on a degree of 'healthy' anxiety! I emailed some previous volunteers to get some framing on what this might mean. What sort of age group are 'senior students'; what competency level are they at? As the School Leaving Certificate is such a big goal, do you have to teach to a curriculum; what seems to work, or not work? All seemingly sensible questions to help me to be able to help the students!

There appeared to be a conspiracy of silence, no one answered my questions in any sort of factual way. What I got was, 'when you go into the classroom, the children will take you to their hearts.' What did he know? He does not even know me!

Should I be swatting up on Key Stage 2,3 or 4, whatever they are!

The least I could do was a Brain-dump of ideas that I could fall back on as and when I needed them. Oh, and I packed a visual encyclopaedia, it might prove useful.

And so we were off.

And we are off.

Kathmandu and the Kathmandu valley

Kathmandu, was constantly covered in a layer of dust, everything was muted in colour. In the one area, just on the edge of Thamel, the comatosed street boys could hardly be distinguished from the dogs that lay down with them. They were both covered in the dirt and grime of the street, along with the atmospheric dust and exhaust pollution. Just along the road from them was the Garden of Dreams, a walled oasis from the reality of Kathmandu life. On the pavement, just outside the Garden of Dreams sat a young boy of about four years old. His eyes downcast until he beamed up at each passer-by, while offering up his begging bowl. A few metres along from him lay a young girl of about two years of age, fast asleep on a piece of dirty red rag, clutching her begging bowl. The human traffic seemed not to even notice them.



You might liken areas of Kathmandu to either a bomb-site or a building-site, depending on your perspective. There were bits of building work and road alterations going on everywhere, all adding to the colour, chaos and air pollution.

None of this detracted from the splendour of Nepal, nor did the political instability, the last minute strikes or the student riots. It all added an unexpected bonus experience to the trip. As did learning to engage with the traffic when crossing the roads.

The roads were packed with cars; mini buses; big buses; lorries; motor-bikes; cycles and people trying to cross the roads. There seems to be one traffic rule; try and drive on the left, but... What would you expect to do if you wanted to turn right at a T-Junction. Go to the left of the bollard and filter in when there is a space. No you want to go right, so you turn right, in front of the bollard, into the stream of oncoming traffic, working your way right and easing across to the left eventually. It works. All the honking of horns and tooting is just to say, 'I'm here, watch out'. The honking is not about aggression or anger, it's just, 'watch-out, mind me'.

Watch out traffic back in England. After a few days the art of crossing the road is no issue. You just get into the traffic and chase across the flow until you arrive at the other side.

project management team.

Three left turns from the rear exit of the hotel and we were there. Nema, Bipin and Binita were our Project Management Team, sorting out any issue we had. They were fantastic people Binita would even take you shopping if you needed that service! Bipin took us on a tour of Thamel and then introduced us to the Himalayan Tea House. Later that evening we all went to Bhojan Gritha, a restored mansion of the royal priests. Here we sat on the floor for our meal, while being entertained by a range of folk dancers and musicians. So we started our relationship with and with a meal, and on our final night we all got together for a farewell meal. Between the two meals we did do project work and Nepali lessons.



And so on to the Projects.

After our introduction to Kathmandu and the Project Management Team we went on an orientation trip to see the two projects.

We firstly went off to Samata to see the school and meet the principal teachers. We drove over the potholes, through the dust, passing on our way the Bodhnath Stupa, built some time just after 600AD. Up a tiny side street to Samata Shiksha Niketan School, to give it its full title. The school is constructed of local bamboo and mud with a bit of cement here and there. There are about 30 classrooms, about three metres by five metres in size, all constructed around a brick and sand quadrangle. A raised platform with a colourful Buddha sits in the centre. Groups of classrooms are all decorated with a facade representing the major beliefs and religions, to reflect Samata, equality. This school has something like 2500 children registered, and on site there are about 1500 at any one time.

As we went through the gate, we saw that the students were having their 'assembly'. On seeing us enter, Binod, the Vice-Principal, announced our presence to the students, who started clapping. We were called forward to be introduced to the students with a lump in the throat and eyes welling-up. If I felt like this now, how was I going to cope? We all took it in turns to take the Loudhailer and introduce ourselves to more applause, followed by hundreds of smiling 'Namastes'.

Once the students had gone to their classrooms we met the teachers and were then taken into the classes we would be working with. 'Senior students' translated into years 7; 8; 9 and 10. This seemed to cover the age range of about 13 years to 17 years. Although there were older children in each class, these children had started in the system later than others. We learned that the focus of the learning was to enable the students to pass their School Leaving Certificate, in Year 10. This was seen as an 'Irongate', distinguishing the student by opening up choices, not available to those without the SLC. In general, across Nepal, only 10% of children, who go to school, are still in education at Year 10. As the SLC exams were at the end of March, we would not be working with the Year 10 students, they would be having concentrated revision prior to their exams. In the classrooms we reintroduced ourselves to between 40-60 children each time. This was not too challenging a task when accompanied by the other volunteers. 'What am I going to do when it's just me and them tomorrow?'



Preparation.

I thought I'd use the first lesson to get to know something about the children and teachers and share information about me. Then when I knew something about them, I'd be able to prepare some suitable and appropriate work. So, I planned to play it by ear, but with something up my sleeve just in case. Fine, straight forward and easy.

At dinner that evening, the air was full of everyone's anxieties about what they might do and how it might go. So, theoretically prepared or not, a less than sleepfull night followed.

Day one of the project came, as did a phone call at breakfast. The Government had announced an education tax, so all schools had decided to shut for the day in protest. So no school today. The volunteers working in the orphanage went off, while the school volunteers decided to visit the newly opened Royal Palace Museum. Apparently this was much to the displeasure of one of the orphanage volunteers!

First day at work finally arrives.

'So when we get there, I'm sure Binod will guide us as to what, where, when and how.

What I'll plan to do if I am by myself is get students to stand up ask me a question and tell me something about themselves.'

We put our Tiffin in the cupboard, lock up and our librarian becomes custodian of the keys.

When the bell rings, we await Binod,s instruction. However, he thinks we have a programme and should just go off and get on, unless we have an issue. Just one thing, at this stage, we all have the same programme, as it is only meant as an illustration.

Nan just wants to talk to Year 10 and Year 9 for articles for the magazine. So, that's what she must do!

I go off to year 8 and Jan goes to 9. Then we'll work out where best to move next.

Inviting students to ask a question etc. does not seem to go down well. Some of the students have their heads on the desk and others appear to be doing revision exercises. No volunteers, so I choose someone. The soft tones don't travel far in the class room. Second choice no advance. The students all appear very quiet and respectful. What do I do now? I'll tell a bit about me and structure it mainly around our family, and I'll pass

round the photos at the same time. Well this seems to go a bit better, but still not dynamic. In general, the most engaged kids are those at the front. The bell rings. 'Namaste, Bholipatola', and I'm off, feeling 'well, that did not go so well'.

And I'm out into the quad, ready for the next class. Off to 7B.

Another introduction, no one takes up option of asking a question, so back to me describing the family and passing round the photos. As I walk around I get questions and comments about the photos, especially from the girls. The bell goes to announce it's 'leisure' time.

The reflections start, it seems that a lot of students are anxious about the end of year exams, while others are probably exhausted from their domestic chores and work, compounded by having to walk for anything up to two hours to get to school. Where's Nan and the keys? How come so many of the teachers, particularly the males seem to be just sitting around and not with a class?

Now it's off to meet 7A, and see if I can do better! I guess I could just relax into talking about family and discussing the photos. This gets the best engagement. I can't do this for a month! Maybe I should not be trying to relate to the kids, but just teaching them. The bell goes and it's lunch-time.

So where's the key. Nan eventually manages to conjure it up.

Tomorrow is a public holiday, so there will be no school and the kids will go home early today, so no afternoon class.

Thursday arrives and Jan and I agree a rotation to cover 7A, 7B and 9. However, none of the students did anything on Holi day, other than stay home. That's blown that, so 7A and 7B can write about the happy things in their lives, and as a challenge to the right side of their brain, year 9 can draw a picture of their best friend and write down their characteristics. Wow, 'what do you mean, draw. What do you want us to draw?' The repetitive rote learning and need to please the teacher really is coming home.

It appears that the students were kept home on Holi Day either to work or as protection, particularly for the girls. Holi Day is celebrated by throwing water or water bombs at people and rubbing powder dye into their hair and face. So, parents tend to try to protect their daughters by keeping them home. Bobby, Helen and I, however had a great time, returning to the Hotel dripping wet and coloured; red; green and purple.

However, the Year 7 descriptions of what makes the children happy were a revelation. Spending time with family and friends that they love was the universal response to happiness. Being helped and comforted by friends or helping a friend brought extra happiness. How would 13 year old students in the UK have answered this question?

Learnings so far.

The concept of tomorrow just does not exist until it becomes now. Plan and be prepared, but above all, don't be precious; be flexible, humble, and non-judgmental. If you are not, you will only stress yourself and others out.

As each day passes, I learn a little more of how things work in both Samata and Nepal. It's like getting a bit of the jigsaw puzzle, day by day, only the completed puzzle is not likely to be the one you expected in the beginning.

Is this because I am guided by the atmosphere and relationships rather than by the objective goal? Or, is my goal, to relate to the students in a way to demonstrate that the repetitive rote and unquestionable respect for the authority figure is not the only way? Certainly I was thinking I will focus on right brain work, where possible, especially with Year 9.

Whereas, standing in a class room of 40 to 60 students did not feel relaxed to me, whenever I sat out in the quad. it was not long before a group of students would gather around, and we would be talking about any topic you could think of. And that felt good.

The students were, bright, inquisitive, and chatty, out of the class room. So, how do we tie this in with the project?

It has to get worse to get better. A lesson and an answer.

I set 7B a task on a logic grid. I explained the task in general and then explained to each group as they started the task. No group was getting the right answer, so I wrote up the answer and then proceeded to go through the process. Suddenly everyone had the right answer. And by the conversation and noise no one was interested in the process. I did my 'Shush' with gentle arm flapping to indicate lowering the noise. 'Gobby', yelled for silence, in Nepali. No response. I thought '...'. Packed up my things and walked out of class saying

'Namaste'. And squatted next to Buddha and swigged from my water bottle, thinking, '... I've blown it, I should not have walked out'.

Next thing, three of the girls came out. 'Please Ted, sir, don't be angry with us, we are sorry'.

'I'm not angry with you, I just got it all wrong today, I'll see tomorrow'.

'Please don't be angry, come back to class. We all want to apologies'.

I go back. They all stand and apologise. I explain and ask, 'what would you rather do next time'. In one voice, 'we want to go on a trip. You took year 9 to the library, we want to go.'

I agree to check out the feasibility of taking them on a trip.

Trips out.

There is no doubt, that in terms of interacting with the students, having more meaningful conversations, exchanging learning and the students having fun, trips out did it. Some Nepali teachers came on each trip, along with Sushil, Uttam's nephew. He was 18, and wanted to drop out of his science course at college and follow a career in music. He was a great asset on the trips as he seemingly could fix anything. These occasions also gave me the opportunity to do something with the Nepali teachers. Yet another bonus. So, we did the library with years 9 and 10; the zoo with the toddlers (6 years – 10 years) and two trips to the National Cultural Museum with year 7, A and B.

The fascinating thing about the library trip was that these 16 -19 year olds sat reading the books in the kiddies section. Winnie-the-Pooh, seemed to be a favourite.

The toddlers were amazingly disciplined. They waited all through the hour long bus ride before getting out of the bus and throwing-up. Bless them, when we got back on the bus after the visit, they were all desperate for a drink. My 1.5 litre bottle was not going to go very far, as they tilted up their heads and I poured a few drops down each throat.

7B were by far the noisiest group. They sang at the tops of their voices all the way to the museum and all the way back. I thought they were fantastic, making the most of their day out. The other two volunteers who came with me, weren't so enchanted.

Each trip was a fantastic experience, but, four on the trot did feel a bit taxing, compared with being in school doing three classes!



Back in class.

With the exams coming up at the end of the trip and my practical learnings, I decided to give three options to the year 7 students in each lesson. One being to do private revision and then an option on written work or for a third of the class at a time to use the school library, which now had Nan's books in place. I seemed to be getting a better grasp of things now!

The last day at Samata.

Reflecting back to the first day, I thought, 'what am I going to be like today, now that I have established some relationships?'

Year 10 were still in their Government Exams. Year 9 were to do their end of year exams today and 7A and 7B were every where. When I asked, 'how many of Years 7 and 9 will be expected to pass their exams and go into the next year', the answer came back as 'all of them will pass'. It seems that in practice the only selecting out on the basis of academic ability takes place at year 8 and year 10. Keeping the children engaged in school is Uttam's way of endeavouring to keep them safe. One day, the ring tones of a mobile phone could be

heard. Uttam was immediately on to it, trying to find out who's phone was ringing. It turned out to be one of the girl students. Uttam took the phone, checked the calls and hit the girl. It seems that all the calls registered on the phone were from men. As he said, he can only 'protect' them for the hours between 7am and 4pm.

Most of the morning was a total mix of 'goodbyes', 'all the best', 'hope it goes well', and taking photo after photo, or arranging for people to photograph me with various groups. It all culminating for me, with being given a picture frame, a laughing Buddha and a figurine by some of the students in 7B. And then two of the girls took me out to the sweet shop and bought me a chocolate bar. It was then all hugs and handshakes as I had to prise myself away and get to the transport back to the hotel. In my rucksack I also had 28 pen-pal letters for my Grandchildren to reply to!



Discretionary and leisure time.

A lot of leisure time was spent on reviewing and talking about Samata school. Not surprisingly, It did dominate one's mind. It was suggested that maybe we could work at finding other things to talk about at dinner. However, I think we often forgot that request.

Four of us did go off to Pokhara for a weekend. How could we cope with the quiet, the calm streets, the clear air and the magic of the Himalayas appearing out of the cloud in the setting evening sun? And then coming back out of the mists at 6am the next morning, greeting the rising sun.

I was lucky to be able to take an early morning microflight up towards the Annapurna range and view the mountains, terraces and rivers from the perspective of a Himalayan eagle. While in Pokhara we walked up to the World Heritage Stupa and took a boat trip on Phewa Lake. On the lake, it was Rs200 to hire a boat for an hour. For Rs250 you could have the boat and an oarsman. A bit of a no brainer for me.

Rs50 an hour seemed to be the going rate for hiring someone, and Rs 4300 seemed to be about the national average wage. That translates to about £12 per week.



Footprints

Did I leave a footprint? Does it matter, I had a wonderful experience. Some of the kids had their first school trip. And I joined in their fun for a few brief moments. Some may remember the laugh they had at an old Western volunteer aping around as a monkey.

If nothing else, the water filtration system that we were able to fund for the school will provide much needed drinking water for the students, while at school.

Culture

People work in real time doing what they feel they have to do when they have to do it. In a sense, similar to Northern India, but moved on a degree. The strong, repetitive rote learning along with the need to please the 'authority' figure, seemingly adds a deeper restriction on creativity and being able to see the bigger picture. What we would call, the competency of Strategic Thinking.