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CEWA: An International, Interdisciplinary, Educational, Environmental Partnership

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ABSTRACT

This chapter reports the international, interdisciplinary partnership that supports the Creative and Educational Welfare Affiliation (CEWA). We begin by describing CEWA, its various projects, and the genesis of the partnership that supports the CEWA card project. We describe the first year's achievements as well as the difficulties with the CEWA card project. We conclude with recommendations for how to create successful international, interdisciplinary educational partnerships.

INTRODUCTION

To overcome global development challenges, i.e., fighting poverty, illiteracy, and environmental degradation, and upholding human rights and equality, an increasing number of Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) and volunteer groups have positioned themselves within the developing world over the past several decades. Although these organizations and groups differ with respect to goals and project initiatives, their basic strengths include ability to reach the poor, promotion of local participation, provision of low-cost services, use of adaptive and innovative technology, and ability to maintain an independent status (Tendler 1998). While these aspects are highly valued, NGOs and volunteer groups have been criticized for their insensitivity of the local culture, the lack of sustainability of their functioning, and their top-down approach in project planning and implementation (Poikolainen 1999). The common challenge is how to best nurture development in this time of "development co-operation." This means not merely

reaching out to those in need at the grassroots level, but reaching out in a qualitative manner.

This chapter reports on the creation of an international project directed at empowering rural young people in Nepal. The project represents a model for other volunteer groups who are motivated to work at the grassroots level. It also illustrates the importance of mutual cooperation in project design and implementation, and the benefits of embracing one another's culture.

The card project, the impetus for the international partnership described in this chapter, involves the production of Nepali student hand-painted cards sold by U.S. students. The project is supported by an international, interdisciplinary partnership whose mission is to prepare young people to become respectful environmental citizens. The card project is one attempt to sustain the Creative and Educational Welfare Affiliation (CEWA).

We begin by describing CEWA, its various projects, and the genesis of the partnership that supports the CEWA card project. We describe the first year's achievements as well as the difficulties with the CEWA card project. We conclude with recommendations for how to create successful international, interdisciplinary educational partnerships.

WHAT IS CEWA?

Founded in September 2001, Creative and Educational Welfare Affiliation (CEWA) is an officially registered educational outreach group, created to meet the social and educational needs of young people in Hetauda, Nepal, a town located approximately 200 kilometers southwest of the capital, Kathmandu. From the enthusiasm of six young teachers who envisaged the organization, CEWA has grown to include a student club consisting of approximately 30 high school students from four public and private high schools in the Hetauda area. With the belief that education should provide an environment where all people can groom themselves to become better human beings, the organization is open to all young people, regardless of caste, ethnicity, or gender. Both the teachers' association and the students' club of CEWA are committed to creating a world which they believe should be "... a peaceful world, one which is intellectually stimulating and rich in experiences." The main objectives of CEWA are to:

- Provide education and support for the overall development of students in Hetauda.
- Give students understanding about the importance of working together for the benefit of society.
- Raise awareness about social, political, environmental, health, and educational issues in the community.
- Develop a feeling of international understanding, peace, and cooperation among the club members.

WHY CEWA?

Out of every 1,000 children born each year in Nepal, on average 700 enter grade one, 70 reach grade 10, and 14 pass the School Leaving Certificate (SLC), which is equivalent to grade 12 in the United States. The majority of children in Nepal—about 80 percent—study in free government-run schools. But over the past five years, only 20 percent of students from these public institutions have passed the SLC. Results from the past two years have become even more dismal, with less than 10 percent passing from government-run schools. As discouraging as these statistics are, they are further compounded by the fact that the SLC system is not designed to provide practical life skills to students, but to “test” their rote-memory skills. It is the frustration with this lack of educational ethos that has prompted organizations like CEWA to “inject” teaching and learning activities into the community that are crucial for the human development of Nepali youth. In particular, CEWA focuses on ways to improve the quality of life both within the school environment and within the Hetauda community. Two ways in which this has been achieved are programs that support the very poor children in the community, and projects that revolve around community improvement in relation to the natural environment.

ESTABLISHING THE PARTNERSHIP

Interest in the town of Hetauda was generated partly by the community green space created in the market and retail areas of the town. Lining each side of the two commercial streets in Hetauda is khair (*Acacia catechu*), trees native to the local area. This “green” retail area, adopted by the town merchants, made an impression on Brenda Bushell, who was doing fieldwork on conservation management in Nepal in 2001. Although the value of the natural environment is highly regarded in advanced economies, it comes at a great cost to those who depend on it for their very livelihood in countries like Nepal, where much of the energy for cooking and heating originates from the forests in and around the towns and villages. Considerable research suggests that exposure to managed “green” environments can enhance human effectiveness in less prosperous areas of towns and cities in advanced nations (Kaplan 1895). Could this be the reason for the greening of Hetauda? Through time spent in the town, Bushell discovered a strong community business group as the active force behind the greening efforts. Pooling their meager earnings, the local businesspeople had transformed the two dusty market streets into inviting green zones with trees and shrubs. The purpose was to enhance the market stalls, bring a sense of well-being to the town center, and cut down on dust and other forms of pollution.

Upon further investigation into the kinds of environmental projects going on in the town, Bushell found that a number of both private and public schools once had active “eco-clubs,” but as educational funding was directed elsewhere, these clubs ceased to exist. Judging from the amount of refuse, the general state of the school

grounds, and the conditions of public sanitation in the schools Bushell visited, it was obvious some support system was needed. Talking with several of the teachers, they too agreed on the need for activities emphasizing environmental awareness within the schools: it was exactly one year later, under the leadership of CEWA students, that this need was addressed. In collaboration with Japanese students from Bushell's environmental studies research class, CEWA students drafted a proposal for reactivating the school eco-clubs as well as extending their activities into the community. Informed by the eco-management model Bushell's Japanese students outlined, CEWA students are now adapting the model to address their schools' environmental needs, and with the earnings from the card project, they are in a better position to make a positive impact on the environment of their schools.

INSPIRATION FOR THE CEWA CARD PROJECT

CEWA has organized and conducted various projects over the past two years, ranging from essay-writing competitions to practical workshops on health and the environment. Each project has been conceived in a very organic way, guided by the club's four main objectives. The international card project, the focus of this chapter, grew out of concern for the welfare of youth coping with terrorism and war both in Nepal and abroad. Under the theme "World Peace," CEWA held its first poster exhibition in May 2002. The goal of the exhibition was to a) help the students express their feeling about the need for peace both within their own community and internationally, and b) provide them with opportunities to explore their artistic talents. Through the drawing of cultural images and natural landscapes, club members and approximately 23 additional students from various public and private schools in Hetauda created their images of world peace.

After an enthusiastic response from the art exhibition held in the Hetauda community, Pratibha Dangol (teacher and founding member of CEWA) worked together with the project facilitator, Brenda Bushell, to arrange for a selection of the posters to be presented as a poster session at the 8th International Interdisciplinary Conference on the Environment held in Toronto, Canada, 27-29 June 2002. An overwhelming appreciation for the posters caused a spontaneous fundraiser at the conference, resulting in \$120 for the Nepalese students.

GENESIS FOR THE CARD PROJECT

If posters drawn by Nepalese students could bring international awareness and financial support to the CEWA program, what could other long-term art projects produce? This was the inspiration behind the development of the CEWA card project titled *World Youth Movement for Peace*.

In setting up the process, CEWA students design, produce, and ship hand-painted cards to students in the United States who would sell them and return the

profits to CEWA students to use for ongoing club projects. Monies from the spontaneous fundraiser at the conference funded the inspiration.

Returning from the conference, Bushell contacted Ms. Dangol and the two drafted a viable plan, based on the resources and support available to CEWA students. Implementing the project meant not only winning the trust of Ms. Dangol and the students, but also piecing together a realistic time frame that worked for both U.S. and Nepali students. It also meant agreeing upon a fundamental plan for how the project would evolve. The CEWA students were excited to enter into a partnership on a project they believed could impact not only their own lives, but also those of other young people both in their community and around the world.

In the minds of the CEWA students, the card project was envisioned as a way to support young people threatened by conflict, terrorism, and war around the world. Two professors, Bridget Lyons, an economist, and Beverly Kracher, a business ethicist, took this vision back to their respective educational institutions in Connecticut and Nebraska, USA. Though they are experts in different academic disciplines, Lyons and Kracher share the belief that service activities are excellent pedagogical tools. They each advise groups of students at their respective institutions on service projects and thus introduced the CEWA card project. The students from the United States were very interested in this opportunity to work with other youth on a global movement promoting peace and environmental awareness. They also welcomed the project as a chance to apply business knowledge, foster their organizational and leadership skills, and make a connection with people on the other side of the world from a country they knew very little about.

The card project was planned as follows: CEWA students created sample greeting cards. These were mailed and then photographed and e-mailed to the student groups in the USA. Cards were selected by the U.S. groups for reproduction based on visual appeal and message. CEWA students hand drew and painted 200 cards on handmade Nepalese paper. These cards and a corresponding number of handmade paper envelopes were mailed to the U.S. students for sale. U.S. students organized card sales at their various institutions. Sales from the cards totaled \$300.00, which was transferred back to Nepal.

WHAT WORKED, WHAT DIDN'T WORK

Successful partnerships require a shared interest, a plan, and investment by all. The CEWA card project worked because it included these three aspects. The strong relationship between the principals was the firm foundation upon which the CEWA card project took hold. All parties shared the belief that economic well-being, social development, and environmental stability must be addressed together to achieve a sustainable society. Cooperation and sharing responsibilities were evident throughout all phases of the project. Communication by e-mail enabled frank, timely discussions that brought the project to a successful conclusion after the first year. Nevertheless, there were difficulties carrying out the project.

1. Transfer of monies between countries was more difficult than initially supposed. To begin with, the Nepali teachers running the organization had neither a joint CEWA bank account nor a personal account. Receiving less than \$100.00 per month in salary, young Nepali teachers have few savings, hence no need for a bank account. Pooling their meager funds, the president of the association, Ms. Dangol, together with another female teacher, was able to open an account in the town's only bank. A bank draft of three hundred dollars was sent from a J. P. Morgan Chase branch bank in Connecticut to the bank in Hetauda. Although the procedure was efficient from the U.S. side, it took nearly two months to complete the transaction in Nepal. In the meantime, CEWA had to negotiate several times for the delay in payment of an express delivery service they had used for the delivery of the cards to Japan, where they were then sent on by express to the U.S. students. Transfer of funds is always of concern in any business partnership, but it is especially so when the system is sometimes unreliable, as is the case in Nepal. The anxiety level concerning the safe arrival of the funds at CEWA was heightened by the fact that had it not been for the students' effort and passion for the project at both ends, the venture would not have taken off.

2. Modes of communication made the project difficult to facilitate at certain junctures. As there are no computers in the high schools in Hetauda, it was virtually impossible for CEWA students to communicate regularly with the students in the USA. Only when Ms. Dangol could afford to use the Internet café in town could Bushell communicate her requests and instructions from the U.S. students. Postal service, like banking, is not always dependable, so express delivery, the only other option, made the card project a rather expensive venture for CEWA and Bushell. And even using the most high-tech form of delivery was not always the most effective in this case.

Although Bushell sent digital images to the U.S. students of the sample designs the CEWA students created, it was impossible for them to get a real sense of images painted on Nepali paper: the original sample designs had to be sent. Once the U.S. students decided on the designs they wanted for the cards, copies of these designs (which Bushell had made before sending the originals to the USA) had to be sent back to CEWA. The unpredictability of communication, combined with the unstable political and social situation throughout Nepal at the time, could be attributed to the lack of quality control in card production.

3. Quality of cards was difficult to ensure. Since CEWA students designed and created cards with particular personal messages and based on particular personal abilities, it was difficult for U.S. students to object to or reject any of their cards. However, each card was handmade, with varying degrees of artistic ability. Nevertheless, U.S. customers are used to high-quality, consistently reproduced cards. While the cards sold extremely well in Fairfield, Connecticut, a wealthy suburb 50 miles from New York City, the students from Omaha, Nebraska, had a difficult time finding the target market for this type of product.

4. The students in Connecticut were fascinated to "meet" students from Nepal, a country they knew little about. The project was very well received and the students

are excited about continuing next year. The popularity of the project in Connecticut may have been driven by the diversity of the student group, which included students from different countries, ethnic backgrounds, and religious affiliations. However, for the students from Omaha, Nebraska, a difficulty of the CEWA card project was maintaining interest in Nepalese life while so many other people and places could be served in their own town. This is a common issue for global projects and can be overcome by continuous long-term exposure to the same project.

OUTCOMES

Education for the U.S. students was enhanced in various ways. First, they had the opportunity to participate in a real marketing project and thus gained insight into issues about pricing and promotion. Second, the students experienced firsthand the challenges of global business. Learning about global business issues in the classroom is important, but these issues came to life as the students grappled with real global trade issues, difficulties in cross-cultural communication, and operational issues such as the funds transfer. Finally, students learned about Nepal and the issues and challenges facing the Nepalese. By the end of the project, students had a better understanding of their place in the global community.

The card project proved in many ways to be a rewarding experience for CEWA students.

On a Personal Level

Regardless of caste or ethnicity, the students learned to work together toward a shared goal. Not only has the project allowed them to tap into their creative abilities, it has given them an opportunity to understand the importance of the global community in a very real sense, by sharing their message of peace with others around the world. Realizing the success of this project in the first year has given them confidence and made them more aware of what they can achieve in the future.

On a Community Level

The monies earned through the card project have been designated for the following areas:

A. Environment Conservation: A percentage of the money will be distributed to both private and government schools for the purpose of activating "eco-clubs" within the schools. Their idea is to hold several workshops focusing on recycling, school ground maintenance, and public sanitation, so that the quality of school life can be improved for all students.

B. School Scholarship: Although public education is free in Nepal, the poorest families still cannot afford to send their children to school because of the cost of uniforms, books, and other items. As of the new school year beginning May

2003, CEWA will use a portion of their earnings to provide books, uniforms, and other necessities for 3 of the poorest children in Hetauda to attend class one.

C. Library: As of February 2003, CEWA has been given the use of a room by a business owner in town. Since then, the students have arranged for a small library in one corner, with the idea of eventually setting up an English reading circle for those students who do not have access to English reading materials. CEWA will use a portion of their earnings to buy several art books as well as other reading material.

D. Materials for Card Production: A portion of the earnings will be used to buy materials for the 2003 card project.

Though none of the money will be used by the members personally, CEWA students are very satisfied with the small changes they are trying to bring about in their community. Through this project, they are learning the value of diligence and hard work for their future independence.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The experience gained from participating in the project discussed in this chapter has given all members a deeper insight into what it means to take part in the global society. Success of any international project is the result of the interest and dedication of various partners in the process. The common elements of a successful project include:

i. A sense of trust in the partnership among those involved, a shared purpose for the project, and perhaps most important of all, the desire to take on a new challenge.

ii. In order to establish a project outside one's own culture, it is essential to have an understanding of the other's culture to accept, compromise, and deal with the unexpected.

iii. When looking to collaborate on projects, particularly based in advancing nations, it is crucial that the project be envisioned by those from the host country. Only they can set the benchmark for what is possible using their limited resources.

iv. Determining factors for the sustainability of any project requires continuous effort, open and frank dialogue among partners, and an understanding of the limits for all those involved.

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