

Chapter 4

Research Narrative

This chapter presents a narrative, or “storied,” account of the field study experience which took place as part of the research. Previously in Chapter Two, an argument was laid forth to justify the inclusion of a narrative account as a significant contribution to the presentation of this research. As discussed in Chapter Three, the researcher’s journal forms the basis of how the narrative has been generated and consequently shared here.

Using the researcher’s journal as the heart of the narrative invites readers to a place still uncommon to academic texts. It illuminates not only the experience of the volunteers, but also the evolutionary process of subjective understanding through the eyes of the researcher. In doing so, the account is consistent with what Bell (2011) has asserted as a strong merit of a narrative approach: “narrative inquiry offers us an approach that allows for the capturing of such temporal shifts and avoids the outdated snapshot picture that can arise from other research methodologies” (p. 576). Readers should not confuse this journal-style narrative as “raw data,” since what appears in this text is an abridged and thoroughly edited version of the original research journal. Still, it presents a daily and “unfinished” glimpse of how the field study transpired. Thus, through the narrative the readers are offered a vicarious opportunity for discovery alongside the researcher, and moreover, a profound contextualization to enhance the meaningfulness of the results in Chapter 5.

4.1 Friday, November 4

I arrived by bus to Chiang Rai at about 4:30 p.m. this afternoon and was picked up at the bus station by Mark¹, an American man who in the past year moved to Thailand to become a field coordinator for ministry work in Thailand. He drove me to his place, where we stayed for the remainder of the evening.

We chatted for hours. Mark, who has helped coordinate the volunteer group’s on-site plans, explained how the volunteer trip is expected to unfold. During the five weekdays, the volunteers will spend the morning setting up a free health advising station near the church grounds of a Hmong village. In the afternoons, the volunteers will be at the village school, where they will be teaching English in the fifth, sixth, and seventh grade classrooms.

Mark also gave me some background about Donna, the leader of the volunteer group coming to Thailand. Mark said that I will really enjoy her, noting that she is an excellent presenter and has an incredible way of bringing people together and motivating them. That may be an especially important contribution here, as the

¹ All character names in this narrative account are pseudonyms, and descriptions of locations are kept vague to preserve the privacy and confidentiality of the participants.

volunteer group members will be coming from across the U.S.A. Mark explained that the work Donna puts into her position as group leader is mostly unpaid. When at home, she works as a nanny and lives with her mother to make ends meet. Otherwise, she travels around to different churches by invitation to make presentations in order to garner support for the short-term volunteer trips she leads.

This will be the first time one of Donna's volunteer groups incorporates English teaching as a major element of the trip. Earlier today Mark and Ving (a Hmong national church leader and seminary professor who will also accompany the volunteer group) traveled to the Hmong village which will be the site of the volunteer trip, about three hours away from the city of Chiang Rai. There they had their first face-to-face meeting with the local school staff. They spent time meeting with the assistant director and the English teacher. Mark said he didn't realize at first that he was in fact meeting with the school English teacher, as the man never introduced himself as such. In the meeting they planned for the English teaching volunteers to meet the local staff on Monday morning. Mark told the local school that this was their first attempt at an English teaching project as part of a volunteer trip, and he's really interested in evaluating the process. I was unsure if he was speaking of my evaluation, the school's evaluation, or his own.

We also talked about my role as a researcher on the trip. I reiterated to him that I want to do what I can to assist the group, but only to the extent that there is a need and that they themselves identify me as a resource to help. While I am not planning to take on teaching responsibilities similar to the volunteers while I'm with the group, I said I could give advice or pointers. Mark said that would be especially helpful. I reminded him of my two research questions and how the goal was to eventually produce some sort of practical guide that would be useful for helping address the needs of volunteer English teaching groups. I further told him that I was aware and sensitive of how my role might be perceived by the volunteers. Mark reassured me that I should explain my intentions to the volunteer group the same way I explained them to him, and if I did so, he didn't foresee any problems during my time with the group.

4.2 Saturday, November 5

Mark and I rode together in his truck to the airport, arriving at about 9:45 a.m. Seminary professors Ving and Pai also came as part of the greeting party for the arriving volunteer group. The total number of people in the volunteer group was more than I had expected; Mark had likewise been unsure about the final count of volunteers until they actually arrived.

In this initial day of meeting the volunteers, many had questions about my personal story in Thailand, often bearing the question "Why Thailand?". After a day of interacting with the volunteers and getting to know each of them a bit, here is what I have gathered thus far about their backgrounds and roles:

- *Carl, Jeannie, and Riley*

They are a family from the southwest region of the U.S.A. A member from the church they attend was a volunteer with one of Donna's groups in the past and told them about the opportunity. Carl, the husband, has worked as a trucker in the past, but now their family is involved in daycare work. Carl has his associate's degree in business and has aspirations to continue with future studies. His wife Jeannie works as a technician in the health care

field. Their family has six kids. Riley, their eldest daughter, is 12 years old; she was able to take time away from school to join this volunteer trip. Carl will have primary volunteer responsibilities in the English teaching portion of the trip, while Jeannie's primary responsibilities will be in the health care portion. Riley will serve in an assisting role in various capacities throughout the trip.

- *Dianne and Pieter*

This mother-son duo also comes from the southwest region of the U.S.A. Dianne works in the medical field on a minority ethnic tribal reservation, driving long distances between home and work. Her son Pieter has been homeschooled in the past but now attends a charter school where he is in fifth grade. Dianne will have primary responsibilities both in the morning health advising work as well as in the afternoon English teaching. Similar to Riley, Pieter will serve in an assisting role in various capacities throughout the trip.

- *Claire*

She is a young woman from the mid-west region of the U.S.A. She has completed an associate's degree in nursing and now is doing online coursework in pursuit of her bachelor's degree, while also working full-time as a nurse in the emergency room of a hospital. Claire will have primary responsibilities in the health advising portion of the trip.

- *Rachel*

She is a young woman from the northeast region of the U.S.A. Rachel graduated from university this past spring and is now living back at home. She has had some job interviews, but nothing has worked out yet in securing full-time employment. Her undergraduate majors were French and International Studies, and her time at the university also included a study abroad experience in France. Rachel's primary responsibilities will be in the English teaching portion of the trip.

- *Pat*

She is currently residing in the mid-west region of the U.S.A. She has been a school teacher for more than 20 years in three different states and has just recently retired. Her primary responsibilities will be in the English teaching portion of the trip.

- *Martha*

Martha is a middle-aged woman from a small town in the mid-west region of the U.S.A. She works in the health care field, and her primary responsibilities will be in the health advising portion of the volunteer trip.

- *Judy*

Judy is a woman of retirement age who lives in the southwest region of the U.S.A. This is her third volunteer trip to Thailand with one of Donna's groups. She serves as Donna's right-hand person for help and counsel.

- *Donna*

Donna resides in the southwest region of the U.S.A. She has been to Thailand numerous times, spanning many years. She serves as the volunteer

group leader. While she won't be one of the lead English teachers among the volunteers, she will rotate through the classrooms each afternoon with a music lesson.

After dropping off bags at the hotel where the volunteers are staying this evening, the group ate lunch and then moved on to Mark's house for some orientation. Missionary Sam and his wife Jit, both of whom grew up in Southeast Asia and have since returned from the U.S.A. to develop the work of the church here, also came. Ving and Pai came, too, and spent a good portion of the day in the presence of the volunteer group. Mark gave some official introductions of the personnel, along with tips on two important things the volunteer group would surely encounter during their time: the customary Thai greeting (the *wai*) and the use of squat toilets.

He also talked about what it might be like in the "ESL classroom" (the volunteer group has typically used the acronym ESL when referring to the type of English teaching they would be doing). It was interesting that Mark took responsibility for giving English teaching pointers, since the night before he was asking me for pointers of where to start with his own English teaching he hoped to do in the future. I suppose that he felt a responsibility for giving pointers since he had more localized language teaching experiences than the group of volunteers. In his orientation, he also remarked that he was impressed with the ESL plan² that had been put together, noting that it would be great because it revolved around the theme of John 3:16³ from the Bible.

Mark addressed some of the "nuances" between Thai and Hmong culture and how, after living in Thailand for the past year and working closely with the Hmong people, he is beginning to see differences between the two cultures. Missionary Sam, a Hmong man, also had a few pieces of cultural advice, including the following example: if a person offers you something, like a cucumber for instance, you should accept it, as it would be offensive not to do so. Carl commented that he was glad to learn about these cultural tidbits. Pat also remarked that she was happy to learn these things. Then she raised some questions about the students they would be teaching, including their current level of English. In response to these questions, Donna and Mark both admitted "we don't know yet."

At Donna's charge, the volunteers divided into two groups. The volunteers who would be focusing more on the health care portion of the trip began organizing and labeling bottles of over-the-counter medications. For those volunteers with more of a teaching focus, Donna gave instructions about how the afternoon English classes would go at the school. She also offered brief explanations and demonstrations for some of the different activities that were on the English teaching schedule. During this time Dianne, who has a dual role with both the health advising and English teaching portions of the trip, was not there to observe or listen, as she was working on organizing the medications.

A lengthy discussion ensued about what would be used as prizes for the various games. Having said that, I noticed that little attention was given on how to actually present an English lesson. While Donna showed the volunteers some of the content of the materials and activities, there was little emphasis on how to use the

² See Appendix J for a copy of the English teaching schedule distributed to the volunteers.

³ John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." (New International Version)

materials, and there was no opportunity for the volunteers to practice using the resources or take a more detailed inspection of them.

It was late afternoon by this time. Donna and Judy left with Mark to buy some supplies for the trip, and the rest of us continued with labeling bottles of over-the-counter medications. When that was complete, there was a lot of down time, since Mark, Donna, and Judy were gone for quite some time. Most of the volunteers, still deep in jet lag, were very tired and expressed their desire to return to the hotel. Meanwhile, Claire, Riley, and I entertained ourselves by playing Hide and Go Seek as the others rested on the couches. Fortunately, Ving and Pai returned to the house with a few Thai-style snacks to help hold over people's appetites.

Mark, Judy, and Donna finally returned, having purchased a truckload of snacks to be distributed daily to the children at the village school next week. The volunteers then headed back to the hotel in three vehicles. I stayed back at Mark's house, and upon his return we chatted for a while. He said that one important change that needs to happen when future groups arrive is that they should have the opportunity to rest and recover on the first day. He noted, however, the difficulty of adding an extra day to the itinerary because it would drive up the cost of the volunteer program. The volunteers already had to raise \$2,500 for their trip as is. That means the one family alone had \$7,500 in costs to come for an approximately 12-day trip.

4.3 Sunday, November 6

In the morning, Mark and I drove over to the ministry center, where we waited for the volunteer van to arrive. On the ride there, Mark commented that Donna needed to change something for future trips in regard to organization – there were too many supplies to carry in his truck. Upon the group's arrival, we rearranged and repacked the items that would travel with the caravan of vehicles to the village.

Most of the volunteer team sat in the van that will transport the group throughout our time in the village. The entire team couldn't fit in the van, though, so Mark drove his truck, too. Mark and I sat in the front, while Donna, Judy, and Martha sat in the backseat. We listened to Donna and Judy share their accounts of past trips to Thailand. Martha had many questions throughout the ride. She asked about the crops, the religion, the cost of motorbikes, and holidays, among other things. Mark and I shared time offering answers to the questions.

When we arrived at the village church, we met a group of about a dozen seminary students who had already arrived there. These seminary students are all Hmong men training for pastoral roles in church ministry at an institute in Chiang Rai. They will be participants in the overall volunteer trip, working alongside the volunteers from the U.S.A. At Mark's directive, the seminary students introduced themselves in English, and then the volunteers also introduced themselves in English to the seminarians. I think a lot of the content from these introductions may have been lost in difficult pronunciation from the seminarians (who have varying levels of English proficiency) and speech that was generally too quick from the volunteers.

After that, the vehicles were unloaded and supplies brought into the building adjacent to the church. For the most part, the volunteers found ways to be productive. Tee, one of the youngest of the seminarians, was looking for a way to be helpful. I had him work with me alongside one of the volunteers on some organizational tasks before he and the other seminarians went off to enjoy a viewpoint further up the

mountain. Besides the introductions, there has not yet been much interaction between the seminarians and the international volunteers.

We left the village church grounds and traveled about twenty more minutes up the mountain towards the resort we would stay in, arriving just as the sun was setting. Upon arrival we figured out our room assignments for the next week. There were nine rooms total: those in families are each sharing a room (Jeannie, Carl, and Riley; Dianne and Pieter; Missionary Sam and Jit); the women are partnered together in rooms; and I think Ving and Pai are sharing a room. I was given my own room, as was Mark. Not staying at the resort, the seminarians are setting up bedding on the floor of the village church.

We walked down to a local restaurant which offered the standard basic Thai food dishes. I sat at a table with Mark, Ving, Dianne, Pieter, and Carl. Mark gave Pieter a lesson on using chopsticks, but Pieter struggled to use them. He ate very little of his noodle soup, but his mom shared some of her stir-fried mixed vegetable dish with him. Those two left a bit earlier than the others, as Pieter wasn't feeling very well. Thus, Dianne didn't hear the announcement of when we'd be departing from the resort in the morning, though Donna informed her when she returned to the resort.

Mark had arranged for there to be a meeting between the volunteer English teachers and the village school staff at 8 a.m. on Monday morning. On the ride to the resort, Donna had asked Mark how many of the volunteers should go to the meeting; Mark replied that the decision was up to Donna's discretion, as from that point on Mark was just an "observer" in the process.

Donna has indicated her desire that I assist Carl when he teaches in the English classroom. (Yesterday she expressed her concern about his capability to be a lead English teacher, having had some time over the past day to interact with him and field his questions). Given my role as researcher, I do not want to take part in the teaching, but rather be a classroom observer. I will see what develops.

To my knowledge, the volunteers who will be lead English teachers have not yet practiced teaching an English lesson. I wanted to check if that was true, so I asked Rachel, and she confirmed it. When I asked her how she feels, she said "anxious" with a laugh and smile, but she also stated that she thinks things will improve as time goes along. Pat, who has the most experience teaching, has been assigned the largest classroom. I overheard Claire ask Pat about the upcoming English teaching, to which Pat responded: "It's fine. Donna has done everything for us – all we have to do is repeat it."

4.4 Monday, November 7

We were informed that the vehicles would be leaving from the resort at 7:30 a.m., and breakfast would be prior to that. When I got to the dining hall, there was a continental breakfast of toast and instant coffee prepared for us. Martha and Pat were already there. Several times Martha used the word "magnificent" to describe the beauty of the scenery to which she was a witness here. Dianne and Pieter didn't make it to breakfast, but Dianne was able to grab a quick cup of coffee before leaving. During breakfast, Jeannie asked Mark about calling the hotel in Chiang Rai for her missing brown bag. At the table Mark passed the message on to Ving, who said he didn't know how to reach the hotel but would try calling the Call Center operator.

At 8 a.m., the volunteers who would be serving as lead English teachers arrived for a meeting at the school – at least, Mark had expected a meeting. When we

arrived, chairs were pulled out for us, and we sat there for some time waiting. Donna went through a few items with the volunteers, and at that time I stated my desire not to teach with Carl, since my plan was to move from classroom to classroom for observation. Donna may have been disappointed but did not make a statement in front of the others asking me to reconsider, for which I was thankful.

After some time waiting, with both water and coffee already served to those of us present, we found out that Kanya, the woman who was waiting around us, was also an English teacher at the school. Previously, Mark had thought that there was just one English teacher at the school, the man that he and Ving had met when they visited the school last Friday morning. Once we cleared up that she was an English teacher, she took a seat and the meeting began. The meeting with her was mainly a negotiation of logistics. Could we combine the two fifth grade classes into one classroom since we only had four volunteer lead teachers? Yes. Could we use the cafeteria to teach them? Yes. Is there electricity there? Yes. Could we have tables set up there? Yes.

After the meeting we drove from the school up the hill to where the church is located. I noticed that no one had arrived yet for health care or advice, so I pretended to be a Thai-speaking patient for Claire and Pai. It ended up being a fun role-play with them, and I think it was helpful to give them a test-run in having to work together to communicate in multiple languages.

Later in the morning I walked back down to the school to interview some of the staff there. The male English teacher was in class but indicated he would be willing to step out to do an interview; not wanting to interrupt his lesson, I declined his offer. Instead, I talked with Oat, a science teacher who has been at this village school for two years and has more than ten years of teaching experience at another school prior to coming here. One thing he said that stuck in my mind was that it would be great if an English-speaking volunteer were able to stay to teach for at least a year – the children would be able to learn a lot if someone was around for that amount of time.

As I walked back up the hill to church, the health care checkups were wrapping up for the morning. I think there were 34 people who came today for the free health care. We ate lunch in a shed-like building behind the church. It was a Hmong-style meal: rice, boiled chicken with green beans in water, another dish, some chili for flavoring, and some melon.

After lunch we traveled down to the school to begin the English teaching. There was no opening ceremony to welcome the volunteer group as I had experienced with other English teaching projects, and it was hard to ascertain when the official start of the class period would begin. It seemed to just happen. Since Pat's class (the combined fifth grade class) was stationed in the cafeteria near the drop-off point for volunteers and supplies, I decided to observe her class first.

Donna had said earlier today that she was "not worried at all about Pat," but from my observation, I think Pat was very challenged by the teaching. She relied very heavily on the use of the interpreter Kamtorn, a seminary student, during the "Word of God" class. Pat relayed the story of the Garden of Eden to the learners in English spoken rather quickly, with Kamtorn trying his best to translate to Thai for the learners. Then Pat moved on to trying to get the students to repeat the Bible verse of John 3:16. Martha, having a primary role as a nurse during the morning health advising activities, was in the cafeteria with Pat as her teaching assistant but did not take a role near the board with Pat.

There was a marked difference when Donna came in with her music lesson. She was able to gain much greater participation of the students. Donna didn't use an interpreter, but rather relied on her own knowledge of Thai language to instruct the learners (about fifteen years ago she lived for two years in Thailand; since then she has returned on numerous short trips). For the most part, the learners were able to comply based on what she said. One thing she did to get the students fired up was to say "Reeeadddy?" and then have the students say "Ready!" in reply. She had the girls and boys say things separately at times to see which group would say it more loudly. That helped keep the class atmosphere animated and light.

Then I walked up the stairs to observe Rachel's class, one of the two sections of the sixth grade. Rachel, Claire, and seminary student Ton were together in the classroom. I noticed that the three of them seemed to be working together pretty well in the front of the room. One memorable observation from my time in Rachel's class was the "TPR (Total Physical Response) class." Rachel used about 50 cards with different commands during the session, which I felt was far too many resources to use effectively for the class. Also, the next set of resources was behind schedule to be delivered to her classroom, so Rachel continued with the TPR lesson until Donna relieved her by coming in for the scheduled music lesson.

I went downstairs to take some notes for a while before returning back to Pat's classroom. She was leading a conversation activity that was printed on a large poster. The activity appeared to be flopping pretty badly. First of all, the conversation dialogue sentences (about riding the bus to school) were too long for the beginning learners. Secondly, Pat didn't use any interpretation for the dialogue, nor did she have any contextual pictures or clues to the meaning of the dialogue. The students were basically just trying to mimic as best as possible the sounds they heard from Pat.

The final activity in each of the four classrooms was an art session. Again I stayed to observe in Pat's classroom. Banners of paper were laid out on the tables, and Pat repeated the John 3:16 Bible verse to them. The students didn't understand that Pat intended for them to write the words on the banner, so the school English teacher Kanya, who was also sitting in the corner of the room, explained it a bit. Then, upon Donna's request, I tried to explain the instructions in Thai also. The students still didn't start at their tables, but it helped when I went from table to table, pointed to the first word on the board, had a student write it, then pointed to a second person, the second word on the board, etc. After some time and individual encouragement, the murals became quite beautiful at all the tables.

Earlier, Mark had thought that the school day finished at 4 p.m. It turns out that it finishes at 3:30 p.m. This appeared to come as a relief to the exhausted volunteers, as it meant there would be less time in front of the classroom each afternoon. Mark suggested that the volunteers meet together to share ideas and concerns when they got back to the resort. When that time came, Donna expressed her thoughts about the day and told everyone the change of plans for tomorrow: there would no longer be a system of "runners" transporting resources from room to room throughout the afternoon. Instead, each teacher would receive a supply of resources to use for the duration of the afternoon. Judy spoke up to say she wanted me to share my thoughts after having observed several classes in the afternoon. I shared simply that, first, I thought everyone did well for the initial day of classes. Then I told them to remember to smile when they were teaching, because both they and their students would feel less stress; I also advised that the teachers speak more slowly. Ving then asked me to interpret for him (from Thai to English) some comments to the volunteer

group – his own thoughts as well as the feedback from the village teachers with whom he had talked. He offered three main points the volunteers could improve upon: slow down, focus on pronunciation, and give the students a bathroom break at some point during the afternoon.

At that time, I also reminded the volunteers of my intentions to have them write a daily teaching reflection journal for me. They were already aware of this journal from email correspondence both Donna and I had with the volunteer group prior to their arrival to Thailand. I passed out notebooks to each of the volunteers, expressing my hope that this journal would be an opportunity for them to reflect upon their time in the classroom, while also serving as a source for informing my own research.

After the meeting, we walked down the hill for dinner, eating at a different restaurant from last night. Ving and I went around to the various tables, explaining the menu options and taking people's orders. I sat at a table with Pat, Dianne, and Pieter. Afterwards, we all meandered around for a bit, peering at what the street vendors along the small strip of outdoor stands were selling.

When we got back up the steps to the resort, I played some card games with Riley, Jeannie, Carl, and Pieter, and then we joined in singing songs with the others huddled by a campfire. The staff of the resort sang for us, and then Ving led some songs for us to sing together, taking requests from the volunteer group for English songs. Afterwards, most of the staff and volunteers went back to their cabins, but Claire, Rachel and I lingered by the campfire with three guys from the resort staff, chatting and singing till about 10 p.m.

My biggest lesson to remember for the day is this: even though resources and activities are present and may be designed well, that doesn't mean they'll find success in the classroom. The volunteers need to know how to make good use of the resources they are given.

4.5 Tuesday, November 8

This morning I was surprised to find myself as the first one up for breakfast. I had forgotten that we'd leave from the resort a bit later in the morning since we didn't have an initial meeting at the school. My morning at the village church started out with some jump roping with Riley and Pieter, before stationing myself in a corner of the building so I could read through the reflection journals that had been returned to me.

Later in the morning I walked down to the village school to meet with English teacher Kanya for an interview, as I had arranged with her the day before. There are a few main points that linger in my mind from the interview. First, she had emphasized the very basic English level of the students. Also, the village school administration had left it wide open for the volunteer group to arrange their teaching however they wanted. Further, she mentioned that a significant constraint on the English learning environment at the school is that the learners study English just two hours per week. Kanya added this was the norm for all public schools, while private schools may have different circumstances. She said that both she and the other English teacher had only been teaching at the village school for a short time, only two months in her case.

Prior to lunch I also had some time to chat with some of the Hmong men from the seminary about their role on this trip. Seminary professor Pai told me that he had been talking with students at the village school. He said that some of them told him

they don't like to study with their regular teachers: "the teachers don't teach them." Seminary student Toey asked me why the volunteers were here in Thailand. I offered him a number of reasons, including sharing their faith through volunteer service, and as an opportunity for travel. Toey, who has years of prior experience working with international volunteers, told me that it's one thing when volunteers who had been in Thailand for a long time carry out an English camp; it's something quite different, and much more challenging, when it is a fresh set of volunteers.

After lunch, just a few minutes before teaching, the volunteers were given their supply of classroom resources for the afternoon, including a game, TPR cards, and conversation posters. I think it might be feasible for some veteran English teachers to cope in such circumstances, but it puts novice teachers in an especially challenging position. Donna had the benefit of a few months to develop these resources, but the volunteers only had five minutes to look at the resources before starting their lesson.

Today I started out by watching Carl's seventh grade class. The first subject was Word of God, followed by a session making use of the conversation posters. Bluntly, the execution of the Word of God lesson seemed altogether unsuccessful. The conversation class was also tough for Carl, but I noticed some positive qualities about his teaching: he used a lot of repetition to boost the students' confidence, and he successfully incorporated Donna's call-and-response strategy when the students' energy and focus seemed to wane. Jeannie was in the room as an assistant, but she remained silent in the corner throughout most of the period.

I visited Dianne's sixth grade classroom next, slipping into the back of the room towards the end of a game of Bingo. Her following session made use of the TPR cards. Dianne then adapted the original schedule by including her own storytelling activity and then more Bingo before I exited the classroom. Dianne had a great presence that kept the students active. But I think she was also balancing concerns about keeping her son Pieter, an assistant in the classroom, entertained throughout the afternoon. She frequently used Pieter as a classroom resource, having the interpreter try to get Pieter to say words in Thai as a way to "let the students see it's okay to try to learn another language."

I realize that my presence making classroom observations is at least somewhat noted by the volunteer teachers. In some instances, it alters what would have transpired in the class. For example, there were several times in Carl's class when Surat, the seminary student helping as a classroom interpreter, couldn't understand the message Carl wanted to relay to the students, so Carl turned to me for help. I would say it in Thai so Surat could get the missing meaning, and then he would relay it in Hmong to the students. Sometimes that helped, while in other instances my own lack of Thai vocabulary couldn't help the cause. After we returned to the resort, Dianne told me she was embarrassed that shortly after I came in, she threw an eraser to a student as part of a TPR activity. The student didn't catch it but rather got hit in the face by it. She admitted to me that "it was like the principal was watching her teach."

After school, I heard Rachel ask Donna if it would be possible to get the resources she would use for class tomorrow, so that she would be able to do some lesson planning this evening. To me, this shows that Rachel is sensing a need for planning ahead of time and also taking the responsibility to ask for the resources she feels she needs to make her lessons successful.

Unlike yesterday, today there was no group meeting when we got back to the resort after teaching at the school. I felt frustrated not knowing the plan for dinner.

The volunteers similarly didn't know when dinner would be or who was really in charge of making the decision about it: is it Donna or Mark? When we did eventually walk down from the resort to a restaurant for dinner, Ving did a lot of work explaining items on the menu and taking orders from the volunteers. I wonder if he feels exhausted from taking care of the volunteers. They rely on him a lot.

At dinner Mark asked me what I thought about what I saw today in the school. I spoke frankly with him that the two days of teaching the Word of God subject matter have not worked well from my perspective. Regardless of the importance of the content, it takes know-how of getting the information across to the students.

Like the previous evening, the group gathered around the campfire. Dianne brought her violin with her and joined along with Ving's guitar playing. Though it was only November, we sang Christmas songs, which I think was especially touching for Mark, who has been largely without the camaraderie of fellow American nationals since his arrival to Chiang Rai. The opportunity to enjoy singing around these evening campfires and make new friends with the volunteers has also been a rewarding aspect for me during my field study here.

The central thought that sticks with me from today is this: Is training and preparation also needed for the participants who work alongside the international volunteers? Were the seminarians ready to face the challenges in their role this week?

4.6 Wednesday, November 9

I didn't sleep well through the night and woke up with a headache this morning. Music and village announcements blaring from a loudspeaker woke me up early, along with the sound of a strong wind which brought in some heavy rain. After eating breakfast, we descended the mountain in the rain towards the church grounds. Neither the van nor Mark's truck could make it up the steep hill where the church stood, as the vehicles lost all traction in the wet clay dirt. We got out and walked up the hill instead.

For the vast majority of the morning health care work, I sat in the back corner of the building, writing responses to the volunteers' journal entries. I also interacted with people who approached me to chat, including conversations with Dianne and Mark. Dianne told me she was surprised that the volunteer team didn't spend more time together in prayer or daily devotion. "Isn't this a mission trip?" Later, as Mark stopped by to talk with me, I relayed Dianne's expectation to him. At lunch time, he made an announcement saying that we would make time for a group devotion once we got back to the resort.

The noon lunch hour seemed to go by quickly, and the group walked down to the school just before 1 p.m. The van was not there at the school, and it had all the teaching supplies and resources. I sensed the panic start to rise among some. The volunteers were reliant on that suitcase to show up with all their resources.

It wasn't a huge delay for the van driver to arrive to the school, but the classes did start late. I stepped into Rachel's class as she was teaching the Word of God. She was reliant on seminary student Ton to help interpret the Bible story she was teaching, but her voice was enthusiastic, and she kept her sentences short. The students appeared to focus well on the story. Rachel had a smooth transition into the penmanship activity and then moved on to the conversation posters and Bingo game. I thought that the sessions I saw Rachel teach went quite well. One suggestion I would make from observing her class, as well as the classes of the other volunteer

teachers, is this: the teacher doesn't need to walk up to each pair of learners to get a response every time for activities, as it leaves the rest of the class unattended for long periods of time.

I left the classroom and went downstairs where I chatted with Mark and Ving. Mark told me he was learning a lot from his observations and notes about how to manage future volunteer groups. He mentioned that in particular, he is getting a better grasp for who needs to take charge of various programming aspects. Mark commented about possibilities for future trips, mentioning that Donna may organize short-term trips for university students who have expressed interest. He is also still reflecting on whether to allow children to come on future trips. While he remarked on some of the downsides of having children on the trip, he also noted that he thought it was helpful having Pieter in the sixth grade classroom – that his attempts at speaking Thai in the classroom put the learners at ease. I found this interesting, as my observations had led me to a different conclusion. I had seen Dianne's attempts to have the interpreter help her son say vocabulary in Thai as more distracting than beneficial (more about her desire to have her son have a good experience than the learning needs of the students). It serves to remind me that varied perspectives are possible from observations of the same phenomenon.

After school, in the van ride back to the resort, the volunteers were discussing their English lessons with one another. Dianne talked about how she was frustrated that obscure vocabulary words like "quail" showed up in one of her games today. Rachel said she didn't like how phrases like "close the window" seemed to pop up in the TPR cards when all the windows already were closed. Carl said while the learners were doing something like penmanship, he was looking ahead at the next resource to get an idea of what to expect.

The volunteer group had a short devotion led by Mark once we arrived back at the resort. Then we had about an hour of break time before dinner. At the restaurant, Ving did most of the work interpreting the menu (Thai language only) for the group. I was impressed by his patience and humble attitude in serving the others. This evening there wasn't a large group assembled by the campfire for long, but some of us did gather around for a short while. Most are planning an earlier evening to bed because of an early trip to the viewpoint at the peak of the mountain tomorrow morning.

Having received the volunteers' reflection journals for a few days now, I've found the dialoguing in the journals helpful for me to capture the thoughts of the volunteers. I especially appreciate Donna's journal, as it takes on a higher level of communication. It's not merely a recount of her day and her feelings; we are additionally having a dialogue on philosophies of what this trip is about and how to develop the work of short-term volunteer trips. I'm looking forward to continuing that dialogue more.

Finally, here is the main thought from today that remains highlighted in my mind: classroom resources can often control the volunteers if the volunteers don't learn how to control the classroom resources.

4.7 Thursday, November 10

I woke up early, at 4:45 a.m., in order to join most of the volunteers for the trip to the top of the mountain, where we received an inspiring view of the morning

sunrise. I am glad that the seminary students also came this morning as a joint experience with the volunteers.

I tried to keep my morning routine similar to that of yesterday, that is, sit in the corner and write replies in the volunteers' reflection journals. I again had some "positive interruptions" this morning from people who wanted to chat. Judy came over to talk with me, wanting to chat about some of the stresses she was seeing and feeling throughout the week. For one, she was concerned about the English teaching in Pat's classroom. Judy said she was "disappointed and disheartened" by it and "wondered if the kids were getting anything out of it." She further shared with me about the constraints, both financial and other, that Donna has felt in preparing these volunteer trips. One big constraint is this: the more seminary students that come, the tighter the overall group budget becomes. She asked if I had any advice about interpreters, especially for the weekend children's Bible program when most of the seminary students will have already parted ways with the volunteer group.

Judy also shared with me her own motivations that continue to bring her back on these volunteer trips. The memories of "the young children running up to the van to greet the volunteers" always linger in her mind, and she can't help but look forward to the date when she'll return on the next volunteer trip with Donna. Even though her husband's declining health is a concern, he supports her desire to take these trips, an opportunity unavailable to her in her earlier years.

When it was time for the afternoon English classes, I started out by observing in Dianne's classroom. I was really impressed with how the Word of God class went for her. I felt like it was the first time that I saw that subject go well for anyone. Dianne got the students to participate by pointing to the poster she was holding and asking the students a lot of review questions, albeit through the help of the interpreter.

Then I went to Carl's classroom, where he was doing a TPR activity. I noticed that his students were getting more acclimated to him and were able to understand and follow some of the commands. He was incorporating a lot of repetition, too, which seemed to help the class. Overall, though, the students looked tired and bored from the monotony of the activity. When Donna later came in to teach a music lesson in Carl's classroom, there was a noticeable difference in the level of energy, as Donna got the students more engaged in the lesson.

Later, I went to the open area on the bottom floor of the school, and I chatted with English teacher Kanya, science teacher Oat, and the physical education teacher. In previous days they had been observing the English classrooms, but today it appeared that they were just "hanging out," playing ping pong during the afternoon English sessions. The teachers told me that the school and village were comprised 100% of Hmong people; the government had assigned the teachers, all ethnic Thai, to that school. Oat explained that he could request to go to a lowland school if he desired, but for him the location of this highland village school was more convenient than his previous job.

After school, Pat showed the other volunteer teachers the patches of paper which her students had decorated and that she will take home. Seeing them, Dianne said she plans to do the same tomorrow, so that she'll have something she can take back home with her. Carl and Rachel both commented that in today's classes, they felt their students had backtracked from the progress made in previous days.

Upon returning to the resort, there was no indication of when to reconvene for dinner. When we did leave for dinner, Dianne, not having been informed, arrived fifteen minutes later than everyone else to the restaurant. At the restaurant Ving

encouraged the group to order “Thai style,” that is, several communal dishes of food in the middle of the table (as opposed to each person ordering an individual dish). The cost of the meal ended up totaling two to three times more than other meals this week. Outside of the restaurant, Jeannie said to me that she wouldn’t have joined in eating “Thai style” if she knew it was going to cost that much, and she didn’t want to do it again.

Thought for today: Not everyone on the trip is permitted to wear a stethoscope. Only those who had nursing qualifications were given that responsibility for the volunteer activities involving health care. Should it be the same for the English language teaching? Should there be more distinction in who is allowed to be a lead teacher, and who should be an assistant or fit in some other role? Also, in Judy’s journal and in chatting with her, she said “it’s okay to have the kids [Riley and Pieter] at the school, but maybe not during medical work or for the weekend Bible program for the children.” Why this distinction? Just as everyone has found some role with the free health care station (whether serving as a nurse, greeting patients at the registration table, etc.), might it be the same for the English language classroom? Is there a role for everyone in the English classroom?

4.8 Friday, November 11

After the team arrived to the village church this morning, I walked down to the school office. I asked the staff sitting there if I’d be able to have my student questionnaire distributed in the morning. One of the staff members took a look at it and said that it would be possible. She would have the homeroom teachers administer it to the students, and she added that the students were familiar with doing that kind of questionnaire. I figured it would be easier to have the questionnaire distributed in the morning with their homeroom teachers rather than in the afternoon in the presence of the volunteers.

The volunteers’ teaching reflection journals didn’t take long to read through and reply to this morning, so there was ample time for me to meander and chat with people in the morning. I spent some time talking with seminary student Toey and with Mark in the back corner of the building. There was a little boy hanging around the church grounds – he learned about his “head, shoulders, knees, and toes” in English from me. I bought some ice cream for myself and Pieter from the man who delivered ice cream up to the church each morning via motorbike, and I helped Judy cut out crafts for the children’s Bible program tomorrow. There was plenty of jump roping in the morning, too.

I also got the chance to sit down and talk with Donna for a while. She gave me her business card with contact information for the non-profit organization she recently founded. By having a non-profit entity, Donna hopes to be able to secure greater funds and resources to continue bringing short-term volunteer groups to Thailand, and possibly expand throughout Southeast Asia. Realizing that she won’t be able to continue on forever in the same capacity as teacher-planner-fundraiser-recruiter, Donna is also looking to draw in more help for the organization. She mentioned the names of a few of the volunteers from the present trip that she’d like to work with in the future.

In the afternoon, I started out by observing Pat’s classroom. I thought the Word of God class I saw today was an improvement from the first one I observed in her classroom on Monday. Pat reviewed the nativity story for the students by having

them act it out. The kids seemed pretty animated (giggly) about it. It was hard to hear Pat because she wasn't using a microphone like she did on Monday, but it appeared to me the students were listening to the interpreter anyway.

After also observing Donna's music lesson, I went to the school office to inquire whether the student surveys had been completed. At first it appeared that the staff in the office were unsure, but then the male English teacher led me to the upper part of the school grounds where the pile of completed surveys was waiting for me. From my quick glance, it appeared that the students had put sincere thought into their answers – it was not just a straight line of “strongly agree” answers for each statement.

I went back to Pat's class where I saw her teach conversation. It may not have gone smoothly, but it appeared that the students were making progress in their ability when compared with earlier in the week. Pat used the “Alphabet Scrabble” resource by having students come up to the front of the classroom, letter by letter through the alphabet. It was a different use of the resource from what I had seen Dianne do with the Alphabet Scrabble activity earlier in the week, showing that each resource could be used in a variety of ways.

Later, I observed the activity in the open area beneath the upper level of the school. Toey played ping pong with students and others, and I played a few games, too. Pieter was kicking the soccer ball on the wall with two other kids. It seems like he was able to hang out with the kids and integrate with them to some extent. Who knows how invaluable that was to the dynamic process of English language learning this week?

Peeking into Carl's classroom, he motioned to me to step inside and see what the kids were drawing. Like Pat the day before, he had distributed quartered sheets of paper to have the students draw something. He told me he asked them to draw something they learned throughout the week. Some of them had religious drawings. At least one student had a picture of Carl and Jeannie.

At the end of the school day, Donna asked me to round up the volunteers. I popped into Dianne's classroom at about 3:50 p.m., and her class was still in progress. The students were finishing up drawing pictures for her. Meanwhile, Pieter, Riley, Rachel, and Ton played soccer with the students outside on the field. I think it would have been great to have more of this bonding time outside the classroom with the students, just as these younger members of the volunteer team had been accomplishing through soccer these past few days as the school day ended. Once everyone had gathered below, the school staff presented the volunteer team a framed Hmong-stitched design, which Donna accepted on behalf of the team. Also, the local English teaching staff exchanged contact information with me, at their request.

Upon completion of the activities at the school, all the seminary students except Ton parted ways with the volunteer team, returning back to Chiang Rai or their home villages for the weekend. Missionary Sam and Jit have also departed, along with Ving and Pai. We had some downtime once we returned to the resort. This evening not everyone ate dinner together – we split into two groups and went to different restaurants. After the meal, I went back to my room for a while to catch up on writing some research notes. Finishing that, I stepped back outside where I saw a crowd gathered around a group of Hmong girls dressed in their traditional outfits. They were performing a few dances near the campfire. Riley said they were girls she recognized from the village school.

We sang some songs around the campfire this evening, led mainly by Claire and me. After the majority of the group had parted ways for the night, a few of us lingered to sing some more. When they talked about seeing Ving again on Sunday upon return to Chiang Rai, Claire remembered I would be parting ways with the group that day. She said that would be really strange, because it feels like I'm part of the group. I must say – I feel the same.

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