Progressive Education in Nepal, 2016
During the Fall of 2016, I was invited to visit Nepal. King's College in Kathmandu hosted my stay. Working with Kathmandu Living Labs, Karkhana, Teach for Nepal, and other organizations, we held a workshop to learn about progressive education and what it means for Nepal today. The book is dedicated to the wonderful participants in that workshop.
New beginnings in Nepal

Friday, October 21, 2016

The list of remarkable things about Nepal is remarkably long.

You could start with the physical: It has 8 of the 10 highest mountains in the world with elevations ranging from 66 meters to 8,848 meters above sea level. It is a biodiversity hotspot deriving from the multiple ecoregions–arctic to tropical, including mountains, hills, and savannas. There is a corresponding diversity of flora and fauna, with gorgeous butterflies and birds. There are many cultural groups and over 125 languages spoken. The architecture, the food, the music, the arts, the history, the religions, and more are fascinating. The traffic in Kathmandu is a story in itself.
However, I experienced something perhaps even more remarkable. I was fortunate to be included in a group of young Nepalis who hope to build a movement to make education in Nepal more progressive, specifically to make it more relevant to people’s lives, more connected to community, and more supportive of inquiry that leads to sustained learning and creativity.

The group has the tentative name of Progressive Educators of Nepal Network (PENN). We met last Tuesday for early morning breakfast at Hotel Vajra in Kathmandu.

King’s College events

Those present represented four organizations. Shisir Khanal and Swastika Shrestha came from Teach for Nepal. Like Teach for America and similar organizations, TFN engages university graduates and young professionals who are committed to reduce education inequality. They emphasize community-based education, teaching in rural, public schools. Fellows work for two years, typically living in a community and staying in a home there.

Children as innovators at Karkhana

Umes Shrestha and Narottam Aryal came from King’s College, a new college whose objective is making world-class education available to Nepali youths at home at an affordable cost. King’s College seeks to make its teaching more relevant for students and more inquiry-based.
Karkhana, meaning “factory,” is a company emphasizing experimentation, collaboration, and play for both makers and teachers. It started as a Saturday morning hacker hang-out and evolved into an innovation focused company that combines education and design of new products. See for example, the recent Kathmandu Mini Maker Faire. Pauvita Gautram represented Karkhana and its inquiry-based learning approach.

![Karkhana](image)

KLL mapping as service learning

Kathmandu Living Labs (KLL) is a not-for-profit civic technology company. It has been mapping all the educational institutions, health facilities, road networks, tangled mesh of gallies, religious sites and other geographic features of Kathmandu Valley using OpenStreetMap. Secondary and college-level students participate through mapping workshops. Nama Budathoki represented KLL and its effort to extend youth mapping work to education for full civic engagement. See KLL goal statement.

In November, this network of people, organizations, and interests will host a month long project to foster the development of educators who can become leaders in community–based education. I’ll lead initial workshops on progressive education, inquiry-based learning, and community inquiry. We’ll also travel to village sites to explore community-based education, then bring those experiences back to Kathmandu for a national meeting.

The work of this group can be important for Nepal, while also serving as a model for others. More to come on this exciting project.

**High above the Trishuli Nadi**

**Wednesday, October 26, 2016**

When Shiva had been walking for a long time in the mountains north of the Kathmandu Valley, he grew thirsty, but there was no water to be found. Angry at that, he drove his trishula, or trident, into the ground to create three springs, which in turn created a river.
Some say that the Trishuli begins with snow melt in the Langtang Himal. Other accounts, such as Wikipedia, say that the Trishuli River arises in Tibet, where it’s called Kirong Tsangpo.

In any case, Shiva’s river, the Trishuli, later joins the Bhote Kohsi that flows from Tibet and becomes a spectacular mountain river, with exciting rapids and impressive gorges. It is no surprise that it’s Nepal’s most popular rafting river. It looks like large parts of it could be canoed as well.

The Trishuli flows through mostly Buddhist regions then into Hindu areas. It is one of the major tributaries of the Narayani River, which eventually goes into India to join the Ganges.

At this moment, I’m sitting on a veranda looking out at a series of hills that we would call mountains in New England. The view is partially obscured by a profusion of bougainvillea, poinsettia trees, palms, and many tropical plants I can’t identify. Workers at this guest house where we are staying have to keep cutting back the gorgeous greenery that people in Massachusetts would struggle to nurture as tiny house plants.

Yes, the economic conditions are bad, the roads are full of surprises, the electricity
is whimsical, and the effects of the 2015 quake are still felt, but all the people we meet are warm and generous. They use their adequate English to help me learn a few words of Nepali.

Locals directed us to a walk one way to see the hilltop village of Nuwakot with its durbar, or palace, square, now being restored; another to make a circuit of the hill behind with spectacular views; another to explore the farm with its geese, turkeys, donkeys, goats, and naturally organic vegetables.

But this evening seems like a time to stay on the veranda and take in the mountain air and the beautiful sunset silhouetting the hills.
Bring on the flood
Monday, October 31, 2016

Imja Tsho
Today’s BBC News reports on an important development in Nepal, one which should be a warning to us all (Nepal drains dangerous Everest lake).

Nepal’s army has just completed lowering Lake Imja by 10 ft. This is because it was in danger of flooding downstream settlements with over 50,000 people.

Lake Imja, near Mount Everest (Sagarmatha) at 16,400 ft altitude, is one of thousands of such glacial lakes in the Himalayas. Many of the lakes are filling fast because of accelerated melting of glaciers due to rising temperatures.

The Himalaya region has been described as the third pole of the earth. It is melting, just as the Arctic and Antarctic are.

Lake Imja is a good example of that melting. It is a new lake, composed of glacial meltwater blocked by a terminal moraine. In 1962, it was 7.5 acres, and is now over 260.

I can only guess at the enormous cost of the six-month project, not just in dollars, but in terms of using up limited Nepali resources. It has been necessary to save lives, but sherpas in the region say there are many more lakes that endanger communities.

**Jasna, Susan, and Nama**

**Monday, October 31, 2016**

Jasna, Susan, and Nama outside a Chinese restaurant in Lazimpat, Kathmandu
My stay in Lazimpat, Kathmandu

Wednesday, November 02, 2016

Welcoming elephant

Those of us in the US could learn from Nepalis (and others, as well) about hospitality. Despite having far less in material resources, my host country for a seven week stay has been uniformly friendly, helpful, and generous.

I’ve seen this at the institutional level (King’s College has supplied me with an overly large and nice apartment in a convenient and pleasant area), among friends and colleagues, in shops or touristy places, and among people I meet on the street. Even the towel in my apartment is welcoming.

Lazimpat Apartment, lit for the third day of Tihar

When I went for my first walk from the apartment, I heard some music and
stopped to look. I was invited in to join the Rotaract Club of Pashupati-KTM, in their Tihar celebration. They asked me to dance with them, which I did in my clumsy way. Will that appear on their FB page?

This was an experience that can’t be captured in words or video, but confirmed my sense of being welcomed. There were many smiles and a lot of interest in who I was, but no pressure to explain myself or to interact in any way that didn’t feel comfortable.

Rangoli for Tihar

I’ve regularly been invited to join family gatherings, garland making sessions, or just to chat. One Tihar party even came to me, just outside my window. You can hear a snipper of that one here: Tihar party in the garden

There is a new manager of Lazimpat Apartment, who started the day I arrived. He wants to make the otherwise international style apartment look more Nepali. He’s placing Thangkas in every sitting room. These are Tibetan Buddhist paintings, in this case, on cotton. They usually depict a deity, scene, or mandala. You can see below, some not-so-good photos of those in my apartment.
Views of Lazimpat

Thursday, November 03, 2016

Views of Lazimpat, Kathmandu from the rooftop terrace of the apartments I’m staying in. Note the mountains, which are unusually clear, probably due to the slowdown of traffic following Tihar and the visit of Indian President Pranab Mukherjee with his Nepali counterpart, President Bidya Devi Bhandari, at the Sheetal Niwas (~White House).

You can see a little of the mix of urban and rural. However to fully appreciate that you need to walk the streets and back alleys.

Kathmandu city itself has about a million inhabitants, but the district and the valley hold several times that many. It’s an interesting mix of megacity (traffic, pollution, crowds) with country (dirt roads, poultry, open air living). I was awakened by roosters and a cat fight outside my window this morning. One can see cows lying in the middle of the densely traveled Ring Road.
In and around the Lazimpat Apartments.

Attached garden 1  Attached garden 2  Front gate
Tihar preparations.
Some of the many thangkas on display.

Neighborhood shots.

UL approved? Poinsettia
Some people in the US judge the success of their local school by its performance on standardized tests, innovation by the incorporation of sophisticated electronic devices, and curriculum by the latest clever acronym.

Schools seek to meet high standards, which actually consign a large percentage of schools, teachers, and students to the category of “failing.” Even “successful” schools look more like efficient factories to produce high scores on the way to preparation for college and career. The school is separated from community life, and often from music, art, and play. Compliance and conformity often win out over creativity and critical thinking.

The vision of early 20th century progressives of the school as the social center of the community, students as critical, socially-engaged thinkers who are capable of shaping a just and equitable society, and learning as a means to nurture good and purpose-filled lives, is often lost.

Education in Nepal faces even more problems. For some the issue is whether they have a school at all or a teacher. Books, computers, and electricity are often lacking. Even private schools are under-resourced by US standards. Yet in my short time here I’ve seen numerous examples of creative approaches to teaching and
learning that build on that progressive vision, and resist the factory model.

In my next few posts I’ll share some of these Nepali examples. None are perfect (as if that were a sensible goal), and none fully challenge today’s dominant education paradigm. However, they do show how vision, dialogue, and experimentalism can make progress, even when operating within enormous constraints.

[cross-posted on Progressive Educators Network Nepal]

**John Dewey in Nepal**

**Sunday, November 06, 2016**

![Image of children singing]

**Singing in multiple languages**

If John Dewey were to return to visit US schools of today, he would surely be impressed with the buildings, AC, and new technologies. But he’d likely be disappointed to see that these modern affordances aren’t always used to enrich education as he envisaged. In fact, they often serve to reinforce the separation of schools from the life of the community and divorce children’s learning from the concrete reality of their own experiences.
However, he might have a better experience at his eponymous school in Baluwater, Kathmandu. The principal and the teachers at the John Dewey School would be quick to tell you they have much to learn, but that desire to learn is part of what makes them an inspiring example.

Music and art are infused throughout the curriculum. For example, grade 5 students are learning Spanish. Encouraged to take charge of their own learning, they use computers to select and play Spanish songs, then choreograph dances for those.

Students work with an organic garden and a compost bin. They learn to recycle, which is not so common in Nepal, and extend that to their homes in the community.

I was able to see a grade 4 math class and to play magic squares with the students. Grade 1 students taught me a Nepali song and I shared Skitter-a-dink. Everywhere I saw examples of student work—drawings, writing, and more. They were learning with their hands as well as their heads.

Some students had made a diorama of a neighborhood area, complete with a huge rain barrel and the sand filters that are used with them. Other students had gone
on learning walks a la Célestin Freinet and then had mapped the community. This suggests a possible collaboration with Kathmandu Living Labs.

Active learners

It would be easy to quibble: The school is private and available to only a few; its model is far from common; its activities are often quite conventional. But what I saw in the first of several planned visits is a school that I would have been glad to attend or to send my children to, and one that sees growth as the goal, not conformity, both for the children and for the school itself.

Some activities:

Discussion of US Presidential election  Learning Spanish through dance
Facilities:

Davanagari Classroom library
The kindness of strangers

Tuesday, November 08, 2016

Children in my neighborhood

Susan and I met a Belgian couple in Patan. They were on their honeymoon on the way to Bhutan, because it was the happy country. When I told this story to Raj, a Nepali friend, he said that people here were not always happy, but that they were kind.

Panipuri maker
Setting aside the fact that no single label can apply to everyone in a nation, I’d have to agree that I see endless examples of Nepali kindness.

I was waiting for a small van to pick me up to go to King’s College this morning. The driver was a bit late and called to say that he would arrive in 15 or 30 minutes.

The eventual explanation was that when he picked up another passenger before me, they saw a blind woman in the neighborhood. They offered her a ride, which delayed things a little. Small acts like that happen all the time without question.

Progressive Education workshop at King’s College

By the way, I got to meet the woman and to watch her set out along the streets. Never again can I complain about the difficult urban walking here.

There are many such examples:

• Children in my neighborhood invite me to join their games, despite the fact that I seem to be consistently inept.
• I stopped in a bakery to buy bread and to ask whether they had a small coffee press. They didn’t. As I was walking away the clerk in the bakery came running after me. She suggested that the tea store across Lazimpat Road might have one (which turned out to be correct). I must have groaned at the continual but chaotic stream of traffic. So, she offered to walk me across the street. A bit shamed by that, I managed to brave the traffic, and made it across and back without incident.
• Tihar preparations
  Police and soldiers, even those assigned to maintain order for the Indian President’s visit, always seem ready to offer directions when I get lost, and even to lead me part way.
• When I stopped to watch the making of panipuri, a man spoke to me and patiently explained what was in it, how much it cost, and how to eat it.
• Climb to the temple in Bandipur
Participants in the Progressive Education workshop automatically take on helper roles with me and each other. In other situations, I’ve had to spend time with awkward requests like “does anyone know where we could get some paper and scissors for this activity?” or “could you help out this other group or individual who is having difficulty?” Here, I see the help before I’ve even fully recognized the need.

• When early on I went for a walk to get groceries, I heard some music and stopped to look. I was invited in to join a Rotaract Club of Pashupati-KTM Tihar celebration. This included dancing with them, which I attempted in my clumsy way. I wonder whether it will be on their FB page.

• I also see Nepalis helping one another. At one time, this is to negotiate impossibly narrow streets. At another, it’s a 10 year old boy carrying his 3 year old sister.

Experiences like these are difficult to capture in words or images. They lead to a feeling, one of trust that the fellow humans around are eager to help when they can in spite of difficult material circumstances.

Views of #45 from Kathmandu

Friday, November 11, 2016

The Himalayan Times: Plan to repair valley roads within a month

At the risk of sinking the world in more words about Trump, I have to share a perspective I couldn’t have imagined a few months ago.

Back then, I was convinced that Trump couldn’t win and I didn’t know that I’d be in Kathmandu. But life is full of surprises, some bad and some good.

I’ve been here in the several weeks running up to the election, and seen it through the eyes of Nepali friends.

Around town

The campaign was of course the best show going, here as in the US and elsewhere. Everyone knew about it and had an opinion. I talked with some grade 3 children who were fascinated by the contest between Donald Trump and “that girl.” One said “I don’t like Donald Trump. Nobody does.” They said that Clinton was the President’s wife. I tried to point out that she’d actually had a distinguished career as Senator and Secretary of State, but that seemed to be of little interest.
Solidarity

Most Nepalis I've talked to were distressed to hear about the election. They worry both about the future of the US and about its impact on Nepal, particularly around trade. Some also display amusement. They would never say it outright, but it's something along the lines of Americans being incompetent and clueless.

A few are Trump supporters, usually following the theory of creative disruption: The system is corrupt, leading to US arrogance, endless war, manipulation by banks, and so on. Something needs to be done to shake it up.

At a conference

As the election results were coming in, I was attending a conference here in Kathmandu. There were attendees from Nepal, India, Malaysia, the US, and some other places. Every speaker made some reference to the election. Late in the morning, which was the wee hours in the Eastern US, it started to become clear that Trump was winning.

One speaker said, “I know you're not listening to me. Instead, you're following the election on your phones. See, that proves my point about new technologies changing everything.”

Everest Trail Race

That afternoon, everyone asked how I felt. It was hard to answer because I felt so many things: surprise, shock, depression, fear, anger, shame, and more. They wanted me to say what would happen next, which is ironic, since I was so wrong before.
So, what happens in the US has an impact everywhere. Yet many in the US may not appreciate how important global perception of our leadership can be.

**In the media**

Despite this, the US is not the center of attention all the time. I looked today at the online *The Himalayan Times*. There are nearly 100 articles. Several at the top of the page address the Indian government's decision to ban 500 and 1,000 INR banknotes ($7.50 and $15). This is supposed to combat counterfeiting, but has dire consequences for many in Nepal, especially those in border areas.

There are articles about roads, traffic, health, sports, and many other areas, but nothing about Trump until you get to the special World section. There, you can read about Trump meeting with President Obama, and about reactions to the election from Russia, Germany, and UK.

Essentially, the US election is rapidly fading into “other news” or none at all here. With chronic infrastructure problems and a GDP per capita of less than $2 a day, most Nepalis have many other things to worry about. Of course, if Trump follows through on some of his outrageous statements, that will change. If international aid programs are cut, the effect here can be substantial and immediate.

I just keep going by reminding myself that I’m fortunate to be visiting an amazing and wonderful country. I experience surprising things every day, knowing that they’ll be only memories in a few weeks. They’re real of course, but not part of the real life I know back in the US. So, maybe when I return there I’ll discover that all this election stuff was just a strange experience that didn’t actually happen.

**Community inquiry in Dalchoki**

*Wednesday, November 16, 2016*

Himalayas to the north, past the Kathmandu Valley

It’s highly unlikely that you would just happen upon Dalchoki, given that it’s two hours from Kathmandu by jeep up narrow mountain roads, which are dirt surface with ruts and random rock from landslides. If you did, you might wonder what was there. You wouldn’t see an industrial center or a tourist destination.

Despite that, I had one of the warmest and most satisfying few days in Dalchoki that I’ve ever experienced. As part of our progressive education workshop we engaged in community inquiry with the residents.
Planning our visit in the Dalchiki Rising Homestay

From Dalchoki, some views are “blocked” by beautiful green hills, but to the south you can see the Terai plains leading to Ganges basin and India; to the northwest there’s a good view of Manaslu (26,781 ft) at the eastern end of the Annapurna Massif; to the north is the Kathmandu Valley; beyond that, the Langtang Himal, with 13 peaks above 18,000 ft; and to east, Sagarmāthā (Everest).

There’s far more than can be included in one blog post. But just to give a sense of what we did, I could talk about the milk collection center. We wanted to meet with people in the village, and knew that they would bring their milk to the center for weighing and testing.

Talking with people in the village

At our time there, we saw the head of the village development committee, and many ordinary farmers. We also talked with the staff in the center. They told us about weighing the milk, adding sulfuric acid which reacts with the non-gay portions of the milk, centrifuging, and then assessing fat content.

One aspect of the discussion was whether this process could become part of the school curriculum, in place of some of the Western content that seems so strikingly inappropriate here. Another was whether there were ways to add value to milk or other agricultural produce to improve the economic condition of the village. That challenge itself could become part of the curriculum. We continued this discussion with teachers at the school the next day,
On a personal level, I had a kind of peak experience, enjoying the incredible views, the warmth of our team of eight, our hosts for the stay, and people in the village. Whether eating delicious, traditional mountain village food, 100% organic, telling stories and laughing by the fire, playing cards, or debating views of education there was an intense feeling of family and community.

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**Shivapuri Nagarjun National Park**

**Saturday, November 19, 2016**

I had a wonderful walk in Shivapuri Nagarjun National Park today, seeing both more and less than I’d planned.

My first mistake was going by taxi without clear directions for a non-English speaking driver. Rather than arriving at the Parimuhuan entrance, we somehow ended up somewhat west at Tokha. There were a couple of good effects of this. One was that I got a good view of the army camp sprawled over that area. The other was that by starting there I had the trail to myself, since most people sensibly enter through the main gate.

The day and the trail were beautiful, I took a side trip up to the Banduspati River. There were over 200 constructed steps and a lot of unconstrusted uphill. But it was well worth it to see the cascades and sylvan setting.

One part of the trail greeted me with mica sparkling in the midday sun. I was once again reminded about how much more one can see by going slowly.

I saw a profusion of wildflowers, butterflies, dragonflies, birds, and more. Since I was alone and had neither guide nor guidebook, I had the luxury of naming each thing myself. For example, I saw many versions of small-brown-butterfly-that-never-alights-long-enough-for-me-to-take-a-photo. That’s now its technical name.

I did see a few people—some mountain bikers, some women cutting fodder, a couple of guys working on the trail.
At the base of the trail to Shivapuri Peak, I met a group of students and faculty from St. Lawrence College. They invited me join them on the walk up.

The climb totally destroyed my conceit about being able to keep up with young ones on a climb. Several times I had to pause, and eventually I decided to let them go on because I was holding them back. Could it be that Nepali youth are healthier than those in the US?

In the end, I walked back down to Budhanilakantha and got a ride back to the area of my apartment. Yes, a bit tired, but it was a beautiful day, and wonderful resource so close to the capital city.

This slideshow requires JavaScript.

**Karkhana, a factory for learning**

**Wednesday, November 23, 2016**

Karkhana, which means “factory” in Nepali, is a place where people make things and learn through doing.

The teachers are engineers, designers, artists, and scientists, but in contrast to some traditional models of learning, the environment is a teacher as well. The Karkhana site is filled with marvels: home-built antennas, a laser cutter, colorful child-designed posters, musical instruments, and more, which make the visitor ask questions and want to touch and make things.

So, it’s an education company and makerspace, one that turns the classroom into a lab for discovery. There’s an excellent slide show with many photos
explaining their approach and an overview brochure describing the variety of classes they run.

Karkhana works directly with learners ages 8-14 through an after-school program. They also do teacher professional development. I've been fortunate to participate in both of these.

There were several good things I noticed beyond the general idea of learning through hands-on inquiry. One was an interesting mix of design though felt pen and whiteboard (or more precisely, whitetable), through physical construction, and with the aid of computers. The point was not to let the medium control the activity, but to let each medium offer affordances that could further the goal – planning a school fair, designing instruments for use on a space station, or building a musical instrument.

Another was the concern for making the Karkhana approach accessible to the ordinary school and ordinary teacher. In addition to workshops for teachers, Karkhana develops a special technology: ziplock bags filled with simple, low-cost materials that can be used in a low-tech, minimal skill situation.

Karkhana already makes new kind of learning available to many children and adults. But it also stands as an example of what could be done someday in Nepali schools, or for that matter, schools anywhere.
Not a lonely park

Saturday, November 26, 2016

NagiGumba

The map/brochure for Shivapuri Nagarjun National Park describes it as a lonely park to represent mid-hill ecosystem of Nepal. It is famous for globally threatened wildlife, birds, and butterflies.

I suspect a misprint, and that the text should read “a lovely park...”, which it certainly is.

There may well be lonely parts, since the park covers 159 sq km (61 sq mi), and most visitors follow one of the popular routes as I did yesterday in the Nagarjun portion of the park. What i’d say instead is that it offers a perfect blend of solitude and connection with nature interspersed with chances to interact with nice people.

(I can’t say whether people who go on these mini-treks are nicer to begin with, or just become so when they’re away from the stresses of city life, but either way they’re fun to visit with.)
Arjun and Vibatshu

Although I did see several people, especially at NagiGumba (Buddhist monastery), I was disappointed not to see any leopards, bears, thars, boars, deer, or monkeys, which reside there. I did see many birds and butterflies, mushrooms, and all sorts of subtropical plant life. I even saw the Asian bittersweet that is so well loved on Cape Cod.

The walk up to NagiGumba is done by people of all ages, school groups, couples, and pilgrims. It’s an easy to follow trail, with steps for all the steep portions. Nevertheless, by the end of the day my knees were rubbery, my shirt was soaking wet, and I had resolved to get myself in better shape.

It was some consolation that my fitness tracker registered well over 200 floors (~3000 steps). The steps were good ones, too, with treads and risers that matched my legs. I wonder how some of the smaller children could manage it.

Along the way, I met a man who had been a mountain guide. He was walking with his 15 yo son. He gave me some good tips for hill walking. I talked with the military guards (the park is adjacent to a military camp), a couple of groups of schoolchildren, some “+2” students, and people at NagiGumba hanging prayer flags.

When I arrived at the top, I learned that there was some kind of ceremony about snakes (which I also failed to see on the trail). A monk served me slices of apples, oranges, and some pear-like fruit, which were hugely welcome after the climb.

Shivapuri Park is new (2002) and the Nagarjun portion was added just in 2009. It makes me happy to know that Nepal is able to establish these parks making possible mini-trekking in the urban area and preserving biodiversity.
Teach for Nepal

Wednesday, November 30, 2016
Teach for Nepal (TFN) is a program in which recent university graduates and young professionals commit to two year fellowships to teach in public schools. The Fellows seek to improve education as they develop their own leadership skills.

Shisir Khanal

TFN is a core member of Progressive Educators Network Nepal, a project I’m involved with here in Kathmandu. The co-founders, Shisir Khanal and Swastika Shrestha, have been big supporters of this initiative from the beginning, and many others involved with TFN have participated in the workshops or our community visit to Dalchoki.

Krishna Kumar KC

I’ve now visited the TFN offices, met many of the TFN Fellows, administrators, and community coordinators. I’ve also observed actual classroom teaching. Throughout I’ve been impressed with the dedication, the knowledge and
professionalism, and the desire to learn more and do better.

For example (and at the risk of leaving out several others), Krishna Kumar KC, Amrit Bahadur Poudel, and Nija Maharjan have been major contributors to our workshop, and absolutely necessary to the success of our extended community visit to Dalchoki.

Nija Maharjan

The very need for projects such as TFN raises questions that people should also ask about Teach for America: Shouldn't society as a whole assume the responsibility of full preparation and support for teachers? Shouldn't it encourage and support teachers to stay in the profession? Shouldn't it provide decent schools for every child?

Questions about quality education for all are even harder to answer in Nepal than they are in the US. Public schooling is limited and severely under-resourced, especially in rural areas.

In the very different economic and cultural conditions here in Nepal, Teach for Nepal is a positive force; it listens to criticisms; and it is committed to working with others. It also works closely with non-TFN teachers and the school plus community as a whole. I’ve seen little of the political agenda mentioned above.
Amrit Poudel from a deck at TFN

In contrast to Teach for America Fellows, those in TFN typically stay in homes in the rural communities where they teach. This leads to a greater understanding of local needs and a deep personal commitment to the schools and the community.

TFN has also engaged with community members in an important student vision project. That led to an impressive mission statement, not only for the students they serve directly, but for all children. It includes the idea that students should acquire knowledge, but also learn to “demonstrate a sense of responsibility towards people and the future of the community”. A key statement is ingrained in the TFN work: “One day all children in Nepal will attain an excellent education.”

Nisarga Batika School

Friday, December 02, 2016
Learning math through games

On the US Thanksgiving Day, I was sorry to be away from family and friends, and looked in vain for a stuffed turkey. But I had something else to be thankful for.

I was hosted for the day at Nisarga Batika School. I was thankful for the warm visit and also that there are at least some schools like Nisarga Batika. At the same time it made me sad that not all students have such great opportunities.

Teachers at the school are eager to find ways to improve, but as of today, the school would be the envy of some of the best progressive schools in the US.

Backpacks of the little ones

The school’s philosophy statement begins:

is a thriving community of learners who engage in education that is holistic, relevant and meaningful. As an experiential learning school, Nisarga Batika offers an environment where each individual looks upon the world as their classroom and values self-motivated learning as a way of life.

Discussion about paper money

I visited every classroom and talked with children there and on the playground, where diverse activities were underway. Although that’s just a small sample, it made me feel that the school is doing as much as anyone can to realize the philosophy statement, including seeing teachers as facilitators towards goals of critical thinking, self discovery, and creativity.

If you click on the photo below, or here, you can see a series of additional photos that convey the flavor of the school, including field trips in natural settings and the
First PENN conference, Kathmandu

Saturday, December 03, 2016

The First Annual Conference of Progressive Educators Network of Nepal (PENN) held on Friday was a big success, thanks to collaborators from King’s College, Kathmandu Living Labs, Karkhana and Teach for Nepal. The theme for this year was “the community is the curriculum.”

There were about twice as many people as we expected, but more importantly, many people directly contributed with activities or presentations, and everyone seemed to be engaged and committed to continuing the effort.

I was very fortunate to be a part of this. As the foreign visitor, I was officially the “lead facilitator,” but I felt that I was the one who was learning. I also shared quite sincerely that I can’t recall another such meeting with the same level of commitment or willingness to listen and learn from one another.

We talked about the issue of importing ideas from abroad. But there are
impressive things underway here in schools, colleges, and informal learning that could be a model others around the world.

I’d like to add that when I heard the initial plans for my trip to Nepal, I couldn’t quite believe that it would all come together: workshops, community inquiry in a village, and a national conference.

But that all happened better than I expected. The reality went beyond the original plan and came to include multiple organizations, trips to excellent schools, and the creation of PENN.

I want to both thank and congratulate Umes Shrestha, Narottam Aryal, Nama Raj Budhathoki, Swastika Shrestha, Pavitra Gautam, Aakriti Thapa, Krishnakumar KC, Amrit Poudel, Shisir Khanal, Raj Poudel, and so many others.

(Now, I’m thinking of all those I just left off the list, some of whom made perhaps even more major contributions. Please accept my apology, but especially, my thanks to all.)

You can see more of the activities pictured in this facebook album.

Mira Rai

Monday, December 12, 2016
Mira Rai (Wikipedia)

A short while ago, while in Kathmandu, I had a beautiful walk in Shivapuri Nagarjun National Park. Later, I read that Nepali runner Mira Rai had been in the same spot two years ago. She was jogging on the hilly trails, then joined other runners, chatting and laughing. They invited her to enter her first race: the Kathmandu West Valley Rim 50K.

If you zoomed through this text so far without a jaw drop, you may need some additional background. The Park’s trails are well maintained, but few people jog there, much less while chatting and laughing. It’s more a place to walk or climb slowly, with frequent stops to catch breath. And if you do decide to run competitively, start with a 5K, not 50K (31 miles).

Rai had never competed in a trail race before. She didn’t have any food, water, or hi-tech athletic gear. But she entered this one. Despite hailstones and rain, Rai, the only female competitor, completed the race.

She had the one big advantage that most successful people have: She worked hard. Growing up in Bhojpur, a remote mountain village in eastern Nepal, she had chased goats, gathered firewood, and carried heavy sacks of rice and buckets of water up and down steep hills. Like many other Nepali girls, she dropped out of school (later than many, at age 12).

A BBC article quotes her:

“I would run to the market – three hours away – buy sacks of rice, then run back and sell them for profit,” she says, flashing that wry smile. She forgets to mention that the bags weighed 28kg (60lbs), and she was just 11 years old.

After that first race, Rai had a long string of running achievements, including the Mont-Blanc 80 km, where she set a record. She’s received well-deserved international acclaim for these many accomplishments.

When she was injured early this year, she began to train other village girls and now organizes running competitions in her village for young girls. She uses proceeds from Mira, the film about her life to provide equipment for them. That film was a finalist in the Banff Mountain Film Festival this year.

Rai herself is now a finalist for National Geographic’s Adventurer of the Year. Although there are nine other excellent candidates, I had no hesitation in voting for her.

As my friend Chris pointed out, the world of running will be in for a big awakening if Nepalis start to take up competitive running.