Debate, Critical Thinking, and Civic Education:

Why No One Should Give Up on Burma

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In 2009, I traveled to Burma (also known as Myanmar) to meet with several non-governmental organizations that were actively involved in a pro-democracy movement working to reform horrifying economic and political conditions. At that time, with somewhere between 47-58 million people, Burma was one of the most repressive regimes on the planet (Currie, 2012, p. 17; Tavaana, 2014). The Burmese junta largely insulated the country from Western influence, particularly Western-style education and principles of democracy (*Christian Science Monitor*, 2012). One journalist described the relationship between citizens and the government as an "Orwellian nightmare" of official corruption and imprisoned dissidents (McClelland, 2010, p. 39). In ordinary life, the Burmese people were constrained by Internet blocks, email monitoring, 24-hour surveillance on suspected activists, no international cell phone coverage, no foreign currency, no ATM machines, government-controlled and/or owned banks and media outlets, suppression of foreign journalists, and a per capita income of $431 USD. For comparison, Haiti's per capita income was $1,300, which meant that only African countries and Afghanistan were worse than Burma (U.S. Department of State, 2009; U.S. Department of State, 2010). Today, despite recent reforms, "Burma remains a highly contested political environment" (Currie, 2012, p. 2).

This essay describes my work with indigenous pro-democracy organizations in Burma, the on-going efforts of such groups, and the lessons we can take away from my 2009 experience in a present-day context. I will use the name "Burma" to refer to the country instead of "Myanmar" for several reasons. First, Myanmar is the name adopted by the non-democratic military regime – a name adamantly opposed by pro-democratic leaders in the country (BBC, 2007; *The Economist*, 2016). Second, the United States officially refers to the country as Burma because Myanmar did not receive consent from the populace (Currie, 2012; Gallagher, 2018). I will follow suit here.

## Burmese History – in a Nutshell

Burma has a long history of authoritarian rule (McCarthy, 2010; Pedersen, 2011; Schock, 1999). That history largely began when Burma was colonized by the British in the 1880s until independence in 1948. Over 50 years of colonial rule was more than enough to set the stage for totalitarianism, including the use of "minimal manpower and maximum firepower to demonstrate, as rapidly as possible, its determination to keep the unrest from spreading and to serve as a deterrent" (Taylor, 1987, p. 336). Although Burma sporadically entertained democratic impulses, gripping government or military rule has been *status quo expectatio*. In fact, in 1962, there was a military coup led by General Ne Win that allowed him to rule until 1988. Another coup occurred in 1989 and the clamp down by the military regime was strengthened by the creation of SLORC – the State Law and Order Restoration Committee – which permitted broad militarized police powers, martial law, and labor restrictions that undermined strikes of all kinds (McCarthy, 2010; Schock, 1999). At this time in 1989, the government also officially changed the name of Burma to Myanmar, although the United States, other countries, and international organizations still refer to it as "Burma" (Currie, 2012, p. 15).

Despite the National League for Democracy (NLD) securing some positions during the 1990 elections, the military junta maintained its rule and ignored the voice of the people (*Washington Post*, 2009). There was very little the international community could do except impose drastic sanctions on the regime (Burma Fund UN Office, 2011). Yet, with China ignoring the sanctions and controlling roughly 60 percent of Burma's economy, the sanctions only had limited impact (Hlaing, 2012; Kuok, 2014). During this turbulent time, Aung San Suu Kyi, the emerging iconic leader of the pro-democracy movement, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991. Nevertheless, the military junta, under the leadership of General Than Shwe, ruled Burma

until 2011. The end of Than Shwe's rule was mainly triggered by massive devastation caused by Cyclone Nargis and a 2008 referendum for constitutional changes that was the result of the so-called Saffron Revolution of 2007, when monks cleared debris, provided shelter to the victims of Cyclone Nargis, and participated in non-violent demonstrations against the military (Clapp, 2007; Human Rights Watch, 2009; Petrie & South, 2013, p. 10; Steinberg, 2012). International attention focused on Burma in September of 2007 when a video that captured a member of the Burmese military shooting a Japanese journalist in the middle of a Yangon street went viral. That singular act of brutality instantly became a sign of the larger oppressive history of Burma (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2007; Committee to Protect Journalists, 2007).

Given these developments, the international community and the NLD demanded democratic elections. At first, the military government was not threatened, since they had experience in manipulating elections. However, with intensified international sanctions and a better pro-democracy trained populace, the government experienced a severe blow with many NLD victories in the November 2010 elections (McCormick, 2011). The government decided to change its tactics from complete totalitarianism to a dictatorship with piecemeal compromises. The first capitulation was the release of Suu Kyi on November 13, 2010 (CNN, 2010). Another concession was to honor the outcome of the election. The government, of course, still retained control and some called it a "sham" riddled with "electoral fraud," but the democrats were beginning to see fissures in the system (Burma Fund UN Office, 2011, p. 5). Because there was election fraud and the military employed violence during and immediately after the election, the United States and the EU maintained their sanctions on Burma (Martin, 2012). Despite the electoral problems, many groups began to organize and form political parties, including pro-democracy parties, so they could generate support and momentum for future elections (Lidauer, 2012; Taylor, 2010).

Between 2011-2012, the government engaged in a series of "democratic" reforms, such as meeting with Suu Kyi in dialogue over the future, establishing a National Human Rights Commission, granting over 200 amnesties for political prisoners, improving protections for some minority groups, agreeing to a cease-fire, creating new labor laws that allowed for strikes, relaxing restrictions on press censorship, increasing assistance for health care and education, and easing some currency regulations (Hlaing, 2012; Kuok, 2014; Lidauer, 2012; Steinberg, 2012). Most notably, "civil society groups now" were able to "function more freely" (Hlaing, 2012, p. 206). Despite these advances, the government, under President Thein Sein, still committed human rights violations and intensified its military campaigns against ethnic minorities – mostly the Rohingya, Karen, and Kachin ethnic groups – along the bordering provinces with China and Thailand (Burma Fund UN Office, 2011; Hume, 2015). However, because of the pseudo-democratic reforms, there was a "by-election" (what is known in the United States as a "mid-term" election) on April 1, 2012. This by-election of 2012 was a "political watershed" that allowed the NLD to secure a landslide victory, claiming 41 of the 44 seats that were up for election, including Aung San Suu Kyi winning a seat in the lower parliament (International Crisis Group, 2012). This meant that out of the 54 parties in Burma, the "NLD will be the only political party in Burma that has won a credible election" (Currie, 2012, p. 43).

Thus, many political and economic changes occurred almost immediately after the 2012 election. The EU lifted its sanctions, the government released another 3,000 political prisoners, the government removed its telecommunications restrictions, and more foreign banking and currency developments occurred (BBC, 2014). The United States also relieved its sanctions and the U.S.

Agency for International Development began funneling development assistance (Milligan & Stone, 2014; U.S. Department of State, 2013). President Obama even flew to Burma on Air Force One in 2012 (Eimer, 2012). Fortunately, the size and scope of civil society in Burma "expanded dramatically" since 2011 (Lidauer, 2012; Petrie & South, 2013). Despite some of the advancements, Aung San Suu Kyi warned in November of 2014 that reforms had "stalled" and we should be cautious against "over optimism" (BBC, 2014). Indeed, Burma still faces challenges; there is an inadequate infrastructure for democratization and liberalization, the economy still suffers from a weak currency and a dearth of trade, and there are still massive human rights violations, particularly against ethnic groups like the Rohingya, Kachin, and Karen (Fortify Rights, 2014; International Crisis Group, 2012; Phillips, 2018). And, as the U.S. House (of Representatives) Democracy Assistance Commission (HDAC) states, "democracy is not just about elections – what is equally essential to lasting democracy is what happens *between* elections" (Price, 2009, p. 160). Democracy in Burma, like most transitioning countries, is not perfect. Since my visit entailed democracy promotion and advocacy training for community activism, I am also concerned with what happens *between* elections.

## 2009 Burma – Democracy Training

For our purposes, this brief historical sketch is very important. Much of what I will be reporting occurred because of Burma's authoritarian history and some of the results of my report helped cause some of the positive democratizing events in recent Burmese history. Although President Obama used "special envoys for specific foreign policy issues" in Burma, my trip was not sanctioned by the U.S. government (Pulipaka, 2009). Instead, I went as a "tourist," while I was being funded by an international organization. Since I was the previous board president of the International Debate Education Association (IDEA) and worked with the organization for nearly a decade, I was asked by the Open Society Institute's (OSI) Youth Initiative Director to travel to Burma for the purpose of training Burmese teachers and community leaders on "deliberative education" (aka "deliberative democracy"), which includes argumentation and critical thinking and the use of debate and role-playing exercises as teaching tools. I was in Burma for ten days, as I conducted four trainings that were each two days in duration for four NGOs.

To help me with logistics and introductions to the NGO leaders, I was aided by an IDEA/OSI employee who was stationed in Chang Mai, Thailand, under the auspices of the office called "the Southeast Asian Youth Presentation and Communication" (SAYPC) organization. She was instrumental in helping me arrive at the various locations accurately and in a timely fashion. She met with the NGO leaders a month and a half before my visit to arrange the logistics and she did a fine job of preparing the trainings/meetings. If we were caught engaging in democracy promotion by the government, we had business cards printed with the SAYPC logo, and our claim was going to be that we were just teaching English. Fortunately, we were not questioned or caught.

## Reflections

Although each of the trainings went extremely well, each of them posed specific challenges, and the evaluations from each training offered suggestions for areas to improve. While we asked for evaluations from each of the trainings, some were overly positive and appreciative, yet personally, I could tell and understand that some improvements were needed.

**Specific NGOs.** I should make clear that a few participants commented that they appreciated that I couched my trainings in a way that was non-threatening to them. I expressed a hope for them to use what was wanted and needed, letting go of what they found unnecessary. "If

any of this poses a risk to you, don't use it," I reiterated often. This encouragement was welcomed. I note also that the work of these organizations had been and continues to be well-publicized, so writing about it here poses no additional risk of reprisal.

These foundations of risk management aside, I made many assumptions about the content of my instruction, as well as my audiences, that I now wish I could go back in time to adjust. For example, I initially assumed that the participants would be familiar with understanding multiple perspectives of an issue. However, I quickly learned that most of the participants were never taught critical thinking – in any capacity – in their formal schooling. This was informative about how the governing junta controls the education of the populace. If entire generations of citizens are taught not to question – even taught how *not* to question – then a governing body can greatly minimize threats to its rule. I scrapped my initial lecture plans to focus more on critical thinking.

Another assumption I made was that every participant wanted governmental change. Upon my first NGO instruction, however, I realized that local needs and problems were much more complicated. In most instances, problems such as electricity rationing, adequate supplies of food, clean potable water, proper education, religious freedoms, garbage collection, labor protection, and so on, were more salient, more pressing, and at times, in conflict with, changing the national government. Thus, after my experience with the first NGO, I changed my curriculum for the other groups. With each group I encountered, I tweaked my lesson plans.

It was illegal in Burma for groups of five or more to congregate for reasons other than worship or familial gatherings (*Washington Post*, 2009). This meant, of course, that each day I met with an NGO, it was illegal, and probably violated other laws like sedition. As such, it should not be a surprise to know that "student activism continues to exist as an underground movement" (Htun, 1995, p. 2-3). Thus, my Thai contact made arrangements with each group to meet in back-alley rooms, far away from suspicious passersby. It was important, for example, that when we took a taxi, the taxi driver dropped us off several blocks away from the meeting place. As I discovered immediately before my arrival, taxi drivers in Burma were often spies for the government. Our cloak-and-dagger behavior was quite necessary. Fortunately, given the democratic initiatives since the 2010 election, the activists and organizations with whom I worked are now safely advocating for ongoing reforms and are free from persecution.

Language was a problem. Most of the participants with the first NGO spoke English sufficiently, probably because most of the members were English teachers. However, the second NGO were mostly high school and college-age students, and while they were learning English, for many of them it was a challenge to be taught entirely in English. The third NGO, the Myanmar Resource Foundation (MRF), was comprised largely of businessmen and community leaders. They, too, were studying English, but it was barely adequate for a conversation. This meant I had to speak very slowly, loudly, and repeat myself at least once. I had to allow time for the participants to use their dictionary and thesaurus. And, in many instances, the leader of the MRF had to intervene and translate for me. The language problem was most acute with the final NGO. The participants of this group spoke virtually no English. Fortunately, they hired a translator. A native Burmese, she was a former primary school English teacher. Even with her help, many of the ideas that were translated into Burmese were still foreign concepts, so they required more attention. Because I needed a translator, it took twice as long to cover the material in the lesson plans. So, in the moment, I had to triage material that was not as important as other content – an extremely difficult task given the circumstances.

**ME (Management English).** My first training was with "Management English" (ME) – an NGO that specializes in English training and other English-related activities. There were about 15 participants and they were eager to learn about different teaching techniques. The participants were teachers/trainers, but on the second day, an additional five student-leaders joined us. The participants asked very good questions, most of which related to how they could incorporate the material into their own teaching/trainings.

ME had a training facility with air-conditioning, they provided snacks and coffee during the breaks, and they seemed excited about using our material for their trainings in future projects. This group was quite responsive about the content of the trainings, which, again, centered on critical thinking and argument skills as a way of understanding social issues and possibly helping with social change. As I learned later, some of my examples were not as "Burma-specific" as they could have been. I (re)tailored my examples for the three other trainings accordingly, thus the training at ME was very helpful to me (and for the other trainings). The participants offered feedback that the trainings should be longer, and they wanted more practical exercises they could use on the ground.

**Egress.** Teaching the Egress participants was a bit more challenging than the initial group for a few reasons. First, there were many more participants – approximately 35. Second, there was a combination of both students and teachers, which meant I had to diversify some of my lessons to accommodate the different audiences. Finally, the facilities at ME were better than Egress. At ME, there was air-conditioning and a buffering from the busy traffic of the streets. At Egress, we were located very near to the street and even though they had an air-conditioning unit, the electricity kept quitting, which made the air conditioning virtually useless.

Despite the practical difficulties with Egress, the group was very responsive to the training and materials. They seemed genuine and committed in their efforts toward enacting community change. Apparently, my experience with Egress was not an isolated event. Michael Lidauer described Myanmar Egress in this way:

[Myanmar Egress is] … the most prominent organisation offering capacity-building and educational    activities in Myanmar ahead of the 2010 elections. Myanmar Egress started to "explore the social space"    in 2006, targeting freshly graduated students by offering curricula that national universities do not        provide, such as "project cycle management," "effective communication in business," "strategic        management," and "social entrepreneurship and leadership." Myanmar Egress was the first such training    institution in the country, opening up terrain that was previously socially and educationally unknown. Its            leadership, as well as some of the younger managerial staff, were educated overseas and decided to        bring        their expertise back home….In late 2009, a Myanmar Egress research team conducted opinion polls to understand the level of voter education and participation in the electoral process. That year, 11
    workshops were held on different topics such as political parties, the legal framework, and polling            procedures. Of the approximately 2,000 participants in these workshops, *many shared the acquired    knowledge in their own networks*, and some became political party advisors or offered campaign    support. (emphasis mine, Lidauer, 2012, p. 100-101)

And the workshops of which Lidauer refers were workshops like mine. Known as "a one-stop shop for civil society activism," Egress was very eager to entertain future trainings (*Christian Science Monitor*, 2010).

**MRF (Myanmar Resource Foundation).** MRF was the third group I trained. Founded by a Muslim and premised on the Islamic faith, MRF sought to build capacity in the Yangon region. As a neighborhood capacity-building NGO, MRF was instrumental in conducting trainings and offering resource support for local leaders.

MRF provided a facility for training that enabled our efforts at teaching critical thinking and deliberative education. Of the participants, one was a monk. According to custom, the Buddhist monks have to eat before 12 pm. The MRF staff (being largely Muslim) accommodated and revered the monk so he could eat before noon. In fact, one of my pre-lunch sessions was going a little too long. The MRF leader kept looking at me, as if non-verbally telling me to "wrap it up." I didn't understand his motions, since it was made clear to me at the beginning that I should be as thorough as possible. After a while, however, the MRF leader interrupted, and kindly asked me if I could finish after lunch. Of course, I complied. As the tables were being prepared for lunch, the leader came to me and quietly told me that if the monk was going to eat, he needed to eat before noon. In my typical Western ignorance, I had no idea of this religious custom. Thus, I was elated that the MRF leader interrupted me! Additionally, MRF encouraged many different groups of "students" – including the monk, community business leaders, English teachers, etc. – to attend the trainings. Most of the members were business leaders who had a vested interest in Burma adopting liberalizing and democratizing policies. All of the participants mentioned they learned something valuable.

**Shalom.** Shalom is an NGO that focuses on peace-building and conflict resolution. It is a Christian-centered organization that houses other activist groups for community empowerment. For example, in our training, Shalom invited trauma healers (volunteers who helped the victims of the Nargis cyclone) and an inter-faith group dedicated to reducing conflict and tension between groups of faith (like Sunni vs. Shi'a Muslims). Incidentally, in addition to the extreme poverty in Burma, in 2008 the country was devastated by Cyclone Nargis, which crippled the economy even more and resulted in over 140,000 deaths (Taylor, 2010). This meant, of course, that the trauma healers were extremely valuable civil society workers for the country.

Their facility was a bit far from the downtown area and my hotel. Apparently, since it is a "religiously-affiliated" group, the installation was free from government surveillance and allowed freedom of speech and, Shalom specifically, had been referred to as an example of the "re-emerging forms of civil society activism in areas of limited statehood" (Lidauer, 2012, p. 94). This is something worth noting for possible future trainings. While the facility had air-conditioning, it was brutally subjected to the government's electricity rationing system (meaning the electricity was off more than it was on), yet the group had its own generator, which helped a little.

This final group had the most challenging English language abilities, as I said before, so they hired a translator. Even with the challenges, Shalom offered eager, excited, and passionate community leaders. The Shalom group in particular taught me that some community issues are more important, at least at first, than broad-based social change. Many of the problems experienced by the participants at Shalom were material, dire issues that required immediate attention. The members observed that after addressing the most pressing needs, they could energize other community members for larger social change. Known by development agencies for "successfully creating spaces for constructive dialogue between the government and the ethnic groups with a vision of a peaceful and just society for all the people in Myanmar," Shalom proved to be a vibrant and energetic organization with members who were anxious to use their argument and critical thinking skills to address community challenges (Swiss Peace, 2014).

**Overall Training Content.** Although some of the trainings varied according to audience needs, most of the content was similar. I titled the sessions, "Training in Deliberative Democracy," with the idea being that participants should leave the workshops with an understanding of what it means to "deliberate," how to engage in critical decision-making, how to defend a position, and how to encourage citizens to voice their concerns in a civil way. Our curriculum included ice-breakers so the participants and myself could become acquainted along with the foundations of deliberative democracy, basic argument ideas, foundations of debate and critical thinking, SPAR (spontaneous argumentation) debates, simulation/role-playing exercises, developing and enhancing listening skills, and a summary of the overall workshop.

For the first session on deliberative democracy, I began with defining democracy and deliberation. The participants had a vague idea of what the terms meant, but a good deal of their conceptions were tainted from years of mis-education from the government. We then discussed what constitutes "good" deliberation. Most of this session, however, was spent on why deliberation and democracy are valuable and important. This created a brainstorming moment when the participants tossed out ideas based on their own situations, as opposed to the trainer spoon-feeding them. At the end of this session, the ideas generated hopefully provided a solid framework for the rest of the workshop.

The sessions on argument and debate were constructed with essentially two premises. The first showed participants how they could have fun with arguments. For most of their lives, they had been told that disagreeing with anyone, particularly people in authority, was forbidden and showed disrespect. With these sessions, we provided an environment that was safe and fun. We purposefully chose topics that were not threatening, such as pizza is better than rice, girls are better than boys, etc. Incidentally, these also served as topics for our SPAR debates later on. The second goal here was to introduce vital critical thinking and advocacy skills, without being explicit. I drew from this session later in the workshop when we discussed critical thinking and advocacy to point out how the participants could use the skills they had already learned to engage in real-world deliberation and advocacy.

The next session on critical thinking defined the concept, the elements comprising critical thinking (questioning, purpose, gathering information, points of view, weighing of issues, implications), and the significance and impact of critical thinking. We also discussed the obstacles that prevent or hinder critical thinking, with the idea that if those could be recognized, we would be more likely to overcome them. I discovered quickly that this session was the most foreign to the participants. As with the debate and argument sessions, the participants had been mis-taught thinking skills throughout their lives. What was more striking was that most citizens were actually taught to *not* question. By tapping into their Buddhist faith, the Burmese government taught and emphasized to students that they should accept suffering and that by not questioning suffering, but rather by embracing it, they positioned themselves for a path to enlightenment.

Therefore, not only was critical thinking an entirely new and unique concept for the participants, it also had a serious obstacle to overcome – religious predispositions. While discussing this, I found that many of the participants supported secular beliefs and even the more religious participants could see the benefit of critical thinking, particularly in ways that it could actually benefit their faith. Additionally, since I was training community leaders, I emphasized how they should develop their own arguments and strategies when training their fellow citizens. Again, by stepping away from the educational moment and encouraging the participants to interject their own ideas, the pivotal component to deliberation of critical thinking was meaningfully addressed.

The next session, which was the first session of the second day of the workshop, was a simulation/role-playing exercise. Given that it was early in the morning, this session was intended to energize them. More importantly, however, this session allowed everyone to see the value of what they learned the previous day. I chose roughly 8-10 participants and asked them to sit in a circle in front of the larger group. The smaller group should be approximately half males and half females. I would then point to them individually and give them a "role," or identity to play, although they didn't know just yet what they would be doing. I began with a male and said he would be the sister. Then a female would play the part of the grandfather. Then, a male would be the mother. Another female would be the father. The next male would be the grandmother. The other female would be a brother, and so on. After this, I announced the scenario:

With this simulation, we need to pretend that we are playing the roles assigned to us. I am a university    representative from a school in Thailand. I am here because my university has been watching the   academic progress of your sister (played by a male). As a result, we are prepared to offer her a four-year,  full tuition, plus room & board, scholarship. You, as the young woman's family, will have 20 minutes to       decide if she should accept our offer. You should remember that given the Burmese economy, each       member of the family has to work for the family to survive. If she goes off to college for four years, the       larger family will suffer and need to make some major sacrifices. However, when she returns from       college,  she  will  almost certainly be guaranteed a nice job that will pay 5 to 10 times more than she       would  without a degree, thereby greatly improving the quality of life for the entire family. Now, you       have 20 minutes to decide.

The family immediately began discussing – actually deliberating – about how to decide this issue. Each NGO with whom I worked mentioned different arguments as to the pros and cons of the young woman attending college and how it would impact the family. Their discussions were fantastic. They put to use the skills we discussed on day one. Additionally, this simulation had the gendered component of forcing the males to pretend they were females and vice versa. Since the Burmese culture is very patriarchal, it is presumed that the men, namely the grandfather, would make the ultimate decision. In this case, however, a woman played the role of the grandfather. In all four workshops, we had a young woman – approximately 20-23 years of age – making arguments where others actually had to listen. As the father and grandfather, these women were able to guide an important conversation and ultimately make a decision that others had to follow. This notion of empowerment, even if simulated, energized the female participants in ways I could not have imagined before the workshops. The men in the exercise were able to realize that the advocacy of women had significance and their ideas should be given credit. This session became my favorite because it was fun, lively, and had an enormous and immediate impact on the participants.

The next session was developing argument skills. We began by reminding ourselves of what we learned the previous day, with an emphasis on why understanding argument was important. We then engaged in SPAR debates. Spontaneous argumentations are impromptu one-on-one debates. The debaters chose a side (pro or con) then were given two minutes to develop key argument points. The pro debater then had 90 seconds to give a speech about their arguments supporting the topic. The con debater then gave a 90 second speech in response. The debaters then gave 45 second rebuttals. The entire debate took no more than ten minutes to complete, but afterwards the debaters switched sides and did the process over again but from the opposite point of view. The participants were applying the skills they were learning, and they could see those

skills demonstrated when others were debating. By doing the SPAR debates, the participants utilized critical thinking and argument skills. After the debates, we had time to unpack what we learned and their utility in community activism and advocacy. In other words, just because we debated about mountains and oceans, it did not mean we couldn't also deliberate about more important issues such as whether political liberalization was more important than economic liberalization or whether community stability was more important than freedom of speech. During this unpacking part of the exercise, the students began to understand the potential these skills offered them.

The subsequent session – listening skills – did two things. First, we discussed the value and importance of listening carefully to others, even positions of disagreement. Respect and civility are crucial components to any sort of democratic activism. When others share perspectives that are different from our own, we may learn something or might be able to incorporate other ideas into our own. An atmosphere of respect also helps individuals feel more comfortable to voice their perspectives. The second element this session taught was how to improve note-taking skills. By discussing acronyms, abbreviations, and symbols, a person can improve the accuracy of their notes as well as the speed at which they take them.

The final session allowed us to put everything together. I encouraged the participants to reflect on what they learned. Beyond the specifics of what they absorbed from the sessions, this period of reflection called on them to discuss how they could use these skills in their particular areas of advocacy. I asked questions such as,

1. What were the key things you learned during this workshop?

2. How will those items help you train others?

3. How will those items facilitate your examination of social problems?

4. How will those items help you to deliberate with others about possible courses of action?

5. How can you anticipate and prepare for opposing arguments and positions?

By asking and answering these questions, everyone involved were able to connect ideas with practical actions for their community work.

**Implications for Burmese Democratization**

In approximately a decade since my visit, Burma has experienced tremendous change, including establishing more freedom of expression, freedom of the press, reduced controls over the Internet and other telecommunications, and the release of political and media prisoners (Burma Partnership, 2012; Myanmar Matters, 2014; Ross, 2018). In 2015, the National League for Democracy (NLD) party, of which Aung San Suu Kyi led, won the national election for the presidency. The change, while not perfect, has been for the better. I share Aung San Suu Kyi's plea to resist being overly optimistic, even while Suu Kyi has recently said she believes she can work with President Thein Sein (Osnos, 2012). Another area where we should hedge our optimism is the scope of the recent reforms and their impact on activism. After all, we know from social movement theory that there is a large degree of attrition once people begin to feel that the hard work is finished, which is also known in the Burmese context as a "revolution of rising expectations" (Hlaing, 2012; Petrie & South, 2013, p. 7; Schock, 1999). In fact, some pessimistic scholars argue that despite the victories of the NLD in 2010 and 2015, the military still maintains significant control over internal affairs, which is why ethnic and religious violence against

minorities has received international attention since the 2015 election (Barany, 2018; Huang, 2017; Thawnghmung & Robertson, 2017; Wilson, 2018).

The current pro-democratic regime in Burma has faced serious criticism about its treatment of ethnic minorities and inadequate development of democratic institutions (Fisher, 2017). Perhaps the most important concern is the government's targeted persecution – and some say elimination – of minority groups such as the Rohingya (BBC, 2018). The U.S. and the international community recently accused the Burmese military leadership with human rights violations and imposed sanctions aimed at stopping ethnic targeting (Associated Press, 2019; Hansler, 2019). While the contemporary Burmese situation can be seen as a democratic failure (Ibrahim, 2018), I join those who remain reasonably hopeful (Batcheler, 2018b). According to the Asia Foundation, a scholarly group that conducts annual reports concerning democratic stability in Burma and other Asian countries, Burma is experiencing growing pains in its democratic transition (Batcheler, 2018a). Furthermore, their most recent report highlights how on-the-ground NGO activism, coupled with democratic skill training, is a continued, necessary ingredient for Burma's ongoing transformation. As such, I believe the work I did in Burma is part of the long-term strategy of reaching the democratic goalpost.

I am fortunate to have played a very small role in this movement. It is difficult to know with any certainty whether my trainings had an actual impact on democracy in Burma. However, based on media reports, we know that Egress (*Christian Science Monitor*, 2010; Lidauer, 2012), Shalom (Aung, 2014; Swiss Peace, 2014), and the MRF (ERCAM, 2012; MRF, 2009) have been vocal and influential in social activism. In addition, while we should not be overly optimistic, we have witnessed real, material change in Burma, such that the current reforms represent "the best opportunity in half a century to resolve ethnic and state-society conflicts" (Petrie & South, 2013, p. 2). In fact, just a few short years after my trip, the Burmese government sat down with the democratic opposition after inviting the Nonviolent Peaceforce to conduct workshops on election monitoring and techniques for ensuring an effective ceasefire (Fraleigh, 2013). While the United States and other countries engage in democracy promotion by providing development and technical assistance, asserting diplomatic pressure on non-democratic regimes, and imposing economic sanctions, typically "U.S. democracy promotion efforts have failed to penetrate beyond the rhetorical or superficial," and recent history demonstrates very mixed results (Price, 2009, p. 160). Even when U.S. democracy promotion has been successful, its impact has been relatively minor. This limited effectiveness occurs because "no amount of external [financial] assistance can ultimately be substituted for the necessary political skills, political will, and measure of sheer luck that is necessary to negotiate all the moving pieces of a transacted transition" (Currie, 2012, p. 46). Thus, individual trainings and NGO activism are much more important than many people think (Aung, 2013). Fortunately, the democratization momentum continues despite the Burmese military's incessant slaughter of ethnic and religious minorities in rural areas (Thawnghmung & Robertson, 2017).

I take no credit for this activism – the move toward democratizing is entirely and solely the result of these Burmese activists. Myanmar Egress was conducting lectures on civil society before I arrived on the scene (*Washington Post*, 2009). Yet I hope that in some small way my workshops, and the workshops of others, tapped into the energy and power inside the indigenous activists. In this way, I believe that workshops like mine are instrumental in fostering a spirit and climate of advocacy and social change. One result of my workshops, and the work of others, was the development of a training manual by the International Debate Education Association entitled,

"Advocacy and Public Communication," which has now been used in Eastern Europe, Southeast Asia, and many African countries. Myanmar Egress uses their experience from workshops like mine to train thousands of others in their own indigenous workshops (Lidauer, 2012). Teaching others how to think critically is vital for deliberative democracy and capacity building. This mentality is illustrated by a vocal activist in Yangon:

> The more informed we are, the better we will exercise our power. "Democracy" would only truly work when everyone, regardless of their ethnicity, religion, color and stance, has an equal level of knowledge of "democratic" practices. Everyone deserves to have their voices heard and thoughts expressed. All individuals deserve to be valued equally, have equal opportunities, and not be discriminated against because of their race, religion, ethnic group, gender or sexual orientation. Everyone deserves to have a country to call 'my nation' in which there is full exercise of mobility rights. Everyone deserves to hold firm her or his own belief as truth. Every kid above five years old deserves to sit and learn in a classroom instead of working outside and running around battle fields. (Khaipi, 2013)

Encouraging citizens to identify problems in their community and country, to discuss possible solutions, and then develop and act on a strategy for social change – this is the work. As one entrepreneur in Mandalay said about social change activism, "We are trying to mobilize people by changing their thought process" (*Washington Post*, 2009).

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