

Narratives from an Excursion to Grapesyard School in Korogocho Slum, Nairobi: Reflections and Perspectives on Education, Community Spirit and Resilience

Eric GONDREE, Zane RITCHIE and Peter EDWARDS,
with Colin BETHELL, Floyd H. GRAHAM III, Michael GREISAMER,
Wayne MALCOLM, Richard MILLER & Michael PARRISH

Abstract

In March 2016, a delegation of English instructors from Japanese universities attended an international conference in Nairobi, Kenya and visited a local school in the outlying slum neighborhood of Korogocho to observe students in their classrooms, visit homes and explore the local community. They also delivered donated laptop computers to help establish a digital textbook computer laboratory to enhance the children's learning opportunities. This report is a compilation of narratives of the trip from the delegation and offers individual perspectives and reflections on education, resilience and the spirit of the school and surrounding community.

Opportunities for Curiosity to Take Root by Eric Gondree, Nagoya University of Foreign Studies

I consider myself lucky to have met the staff, teachers and children of Grapesyard School in Korogocho. What I remember most vividly was the energy and smiles of the youngsters I experienced after alighting from the bus when arriving with the other volunteers of our group. We made our way to the school,

carrying the bundles of donated computers we had brought from Japan; we were eager to meet the students, staff and teachers.

Upon arrival, we were treated to a welcome in which the students sang and performed dances for us; it was a memorable introduction to the spirit of the school. Soon after, we were happy to have had a chance to see the kids having lunch together and witness the staff's concern for the well-being of their students. In the afternoon, as other volunteers and I began to help install the donated computers and Local Area Network for the new lab, I was pleased to notice how well the room had been set-up to accommodate the gifted machines; the school had borne the expense of installing an appropriate and reliable electrical supply for this purpose and had future plans to install Internet access as well. In the days before our visit, some of our delegation and I had inspected our computers. After thoroughly erasing the hard drives of the donated machines, we installed a free Linux-based operating system and made tune-ups of the equipment where necessary. The machine I found the most interesting was the Raspberry Pi, which would provide the lab's wireless LAN. The best-selling British computer was originally created to make computer education accessible and affordable to all.

As the Grapesyard staff began the small opening ceremony for the new computer lab, I was seated at one of the computer tables, beside one of the school's girls. She was curiously inspecting the laptop before her, running her fingers across the keyboard and touchpad. I quietly asked her if she had used a computer before and she replied that she had not. After giving her a quick introduction of how to point and click, she began to orient herself and investigated the computer's operating system, guided by her curiosity and intuition. Very quickly, she was able to see how to move the cursor and open folders; within a few minutes of exploring, this young woman had found the computer's calculator. Within seconds, she began to use the skills which she had learned in a math class to add, subtract and multiply. All of this within twenty minutes of seeing a computer for

the first time. If the rest of the students are like her, their curiosity and desire to learn will let them make good use of the opportunities afforded to them.

Familiarity with computer use has become an increasingly important prerequisite for finding well-paying, secure jobs in the modern sector. Fruitfully accessing global information and media has also become an indispensable aspect of modern life rather than a luxury. Kenya is a country with an increasingly literate, English-speaking workforce which has avidly embraced mobile Internet technology. For instance, the popularity of mobile devices and innovative home-grown applications such as the famous M-Pesa electronic payment system has brought e-commerce and e-banking to the masses. I am filled with hope that the new computer lab at Grapesyard School offers a ticket to a more gainful future for its students and their surrounding community. I was glad to have played some tiny role in this beginning and I hope to visit the eager teachers and youths of Korogocho again in the future.

Reflections on Setting up a Computer Lab by Zane Ritchie, Josai University

This was my second trip to Grapesyard School, having first visited in 2015 as part of a research trip into education conditions in Korogocho slum. While there, I noticed that the school had a few old computers sitting in a corner, unused. The director had mentioned that he had hoped that these ancient boxes could be networked together in a computer lab for the students. The thought struck me that should I return, I would endeavor to help him realise his dream.

I am delighted to report that over a few days in early March of 2016, thanks to kind donations of laptops from our delegation and the purpose-designed computer laboratory that the school had developed, we were able to bring the dream to fruition. Fortuitously, one of our delegation, Colin Bethell, happened to be involved in a new digital publishing initiative and had kindly arranged to bring a Raspberry Pi single-board computer with him, preloaded with dozens of

digital textbooks, which provided extra focus to the project. With the Pi acting as a server, we were able to create an LAN network in which each computer is able to access the digital textbooks.

Through our initiative, the students are now able to enjoy the benefits that digital textbooks deliver such as video, voice reading, or interactive activities that traditional texts are unable to provide. The Pi can also be easily loaded with more textbooks as required. Once the computer lab was up and running and its testing complete, it was officially opened with a ribbon-cutting ceremony, accompanied by some very moving traditional cultural dancing and other activities performed by the students.

During our stay in Korogocho, we also received a tour of the local neighbourhood and school where we were able to come into contact with the children and their families and observe the extremely harsh living conditions. It was an extremely moving experience and our delegation was able to see for themselves just what the children and their families endure. I strongly believe that this initiative will positively contribute to the children's welfare, and may indeed be life-changing, as they discover the wonders of technology, which we hope will plant the seeds to eventually lift them out of poverty.

Africa. Why? By Peter A. Edwards, Mount Kenya University

Why Africa? Before and after traveling with the delegation from Japan, many people asked me this question and I also asked myself. In other sections of this article my friends and colleagues express many of the things I also experienced on our trip to Kenya, Nairobi and Grapesyard. I could not agree more with the expressions of the profound impact the journey has had on me, the continued hope for the future and the belief that our contribution may bring about some positive effects. This section, however, offers more about the *context* I found surrounding the venture instead of the many specifics within the excursion itself.

The curious people I spoke with had follow-up questions: How was the trip

worthwhile to me? Was I gaining anything by visiting a developing region of the world? Should they themselves ever consider going? Essentially: *The developing world – What’s in it for me now?*

As mercenary, if not imperialist, as that sounds, I hold that a part of each of us always factors personal benefit into all of our decisions. I certainly had to contend with demanding contextual questions before, during and after my visit to Africa:

- What precisely is the “developing world”? Is that even a proper term?
- Where in this developing world can I put my attention or money that will actually achieve results that are meaningful to me?
- What advice can I give my students or children about preparing for an uncertain human future, when machines may do everything better than humans?
- What can I do to kickstart and protect my own career?

These questions surprised me a bit at first, but they have stuck with me whenever I reflect on the trip and they also guide my writing here. Please allow me to describe how I framed my travel by reading books that provided a context within which I could situate my journey. I “book-ended” my 2016 trip to Africa with two volumes by the same writer, history professor Yuval Noah Harari. I ventured through one before my travels and another upon returning to my life in Japan. Harari’s views on human evolution gave me a great deal to consider while encountering Africa.

The first book, *Sapiens*, tells the story of the past 70,000 or so years of human history, detailing events such as the Cognitive, Agricultural, and Scientific Revolutions. Prof. Harari mentions that he chose this title to point out that our species, *homo sapiens*, beat out other humanoids (Neanderthals et al.) for dominance on earth, due in no small part to our unique capacity for telling stories that unite us.

In the second book, *Homo Deus*, Harari discusses what may befall our species in the future. He argues that despite the horrors of 20th century wars and terror threats today, human suffering due to violence, famine and infectious diseases are at the lowest levels ever known to humankind. Additionally the book describes how smart machines can do more and more of the old work we used to toil over, including processing data well enough to create music and stories! Machines could elevate our species to something like the idle gods from old mythologies, with extended lifespans, bio-tech superpowers and time on our hands. However, Harari asserts that this also leaves a dilemma. As machines continue to reduce our suffering and toil, and are even taking up art... are we even really necessary?

Certainly Harari has his skeptics, but his books framed my encounter with a Nairobi slum. Whether or not I agreed with many of his assertions, *Sapiens* and *Homo Deus* provided a prospective “backstory” and “foreshadowing” for the story I was experiencing. My colleagues and I were a “developed world” delegation, bringing cutting-edge technology to a school with dirt floors and free-flowing sewage. Yet we could all feel a 70,000 year old, vibrant and knowing pulse among the people.

I wondered how I got to this slum in Nairobi; an African-American living in Japan and visiting Africa. Also, how did humankind get to Korogocho, with shoeless orphans hunting and gathering in the trash from nearby luxury shopping malls, all in the cradle of human civilization? My trip and my reading force me to consider what the next human revolution will uncover. The books situated my trip in a narrative context and forced me to realize I had a role in a story that I didn’t know so well.

I recall how Harari pointed to *ignorance* as a great birth of revolutionary ideas. When humans invented powerful microscopes, for example, we discovered in a drop of water our own flooding ignorance. Innumerable mysteries we never knew existed suddenly appeared and we embarked on quests to solve them.

When I contextualized my trip into the story of human evolution, my ignorances and quests underwent renaissances.

We know that across the earth humans celebrate births with gifts. We give toys to challenge a growing child's senses, or first books to be read before sleep in a cradle. These gifts are not insulting the ignorance of the child, but celebrating the lifetime of discovery ahead. My trip to Kenya and the reading that surrounded it was a celebration of my own ignorance. I continue to face mountains of basic knowledge that I don't know about Kenya and about so much of Africa's past and present. I still don't know what "developing" means exactly and I have few useful prescriptions for the future.

However, I do vigorously believe in celebrating ignorance, which is why I open new books, buy plane plane tickets and "teach." I also appreciate Prof. Harari's approach to closing his writing by assigning questions for his readers to further contemplate. I will similarly end this piece with a task for you, dear reader: homework that I hope will lead you to further celebrations. I promise it will take only about 30 minutes online:

- Know of seven (of the 50+) African nations by name and location, and the countries that colonized them.
- Know of seven famous African people, of any gender or era or area of prominence (but not "Lucy" or Nelson Mandela. Too easy!).
- Know of seven books by African writers (Dr. Harari is Israeli. Can't use him!).

I say "*know of*" because I only ask you to be familiar with these 23 bits of information (including Nelson and Lucy). Just Google or Bing them each for a minute or so, jot down some notes and be able to recall them. Actually, this 30-minute task will probably make you the hands-down "Africa expert" in most conversations you are likely to have. This could well be a major step toward answering my earlier questions, or at least generate more celebratory discussions,

which I guess is why I went to Kenya. You might even embark on discovering *What's in Africa for you now!*

A Return to Korogocho by Richard Miller, Kobe Gakuin University

Having visited Korogocho slum and Grapesyard School in the past, it was an honour to return to the area with nine colleagues from various institutions in Japan. The plan for this visit was to tour the school, inaugurate a computer room and visit the local neighbourhood. Our delegation arrived in Korogocho on March 6th, 2016 on the Management University of Africa (MUA) school bus on a sunny Saturday afternoon to be greeted by school children from Grapesyard School, noticeable by their distinctive uniforms and cheerful laughter.

In addition to the school campus, we were kindly escorted around the neighbourhood by school staff. It was striking to see the difficult living conditions that some of the children are forced to endure. These hardships include no electricity, gas or running water and living on a dirt floor. The contrast between the school and the home environment made it clear how the school was a real safe haven and why student motivation was so strong to attend school. The knock-on effect is that students are keenly engaged in a positive learning environment and away from potential negative peer and environmental pressures of their home neighborhoods. The school provides the children a window to a greater world of opportunity and teaches them how to build better life skills. This was reflected in their attitudes of cheerfulness, respect and honesty. We allowed the children to help us carry various donated goods from the bus to their school and they obliged to ensure that everything arrived without incident. During the visit, children entertained us with a wonderful display of traditional dance and song. It was a very moving experience to see such talent, even though the school possesses very few resources.

The trip to Korogocho changed our outlooks and perspectives on life, especially regarding Africa, and we were humbled by the hospitality of our hosts.

We hope it is possible to make a positive difference in people's lives through a little generosity and humility.

An Oasis in Nairobi by Floyd H. Graham III, Kansai Gaidai University

It was a privilege to be a part of the group of educators from Japan who visited the Grapesyard School. I checked the Grapesyard Facebook page several times prior to leaving Japan in order to prepare myself for what I might encounter and expect. In retrospect, there was nothing I could have done to prepare for such a life experience.

A confluence of emotions swirled inside of me prior to our arrival there. As our bus emerged from the congested streets of Nairobi and approached the area of the slum, these feelings had settled into a nervous anticipation. When the bus parked on the fringe of Korogocho, we were warmly welcomed by a small group of students clad in red uniforms and some school staff. They carried our donation-filled bags and led us to the school, a true oasis. There, I witnessed classrooms filled to bursting with attentive students eager to learn; I saw student performances that moved me to the depths of my soul; I also met kind and compassionate people, the type of which this world needs many more.

Many memories are etched in my mind, but I was perhaps most deeply affected by the smiling faces I encountered. How can children who are surrounded by so much squalor in their everyday lives smile in the way that they do? I think it may be because of *hope*. Grapesyard and its wonderful staff provide an environment that cultivates hope and a promise that an education will set a child on a path to a better life. I was able to reaffirm my belief in the transformational power of education because it can provide us with a necessary *optimism*. To be in the presence of the director and staff, even for just a few hours, provided a recognition that with our actions we are all capable of creating a better place for us to live and grow together. It seems as if we are constantly bombarded by news of divisiveness, violence, hate and ignorance. Spending an afternoon

at Grapesyard helped me to balance all that negativity and, indeed, provided a confidence that good can overcome bad and that love can defeat hate. I remain extremely grateful for this experience.

Revolution just down the Road by Michael Greisamer, Kobe Gakuin University

The initial shock upon visiting the Grapesyard School was getting off the bus in the middle of the village while children gathered around and people watched curiously. To get to the school, we crossed a metal footbridge over a small river flowing black with raw sewage and garbage. Carrying the boxes of goods and computers to donate, I felt I could have given them to anyone we passed by but these computers had a mission: to become the first computer lab in the school and connect the students to the world.

As is usual with computer systems, we ran into a few problems and several of us returned the next day to finish the job. The walk across the dirty bridge the second time was not as shocking and the stench was not as bad. In just two trips, a bit of normality had set in. This time I did not meander like a tourist with sympathy but walked normally to the school with a purpose. We needed to buy some supplies, so we left the slum area and in less than 20 minutes (9 kilometers) we arrived at Garden City Mall. I was shocked to see this huge complex of high-end shops and restaurants and just next door was a kids' park. To see this extreme contrast demonstrated a larger problem in Kenya.

I came to the realisation that perhaps the Grapesyard kids could spend time out of the slum area. Perhaps, they should have field trips in small groups to the Garden City Mall. Those selected will have projects to complete, take notes, draw pictures or buy goods for those who could not make it. Will this be beneficial to the children? Will they return with hope and desires for the future or will they become bitter and feel that life is unfair? After the experience, will they feel resentment or hope? I feel it would be a learning experience providing

hope for the future; at least, they could enjoy the park and some sweets with friends. Director Mr. Edmond Opondo, the staff and teachers have all dedicated their lives to Grapesyard school and it is up to us, the international community, to support them in any way we can.

Taking the Internet Offline: Publisher Promotion by Colin Bethell, DEC Publishing

In this delegation, my role as a digital publisher and e-learning consultant was to supply the content, the server (a Raspberry Pi) and one laptop.

Due to intermittent Internet access at the centre, I used a Raspberry Pi as a wireless server to store content. The Pi was configured to simulate the Internet for any device with a browser in the vicinity. This works for 20–40 devices and the range is around 75 metres. My company, PIRON, developed this solution and we supplied it as a charitable donation. The total cost of the Pi is less than USD100. The software was supplied as donations with the goodwill of the following publishers of reading materials:

- Atama-ii Publishing
- ELF Publishing Japan
- Hiragana Times
- MediaTechnics Math and Spelling and Learner Management System
- PIRON science and maths video materials
- Real Reads
- Saddleback Publishing

The publishers entrusted PIRON to digitise their published books and supply them securely with full DRM (Digital Rights Management) using the Raspberry Pi server solution. The secure nature of the PIRON digital solution enables us to make this content freely available to the Grapesyard students with no risk of the publishers' valuable Intellectual Property rights being breached.

The set-up was pretty straightforward and the only real challenge was to make sure the teacher at Grapesyard was familiar and comfortable with the use of the Pi and software. Since the Internet was not available and there is no budget that can be allocated to buy content, this arrangement does two things. First, it simulates the Internet in the way it looks, functions and delivers content. Second, it enables publishers to provide their content restricted just to the authorised audience. This latter point is critical because in order for good quality published content to be accessible, we must protect the publishers' Intellectual Property.

Over two days in March 2016, several delegates were able to set up a working computer lab that connected ten donated computers to the Pi. I believe this solution will enable the students to start becoming familiar with technology and content that they may not otherwise experience and I hope this will enhance their opportunities in some small way for the future.

Creativity and Resilience in Korogocho by Mike Parrish, Kwasei Gakuin University

My first impressions on visiting the Korogocho slums were the colors. There was a stream choked with multi-colored plastic trash. Then there was the smell of rotten garbage and human waste from the lack of proper sanitation services. As my senses became accustomed to the new sensations, I began to notice not how much the residents lacked, but their resilience and how much they had accomplished in spite of a lack of resources.

I was greeted by smiling students from Grapesyard School dressed in their distinctive red-and-white checked school uniforms. While they led our group to their school, I was amazed at the number of students crammed into the small classrooms who were eagerly and attentively learning. Along the walls of the school there were hand-made educational materials, posters and murals illustrating many subjects. The teachers used the materials at hand to create simple, colorful, effective and engaging instructional materials, perfectly suited to their

environment and the context of students' lives. I was surprised to learn that the school used redeveloped slum houses as classrooms that now serve over one thousand students. This represents a creative transformation making the best of the situation that brings hope to the whole community.

The students demonstrated this spirit of hope and creativity in various ways. They performed original poetry and traditional dances for us that were entertaining and moving. A local Boy Scout troop performed a precise colour guard in mismatched uniforms while proudly bearing the Kenyan flag on a simple branch as a flag pole. Their dignity and dedication shone through.

The neighborhood surrounding the school was decorated with intricate and vibrant murals. Many of the homes were built from discarded materials creatively repurposed as building supplies. Roofs were thatched with plastic carrier bags to make them more waterproof. The discarded ends of large tin cans became a distinct wall covering that was arranged in a fish-scale pattern, beautiful and weatherproof. One of the school administrators, Charles Guda noted, "There is a lot of creativity in the slums." I agreed, but not just in terms of the paintings and posters, but in how residents overcome the odds, maximize limited resources and survive. There is so much untapped potential in Korogocho; Grapesyard School kindles and develops this potential in all of its students.

Seeing My Daughter – Reflections on Korogocho by Wayne Malcolm, University of Fukui

My daughter watches movies about "superheroes," magical lands and beings, strong women, etc. My daughter also gets a healthy dose of CNN. She sees other narratives of the world that allow her to envision possible futures for herself.

A little girl was brought into this world. Living under corrugated iron welded together; insulated with plastic bags and tarp; no electricity or sewage infrastructure; baking in the darkness. I would say this was not her dream, but what is your dream when the reality that you live in has never been augmented by something

drastically different? Maybe that changed when a bunch of foreigners walked into her school with some second-hand refurbished computers and a purpose.

In the deep brown eyes and smile (I had been trying without success to make her smile, but eventually got her to smile) of this little Kenyan girl, I felt optimism and pure joy, which I often feel when my own daughter smiles. I want to believe her smile was one of comfort and appreciation knowing that total strangers can actually care about her and that her future has greater options, like that of my own daughter.

However, the hard truth of Korogocho is: to change the fortune of this little girl, others like her, and the place they survive in will take an enormous effort on many levels. How do we solve what seems like intractable poverty? The people at Grapesyard provide an answer. These dedicated professionals are lifelines for the children and families of Korogocho; people at every level of government and society who have the wherewithal to make positive change, and hopefully they do. And then you have the group of foreigners from Japan who came to Africa for all various reasons, with various backgrounds and skill sets, now united in purpose by this common experience at Korogocho. Together, the hope is that we can keep the smile on the face of the little girl and others like her who have been infused with a vibrant spirit that my daughter recognizes as her birthright.

Conclusion

Our delegation of ten instructors from Japan brought a few suitcases of donated computers to the Grapesyard School located in Korogocho outside of Nairobi. While our hands (and suitcases) were empty when we left, somehow our hearts felt considerably more full. Through spending time with the children of Korogocho, we were able to hopefully provide a new means for them to change their lives. Our wish is that outfitting a computer lab at the school will help to make a difference and provide a ladder out of poverty. At the same time, each of us became more aware of things that may have seemed so distant and abstract

prior to our visit. With this understanding and knowledge comes the burden of action on behalf of those we met and, of course, ourselves. Since the visit, our contingent has tried to raise awareness of the issue of poverty and lack of education resources in the slums of Kenya by sharing experiences with our students in Japan and by arranging ongoing donations to the Grapesyard Foundation in hope of continuing the virtuous cycle.