

Reflections on Gigapan training

Soweto and Lavela High School: April 22 and 23 2008 ; Illah R. Nourbakhsh

I Lavela High School

Clean Water Not Cameras

There is a refrain that schools in conditions of true poverty need clean water, and that technology such as Gigapan is, simply put, the wrong application of resources. Now I can say with confidence that this is utter nonsense. The school, Lavela High School, is in a poor part of the township, Soweto. But that does not mean that there is any difference between the attitudes, desires and enthusiasm of the learners as compared to our "priveleged" students in a private school in the U.S. Lavela is down an unmarked road and consists of fifteen dust-colored buildings. The facilities are modest but well-kept, and wait until you approach the large, steel, blue-painted door. Behind that door is a computer lab, nine months old, that contains 30 Intel workstations and a large server. Imagine the feeling when you fly for 24 hours then drive into Soweto, which both feels like a foreign land because of all the prior stereotypes you hold in your head and also has shopping malls that are newer and prettier than what Pittsburgh possesses. Now you turn down a road, drive through a section on dirt paths next to the actual torn-up road, take two more turns, then walk in on that computer laboratory. Gigapan signs have been printed and posted on the walls. An arrow to the left, with the word Gigapan printed above. Where the direction is right, the sign is posted upside-down.

The computer lab is occupied with thirty learners when I walk in, all dressed in uniform, all on the Gigapan website exploring, reading conversations, zooming in and out. Thirty workstations serving Gigapan at slow but manageable speeds for thirty children, just more than half of them women.

Is there hunger? Certainly. One teacher told me about the hunger some of the students feel at home, and forcefully asked for some form of help. Yet ask the class who has computers at home, and three raise their hands. Ask how many have used computers for more than ten hours, and half of them raise their hands. Their access and exposure to technology has been limited. Yet in the space of three hours' training, they are outside, without me, in small groups, making Gigapan panoramas of pollution in the neighborhood.

The single biggest hit for the students and teachers alike is the printed Gigapan posters. The Pittsburgh Skyline conveys to them incredible beauty. It is a piece of art, and this makes them want to create art. And they say so. The Falk Playground panorama conveys to them storytelling

and narrative. It makes them eager to tell their stories. Lasanda tells the Sunday Times her plan: "I am going to take the Gigapan camera home and photograph a traditional Xhosa meal and write all about it." We did not plant this seed; this is hers, a product of her pride, her enthusiasm, and the pittsburgh and playground posters.

Day two, in the space of two hours, the learners are logging into our "Unesco" site, exploring the Falk Gigapan panoramas, snapshotting them, starting new conversations and making panorama comments. Their excitement about speaking with Falk students is deep and across the board. They cannot wait to see how Falk students have responded tomorrow, to the Soweto comments of today.

The students are all genuine, all attentive, all incredibly proud, kind, generous, full of smiles, quick to laugh and polite. They have self-confidence in heaps. Where US students shy away from the Gigapan control panel buttons during training, these girls will interrupt me to start trying it out themselves. And as I teach, they are not silent and passive. They ask many excellent questions, nod when they are in synch with me, and speak up regularly to make it clear they understand the content. I see the same attitudes in five older graduates, unemployed youth who volunteer to help run the computer lab. They are helpful to a soul, positive, encouraging and they do *everything* I ask them to do in about five seconds. There is no lethargy, no random chatter, no carelessness.

In a way this is the perfect learning environment. These learners could easily, easily succeed in an American school. They exhibit a rare combination of generosity, raw intelligence and self-confidence that I never find, three for three, in our American classrooms. The idea that poverty, that a township, has little use for technology, from the learner's point of view is pure nonsense. Are the learners thirsty? Yes. They are incredibly thirsty for hope; for a way up and forward. They are thirsty for technology, not only water. And now I have enough detailed stories and enough of a real experience to say this forcefully, and in front of anyone who cares to listen.

"Thank you for putting us on the map"

The headmaster is equally misfit to any stereotype one might imagine. He is a middle-aged gentle man, fit as is every teacher in the school (and every student: their food is truly balanced and nutritious). He is grateful, deeply, for the opportunity. And he is totally committed to working the Gigapan technology into curricula across their teaching subjects. He travels to Europe, to South America, to visit and study school systems in other countries. All this to better his school, Lavela. All on his own dime. And he works extra hours, outside school, specifically to pay for these travels. Be aware: Lavela is a small school: 1,000 students. A small school that is not well known in Soweto, a township in South Africa. Any degree of extrapolation you do will be alarmingly powerful. How many proactive, dedicated headmasters and teachers are there in Soweto? In the entire township system? Throughout poverty-stricken regions the world over?

And yet when the Headmaster thanks us for coming, he talks about how important it is that we are putting Lavela on the map, that 5 major newspapers in South Africa are covering the class, that the UNESCO officials in the government in Pretoria met with us and are strongly behind the effort, that a major art gallery, the biggest in South Africa, will be showing his learners' panoramas and stories in combination with panoramas from Pittsburgh, Trinidad and Tobago. He is a quiet, carefully spoken man who means deeply what he says. And he promises, guarantees, a long-term relationship with us, a joint exploration of how this technology can better Lavela for the learners.

He has a world view; he understands the importance of national attention; he studies other cultures' school systems and brings the lessons home. All at a tiny township school that the director of UNESCO South Africa had never visited or talked about previous to our meeting him.

II Soweto: South and West Townships

Decorum

Soweto is a land of more than 6 million residents, more than a hundred major neighborhoods, with Zulu, Xhosa, Khoisa and other tribes in some places intermingled, in other areas in their own discrete locales. There are chiefs of neighborhoods, there are owners of eating establishments. These people *matter* in a way that no owner, no "neighborhood mayor" matters in the US. When we walk to a "hostel" (this is really a very poor apartment block), we first ask a woman with Zulu face paint and spices about where to go to ask permission to enter. All these conversations are in Zulu. All the time. We are led away from the complex to a small building, where a man in a blue uniform receives us, talks politely with our guide, one of the Lavela teachers who is Zulu and lives in Soweto. He greets us with spare English, then whips out his cellphone to get the chief's permission for us to enter the area. Without such permission, you are in danger. With such permission, you are greeted warmly, as guests. Cellphones are *de rigueur* in Soweto in the hierarchy of neighborhood life. The chief comes out and greets us and we are on our way, fifty yards into the compound, where we briefly tour a kitchen, a shower, a latrine that typifies life here. There is running water, electricity, and four walls. And there is nothing more. Except that every interaction we have with every establishment is filled with a generous level of decorum. You must find the person in charge, you must talk to him or her, and then you are utterly, perfectly safe. There is never a single request for a thing, for money, or to sell a thing. This is not the middle east, nor Tangiers, nor Egypt. Money never comes up. There is never, ever a sense of doom, of animosity, or anger. These people are completely friendly, and totally guided by tradition at the same time. You must do things right, and when you do, all doors are open.

It is hard to describe what it is like being in such a place for hours on end, where you are literally the only white person in many kilometers. There are none like you. Yet you are received as if your presence is in no way an imposition, a naivete, an overstepping of bounds. It is hard to describe how warm the African cultures are, as you observe them operating before you and toward you.

We go to a park in Soweto where a dance group is filming a DVD. With high-end digital videocamera equipment. They are dancing, singing, playing music. They want us to invite them to the US to perform! They perform for us the traditional Zulu ritual of asking for a woman's hand in marriage. The young man with his friend (for moral support) kneels before a woman, holding her ankles and pleading for her love. She must say no, she must play coy, for about three years, only then to yield with a yes that vaults them into a life together. Divorce does not happen after that: the families work hard to make the marriage a success. The performance for us is filled with laughter, comedy and drama. She yields and he dances across the grass, leaping and shouting for joy.

"No More Africaans"

We go to the place where the massacre of 1976 began. Our guide was there. He was 18 and he was in the streets, part of the march, part of the protest against forced Africaans in the classroom, when the police opened fire and made a bloody massacre that became a major milestone in the transformation of South Africa. He tells us that he and his friends modeled the protest after Martin Luther King's approach, with singing and peaceful marching in the street. He tells us that, ironically, it was the whites, the Africaners, who stopped whites from coming to Soweto for decades. It was "no go" - you had to have a very good reason to enter the area. Today I think it is purely in-built stereotypes that stop whites from traveling to Soweto. A heightened sense of danger that is, plainly, untrue.

Is there crime? Of course. There is poverty, there is famine, and those who must eat steal. Mostly this is stealing in Soweto itself of course (that is after all most convenient). But drive half a kilometer into a central portion of Soweto, and you see before you a shopping mall and supermarket that is as new as the newest in Europe and America. Squint and you can easily, easily be in Atlanta at any giant Safeway mall.

Many were amazed that we ventured into Soweto. But we didn't just venture to our school, Lavela, and back. We dallied. We explored Soweto, with a guide of course. And I honestly, never ever felt endangered even once, even slightly. I didn't get 'cased' until the moment I arrived at Jo'burg airport and faced a long line, with some fellow trying to pull a fast one on folks in line. But in Soweto, nothing. Just a vibrant place with incredible decorum, ancient culture, beautiful, colorful clothing, spices, roots, face paints and a history of nearly unspeakable massacre and violence.

Ask blacks in Soweto if things have improved, and they give you an unequivocal yes! Things are far, far better than five years ago and twenty years ago. Everything from infrastructure to education is improving massively. Self-employment is very high because unemployment is so rampant. No-go areas for Sowetans are disappearing as everywhere can be visited. "Power shedding" is on a schedule and they plan around the known days and times when there will be no electricity. There were more parks and green spaces throughout Soweto than I have seen in any modern American city. And the people use these spaces: for picnics, for weddings, for festivals and for walks in nature. Is South Africa improving? Without a shadow of doubt.