

Commentary

Teacher Travelers in Jamaica: Using Study Tours as Field-Based Experiences

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In his article titled “Why We Travel,” Pico Lyer (2000) clarified a clear distinction between travelers and tourists with “travelers” leaving their assumptions behind and “tourists” complaining that “nothing is the same way it is at home.” When a group of six undergraduate students and one faculty member from the University of Central Missouri (UCM) spent a week teaching 125 students a day in an at-risk youth camp in Petersfield, Jamaica in July, 2013, we were immersed in the local culture enabling us to experience Jamaica more as teacher “travelers” than “tourists” in many ways.

Home Stays. The fact that we stayed in host family homes encouraged the “traveler” experience. Rather than living in a hotel or Club Med environment, this group lived with local host families. Chosen very carefully for their gracious attitudes, an extra bedroom and bathroom for visitors, proximity to the campsite, and good cooking skills, these women and their homes were definitely a strength of the program. We picked fruit for breakfast from the trees in the backyard and walked three to five blocks to school viewing the local neighborhoods up close and personally. Part of these daily trips was walking past metal roofed food vendors, a local bar, and cattle or goats in the front yard of houses. Additionally, cold showers and living without air conditioning were integral to this immersion into a small town in Jamaica.

Camp Teaching. Working as a lead teacher for a group of 25 or more Jamaican students discouraged feeling like a tourist. Because this trip was a “service learning” trip organized through Amizade (www.amizade.com), UCM students planned and implemented four and a half days of lessons for a designated age group from Kindergarten to high school. With the theme God Loves All the Children of the World, each college student picked one country to write an all day integrated lesson using library books, original reading materials written with www.glogster.com, and art. “Foldable” notebooks, reading logs with teacher conferences, and FAB FOUR cards put on pipe cleaner rings (predicting, questioning, summarizing, & clarifying) were also included in the lessons. (See picture below). The middle school/high school group emphasized writing original math story problems related to the topic each day.

After six weeks of finding and revising materials, these six undergraduate students became the lead teacher for their age group. However, each UCM student had at least one experienced local teacher or high school student assisting her. This interaction with the local people both for planning and teaching became a strong bond. A large group “reflection” was held at the end of each day as well as individual conferences with their UCM professor conveying what happened in class that day and what was planned for tomorrow. There was a lot of growth as flexible and realistic teachers from Monday to Friday of our week of camp school. Indeed, this week of teaching in Jamaica added an additional practicum experience to each pre-service teacher’s Program of Study.



Activities. The types of extracurricular activities encouraged up-close local interaction. All tour groups have planned activities, but the activities in Petersfield, Jamaica focused on being with local teens and young adults “off the beaten path.” On the first day, the group plucked thirty six chickens to be cooked and served that week in camp as well as gong to a very natural local beach with picnics packed by host mothers. We also went on a cave tour stopping to pick sugar cane in route and to Jimmy Buffet’s Margaritaville beach in Negril, Jamaica. (See picture below).



The first night each person was individually introduced at a special welcome dinner at the Association of Club’s (AOC) building. Later in the week, the host mothers staged a creative cooking class featuring local specialties enticing our taste buds. Being present at the weekly AOC Thursday night meeting was another community touch, and they asked us to pledge

allegiance to the U.S. flag to close the meeting. Finally, two farewell parties combined with a 21 year old birthday party promoted rum punch, local music, and dancing to round out the week's extracurricular activities.

Socialization. At each activity and hour of teaching, these UCM students were communicating with local people and negotiating the local English dialect. Far beyond a conversation with a waitress or desk clerk, we made friends, exchanged e-mail address, and fielded children's questions. We were entrenched with the running of the AOC camp school from feeding them to teaching them. Although English was spoken with a British dialect, Patois ("Pat-wa") was also heard at school and during social interactions outside of camp. Patois is an informal language from the descendants' African roots.

Weather. Because we walked to our camp school, taught outside, and stayed in un-air conditioned houses, the students from the U.S. had to adjust to the heat and humidity of this tropical region. Drinking lots of water, wearing wet shammy cloth rags around our necks, and taking frequent cold showers kept us hydrated and healthy.

Conclusion. In conclusion, six pre-service teachers and one professor flew from the middle of the United States to Jamaica to lead students of all ages in an at-risk youth camp for a week. Thematic units around a country were written, materials made, and lessons implemented. Flexibility and adaptability were key attributes practiced. Indeed, this adventure added an additional practicum experience to Programs of Study for these junior level pre-service teachers.

In retrospect, we were much more like travelers than tourists as we stayed in local homes, planned and implemented lessons in the AOC at-risk camp for four and half days, participated in local recreational activities, negotiated verbally with the local dialect, and endured the tropical weather without air conditioning.

In route from the Kansas City airport to our college campus in Warrensburg, Missouri upon our return, one student sighed, "Oh, it is so nice to be on roads without any potholes!" Our perspectives have been forever changed.

References

Amizade: Global Service-Learning. www.amizade.com.

Lyer, P. (2000). "Why we travel." Reprinted with permission from Salon.com in Amizade's journal, p. 3-21.

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