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USING YOUR TALENTS TO SERVE THE WORLD:

A Trip to Haiti

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ABSTRACT

A Purdue student describes her study abroad experience in Haiti as a member of a class chemistry team that partnered with Université Anténor Firmin (UNAF). The goal for this project was to create curriculum to teach to the students of UNAF and the citizens of Cap-Haïtien during a symposium. The student reflects on this life-changing experience and describes what she learned during her time in Haiti.

INTRODUCTION

Traveling to Haiti was one of the most impactful and amazing experiences I have had in college thus far. While in Haiti I didn't just learn new things about the country and culture, but also about myself as an individual. Thanks to Ewaldy Estil, the northern director of Heifer International Haiti, I learned that "the purpose of life is not to make money, but to use your talents to serve the world."

When I first arrived in Cap-Haïtien, I was surprised at how differently the people lived. As we drove down the streets, I looked to the left and there was trash lying in the ditches. I looked to the right and there was trash burning in the streets. As we crossed over streams and rivers, people were washing their laundry in contaminated water. As we drove by the first village outside of the city, I saw makeshift buildings that served as homes. They didn't have doors or windows, just the framing. The properties were divided by cactus fencing, which doubled as clotheslines for some. There were

children playing with no shoes on and toddlers without clothes. People were doing everything they could to make a living in a very impoverished country.

Figure 1. Trash and sewage lining the main highway in Cap-Haïtien.

Figure 2. A makeshift building in a Heifer International Village we visited.

As my trip progressed and I traveled to different parts of Haiti and interacted with different people, I realized that these people are proud of where they come from because Haiti is their home. I thought that people would envy us because of where we come from, but I realized that they envied our resources. They love being from Haiti, and I realized that they wouldn't change where they were from, only what they have access to where they live.

CURRICULA

During this class I was a member of the chemistry team that partnered with Université Anténor Firmin (UNAF). My job for this project was creating curriculum to teach to the students of UNAF and the citizens of Cap-Haïtien during our symposium. I created a lab on soil pH that taught citizens how different soils have different pH levels and why that is important in order to have successful crops. My team also created a lesson and lab on leaf chromatography. These were the two lessons and labs that really ignited conversation during our symposium.

During the lecture part of our symposium at UNAF, the students couldn't believe that there was a thing called photosynthesis. My group was presenting the students the lecture on photosynthesis, and all of a sudden the students were shouting back and forth. We couldn't understand what they were so excited about at first because they were talking in French, but the translator told us what they were saying. This made us excited, too. We realized that day what one of the main focuses should be for next year's team—functions of a leaf.

When it came to the soil pH lesson and lab, the students couldn't understand why different plants needed different soil pH levels. We had to explain to them that each plant requires different amounts of nutrients that they receive from the soil. This topic was another conversation starter and something they could apply to real-world situations. These were topics we didn't know they were interested in, but they were excited about these areas of science. This created a base for next year's team. Next year the chemistry team can worry less about the topics to cover, and more about the content of these two subjects.

LEARNING

While in Haiti we learned a lot about ourselves, too. Every day we reflected on what we experienced. It came down to discovering more about ourselves and things we can take back home with us. We also learned about our partners in Haiti.

Figure 3. Students at the symposium watching as I demonstrate soil pH.

One transferable skill that I gained from my experience in Haiti was communication. Having a language barrier between you and the people you are trying to teach and learn from was a huge challenge. Throughout our trip we had three Haitian students who traveled with us everywhere we went. They were our translators and spoke both English and French. During our symposium they translated our lessons. Having a translator taught us to speak slower and in shorter sentences.

Something we learned from the language barrier was how to communicate without using words. We would see children on the streets or in villages and want to play, but we couldn't talk to them. We would use hand motions such as "rock, paper, scissors" or "hot hands" and they would learn from our motions. We also taught the children how to play "duck, duck, goose" by patting people's heads and running around them in a circle. Learning how to communicate without actually speaking is challenging and something to be proud of.

Adapting to situations was another transferable skill I learned while in Haiti. When we first got off the plane in Cap-Haïtien, we had to adapt to people wanting money from us, and trying to help us with our luggage. In the villages we had to adapt to people looking at us like we were aliens because we were the minority in their

Figure 4. Haitian children joining us in a game of “duck, duck, goose.”

Figure 6. A Haitian child and me playing “hot hands” in a nearby village.

Figure 5. Other Purdue students and me attending the symposium.

country. There were always people following us around with their products, trying to get us to buy them. Then, when it came to being in the classroom with the students at the university, we had to adapt to the way they were used to learning. It was challenging at times.

A third transferable skill we learned was flexibility. There were days when our plans were changed or canceled and we had to go with the flow. One day we were supposed to attend a school graduation, but it was canceled and we stayed at the hotel and did team bonding. There was a day when I bought food for the orphanage and it ended up taking longer than expected. We only got to spend two hours at the orphanage instead of five. One day at the symposium we were supposed to have three lectures and one was canceled, so we sat through a demonstration instead. I am the kind of person who has a schedule and sticks to it, so learning to be flexible was challenging for me.

When you relax and try to become a part of a culture, that is when you really start to gain skills you can use anywhere. I began to adapt to everything—the food, the roads, the language, the smells, everything about Haiti. This was the first time I ever felt like a minority.

Sometimes I forgot I was a different color, but then there were times I felt like I stood out like a sore thumb. When we would drive down the streets we would say “*bonjour*” (good morning in French) to everyone we encountered. When we were in a village we would stop and make an effort to interact with the people and play with the children. By putting myself out there and not being afraid to interact with the Haitians, I began to feel like I belonged.

Communication, flexibility, and adapting to situations are skills any effective teacher needs to have. There will be students who don't speak the same language, those with disabilities that don't allow them to communicate in the same way as you, or those who just don't want to learn what you are teaching. These three skills will help me and others in becoming an effective teacher. Being flexible and adapting to different situations is extremely important to agriculture teachers. There will be times when I don't leave my classroom until 9:00 p.m. and have to be back at 7:00 a.m. in the morning. There will be times when a contest gets canceled or rescheduled. There also could be times when a class gets switched and you have to decide what to teach and when to teach it. Agriculture teachers have some of the most rewarding and challenging jobs out there, and this trip has helped me to better these skills for the future. These three skills were applied at almost every step of our trip, from traveling to different villages to teaching at the university.

CONCLUSION

We became aware that these students wanted to learn and often really were interested in what we were teaching. Through trial and error we learned topics in which the students were and were not interested. We were told many times, "You are all our teachers," and that was the

most heartwarming thing I heard. Seeing how excited these students were to be in college and learning from us made me realize that I take going to college for granted. These students would kill for the opportunity and experiences that we have in America. Now I feel guilty if I skip class. I want to put so much more effort into my studies so I don't feel like I'm letting these students down. One student Facebook messaged me and told me to promise him that I will finish strong. They made me realize that I need to try harder and appreciate the opportunities I have. Everyone says they have those life-changing experiences, but this one truly was. I went to Haiti thinking I might make a difference in the Haitians' lives, but in reality, they made a difference in mine.

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