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Off the Script: On Course-Based, Global Service Learning at RWU

Chelsea Silva '14 chats with President Farish about a winter intersession trip to Petersfield, Jamaica, that focused on mental health issues in the island's classrooms.



April 15, 2013 | Brian E. Clark

Last January, Chelsea Silva '14 joined Becky Spritz, associate professor of psychology, and 13 fellow students in a course-based, global service trip focused on mental health issues that teachers face in schools near the rural community of Petersfield, Jamaica. She shares details with Don Farish, who offers his take on how such experiences complement classroom education at Roger Williams.

Donald Farish:

A year ago, this trip started with a question: How can we create a true international learning experience in Jamaica in which students get more than the tourist treatment and earn course credit for their work rather than doing it as a volunteer activity? The idea was to offer students the opportunity to interact

with a society quite different from our own, where people are facing the same kinds of issues we might face here, but having to resolve them in very different ways. So, Chelsea, as one of the early experimenters – our guinea pig, I suppose – how did it work out?

Chelsea Silva:

The trip was incredibly successful in creating a genuine learning environment. This was so different than what I imagined about study abroad, because we were truly immersed in the community. Theoretically, we were there to work with Jamaican teachers and student teachers to create awareness for autism. We ended up having these dialogues with people about how the knowledge we have in the Western world could be adapted to suit this tropical island, which has different resources than we do and different ways of looking at things. That's where the biggest learning occurred for us – participating in a conversation rather than an attempt to teach or to be taught.

Farish:

Your trip was certainly immersive in the sense that you're not looking at those you are working with through binoculars from the safety of the Hilton. You're right there.

This idea grew out of a few existing programs at Roger Williams including a spring break trip to El Salvador in which biology students work in a public health setting in a rural environment. That started as a purely volunteer effort – “We're from America, we're here to save you!” – but quickly developed into something else. Yes, they were certainly there to help that local group, but it goes much further than the “hero mentality,” where students swoop in, capes flying behind them, and then swoop out again. For 10 days, they are immersed in this society, and they develop a sense of perspective about their own country from the vantage point of a remarkably different environment.

Originally, we didn't formalize the El Salvador trip in a course setting that asked students to reflect on their experiences. We weren't taking full advantage. To tie these two things together – the notion of going to a place where there is real, hands-on work to do *and* structuring it as a formal part of an RWU education with course credit – was just the logical step to take. I'm really happy you're saying what you're saying about Jamaica. When you go on a trip like this, it seems almost inevitable that you come back with a changed mindset.

Silva:

It was absolutely eye-opening. We all expected to learn about family situations in Jamaica and how they handle mental health and specifically autism, but the longer we were there, an awareness grew that the primary thing I was getting from the experience was something different – learning to be relativistic in our look at cultures. As you said, we went down there with the mentality of helping this culture to address autism. That autism is prevalent in Jamaica, they are not handling it like we are and that we'd like to change that. And that is what they asked us to do – to come down and educate them. But the

longer we stayed, the more we realized that we don't have all the answers, and we certainly don't have answers that are going to work in Jamaica. For us to be of any help, we had to communicate with them. Those conversations were most valuable for me.

Farish:

One of the things that's remarkable about Roger Williams is that more than half of our undergrads participate in an international experience while they are here. And that's terrific in the sense that it reflects our value system and our global focus. But I can't help but think it runs the gamut from trips that are one step up from tourism to the kind of immersive experiences that you've had. We have parallels with respect to experiential learning in this country – you can have an internship, and maybe you're going to learn a lot and maybe you're not going to learn than much. It depends on the nature of the internship. Or you can have what we're doing now with our Community Partnerships Center, where formal projects are being done and we know the outcomes are super. "Internships on steroids," I like to say. I would say that your Jamaica experience is "international education on steroids." So this may be a softball question, but to the extent that this was worth your while, is this the kind of experience we should be encouraging more students to do?

Silva:

Absolutely. Especially because as an English major going on a what was largely a psychology-focused trip, I know that there are certain majors that have a propensity for sending students to study abroad. Unlike business or architecture, psychology is not always one of them. Getting other majors involved in this way is critical. This trip was psychology-oriented, but it was a global citizenship learning experience – and that's a huge part of what this university is all about.

Farish:

Let me challenge you a bit. You're an English major. How do you go about preparing for your future career, whatever you imagine that is?

Silva:

I'm an English literature and creative writing double major and I'm planning to go to graduate school for English. I'm studying abroad in Cambridge, England, over the summer – an international experience that's going to be miles apart from our rural Jamaica homestay trip.

Farish:

I've been to Cambridge and it doesn't look very much like Jamaica! But it doesn't look much like America either. From the standpoint of job-readiness and contributing to society and getting a good paying job, people often use the English major as perhaps the archetype of what relevance does it have to much of anything? Part of what we are trying to do is to offer English majors at Roger Williams

the chance to gain an edge. How can we augment your education and provide additional tools, reference points and perspectives that make you stand out from the next English major from a different school who is looking for the same job?

I like to think it's this kind of experience. You have a pretty compelling story to share. At Roger Williams, we feel good about offering opportunities for you to get a leg up over other people. Not to take anything away from you – you actually had to do it. But providing those opportunities is important, because we're trying to give people more than one arrow in their quiver.

So if you're going to attend graduate school for English, good for you – the Cambridge experience is clearly going to be very beneficial to you; but in a different way, so will the Jamaica experience. And maybe the Jamaica experience makes the Cambridge experience more easily accomplished, and maybe you can triangulate? It may be quite different than Jamaica, but the British certainly have a different way of doing business than we do. You will emerge with a perspective that students who never left home during their four years won't have.

Silva:

One of the things that stood out for me was just that complete removal from Western culture. Now that we are back at Roger Williams, I've started an anthropology course that I'm interested in, because of our trip. For a thesis project I'll be doing in Cambridge, I want to take an anthropological look at European folklore. So what I took from the Jamaica trip is working its way into my academic work in English literature.

Farish:

Even at this late date in your undergraduate career, you're finding that the experience in Jamaica is still helping to shape your thinking?

Silva:

Yes. And with English literature, particularly for graduate school, it's critical that you home in on what really appeals to you – an era or a style of writing. I would not have looked at the cultural side of it nearly as closely if I hadn't experienced what I did in Jamaica.

Farish:

The whole idea is to have a broadening experience, and you are able to reference that quite literally against your choice of classes. Part of what we are trying to do with experiences like yours in Jamaica is to interconnect a number of educational values we have at Roger Williams. For one, we need to give students opportunities to see how what they are learning in class pertains to the world they will live in when they graduate. But also, the chance to work collaboratively with peers from other disciplines – something that the workplace really values. The students who went with you were from different majors – psychology, but not just psychology. People have different things to learn from each other in these

majors. And the other connection is civic engagement. How do we encourage students to contribute to the betterment of society? We are not trying to turn everybody into Gandhis and Mother Teresas, but we would like to think we are graduating students who have some greater sense of social responsibility.

We can use courses like your Jamaica trip to get maximum, lasting educational value by way of a single international experience. If you are dropped into the middle of Jamaica to work with a community for 12 days, how can your worldview *not* change as a consequence of that experience? Traditional study abroad is inherently a good thing; our thought was to take that inherently good thing and make it even better. These outcomes are not standalones – we can mix them together in a single experience. To me, this represents the next evolution of our educational thinking. You got to do this right out of the box, Chelsea! You're very brave in going out in unchartered waters!

Silva:

It's a very different kind of learning. To travel under the umbrella of an academic course that's also service-based – that was a very jarring experience. The culture is so completely different that it took us a long time to understand *how* to work effectively – now we're thinking about how to make this a two-part program so you can come back with the knowledge gained on the first trip. It was such a revelatory experience for us to finally understand how we needed to work within the community.

One of the bigger challenges for us was re-acculturation when we came home. I went out to dinner with family members who talked about stopping in Jamaica on a cruise. I was thinking to myself, "I have no way of articulating how different my experience was than a cruise stop..." We spent a half day in Negril in the tourist section at the end of our trip and it was so uncomfortable. The white beach was amazing, but we were so glad we didn't spend out entire trip as tourists because it was a completely different experience. It's impossible to say that you stopped on your cruise for an afternoon, sat on the white sand in Negril and now you've been to Jamaica.

Farish:

It's great to talk with you about this. A lot of thought and planning went into the experience, and you often wonder if it measures up to what we had hoped for. Most of these do.

Silva:

The community in Petersfield was so welcoming and hospitable to us. We stayed with host families and I have a letter for mine in my backpack right now that I'm going to mail.

The experience was emotional, too. At one point we were leading workshops on autism with small groups of teachers who worked with the Heart Program in Montego Bay. We started off by asking: What do you know about autism? Do you know students with disabilities? Have you had students in your classrooms that in retrospect, you think might have had autism? The group was very vocal and supportive of the need to change the ways that schools deal with autism and other disabilities.

Halfway through the workshop, one woman raised her hand and shared this moving story about a principal who was very supportive of children with disabilities. And then at the end, she said: “And I really respect this principal because my own daughter has autism.” We all just sat back. This was one of the experiences where we went in with the intent to be the disseminators of knowledge, but we just sat back and let her talk. This woman had an amazing story about how she had reacted when she discovered her child’s autism.

There had been four or five of these small groups, and when we all came back together, this woman volunteered to speak for our group. She stood up in front of this crowd of hundreds of Jamaican teachers and shared this incredibly moving story that was personal and from the heart and had so little to do with any knowledge that we had given them – a story that this culture had created all by itself.

I just lost it. I stood in the back and cried for 10 minutes. It was such an amazing and unique experience. We’d like to think that we were helpful in building awareness or catalyzing some kind of action to be taken, but that was one moment where we realized that they really didn’t need that much from us. They just need someone to spark that conversation.

Farish:

Great story, Chelsea, and clearly a very meaningful experience.

This conversation served as the basis for “Off the Script” on Page 3 of the [Spring 2013 issue of RWU Magazine](#).

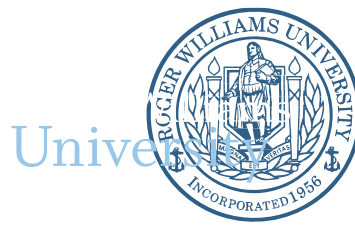
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