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Profile Interview with Dr. Jill Newton

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Profile Interview with Dr. Jill Newton

Cover Page Footnote

Dr. Jill Newton



PROFILE INTERVIEW WITH DR. JILL NEWTON

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Kelly Hock (*Elementary Education*), and Meredith Marsden (*Early Childhood Education*)

STUDENT AUTHOR BIO SKETCHES

Kylie Arnholt, **Emma Copp**, and **Kelly Hock** are students in Elementary Education at Purdue University with minors in Global Studies. **Meredith Marsden** is a May 2020 Early Childhood Education graduate with a minor in Global Studies. All four of the authors went with Dr. Newton on her Maymester in Tanzania Study Abroad program in 2019. Dr. Newton introduced us all to the importance of cultural understanding and service-learning. The experience was eye-opening and perspective changing for all students participating. In this article, Arnholt, Copp, Hock, and Marsden describe the experiences of the Tanzania Study Abroad program and Dr. Newton’s impact on Purdue’s Service-Learning initiatives.

INSTRUCTOR BIOGRAPHY



Figure 1. Dr. Jill Newton

From the time she was young, Dr. Jill Newton has lived with a focus on serving others (Figure 1). Newton grew up in Bangor, Michigan with service-minded parents who instilled the same value in her. Growing up, Newton saw her parents’ consistent involvement in service through donating blood, moving furniture for others, baking for bake sale fundraisers, and so on. In high school, Newton was already beginning to involve herself in service as a member of Key Club and other service-oriented activities. Newton also had a passion for teaching from an early age and recalls consistently playing the role of the teacher when playing “school” with her siblings. Driven by this passion for teaching along with her love of mathematics, Newton went on to study Mathematics Education at Michigan State University as a first-generation college student. Newton

later continued her education, completing her master’s in International Education at George Washington University and PhD in Mathematics Education at Michigan State University.

Newton taught high school math and science for 12 years. She combined her passion for service with her love for teaching by becoming a member of the Peace Corps and teaching internationally (in Tanzania, Bulgaria, Venezuela, Zaire, and Democratic Republic of the Congo). In 2008, Newton began teaching at Purdue University. At the time, she

knew she wanted to lead a study abroad program and then learned about service-learning grants. Throughout her life experiences, Newton has come to believe that it is important to think about the world instead of just ourselves and what we can do to help. Through study abroad and service-learning, she wanted to work with her students to “think about both how the world ended up the way it did, in terms of inequities, but also to see what part we can play in helping.” Based on her time spent teaching in Tanzania, Newton felt it would be an excellent fit for her service-learning program. Every May since 2010, Newton has organized and led a four-week study abroad experience to Tanzania. Students spend three weeks teaching English in Tanzanian schools and one week experiencing a different part of Tanzanian culture on safari.

Now, Newton applies her continued passion for teaching and service through the service-learning experience she leads through Purdue’s College of Education. Newton was recently given the 2020 Purdue University Outstanding Undergraduate Teaching Award for all of her outstanding work with her Math Education undergraduate students.

SERVICE-LEARNING COURSE AND STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

For the first three weeks of the Maymester in Tanzania Service-Learning experience, Dr. Newton’s students have the opportunity to live on the coast of Tanzania on the Indian Ocean at Fish Eagle Point. Students wake up each day before sunrise in their open-air *bandas* (rooms), which allows for the joy of watching the sun rise over the ocean. After getting ready for school, students eat breakfast together and head off to school, either by bike or by boat. Students who bike, as we were all lucky enough to do, are joined by many students who are on their way to school and more than willing to lend a hand if mud gets stuck in the tires. While at school, Purdue students work alongside Tanzanian teachers to teach English to students at all levels, with a break for “chai,” complete with tea and *mandazi*, which is a delicious fried dough treat.

After school, students return to Fish Eagle Point, which comes to feel like home during the three weeks there. Dr. Newton is eager to hear about their time at school and new things they learned. Students also have the opportunity to swim and work on homework before class begins. Dr. Newton spends time with all students as a group as a part of the course History, Language, and Culture in Tanzania. During class, students discuss assigned readings about Tanzanian culture (education, gender, social justice, etc.) and how we have seen those concepts play out in our experiences. New Swahili vocabulary is introduced as well, based on words we have encountered that we think would be beneficial for everyone to learn. Students also attend their elective courses from Knowing Africa through Literature to Mathematics Education, along with independent study meetings with Newton. Later in the evening, students eat dinner together before returning to their *bandas* for an early bedtime in preparation for another full day of learning, teaching, and building relationships.

Newton’s service-learning course is aimed at addressing the global problem of inequity, with a large focus on educational inequity. Newton often leads conversations with her students about the “brokenness” of the global educational system, looking at how children in some parts of the world have everything they could need and others do not even have a pencil. By going to Tanzania year after year, Newton and her students start a chain of making a difference in a small part of the world. Newton connects students to community members in Tanzania from those who work at Fish Eagle Point to the teachers at the school. By opening up lines of communication, Newton sets the context of service-learning for her students, combined with a rich curriculum of coursework throughout the semester leading up to the trip and throughout the experience. Newton’s students become better educated about social justice through conversations focused on social justice within education.

However, the work of teaching in Tanzania and considering complex social justice issues is not always easy. Newton is transparent with students regarding the challenges that will come with participating in her service-learning experience. Students are prepared to live a month without their typical amenities. Fish Eagle Point is a beautiful location with breathtaking views. Still, occasional challenges do arise, from living in open-air *bandas* to riding a bike, boat, or truck to school. For each student, the study abroad experience pushes them out of their comfort zone. Newton is adamant about the respect and appreciation that must be shown for the work that goes into making her and her students’ stays possible. From getting to know each of the staff members as part of an introduction activity, to eating dinner in their homes to celebrate Ramadan, Newton’s students’ leave with a love of the Tanzanian people and culture. Students leave the trip with a greater understanding of the world around them and a new perspective on important educational issues.

Throughout the four weeks, Purdue students come face to face with the global inequity of the education system. However, Newton never provides students with the false idea that they are there to fix systemic issues or change the entire world. Instead, Newton hopes to instill in students the value of doing small things to make an impact. These small things can be life-changing for one person. For instance, while the scope of this service-learning experience does not allow for new school supplies to be provided to all students in Tanzania, it does allow for pens and notebooks to be provided to hundreds of students in Boma Village, Tanzania. Pens are a simple item, but they are a necessary educational tool that have a large impact on the students who receive them.

COMMUNITY PARTNERS

The majority of our time in Tanzania was spent in Boma Village, teaching at Boma Primary School and living at Fish Eagle Point. Many of the Fish Eagle Point employees live in Boma Village, which is home to about 4,000 people. (Other Purdue students teach in two other nearby villages, Manza Bay and Zingibari.) Community partners include both the schools where Purdue students teach as well as Fish Eagle Point. These partnerships have been established for many years through Dr. Newton's connections and ongoing relationships with individuals at Fish Eagle Point and teachers in each village. The main needs of the community partners in each village include clean water, school supplies, food, medical supplies, and clothing. The Tanzanians whom we interact with live on the edge of having enough food and water versus not enough food and water.

Before students ever set foot in Tanzania, they are already communicating with community partners. Newton connects students with community partners in Tanzania so that students can learn the needs of the community partners. Newton wants her students to understand that the goal is to help community partners in the way they want to be helped, not in the way students *think* the community partners need. Students learn about cross-cultural communication and the significance of involving community partners in conversations about how to best serve. Dr. Newton shared an example of students who wanted to purchase backpacks for students at the school, but after more conversation with school leaders, they learned that the school wanted cement instead so the road to the school could be paved. Students learned the importance of listening and not assuming that we know best. However, this is sometimes made more difficult due to language barriers, causing communication to take longer or require additional clarification.

To facilitate communication with community partners, each student is assigned to a service team with a different focus, such as the schools, Fish Eagle Point, and the villages. One student from each group is responsible for applying for a grant so that materials can be purchased for each service project. Students then reach out to those community partners, thanks to Dr. Newton's existing relationships. For example, one student contacted a teacher at a secondary school to ask what needs they had for that year. The school team used the grant money to purchase one notebook and two pens for each student, which Purdue students were able to hand deliver. One way the Boma Village team used their grant funding was to purchase soccer balls and pumps for the village. Newton shared that she has also been challenged by learning to step back from being the one communicating with the community partners to allow students a more hands-on role in the service-learning experiences. Her efforts to take those steps back while still supporting us created a more meaningful experience through our direct communications with teachers at the school, Fish Eagle Point employees, and others.

However, providing material goods is only a small portion of the role we play with community partners. For Newton, service learning is all about relationships. From day one, students are aware that relationships are the focus of the experience. Newton and her students know that these relationships are not one-sided. The Purdue students learn as much or more from the people they meet in Tanzania as the Tanzanian students learn from them. The importance of relationships is evident in the teaching and learning students engage in while in Tanzania.

One such relational element of working with the schools as community partners is teaching English. The Tanzanian students we worked with attend primary school for up to eight years, where they receive English instruction as one of their subjects throughout the day. While they are in primary school, instruction is entirely in Swahili. After they finish primary school, they take an entrance exam for secondary school, which is given in English. In secondary school, all instruction takes place in English. For this reason, it is crucial that students have a strong understanding of English by the time they finish primary school if they wish to continue their schooling. Their teachers all speak English in addition to Swahili and can instruct students in English, but they do not often hear native English speakers, which is one way we are able to serve them. By working with Tanzanian teachers and observing how they teach, we are able to use our limited knowledge of Swahili to help students grow in their English-language development.

Our limited knowledge of Swahili did present several challenges since we could not always clearly communicate our ideas to our students, and we could not always understand their questions. After a few days, we realized we were ignoring our most valuable asset: the Tanzanian teachers at the school. This exemplifies the value of relationships since we were best able to teach English when co-teaching with Tanzanian teachers who were able to communicate with students in Swahili as we taught in English. Although communication with the teachers was not always seamless due to language barriers, Newton continually reminds students of the value of trying our best to speak Swahili, even if we are afraid to make mistakes. The more of an effort we made to build connections and step outside our comfort zones to speak Swahili, the stronger our relationships became with both our students and other teachers at the school.

IMPACT ON STUDENTS AND THE COMMUNITY

Even after Purdue students leave Tanzania, Newton believes that this service-learning experience continues to impact them. Students return to Purdue with an increased awareness of global inequities and needs as well as a deeper appreciation of the fact that all people's lives have value, even if those people live halfway across the world. Several students have even chosen to return to Tanzania again to reconnect with the friends they have there. Tanzania becomes a permanent part of the lives of the students who participate in this service-learning opportunity. Tanzania is not just a place students have visited, but a place where they have friends and students they care about.

When Newton assesses the success of the service-learning experience, she focuses on students' mindsets and attitudes as a result of what they have seen and done. Since Dr. Newton leads class discussions throughout the experience, she monitors student conversations in class as well as with community partners. While students spend time at Fish Eagle Point after teaching, there are many opportunities to talk with employees there or with teachers at school before the school day starts. Newton also explained that she looks for a changed mindset about social justice problems. If her students walk away with a new perspective on the world and inequity, Newton believes that the service-learning experience has done its job.

The Tanzanian community of Boma Village is also continually impacted through this service-learning experience. Newton is proud of the continuing nature of her program that provides consistency for the Tanzanian students and allows the impact of the experience to be



Figure 2. Dr. Jill Newton with Boma Primary School students at Boma Village soccer match (Summer 2019).

greater due to ongoing communication between community partners, Newton, and her students (Figure 2). As Dr. Newton often tells us, speaking English with our Tanzanian students for three weeks may not cause a huge impact. However, a child who grows up in Boma Village will have had Purdue students teaching them English for three weeks every year for all eight years at Boma Primary School. The cumulative impact is much greater than any of us could have on our own.

REFLECTION AND CONCLUSION

Dr. Newton's use of service-learning pedagogy helps students become more connected with the world around them and broaden their scope of what service means. Additionally, service-learning allows Newton to build relationships with students in a unique way. Newton and her students have the opportunity to connect through the curriculum as well as co-curricular activities. Furthermore, the service-learning program is a shared experience for Newton and her students. As stated previously, students face new challenges and begin to process things they have not thought about before. Dr. Newton is always willing to lend a listening ear and support her students as they think critically about social justice and educational inequity while learning to teach and live in a new environment. This reflective thinking is facilitated through course conversations in History, Language, and Culture in Tanzania as well as written reading reflections. All students complete a final project, with many students writing a poem about their experiences. These projects are shared with the group, resulting in a beautiful exchange of ideas about how we have all changed over our month together. Many students share a deeper appreciation for Tanzanian culture, awe at how much



Figure 3. Purdue Maymester in Tanzania Study Abroad students spend an afternoon with children at Samaritan Village Orphanage (Summer 2019).

they have learned, or sadness at the thought of leaving new friends that have been made. However, service learning in Tanzania impacts each of us uniquely and continues to do so long after we have returned to Purdue.

Dr. Newton’s program gives students the opportunity to see a new part of the world and learn from others (Figure 3). The Maymester in Tanzania service-learning program serves the Purdue students as much as the Boma Village community. Dr. Newton believes service-learning is at the root of a well-rounded education. She believes that educating the whole person includes the combination of service and course information. She believes that real-world experience is necessary for students’ growth and broadening of their perspectives. Based on her experiences, Newton’s advice to instructors who want to use service-learning is to “embrace

the messiness.” While developing a service-learning experience may not always be easy, Newton believes it is always worth it. As students who have been fortunate enough to learn from Dr. Newton and service-learning through the Maymester in Tanzania, we wholeheartedly believe it is worth it too.

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