

A lesson learned

Four aspiring teachers travel from Athens, OH to Ghana

By Jennifer Cochran

One of the best ways to learn about yourself and your own culture is by immersing yourself in another one - or so discovered four Ohio University students when they visited Ghana this fall.

The four students spent the fall quarter teaching and living in Cape Coast, a city southwest of the Ghanaian capital, Accra, as part of Ohio University's Teach in Ghana program. While they gained valuable experience as teachers, the students said they learned much more than that, especially about cultural similarities and differences.



Middle childhood education major Lauren Poeppelman celebrates her birthday with her Ghanaian students. Poeppelman, a junior, says she plans to teach sixth-grade social studies and language arts.

(Photo courtesy of Teach In Ghana program)

"People do the same things generally all over the place," says Trish Murphy, a senior early childhood education major who taught fourth and fifth grade in Ghana. "You can go somewhere completely different, and you'll find people similar to you."

Erin Miller, who taught English reading comprehension to Ghanaian fourth-graders who ranged in age from 8 to 11, agreed.

"Kids are the same around the world," says Miller, a junior middle childhood education major.

At the same time, the students quickly noticed interesting differences. For example, junior Laura Poeppelman had to adjust to having students offer to do things for her. She was amazed by the children's respect for their elders, which motivated them to carry her books and bags.

"I learned that that part of their education is as important as the academics," says Poeppelman, joking that now that she's back home, she must adjust to doing things for herself again.

Amy Bernath, a junior in the Honors Tutorial College studying integrated social studies and political science, developed good relationships with the other teachers at her school and with her students, but also faced a few challenges adjusting to life in Ghana. Finding ways to discipline students was one of those challenges: "I was the only teacher in school who didn't cane them (students)," she says.

Also, she felt uncomfortable with all the attention she received as a white person in Ghana and welcomed the anonymity that accompanied her return to the United States.

"I didn't know before what a private person I am," she says.

Developed jointly by the Ohio University Office of Education Abroad and the Institute for the African Child, the Teach in Ghana program takes place during fall quarter. Ohio University students interested in participating must submit an essay, recommendations and student records and then must conduct an interview with a screening committee.

Students and their parents participate in a pre-departure orientation during which they have the opportunity to talk with students from Ghana as well as faculty and staff members who have experience living in Ghana.

Poeppelman says she didn't realize how little she knew about African cultures.

"In my schooling I was never exposed to Africa," says Poeppelman, an education major studying middle childhood. "It's important to change that. Since I've been home I have all this energy and excitement about my trip. I have so much I want to teach my family and friends."

She became interested in the Teach in Ghana program last year when she took a course taught by Ghanaian Francis Godwyll, an assistant professor of education. Grace Gaboury, who participated in the program last year, spoke to Godwyll's students about her experience.

Poeppelman says she plans to teach sixth-grade language arts and social studies and continue sharing what she learned about Africa.

Bernath hopes to do the same. She is pursuing an education certificate, and says it's important to be open and experience other cultures in order to teach about them. She was shocked last year to learn that very few people in her social studies methods class had been outside the United States.

"I want to go everywhere," she says. "I want to focus on bringing other cultures into my lessons."

According to Miller, teaching in Ghana helped her acquire the ability to teach kids with a different background -- which will help her teach anywhere she chooses. She also learned to be flexible, a lesson shared by her fellow teachers.

"I tried not to have too many expectations," Miller says.

Her biggest challenge was getting used to how her students thought and learned differently. Similarly, Bernath arrived in Ghana with many ideas for lessons that were not feasible due to lack of resources or other challenges. The school where Bernath taught was under construction this fall, and all the classes in each grade were

combined. She had to adapt to the extraordinary challenge of teaching 140 students at once.

Murphy taught mainly English, and science and social studies on occasion. Even with 60 to 70 students in her classes, she says the class size was not the most challenging aspect.

"Communicating with the students was the most difficult thing because of my accent," the Columbus, Ohio, native says.

Both Bernath and Poepelman say they would like to return to Ghana some day.

"I feel like I left a part of me in Ghana," Poepelman says.

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