

What I Tell My Students

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I am a geography professor at a small liberal arts college in the Upper Midwest. The college, which prides itself on internationalism, attracts many students with an interest in far away lands. It is also a left leaning campus where students have a deep interest in making the world a better place. The courses I teach are international in scope, focusing on environment, development and Africa. For better or for worse, slides from my Peace Corps days and other international development experiences often feature prominently in my lectures. All of this context may explain why I have a number of students walk into my office every semester asking about my experiences as a Peace Corps volunteer. Most of them also want to know what I think of this as a possible opportunity for them. While I have all sorts of responses, this is the long version of what I tell most of them. I try to be honest as possible, sharing what I believe to have been the positive and negative aspects of this time in my life.

I usually begin with my decision to join the Peace Corps. This decision did not occur over night, but rather grew on me during my undergraduate years – which also occurred at a small liberal arts college in the Upper Midwest about 45 miles south of where I teach today. The Peace Corps inclination probably began with a trimester study abroad program in Pau, France at the end of my freshman year. This was my first real time out of the country and it helped me to begin to think in a different language and to understand

the world from the vantage point of a different culture. My parents then moved to Belgium during my Junior and Senior years in college, which afforded me two summers of work at a pharmaceutical factory on the Flemish-Walloon language frontier just outside of Brussels, Belgium. While my job as a fork lift driver was tedious – seeing the world through the eyes of blue collar factory workers – and learning to cuss in Walloon French – further deepened my interest in the world beyond US borders.

By the time I was a senior, I was tired, actually really tired, after four years of fairly intense academic work. I longed to engage with the real world, and especially to spend an extended period of time in what we now call the Global South. This is what led me to apply to the Peace Corps in the fall of 1986. I don't think I was ever out to save the world. I actually was pretty cynical about development in general, having read many of the classic development critiques in my anthropology, history and economics courses. No, I believe I joined Peace Corps to experience the world in some remote part of the Global South. I wanted to be as far away from the 'West' as I could. If I am to be brutally honest, I believe this desire to be 'away from the West' probably had something to do with my mixed feelings about where I grew up in the suburbs outside of Chicago. Clearly I had benefited from the good schooling this environment had provided me. Yet my college education and experiences abroad made me increasingly uncomfortable with the blatant materialism, homogeneity, and pro-business orientation of the suburbs. Perhaps Peace Corps was the logical antidote for my suburban American upbringing?

So where did I go, how did I live and what did I do? I learned in the spring of 1987 that I would be sent to Mali two weeks after I graduated from college in June. Of course I had no idea where Mali was when I received my appointment letter – having to look it up in the world atlas just like all of the other non-sophisticates. Some members of my extended family thought I was going to Bali (Indonesia) or Maui (Hawaii), tropical states which were quite different from the semi-arid, land locked, West Africa nation which is probably best known for a town many people are not sure really exists, that legendary city at the end of the world – Timbuktu. Why I was sent to Mali I am not sure. I had told the Peace Corps recruiter I would go anywhere – and my French language skills are probably the best explanation for this appointment. Mali was also recovering from a major drought in 1984-85 which had struck much of Sahelian Africa. As a result, Mali and a number of other countries in the region were targets for expanding Peace Corps initiatives in the late 1980s, all under an umbrella program known as the African Food Systems Initiative (AFSI).

I initially underwent four months of training in a small town outside of the capital city, Bamako. I perfected my French, learned a local language known as Bamanan or Bambara, studied community development approaches, and learned country specific skills related to my chosen technical sector of agriculture and community gardening. To say that I was an agricultural expert would be a huge misnomer. I had studied history as an undergraduate and played around in the garden with my parents growing up in suburban Chicago. About the only other qualification I could claim was a high school career test which indicated, to the horror of the school guidance counselor, that I should

be a farmer. While this training was amazing in terms of quality, as well as the opportunity to bond with the 50 other volunteers who formed my training group, I was ready to begin my service when this training period was over.

Having listened to my request for a remote, rural site, I was sent to small Bamanan village of 200 people about 50 km from the nearest paved road. There were two other French speakers in my village, the grade school teacher, and the government agricultural agent who was my counterpart. I distinctly remember the Peace Corps truck driving away that first day, feeling like I was really, really on my own. Over the next six months I would live in two temporary homes while the village and I built my home. It was a basic adobe structure with three non-standard (for the area) improvements: a cement floor, a tin roof and a pit latrine. While I had my own home, I took my meals with a family in the village that had been assigned to look after me.

During these initial months, my only real job was to perfect my Bamanan language skills and to get to know the place. I spent a lot of time hanging out. One of the main ways males pass their time in this setting is to do tea in the evening (this is, of course, while women are doing all of the work). Over several hours one will prepare and serve three rounds of strong, sweet tea to their friends. During the long dry season this is typically done outside under the stars in the evening. It is here that I perfected my Bamanan, discussing everything under the sun with my new found Malian friends, from sex to philosophy, to the basic structure of the solar system.

Hanging out is a difficult task for many workaholic Americans. Getting things done is so engrained in us that this initial phase is a very challenging time for most volunteers.

Even after my initial start-up phase, there were often slow times, especially during the rainy season when all of the villagers were busy at work in their fields. I did work with people in their fields during this time, and even farmed my own peanuts, but there were real physical limits to how much I could do. This meant lots of time reading in the afternoons during the rainy season. I remember becoming totally engrossed in Tolkien's *Trilogy of the Rings* and then emerging from my hut to rejoin village life. It could be surreal, very surreal.

While I was trained to be a gardening volunteer, I quickly learned that I had little in the way of agricultural insight to offer to members of this community. In fact, the more I observed, the more I became impressed with the agricultural and natural resource management practices of this and surrounding villages. These farmers' tillage techniques, their way of mixing different crops in the same field (known as intercropping), their knowledge of different soils, and their fallowing schedules were all fascinating to me. I became increasingly skeptical of the government's attempts to promote 'modern agriculture' in this area which tended to emphasize cotton production and the use of pesticides and fertilizers. While I eventually did work with some community gardeners, I did many other things in response to village interests. I helped: form a beekeepers coop which sold honey in the capital city; built an improved, cement lined well; offered basic nutrition training; grafted fruit trees; and experimented with different agroforestry approaches. Had I been a formally trained agronomist, I am not

sure if I would have been as flexible as I was about approaches to farming. Being a broadly trained liberal arts college graduate, I never positioned myself as the expert, but rather as someone who could work with the community to address certain problems. I also did not have large sums of project money with which I could ‘purchase’ local cooperation. If people didn’t like my ideas, they eventually let me know their disapproval by dragging their feet, or just telling me.

It is at about this point in my conversation with a student that I pause, and let them know that I am very biased in my assessment of Peace Corps. It may sound corny, but it was a transformative experience for me. I found my calling – so to speak – which was to study, write and teach about agriculture and natural resource management approaches in Africa. This was a rare moment in my life where I could just ‘be’ and it taught me lasting lessons about how people think and live in a small rural farming community. Had I been hell bent on writing a dissertation at the time, or bound and determined to mount some huge development project, I am not sure I would have learned half of what I did.

Being well trained and critical thinkers, most students will then ask me two to three somewhat inter-related questions. First, isn’t the whole development process a flawed, neo-imperialist project (I told you I have left leaning students)? I usually agree that mainstream approaches to development are highly problematic. Nonetheless, I argue that our job is to re-invent development, and to begin to think about this process in very different ways. I further assert that places like Mali are increasingly connected to us

whether we like it or not. As such, our job is to figure out how to engage positively with the Malis of the world.

In order to demonstrate my erstwhile naïveté, I sometimes tell a story about my near refusal to publicly use nail clippers in my Peace Corps village. One night while having tea with friends I remember feeling the urge to trim my nails. Having had a healthy dose of anthropology in college, I was determined not to introduce the desire for outside material goods (à la *The Gods Must Be Crazy* film). As such, I pulled out a large hunting knife and set to trimming my toe nails. Just as I was on the verge of loosing half my foot to the knife, a village friend held up a pair of clippers and announced “this is what we use to trim our nails.” Clearly, I had made certain assumptions about what types of outside technology were available in this village, and my urge to shelter them at this particular moment was amusingly exposed. Once we acknowledge that Africans are already in contact with the Western World (whether we like it or not), I believe this opens up a new space for development. With its Friirian inspired, bottom-up approach to development, I believe Peace Corps is closer to a sound development approach than almost any other group active in this arena.

Second, students often ask if they are only serving US interests abroad by joining the Peace Corps and becoming “an agent of the US Government.” A bit of context is needed here. In my experience, today’s students are very skeptical of any good that could be delivered by a government organization. Perhaps this is a triumph of Reaganism, or Republicanism more broadly – but I suppose the right should take pride in knowing how

skeptical left leaning students are of government in general. While Peace Corps will not serve where the US has no diplomatic relations, the reality is that most Peace Corps countries are of little strategic importance to the US. I never felt like an agent of the US government in Mali. I know some of my village friends thought I might be CIA at first. But as far as I know, they came to realize that this was not what I was all about once they got to know me.

Third, there is the very American workaholic question, do Peace Corps volunteers really achieve anything meaningful in terms of development? I certainly knew some volunteers who did not accomplish much in the way of work, but these were the exceptions. Some of these individuals were suffering from culture shock and/or depression, others eventually went home early. However, by and large, most of the volunteers were very hard working. I also remind my students that Peace Corps is more than just a development organization, but also serves as a vehicle for cross-cultural exchange.

While what we actually do as volunteers may be difficult to quantify, the understanding we bring back home is just as or more important. Heaven only knows that the lumbering giant we call America could always use a more informed citizenry. In other cases, volunteers often plant seeds that take years to bloom. I remember being frustrated that a large community garden was never established in my village when I was there – despite numerous suggestions that this be considered. I went back several years later to discover that one had been established and they thanked me for initiating the idea several years prior.

There are, of course, loads of other questions that I am often asked. For example, isn't two years too long of a commitment, or isn't it better to work on these issues at home rather than abroad? I left Peace Corps ready to leave (two years and four months was just about right for me), but anything less than this would have been unfair to the people I was with in my community. I also laud those who work on development issues at home, but I think there is something very important to be gained from living outside of your culture and country. It allows you to appreciate the immense power that the US exerts on the rest of the world. I realize that Peace Corps isn't for everyone, and that my very positive tenure may not be the norm. But I also want my students to make an informed choice, and I hope that they are open to considering what was for me a life-altering experience.

William Moseley is an associate professor of geography at Macalester College in Saint Paul, MN. He was an agricultural volunteer in Mali from 1987 to 1989. He is married to another Mali RPCV, Julia Earl, and they have two children, Ben and Sophie.