

# Stepping Outside my ESL Comfort Zone: Community Development in Rwanda

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During the summer of 2018, I was fortunate enough to join my colleague Tim Costello, Director of the Center for Community Learning at WWU, and Hassan Byumvuhore, a recent graduate of our Intensive English Program, as a teacher for a 12-credit Global Learning Program offered by Western Washington University. In brief, WWU students and three teachers (two Americans & one Rwandan) live, study, and volunteer teach in Gashora, in southern Rwanda near the border with Burundi, and the entire program lasts about six weeks, four weeks of which are spent in Gashora. Tim has been organizing and teaching this program for several years and is quite familiar with the culture, people, and area; it was my first time in Rwanda and Africa, but my third time living abroad for more than a month.

In my daily life at WWU, I'm the Director of Studies and a Senior Instructor in the IEP, which is long-hand for "I teach and I have administrative duties". Within those administrative duties, I frequently recruit, interview, and place WWU TESOL volunteers and practicum students with our IEP teachers, so I have some experience working with WWU degree-seeking students. The Rwanda program was my first time being a teacher of record for a credit-bearing class, and this fact made me a bit apprehensive before the class started. Eventually, more than 12 WWU students signed up, while seven interviewed and paid their deposits, so we had a small class, but we were still on track to go.

We spent our pre-departure week in class at WWU, getting to know one another, learning about Rwanda, and setting some



*Paul Mart loves teaching and is in his 13th year teaching English as a second language (ESL). He recently started his 5th year at WWU in the Intensive English Program (IEP), and he holds an M.A. (Education) from Dominican University and a B.A. (English Literature) from Montana State University. Paul has lived abroad three times in the last 20 years, with one year spent in Halle, Germany, studying German language, culture and history, another year spent in Cuenca, Ecuador, volunteer teaching, studying Spanish and salsa dancing, and learning about Ecuadorian culture and history, and most recently, 7 weeks spent in Rwanda teaching a WWU course on service learning. Paul feels honored to have had students from many countries, including Brazil, Venezuela, Colombia, Libya, Rwanda, Tajikistan, China, Japan, Mongolia, Korea, Burma, Turkey, Czech Republic, and Pakistan. Initially not knowing anything about Rwanda beyond*

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guiding principles for the program. We learned about Rwandan agriculture, language, history, and customs. Luckily, Hassan, who had just completed the highest level in the IEP and had become a friend of mine in the past couple years, was available to teach us some language and customs before we left.

Our time in Rwanda basically was spent in three places: Gashora, Kigali, and Gisenyi. The WWU students and I lived in the guest house of the Gashora Girls Academy of Science and Technology, and Tim lived across the village with the Rwandan teacher, Hassan. The WWU students and I ate most of our meals in the academy's cafeteria, and we became friends with many of the students as well as some of the faculty and staff.

The program consisted of the following parts: a WWU course on service learning, with subtopics ranging from cultural humility and privilege to status, rank, and social action, among others; Kinyarwanda class, in which we learned enough language to negotiate in the market and stores and to greet people and have brief conversations; and English teaching, where we offered free English class every weekday inside the local community health center. Basically, during the week we held WWU-Kinyarwanda class for three hours every morning, and we taught English for about 90 minutes every afternoon. After English class, the WWU students were free to visit friends they made in Gashora, join club activities at the academy, or head home and do laundry by hand.

For me, this was such a departure from my ESL jobs of the past 13 years in Washington, Montana, and Ecuador. I was not only a classroom teacher (and the one responsible for final course grades), I was also the ESL instructor and teacher-trainer. In addition, I became the de facto "camp counselor", as I lived in the same building with the WWU students. I found I needed to be able to switch mental gears at the drop of a hat; for example, to go from talking about the ethics of service learning, expectations, and bribes, to practicing a song with the class in Kinyarwanda, to directing my WWU students in their ESL lessons for the afternoon, to attempting conversations in Kinyarwanda with villagers who were shocked to hear abazungu ("white people") speaking their language, to video chatting with my wife and son back in the U.S., to advising

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*civil war and genocide, Paul became inspired to learn about and visit the country from one of his current students and gain a fresh perspective on trust, learning and community. With Tim Costello, Director of the Center for Community Learning at WWU, Paul taught a course on community development and service learning in Rwanda during summer 2018. Recently, Paul has also played a fundamental role in developing Business English classes for international students in a pre-MBA pathway program. He has also mentored many TESOL student-teachers over the past several years.*

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the students about cleaning house.

The program and experience were so rich and different, and yet trying and difficult in so many ways. I tried my best to be as patient as possible when schedules, plans, or food would change, or when gaps in cultural understanding would arise. Our WWU students made some genuine connections in Gashora, and I was impressed with their engagement with the course material and requirements; for example, we dressed very modestly whenever we left our house gate (which meant long pants, dress shoes and collared shirts for men, and long dresses with sleeves and shoes for women), and we never directly questioned any Rwandans about certain topics, such as politics or the civil war and genocide of the 1990s. We read about and discussed tourism and “voluntourism” and wanted to avoid being seen in such a light. We met with two NGOs in Kigali and learned how Rwandans are helping their fellow citizens, and we met with local, volunteer health workers in Gashora who visit patients in their free time to advise them and dispense medicine. We also spent a good amount of our free time with a cooperative of weavers, all female, who taught us how they weave their eye-catching handicrafts.

I’ve been fortunate enough to live outside the U.S. twice for a year each time, once in Germany as a college student and once in Ecuador as a rookie teacher. In both cases, I definitely rode the rollercoaster of culture shock and language learning. I can sympathize with some of my international students’ woes as they arrive here, far from family and familiar situations, but my Rwanda experience refreshed those sympathies. I believe I bring more patience to my job in the IEP than I had previously, and I can encourage my colleagues to go get uncomfortable for a while. If you haven’t worked or studied abroad, or it’s been a long time since you last did, get out there! You have so much to gain and so many interesting people and places to encounter.

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