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Middle Childhood and Early Adolescence Education Major

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1. For my study abroad experience, I had the honor of traveling to Costa Rica, the “Rich Coast” and most developed country in Latin America. However, it is still considered a developing nation. I lived in the town of San Josecito, which is right on the edge of San Isidro de Heredia and situated in the central valley. I got to experience a true Costa Rican lifestyle by living with a host family. My host family consisted on my mom, a kindergarten teacher, dad, a national park officer, and sister and brother who were 13 and 9 years old. Our house was connected to my grandparents, so I also spent a lot of time with my grandma and grandpa. My grandma had lived in San Josecito her entire life and spoke with a heavy native accent.

Our group walked a mile and a half to school each day, uphill both ways, where we were taught by bilingual Costa Rican professors. Our professors became somewhat of our mentors to help us learn more in depth about the culture and language that we were living in. They were extremely helpful and held high expectations for us. When we were not in school we had the privilege of traveling around the country on the weekends.

This program also provided a service learning component where we traveled to Bajos de Loaiza for a week to work with the community and restore their school building. Lastly, we also traveled to Nicaragua for a week to study the geography and learn about the culture of a poorer Latin American country. Many times we group all the countries in Latin America as one but they are very distinct in their dialects, cultures, and adversities. These were two great learning experiences that I will expand on later in the reflection.

2. A common practice in Costa Rica is taking an hour to two hour break each afternoon for a *cafecito*, which means little coffee. They will invite friends and neighbors over to just sit, talk, and enjoy a light meal. I was able to participate in a few of these at my house and it was a really beautiful experience. My host mom would share whatever she had in the fridge with our guests and no one left unsatisfied. Sometimes she would use an entire loaf of bread just so everyone could have a sandwich. Many people in the United States would do the same but the key difference is a lot of the times we would see it as a burden saying to ourselves, “great, now I need to buy more bread”. However, my host mom was happy to do it and since she only went grocery shopping once a week, we would sometimes go without bread for a few days. She never complained or held back. I am sure that if someone was still hungry she would have pulled out the tortillas and made them something with those. As a group, we all saw this unconditional giving time after time with all the people of the community.

This value of giving was portrayed in the purest form on our trip to Bajos de Loazia. We did not find out about the lengths that some of the families went through to host us for the week until after the trip. When we found out, we were all shocked. Some families had their children sleep in their parents’ bedroom on the floor just to provide us with a bed. Others had grown children go and stay with grandparents each night and then return home in the morning to get

ready for school. The lunch lady at the school prepared us a snack each day at the worksite in addition to making lunch for the students and also coordinated a group to make two very large all-community meals, for over 100 people, during our opening and closing ceremony. The school staff also made all of us little gifts to take home and remember this small, but beautiful community.

I have always tried to be as giving as possible, but I had never really seen it acted out in such a simple and daily manner. I do not believe that they did this just because we were from the United States either. It was clear to see that this is engrained in their lifestyle and they have high regard for the value of a person and friendship.

3. To be honest, this study abroad experience has turned my understanding of global systems, institutions, and relationships of power completely around. I had very little knowledge about the connections between them going in and coming out I honestly see the world in a whole new way. Sadly, it is not in a very positive light because it is tainted with the atrocities caused by the huge power struggle that this world faces. Much of this understanding came from my class about the history of Latin American civilization. I could write this entire paper on the knowledge that I gained, but I will focus on just one aspect: drugs.

Drugs, gangs, violence, immigration are all just a few things that come into our minds when we think about Latin America. We think, “if only they could clean-up their act”, but never realize that WE ARE THE PROBLEM! The United States is the number one consumer of drugs in the world. Less than 5% of the drugs that pass through the land bridge of Latin America from South America actually stay in these countries, but yet they are the ones plagued by the violence. Drug trade has become a business that literally sustains entire countries within Latin America. The main distributors of drugs, gangs, have infiltrated every facet of government and hold citizens captive in fear. This leads to a cycle of immigration to the United States for a better life, let alone to keep their life, that the United States fights tooth and nail to suppress all the while perpetuating the problem by continuing the flow of drugs into our country! This is a very simplified version of the relentless cycle of a power struggle and the strained relationship between our countries. I love being a United States citizen and all the freedom that comes with it, but sometimes the compromises made to protect freedom really seem unfair because United States citizens never fully see the truth. I feel that during my time in Costa Rica I had the opportunity to step outside of a bubble and see the United States as non-citizens see it and I was surprised and scared to say the least. Upon returning, I hope to gently begin to shine a light onto these issues to help release others from the ignorance that I was living in so that a real change can happen and we do not have to rely on easily swayed institutions to control all the power.

4. Costa Rica is considered the “United States of Latin America” because of its close relations with the U.S. and the higher level of development compared to its neighbors. Many diplomatic steps have been taken in the past few years concerning land conservation and drug enforcement, but there is one event that Costa Ricans will never let the United States forget.

In 1856, William Walker, an infamous United States citizen and believer in manifest destiny, slid into control of Nicaragua with the secret agenda of conquering Latin America and making everyone slaves. His first target was Costa Rica and he led and fought in the Battles of Santa Rosa and Rivas. He was defeated by the Costa Rican forces and later killed in Honduras. A famous hero was born in Costa Rica known as Juan Santamaria. They believe that his act of bravery is what saved their country and helped them keep their freedom.

Even though this was a long time ago, the children of Costa Rica are still taught this story in school and everyone knows about Juan Santamaria. Sadly, it does not depict a very good image of United States citizens. I had to do an oral presentation on these two battles and I was talking with my brother and sister about what they knew about it. They became a little defensive and explained how that it was an awful thing that Walker tried to do and with pride sang me the Juan Santamaria theme song. It was very interesting to hear the story from this point of view. This shows how much of an impact one decision had on an entire country.

5. My study abroad experience has further solidified my desire to be an ESL teacher. My Spanish skills have grown exponentially and I learned a lot about the Latino culture. One skill that was highly enhanced was being able to identify with native Spanish speakers about their biggest troubles with pronunciation. Every weekend I worked with my host sister on her English homework for school. Many of the times she struggled with pronouncing words with silent letters in English but was able to understand the meaning by reading it in her head. It was an interesting phenomenon that I took note of and noticed in my own language learning life.

I also understand the struggle of learning a different language. This is a very important skill that without being fully immersed I never would have truly understood. This will be the reality for many of my future students and at times it will be extremely frustrating and tiring for them. However, I now have the ability to sympathize with them and work to create an action plan for their future success.

Lastly, my career goals have not fully changed but have begun to take more shape. Before studying abroad I was a Spanish Education minor, but then I switched to Spanish-Liberal Arts. I am still continuing with Spanish-Liberal Arts but am considering a Bilingual Certification and possibly graduate school with a focus on dual-immersion learning. This is where the classes are taught in English and Spanish for native speakers of both languages to encourage bilingualism. Altogether, all of the intensive grammatical and oral structures of Spanish that I studied while abroad have refined my previous knowledge and helped me to build fluency.

6. A disorienting dilemma that I faced almost daily was cat calls and stares from the local males throughout Costa Rica. This was an entirely new experience for me that I found extremely annoying and sometimes frustrating especially after living there for a prolonged period of time. We would watch Ticas, Costa Rican women, walk past a group of men and the males would say

nothing or very little. As soon as our group of pale skinned, United States citizens walked past we would receive hoots, hollers, whistles and pet names. Sometimes they would say nothing, but purely stare until we walked past. Daily, this occurrence challenged my knowledge of their culture and values, because over 80% of the world's Catholics live in Latin and South America. All the times I attended church with my host family it was full and there were symbols of the crucifix everywhere. They taught purism, to treat everyone as brothers and sisters, and turn away from sin, but it was still as if these words had no influence. I have no doubts about their faith, but it was disheartening to see them living a lifestyle so focused on the secular when they were surrounded by the eternal.

This dilemma helped me to understand that in every situation I am a living ambassador for my beliefs and the United States. I do not think badly about Costa Ricans, but I do have a schema in my head about the way they treat foreigners from my experiences that does not match with what I am sure they believe to be true about themselves. I have become extremely aware about my actions and body language around others and seek to create a more comfortable and positive environment for others, so that they do not have to feel excluded or devalued by our culture. It just takes one person's actions for someone to get the wrong impression of an entire culture and I hope to change that by being a positive ambassador on a global scale for the United States.



Bajos de Loaiza, Costa Rica. This is a picture I took on a hike during our time in Bajos de Loaiza. It perfectly captures the ultimate beauty of Costa Rica. The biodiversity and rich valleys provided breathtaking sites everywhere we went and are something I will never forget. I have a greater appreciation for environment protection for the sake of protecting these natural masterpieces.



Camila, Jimena, and Vladimir: my host family. This picture was taken on our final night together. I loved being placed with this family. They took me in as their own and had an incredible amount of patience with me and I learned and struggled to communicate daily. They worked to make me feel as if I was at home and never made me feel like a burden. Altogether, their generosity and kindness helped me to feel comfortable to be able to fully enjoy my time in Costa Rica. (Plus my mom was a great cook and her food was delicious!)