



More Than a Study Abroad

If you've ever traveled to a different country, you know that there is a lot to be discovered from nearly everything you encounter. Yet, even completely surrounded by a different culture or language, it can be hard to have anything more than the classic tourist experience. This is what Dr. Jason Gilmore wanted to change about his study abroad program. "So many study abroads are about: go, learn the language, [tour] around. But our experience, we wanted it to be a little more in-depth." In cooperation with Utah State University professors Dr. Francoi Dengah and Dr. Marcus Brasileiro, Dr. Gilmore wanted to create a more hands-on experience than most study abroad programs offer. It was decided that Brazil was the place to do this, as all three professors have worked extensively in Brazil before and wanted to return to study the rich culture there in a deeper way. Avoiding the touristy cities such as Rio de Janeiro or São Paulo, they decided that Salvador would be a perfect place to study race, class, and identities in modern Brazil.

Salvador, Brazil is one of the original colonial capitals which contained one of the two largest slave ports in the Americas. Salvador is home to a diverse range of races, societies, and cultures all combined under one roof. Salvador is home to lineages of European colonists and African slaves, as well as the indigenous people of Brazil. "It is a meeting of those three different forces. We wanted to delve into the roots of modern Brazil identity," said Dr. Gilmore.

The twenty-four-day-long trip would certainly achieve this goal. Upon arriving in Brazil, the twelve students and three professors made the Pousada (Portuguese for Inn/hotel) their home and headquarters. Instead of having formal classes the students were allowed to choose from several different projects including:

- Collecting life histories.
- Conducting a research pile sort.
- Creating and maintaining a robust social media campaign for the program.
- Cooperating with Utah Public Radio (UPR) to create the series "Roots of Brazil."
- Creating a photography collection to document the experience.
- Those fluent in Portuguese participated in a translation project documenting people's life stories.

Dr. Gilmore's hope in designing the program this way was to change the way students experienced another culture. According to Dr. Gilmore, "this was not a regular study abroad, but a project-focused experiential learning endeavor."

Ryan Jensen, one of the students involved in the social media project, explained "The three professors that helped lead this, they really allowed us to create the curriculum. They arranged where we were staying, where we were going, and the topic we would be investigating or writing about, but it was up to us to go out and do it." The students arranged meetings and conducted studies on their own. "We came up with the details of [everything]."

In addition to the different projects, students were also involved with Projeto Axé, a United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) sponsored non-profit organization which aims to bring Arts Education to low income neighborhoods. The students would travel by bus to underprivileged neighborhoods to engage with the youth in various arts educations. Dr. Gilmore explained, "certain days they'd invite them in to play an instrument. Certain other days they'd invite them in for drawing or capoeira" (a type of martial arts specific to Salvador, Brazil).

Throughout the experience, Dr. Gilmore hoped the students would learn they, "were not going down to teach. We were not going down to look at Brazil as if it were something lesser. We went down to learn *from* Brazil, and to learn from the amazing stories that we heard while we were there."

Communication Studies Major, Felicity Hughes, shared an experience she had during the trip, "It was probably about the first week we were there, and some of us attended church in our own denomination." After church, a family approached the group and invited them to their home for lunch. "There were like 5 of us so we asked, 'Are you sure?' and they said, 'Yeah of course!'" The family's car wasn't big enough to take the entire group at once so they took one student home with their own kids and then returned to the church to pick up the remaining students.

The family had three little girls, aged 7, 9, and 13 years old, as well as a 17 year-old son. "The three girls showed us all of their toys and told us about the music that they liked even though they spoke Portuguese and I don't speak any Portuguese, so we were kind-of communicating through their dad. It was so much fun and they showed us magic tricks with cards, and I sung them a song in English, and they sung me a song in Portuguese. The 13 year-old kept sitting next to me. She knew how to say 'You're so cute' in English, and so she kept saying it and telling me, 'You're so cute. You're so cute.' She gave me these Minnie ears and I tried to give them back to her and she said 'No, you keep', so I have these Minnie ears that I kept from her. The youngest girl had these figurines of Brazilian soccer players and she made each of us choose one to take with us, and it was so precious. They really wanted to welcome us into their home. We stayed in contact with them the whole time we were in Brazil, and we went back to their house another time and they showed us pictures of them travelling and we seriously just sat and talked with them for hours. When I tell people about them now, I call them my 'Brazilian family', because they just welcomed us into their home and loved us even though we didn't [know them].

Jensen also explained, "What I really liked about these interviews and these interactions, was realizing the similarities we all have as humankind. That was eye opening. We went there with the mindset of studying and learning more about race and class, but it was really cool to see how easy it is to connect with another human being because there's so many more similarities than differences."

The students were impacted so strongly by their experiences within the culture that those involved in the social media project even came up with a hashtag to share their experience with others: #MoreThanAStudyAbroad. According to Dr. Gilmore, “It was the students who felt that identity and wanted to put that forward. It wasn’t an identity we were trying to force on them, but they felt it.”

“Something that’s really probably going to stay with me, it’s so cliché, but not judging the book by the cover. I thought this was going to be a study abroad and it was much more than that because of these experiences we were able to have. And I thought that the people of Brazil were a certain way, but when I actually got to know them, they’re definitely not, so it reinforced that saying,” Jensen added.

After returning from their study abroad, students continued to share their experiences with others. Their 5-part series “Roots of Brazil,” which explored various parts of the Brazilian city and culture, aired on UPR every Tuesday throughout the month of August and is still available to enjoy online at <http://upr.org/post/roots-brazil-introduction-series-exploring-brazilian-culture> .

The unique design of the study abroad allowed students to experience a culture in a completely different way than most people ever do. As Jensen explains, “I think more programs should look into how this was structured because it really gave the students ownership and it exposed us to the culture. We weren’t studying the culture; we were in it.”

By Sarina Hicken

