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# **Educating the Island Community:**

## **A Realization**

### **Benjamin Schultze**

*Educating the Island Community: A Realization* is a reflective memoir on the author's experience as a Peace Corps Volunteer serving on Ulithi Atoll in the Federated States of Micronesia. The narrative will capture the education of the volunteer, the process of understanding the educational culture in Ulithi and the author's personal reflection about the future of the island community. The author will tackle what he believes should be done to help ensure the future of Ulithian youth and the preservation of their culture combined with how higher education may have the ability to play an intricate role in this preservation process.

While serving as a United States Peace Corps Volunteer, I developed a new vision of what I dream to accomplish with my life that I had never thought of previously. As an undergraduate student at the University of Minnesota, I obtained a degree in biology with the hopes of entering into a career that would allow me to work constructively to end environmental destruction. However, the combination of my time as a Peace Corps Volunteer (PCV), along with my extensive extra-curricular and employment involvement during my undergraduate education, pushed me to create an entirely new path for my life. As a PCV, I became acutely aware of the need for educational improvement within developing countries. As my time in the Peace Corps (PC) drew to a close, I knew that working on this issue was something I needed to pursue. In order to accomplish my goal, I am now pursuing my Master's degree in Higher Education and Student Affairs Administration with the hopes of later obtaining a doctorate in International Relations.

Throughout my time at the University of Minnesota, I participated in many student groups. As an athlete, I rowed on the men's crew team. During this experience, I was fortunate to become team treasurer and began to see and understand how a university operated from an inside perspective. I also volunteered at the YMCA, located on campus, and eventually coordinated one of the largest student activities on campus called Project Motivation (a youth mentoring program). Fortunately, this experience opened my eyes to the power of working at the grassroots level while affording me the opportunity to coordinate large groups of people through various activities. As coordinator, I began to comprehend the important role universities have in educating community members and how complex this role is. This formed my opinion of what I believe an engaged university is: a place that is willing to not only educate its enrolled students, but also people residing in the community.

One of my highlights as an undergraduate student was becoming a Community Advisor (CA), a role similar to that of a Resident Assistant. My CA supervisor encouraged me to think about pursuing a Master's degree in higher education. I was happy to be sought out for such an adventure, however, I had no intention of being a CA for the rest of my life! I struggled to see the "bigger picture" a higher education degree could provide outside of employment in residential life and, therefore, concluded that a higher education degree was not for me.

As graduation approached, I decided that the Peace Corps was exactly what I wanted to do. In fact, becoming a PCV had been on my radar screen since I was a young tyke. On Saturday mornings, I watched cartoons during which CBS would air a special world news report for kids. To this day, I can remember my complete enthralment with the beginning of the segment; it started with a globe that felt like it was literally coming out of the television and reaching for me. As I watched the reports, I became aware of the world outside Minnesota and knew that one day I wanted to travel and see these amazing and exotic places. As a first year undergraduate, I called the PC to determine what qualifications I needed to become a volunteer. I was told to call back once I had my degree nearly completed. This is exactly what I did. Subsequently, at the end of my

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undergraduate experience, I entered the Peace Corps and was off to the Kingdom of Tonga in the South Pacific.

I set out for the Peace Corps in the summer of 1999, fresh, naïve, confident, and energized as part of a new Pacific initiative called *Capacity Building of Environmental Management in the Pacific*. I was sent to educate youth in Tonga about the principles of shoreline conservation. Unfortunately, my time in Tonga was short-lived. Through a bureaucratic mix-up, I was mistakenly placed into a host home that was dangerous and potentially life-threatening. The safety conditions in my host home deteriorated quickly after my arrival. After eight weeks, I found myself being evacuated for safety reasons. This was indeed a predicament that I had never imagined possible. Where was I going to be sent? Back in the United States capital of Washington, DC, the Peace Corps administration reviewed my file and decided that, based on my experience as a Community Advisor and volunteer at the YMCA, I would be a perfect fit for a small island community called Ulithi Atoll, which is located in the State of Yap in the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM).

Ulithi Atoll is comprised of 44 islands with a combined area of 1.79 square miles. I was assigned to work on the main island, Falalop, which literally means “main,” at the Outer Islands High School (OIHS). There I was to help develop a new high school counseling program and teach science if my schedule allowed.

There were many reasons why OIHS had been identified as needing a high school counseling program. These reasons were made clear to me when I met PC officials in Yap. Two main issues had been identified by the FSM government legislature that they wanted help in combating. One was the high suicide rate among males aged 15-30. Second, they wanted a PCV to identify areas that would improve the number of young Ulithians who would graduate and move forward to obtain advanced educational degrees. Truthfully, I had no idea what I was getting myself involved with and I was, quite frankly, nervous. My original plan of working on coastal environmental issues had suddenly been transformed because of a twist of bureaucratic fate. Magically, I had been transformed into a counselor in the eyes of the PC.

I traveled to Ulithi from Yap on the airline that would be responsible for keeping me in contact with the outside world during my stint as a PCV. Pacific Missionary Airlines was responsible for delivering the islands' mail once a week. The only other form of communication with life outside of Ulithi was a radio. Fortunately, there were two other United States citizens residing in Ulithi that I was able to talk with during my experience.

After touching down, I deplaned, paused at the top of the stairs, and absorbed my first sights of the place I was to begin calling home. I could feel many eyes of deep chocolate brown people examining the new, pale, White man who had just entered their community. As I glanced around, I saw women wearing intricately woven *lava-lavas*, the traditional wrap worn when a woman begins menstruating. Some women wore t-shirts, but many were bare-chested allowing their breasts to hang to the middle of their stomachs. Men stood wearing red or blue *thunus* which are simply long pieces of cloth that are wrapped around the waist. Some men wore shorts. As I have found no other way of describing how I felt when I first stepped off the plane, I can only say that it felt like I was stepping into a *National Geographic Magazine*. No amount of training prepared me for what I saw when I deplaned.

After I arrived, a whirlwind of activity began. I met my host family, threw my stuff in my room, and was introduced to the principal of the school as well as my counterpart, John. Each PCV is assigned a host-country counterpart to help ensure the transition of skills from the volunteer to someone within the country. I became involved in several different facets of OIHS immediately, as John had many expectations of me. I promptly began teaching biology and was thankful for this opportunity. Teaching gave me direct contact with the students who I was serving. The student contact gave me an edge when it came to making decisions about how the design of the counseling department would transpire. As I taught, I gained an understanding of the students I was supposed to help attend college. Subsequently, this contact would lay the groundwork for the development of my ideas that might prevent suicide. Wrestling with these complex issues became very overwhelming from my first day and I quickly realized that the task I was assigned to help with was going to demand a plethora of outside resources and more volunteers to carry on my cause after I had departed.

OIHS was developed based on the United States educational system of high schools and consequently was operating on a ninth-twelfth grade system. For obvious reasons, the students that I was working with were much different than the students in the United States. As I taught, I learned that the students' educational level and abilities were extremely low and that my goal of preparing them for college would be difficult. In turn, this made developing the facet of the counseling department, responsible for sending students to college, daunting.

One of my first experiences with the educational competency of the students occurred on my first day of teaching. As I introduced myself, I held up a world map, similar to those found in United States classrooms, and explained where I used to live. As I did so, one student raised his hand and asked, "How big is your island?" I tried to explain my answer by comparing how many Ulithis would fit inside the United States. The students sneered and told me that this was not possible. To add to the dilemma, many students thought that the map looked "weird" because it showed the United States being so large in comparison to Ulithi and they wanted to know why. My explanation of size seemed to be futile.

Considering students had difficulty conceptualizing size on a map, imagine trying to teach biology and explain what a cell is and how small cells generally are. They couldn't understand largeness, why would they be able to grasp smallness? As time progressed, I realized that the instruction of biology was never going to be what I had encountered as an undergraduate or even as a student in high school. Eventually, I asked the students what they were interested in learning. The students' answers allowed me to develop a marine biology curriculum addressing various aspects of island ecology. This was a pivotal moment for me. I realized that it was important to start with the resources I had, as well as with a topic to which the students could relate.

In view of students having difficulty with the discernment of size, I was not surprised to find their math skills in serious need of improvement. In all honesty, I became very self-conscious as a teacher and began to question my effectiveness when students couldn't even solve simple single-digit addition and subtraction math problems. I discovered that the problem did not lie with me, but with how OIHS and the local elementary schools taught math.

OIHS accepted students who had graduated eighth grade and when they started high school, regardless of ability, they began pre-algebra. In the 10th grade, by mandatory rule, they were required to have algebra I irrespective of their performance in pre-algebra. Once again, in the 11th grade all students took geometry followed by algebra II in the 12th grade. The system did not allow any flexibility for different student ability. As I investigated the situation, I learned that the current school system had been developed by a large group of PCVs during the 1960s. According to Nero (1999), it is indicated that the current educational structure is a direct result of the educational agenda of 1966 and the subsequent augmentation of PCVs to the FSM. Within this augmentation, PCVs taught all levels (K-12). Eventually, the Peace Corps reduced the number of volunteers in the FSM and with this reduction came a decline in the overall educational quality of the school system. As this happened, there was not enough foresight to recognize that Ulithians had not been given the appropriate skills to continue the high level of education PCVs had provided in mass numbers. Subsequently, students' math skills declined because there were no elementary teachers capable of instructing math, and eventually the high school had entering students who could not solve basic math problems. As this educational decay occurred, students were still required to follow the mathematical learning model implemented in 1966.

Teaching biology also opened my eyes to other problems plaguing the Ulithian educational system. Another dilemma pivoted around the use of language. Considering there are over nine different languages, each with their own derivations in dialects spoken in the FSM, it was decided by the FSM legislature to have a common language for everyone to use and learn. Consequently, the FSM official language became English after World War II, when the FSM became a territory of the United States. All Micronesians who speak English, literally do so as a second language. By mandate, teachers are to instruct classes in English. However, teachers often feel inadequate with their English language skills and usually revert to their first language. When they do so, this means that some students who do not speak the dialect or language are placed at a disadvantage. I dealt with many student complaints surrounding this issue, but was without power to change how a teacher spoke in their classroom. Unfortunately, the only thing I could do was to speak in slow, clear English in my own classroom and during any interaction I had with students.

Not only did students battle with having poor resources for learning at school, they also lacked adequate studying spaces at their dwellings. There was only one home on the entire island that actually had a desk. In addition to this, students also resided in places that had very poor lighting. After dark, this made studying for school very difficult. Students usually spent most of their remaining daylight hours after school finishing chores rather than studying. I couldn't blame them, only the basic fact is that if the chores were not completed, students would not be able to eat. Realizing this, I opened my classroom most nights to allow students to come back and study with some light.

In terms of developing a program for helping students attend college, I was at a loss. Overall, OIHS students were severely limited in a plethora of academic abilities such as reading comprehension, math, and writing. This added to the numerous obstacles (poverty, low caste membership, travel distance to college) placed in their paths toward obtaining a college education. While I was able to identify individual students who may be successful in college, overall the small number made it difficult to implement a program that would allow a large number of students to attend college. Therefore, I worked with John to help identify "gifted" students who might be able to move onward to college.

Along with working on educational problems and developing a program for promoting student enrollment at the college level, I was also working on suicide prevention. As a Community Advisor, I had been trained in recognizing suicidal tendencies, but I had never received a formal education focused on how someone may prevent suicide. According to Hezel (1999), suicide in the FSM is unlike anything that the body of literature on suicide in the United States and Europe addresses. I was floored by what Hezel calls the "trivial nature of the suicides" (p. 474). For example, sometimes young men would commit suicide because of a fight they had with their fathers. Other times, men would kill themselves to show honor toward deceased relatives by hanging themselves on the anniversary date of the death.

I had merely been told about the suicide problem by the FSM PC Country Director two days before arriving at OIHS. It was up to me to begin both understanding the Ulithian culture and developing a plan of action to combat the suicide problem. From my analysis, I concluded that the students had very little connection with OIHS and lacked a feeling of belonging and school spirit. I decided that perhaps if there were a few exciting and fun activities that the school provided, in addition to just academics, maybe the students would feel a bit more connected. I discussed this issue with John and the idea of a spirit week was born. It was aptly named "Coconut Days." Similar to spirit weeks in the US, each day had a theme and the students would participate (hopefully) in that activity. The idea was a huge success! Students became involved. One of the things I will never forget was the idea of "coconut grams." Students were able to purchase a coconut and have that coconut sent to someone with a note. The proceeds went to the seniors for their graduation. In preparation of the nearly 200 coconuts that were sent, I was fortunate enough to learn how to climb to the top of a palm tree, bare-footed, and retrieve fresh coconuts.

This spirit week really opened the students' eyes to me and I was able to begin connecting with the students on a level I had not previously. Through their own voices, they began to discuss their dreams and desires as well as what they wanted for their island community in the future. Some wanted to attend college, but the majority of students had decided that life on the island was perfect for them. As I connected with the students, there were no suicides. Sadly, a few weeks after my departure, I was informed that one of the students I had worked closely with had committed suicide. I was depressed over the fact that I wasn't there for him.

With the exception of "Coconut Days," I have thus far painted a bleak picture of the educational system in Ulithi. The fact that an independent assessment by Hezel, Petteys, and Chang (1997) states that "the FSM education system suffers from unacceptable low quality and that only 20% of students are able to pass the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) exam," (p. 34) only highlights the status of the current picture. What is the goal of education in the FSM, considering the many negatives that have been outlined? The purpose of education within the FSM is delineated by Title 40 of the FSM Code (1997) and states:

The purpose of education in the FSM shall be to "develop its citizens in order to prepare them for participation in self-government and economic and social development; to function as a unifying agent; to bring people who inhabit the islands; to preserve the Micronesian culture and traditions; to convey essential information

concerning health, safety and protection of the island environment; and to provide its citizens with the social, political, professional and vocational skills required to develop a nation.”

[Available at [www.fsmlaw.org/fsm/code](http://www.fsmlaw.org/fsm/code)]

In short, the goal of the people of Micronesia is to develop a quality educational system. Ulithi struggles to educate its youth, as it suffers from a lack of educated teachers and resources. Ulithi's location within the State of Yap creates another problem as the Yapese speak an entirely different language than Ulithians. Additionally, Yap is socially based upon a caste system where Ulithians are literally at the bottom of the social ladder. This creates problems when it comes to obtaining educational resources, as Yap officials administer the school system. According to Hezel (1999), outer islands, such as Ulithi, were increasingly being neglected by administrators and marked by social and economic stagnation. Radio and mail were the only methods available for communication between Yap and Ulithi; it was easy for the Yapese to ignore OIHS needs and requests. In fact, one teacher put a request in for new hammers four years prior to my arrival and still had no response. I was often times looked at as the answer for solving these communication issues. Nonetheless, Yap hired educators from the United States to help with implementing Title 40 throughout the state. The director of education made it clear that he did not want a “Band-Aid” approach to the problem according to Piper and Paul (1995). While I worked in Ulithi, it appeared that a “Band-Aid” approach was all that had been implemented in solving some of the educational problems.

Considering the many problems that I have outlined surrounding the educational system in Ulithi, how did I conclude that pursuing a Master's degree in higher education was the right path for myself? While living in Ulithi, I began to realize that if the FSM, a developing nation, was struggling with implementing an educational system, there were more than likely other countries in the same condition. Combining my intrinsic desire to work with people, my desire to explore the world, and my enjoyment of higher education, a Master's in higher education is perfect for me. It will add to my repertoire the skills necessary to understand how academies function and what methodologies are used in the implementation of the educational process. In short, I believe I can help the world with this degree.

I also think that a Higher Education and Student Affairs degree from the University of Vermont will give me the necessary foundation to combat global educational problems. For example, in Ulithi, the degree may be able to give me the skills and knowledge to implement programs that help educate a very neglected group of people: the teachers. To this day, there is no system in place to offer a formal training protocol or to help give teachers basic pedagogical concepts to improve their teaching abilities. The Yap Assessment Model, a plan to elevate the education of students addressed by Piper and Paul (1995), demonstrates that an effort was being made by Yap to overcome this problem. However, the basic dilemma was that uneducated people became teachers and this fostered a cycle of what I call “missed education.” According to Hezel, Petteys, and Chang (1997), what is even more shocking is that the majority of graduates in 1994 from the Community College of Micronesia were people supposedly educated in teacher training programs. Incidentally, I met only one teacher in Ulithi who had been educated in the program. Further development of programs such as this must happen. In the case of Ulithi, developing specialized teacher training programs in places like Guam, where teachers are educated and as repayment return to the islands to teach, might actually help bring a higher level of education back to places like Ulithi. Unfortunately, according to Hezel, Petteys, and Chang (1997) teachers are being educated in Yap, but are not finding their way to places like Ulithi.

As the world becomes smaller and more interconnected, the people of Ulithi will need to be able to defend themselves on an intellectual level so that they are not ambushed by manipulating people who could potentially take advantage of them. As electricity and the Internet become more ubiquitous, imagine the future when credit card applications are sent to Ulithi, which is served by the United States Postal Service and, therefore, has a United States zip code. Ulithians could begin purchasing products on credit cards without the ability to conceptualize the magnitude of their actions! I state this scenario only to highlight the possible manipulation that Ulithians could face and stress the fact that they are vulnerable due to the lack of current overall educational competence.

When I speak of higher education, I am not necessarily advocating that systems similar to that of the United States suddenly be formed in developing countries. What is needed, I believe, are people who can help people

within developing countries form their own higher education system. If this happens to mirror the United States, and the people of that country want that, then, and only then, should it be developed in that image. In terms of Ulithi, the teacher-training program is critical. However, outreach work by universities will also be needed to educate people on the basics such as taking care of their islands (or villages) from a fiscal level to an environmentally sound level. Many problems plague developing countries and the education of the layperson is crucial in solving these issues.

I do not advocate forcing western beliefs on others. However, there are developing countries, such as the FSM, that welcome United States help with developing higher educational systems to ensure their future and survival. I know first-hand that Ulithians want a stronger educational system. The article by Piper and Paul (1995) indicates that they feel that for Micronesians, the education of their children is an essential part of their lives. One student told me that he wants to be educated because he fears that his culture will be destroyed soon if he doesn't learn and understand how to preserve it. From what I witnessed in Ulithi, I couldn't agree more.

It is my vision to help developing countries construct a self-designed system of education where necessary and wanted. My time as a PCV highlighted the fact that there is a desire for educational improvement in developing countries. I was offered a taste of this need while serving in Ulithi and recognize educational reform needs to be accomplished globally. Overall, higher education plays a vital role in helping to educate people of developing countries and fostering the preservation of cultures, while providing the educational skills to prevent manipulation by people from outside their countries. I know that Ulithians would appreciate help with their educational system. I'm sure that there are other countries that would like this help too!

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