

Copy and Paste:

Shifting Into a New Teaching Environment

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Tags

Cross-Cultural Issues; Ethics, Equity, and Social Justice; Language Education; Partnerships; Personnel Management; Primary and Secondary Education; Student Learning and Development

Setting

Magambegu City High School is a mid-sized private high school in Magambegu City, Magambegu, which is located off the coast of East Africa near Tanzania. Magambegu City is the capital city of Magambegu. It has been described by numerous world aid organizations as struggling with deep poverty and it faces significant challenges, including poor infrastructure, lack of access to clean water and health care, and underdeveloped education and employment sectors. Nonetheless, the residents of Magambegu City are known for resilience, traditional arts and culture, and strong community ties.

Since 2003, Magambegu City successfully established 23 new schools and 4 community centers, including two schools which focused on vocational training. Magambegu City High School, which was established in 2010, graduated over 500 high school students in 15 years with top grades. School administrators decided to enter into a new partnership with Australians Serving Africa to invite a foreign English teacher to their school to train their teachers and teach their students. The organization Australians Serving Africa was responsible for the volunteer's basic training, providing a stipend and health coverage, and helping them connect with the school administration before departure. While the partnership was new, Australians Serving Africa had previous success with volunteers in other countries and maintained excellent ratings from former volunteers as well as from host agencies.

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Case

Gillian was a certified English teacher from Queensland, Australia with five years of experience teaching year 11 in her hometown. Wanting to step outside her comfort zone while also making a difference, she applied and was accepted to teach at Magambegu City High school for two years with a government-sponsored program called Australians Serving Africa. The program staff and the former volunteers all spoke positively of the opportunity, but Gillian would be the first person they sent to Magambegu and Gillian was a bit nervous being part of a pilot program.

Three months before her start date, Gillian participated in the Australians Serving Africa pre-departure orientation on Zoom, which covered the details of her program, information about living in Magambegu, her health insurance, how she would be paid, navigating culture shock, and how to connect with school administration. Wendy, the Australians Serving Africa coordinator, was on hand to answer any questions Gillian had and to help with medical clearance and airline arrangements. Gillian was a little concerned that Wendy seemed to not know very much about Magambegu beyond basic information that could be found online and was unable to refer her to other people or resources of information on the specific school and what it would be like working there. However, Gillian tried to put her concerns aside, remembering her study abroad experience in Nepal as a college junior, and how much fun she had volunteering at a school there. Gillian remained hopeful that her time in Magambegu would be similar.

Gillian arrived in Magambegu and began her volunteer teaching position at the high school. The orientation she was supposed to receive at the school never happened, despite Gillian asking about it several times. She was told by a school staff member to not “worry”, to “enjoy herself” and they would get around to the orientation “later.” The staff member also said that work at the school was very flexible. Gillian did not receive an introduction to the students until three months into her time in the school. She perceived the situation as disorganized in contrast to her teaching year 11 in Australia. Gillian often showed up to the school with nothing to do or was told the students were at another activity.

The difficulties with her volunteer position at the school resulted in her spending little time socializing with school staff or trying to understand school culture. Lonely and homesick, Gillian eventually met some expatriates nearby and started hanging out with them on the beach on the weekends.

After three months, Gillian finally began working with year 9 students with no syllabus, materials, or information provided by the school as there were limited resources available for teaching. Gillian set out to develop her own lessons for the students, beginning by assessing their English with a series of exams. She was dumbfounded to learn that most students in the class were not at the level she expected based on what little information she had been given by Wendy about English levels in the country. Based on the tests, she set about creating appropriate lessons and homework assignments.

One day, after giving the class a writing assignment to create a short story of no more than three paragraphs using the vocabulary and grammar from the previous two lessons, Gillian collected their assignments. That evening while reading their stories, Gillian noticed a pattern—nearly every short story out of 17 was the same and written in flawless English. Only two of the stories were unique and contained errors that Gillian would expect of non-native English speakers. After entering parts of the text from the stories into Grammarly, Gillian

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found that the students copied the stories from an Internet source called Free Short Stories. The following week at school, she confronted the class, upset at their copying from the Internet. The students stared at her, not understanding what they did wrong. One of the students said “Teacher, we always copy so we can memorize.” Puzzled, Gillian asked him to explain further. “We have to memorize to pass the test. That’s how we did it last year, teacher. We can just copy-paste”, he said. She explained that they must not copy and needed to do their own work. She informed them that they would have one more chance to do their work responsibly. She decided to let them do the assignment again after she taught them what plagiarism was and how to avoid it.

The following week the students turned in their assignment again but Gillian found that they copied from the Internet again. Gillian told the class that they would fail the assignment and she would be speaking to the school administrator. The school administrator seemed receptive to Gillian’s concerns about the class but also stressed to her that the students must “pass.” She continued, “Gillian, the parents pay a lot of money for their children to go to school here. They expect them to pass so they can go to university. Please teach them again and do not count the previous assignment in their grades.” Gillian was stunned by the school administrator’s suggestion that she ignore the issue by dropping the assignment from their grades but did not want to cause problems for the school or Australians Serving Africa.

When she contacted Wendy, Gillian was reminded that the organization’s role is to support volunteers with basic training, a stipend, and health insurance, not be involved in teaching or local school administrative matters. Gillian taught the lesson on plagiarism again and then gave the students another writing assignment to do at home. She hoped they would not copy from the Internet this time. However, when reviewing these third assignments, she found that they copied again.

At the end of the quarter, Gillian submitted final grades for the class giving all but two students failing grades. The following day the school administration informed her that she was fired citing her inability to teach the class to pass the assignments as the reason for her termination. The school administrator also told Gillian that the students informed her that they were not learning anything from their new teacher. Gillian contacted Wendy repeatedly but was told that Australians Serving Africa cannot be involved in this situation but could give Gillian a new placement in nearby Tanzania. Gillian declined and returned home frustrated. She later heard from an expat she met in Magambegu that students are used to learning how to memorize and usually copy down information verbatim, something Gillian was unaware of until her volunteer role at the school.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- What responsibility did Australians Serving Africa have in providing Gillian with information and support before, during, and after this experience?
- How could the situation impact the relationship between Australians Serving Africa and the staff at the high school?

- Gillian did not speak Maga, the local language, and was unfamiliar with the culture in Magambegu. How do you think this may have contributed to the issues with teaching in the high school?
- How could Gillian have better handled the situation with the students' assignments? What recommendations do you have for Gillian regarding her role and expectations?
- Consider Gillian's failing of the students and her termination from both her perspective and that of the school members. How do you think Gillian, the students, and the administrators differently interpreted the situation?
- To what extent might Gillian's approach reflect the imposition of her own educational values, and how might greater contextual adaptation have altered the outcome?
- Have you experienced or observed in your professional life any time when different international education systems or values have come into conflict? If so, how?