

A letter from an alumna in Rwanda



Hello! My name is Ceri Whatley and I graduated from the Centre of West African Studies (now incorporated into the Department of African Studies and Anthropology) in 2010. I was awarded a First in African Studies with Social Anthropology and loved the interdisciplinary approach and supportive learning environment.

After graduating I wanted to gain some real life work experience before continuing on to postgraduate study. I interned for One Laptop per Child (OLPC) Rwanda, a non-profit organisation which provides children in developing countries with durable, in-expensive laptops designed to transform education. My work included designing and running educational workshops, as well as assisting at teacher training events and expos. I was also one of a small team responsible for the testing, re-flashing and boxing of 63,000 XO laptops ready for deployment.

When interning for OLPC I recognised the need for evaluative research; I wrote a proposal and was consequently appointed Head of Research for a 3 month contract. I was in charge of the entire research process, which had a steep learning curve, and I used my findings to write both a research report and policy paper to improve the program.

Working for OLPC was a fascinating and meaningful experience, though it was not without its frustrations. While it was rewarding to work on such a forward-thinking and ambitious project, I also had to learn how to deal with some of the complex difficulties faced by an NGO on the ground in a developing country. Some of the more obvious challenges we faced included: financial constraints, infrastructural issues (lack of reliable electricity, internet, etc.) and the everyday ongoing frustrations that come with working in a less efficient environment; in Rwanda, for example, employees are not expected to turn up to work on time if it has been raining! Additionally, OLPC in Rwanda was working in a supportive role with the Rwandese Ministry of Education (MINEDUC). While it was meaningful knowing that the project I was involved with was something that government had such a high level of interest in, there were unfortunately many conflicts of interest between the different teams to do with egos, fiefdoms and individual career advancement which led the project to be less progressive than I would have personally hoped.

After working for OLPC I didn't want to leave Rwanda as I was having too much fun, so I decided to stay in Kigali with friends while I taught art and music at an international primary school. I was given a lot of freedom with the curriculum and so (of course) my students are now fans of Fela Kuti among other African artists!

I am currently working and saving money for my Masters Degree which I hope to do at DASA... maybe I will see some of you there very soon!

Best Wishes

Ceri

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