

Nick Eastmond Gives a Seminar on Educational Research in Haiti | CEHS

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When Nick and Irene Eastmond arrived in Haiti earlier this year, they hoped to bolster education in that country, fostering the skills that would encourage leadership, entrepreneurship and problem-solving.

What they found was an experience that drew more from them than they expected—and it gave more back to them, too.

Dr. Nick Eastmond, an emeritus professor from the Instructional Technology and Learning Sciences Department at Utah State University, went to Haiti as a Senior Fulbright Scholar. His objective was to teach a seminar on educational research for faculty members at the Jacmel branch of the University of Notre Dame of Haiti. He would also help design classes in statistics and education research, and he would do it all in French. He departed the United States, armed with a plan and a stack of books he would later leave in the library at UNDH-Jacmel.

Irene expected to accompany her husband and soak up the atmosphere, which surprised them both with its color and beauty. It also reminded them a lot of Benin, where they had served an LDS mission together. “It was like we had been transported to West Africa,” she said. Many Haitians are descended from West Africans who were kidnapped and brought there as slaves. Despite being separated from those beginnings by the Atlantic Ocean and 400 years, Haiti has retained its African roots in many ways.

Irene had her own background in education: she was once an adjunct singing teacher at USU, and she also supervised student teachers for the university. When Monseigneur Saveur Content, vice rector of the university, learned of her skills, he asked her to teach a class in conversational English.

“I had no advance notice, but I had an iPad,” she said. So she developed lesson plans right before she presented them.

The Monseigneur was busy educating people, too. In addition to his duties as a vice rector and Catholic priest, he was the principal of a private high school and an elementary school. “I’ve watched him give away large portions of his small salary,” Irene said. The Eastmonds agree they learned much about dedicated service, commitment, and kindness from the faculty and the Monseigneur at UNDH.

The Eastmonds saw that Haiti had a real need for more literacy, more education and problem-solving skills. And right away, they discovered some of the literacy barriers in Haiti.

“I was astounded that there were no bookstores in Jacmel, other than some selling school texts for kids,” Nick said. The branch of the university, which came to the city 16 years ago, had a small library. But most of the people did their reading on electronic devices—which often could not be charged at home. Electricity was only available in the community during random hours of the day.

The Eastmonds were conscious both of the need for literacy and the fact that many educated Haitians are unable to find jobs in their home country. So many of them have to leave Haiti to earn money, which they then send back to their families.

The couple had also pondered the issue in West Africa, and their conclusion was that the western model didn’t work everywhere. In a country that needed more entrepreneurs, it wasn’t enough to focus on producing good employees or teaching people to memorize the answers to questions. They wanted their students to figure out what questions needed answering, and that took a different approach.

The education style the UNDH faculty were used to was heavy on lectures, light on participation. The Eastmonds did the opposite. In her English classes, Irene didn’t lecture as much as she encouraged her students to talk. What’s more, she introduced activities that forced them to engage.

Nick also put his students to work, presenting exercises that required them to solve problems. For example, he asked, if you were on a Caribbean fishing trip and your boat's motor failed, what should be saved, and how would you rank the items in your boat for survival? Individual students made a list, then got in groups and ranked the items again before comparing their answers with those of an expert reviewer. Their group lists were almost always better than the individual ones.

The lessons took some getting used to. "People were a little impatient with the process," Irene said. "Then one of them said to the rest of the group, if we will just hang in here, when we finish we will know how to do research."

The faculty in the seminar warmed to the methods, so much that they formed their own university-wide research group and elected officers. Nick put them in touch with the office of Jamison Fargo, associate dean for Research in USU's Emma Eccles Jones College of Education and Human Services, about possible research grants that might be available to them.

Irene had teachers ask her for the course outline she was using to teach English. She laughed, because she was generating her lessons on the fly, but she did share her two rules: Open your mouth and don't be afraid to make mistakes.

Though the Eastmonds have returned home, the research group continues. "They're meeting and they're looking for the right problems to go after," Nick said. Meanwhile, the Eastmonds checked out surplus sales at USU, rounded up power cables and sent them back to a private high school in Jacmel.

Now, they're dreaming of working on some different questions, like helping to ease deforestation and set up service learning opportunities in Haiti.

The Haitian experience was Nick's second Fulbright stint (he did one in Lima, Peru 20 years ago). He came back enthusiastic about the Fulbright program, and about possible involvement with the same people in Haiti in the future.

Nick and Irene feel a Fulbright is a two-way street, where they were able to teach and share. "You are taught by them at least as much as you give," Nick said.