

4 ways travel made me a better teacher

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1. I learned that gaining the respect of my students is the key to success.

My first teaching stint was in Sihanoukville, a beach city on the western shores of Cambodia. As with most Asian cultures, elders are respected in Cambodia. My students would stand to answer me and were some of the most polite people I had ever met. Eye contact with an elder is never permitted and so the students would stand, look at the ground and address me as *Kru*, which is Khmer for teacher. After the students answered my questions, I would allow them to be seated and they would promptly say *akun* (thank you) and take their seats, still looking downward. I quickly came to the conclusion that all overseas classrooms must be equally calm and that teaching was going to be an easy way to travel the world.

Then I moved to India.

I couldn't keep the attention of my students for more than a few moments at a time. They were constantly out of their seats, leaving the room, and talking in a language I didn't yet understand. I was utterly frustrated and disappointed and realized I needed to approach this area of the world in a different way. Learning Hindi became a new goal and the more words I learned, the more respect I gained from my students. I had to bring myself to their level and show them that I wanted to learn as well.

I began to relate to my students more as I had the opportunity to travel all over the northern half of the country. I was based out of Jaipur, but one day I would be in the capital of Delhi where some of the richest people in the world lived, and the next day I'd be in a village just minutes outside of Jaipur — where the houses were huts and the children were sold into the sex trade by age fifteen. The Indian mindset is set very much in the present — whatever will help them get further in that moment, that is what they aim for. To the upper castes, that meant sending their children to the best schools in India, but to the lower castes, that simply meant doing whatever is necessary to survive. Schooling for the underprivileged is something that most Indians have never contemplated before. The children are so unruly because they are used to spending their days roaming the streets, collecting trash and trying to stay alive.

2. I learned how to build a structure of safety in every classroom.

Living and teaching in a country like India — where there are more than a billion people and hardly any space that isn't filled with concrete buildings, trash heaps, or wandering cows — can seem chaotic at times. Organizing my classroom so that the students felt safe and protected was key. Working one-on-one with students who were having trouble meant learning how to introduce a classroom time schedule, and how to assign homework at regular intervals. I needed to find effective ways to build structure in my classroom. After visiting some of my student's homes, I had a much better understanding of the lives they led and how I could help make their education work for them. Structure was something these students never had outside the classroom, so implementing it into their everyday lives was a welcomed change. It caused a complete turnaround.

3. I learned the importance of teaching culture at home.

Travel gave me so much insight when it came to teaching at home. Through teaching ESL, I had learned how to

relate to all sorts of people from all sorts of (often extreme) situations. Teaching in bare classrooms with no supplies forced me to improvise every day. So when I went home, I knew how to make a classroom run smoothly. And I knew how to spark a desire in my students, how to entice them to want to learn and understand the global world. I told them about my travels. When students at home are inspired to learn about other cultures at a young age, they grow up with a better understanding of the world around them.

4. I learned that I will always be a “student” teacher overseas.

Traveling has shown me that to be a better teacher, I have to become a student. In every new place I teach, I adapt to their culture and customs. In Cambodia, I learned the importance of giving honor to the king before school each day. In India, I learned how to understand different class groups in order to better know their way of living and learning. Traveling has not just taught me to be a better teacher, it has taught me how to love teaching. And as I

wander my way around the world of teaching, I know I still have so much to learn.