Interview with Shay Galto conducted by Sociology faculty, Dr. Diane Rodgers

**Summary:**
Student: Shay Galto, is a graduate student in the NIU sociology department. Destination: Cambodia in 2011. Earlier in 2010 as an undergraduate at NIU, Shay had traveled to Cambodia through the USOAR program (http://www.niu.edu/usoar) for two weeks. This summer she returned with the help of a Foreign Language and Area Studies Fellowship through the NIU Center for Southeast Asian Studies and Study Abroad.

**Interview:**

Where did you go for your trip?
Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam.

What was the purpose of your trip? (Study Abroad/Internship/Other)
I received a Foreign Language and Area Studies Fellowship (FLAS) to study Khmer in Cambodia. I decided to go to Cambodia a month early to do my thesis research on genocide education. Also, since I went earlier than my program and stayed later, I was able to travel to Thailand and Vietnam.

Why did you decide to go to Cambodia for your (Study Abroad/Internship/Other)?
When I was an undergraduate I received a Special Opportunities in Artistry in Research Grant (USOAR) to study the oral transmission of history after the Khmer Rouge regime. I had never planned to go to Asia before, but I had a professor who urged me to pursue my research interests internationally. I was very fortunate that NIU has such great international scholars and professors who specifically study Cambodia.

After my initial trip to Cambodia I became very interested in the country and decided to learn to language and continue to conduct research there. I decided to travel back to Cambodia while pursuing a Master of Arts degree in sociology so I could further my language skills and continue my research.

Who else from NIU went on this trip with you, including faculty?
I went with a graduate student from the Anthropology Department, Lauren Bell, who also received the FLAS fellowship; it was really great because we were able to create our own program of language study with just the two of us in the classroom.

We had help from our language teacher, Kheang Leang, in developing our language program and making contacts with our teachers in Cambodia before the trip.

How have you personally been affected by your decision to go on this trip and the experiences you had on the trip?
Cambodia is different from the United States in every aspect. Everything little thing changed while I was in Cambodia: what I ate, how I interacted with other people, how I dressed, etc. Everyone in Cambodia is so friendly and curious, traits that are rarely displayed in the United States, especially to strangers. In the United States, our interactions with strangers are so distant and often times they are not sincere. In Cambodia, everyone is curious to know why you are in the country and want to learn about you. In addition, Cambodians in general are eager to teach...
you things about their culture and learn from what you as well. I have really taken this open-minded, curious, perspective back with me to the United States and am now viewing my world differently!

Also, I can now admit that before going on this trip I had an issue with over-planning. The trip really taught me to take life in strides and laugh at the situation and myself when things do not go according to “plan”. I believe this has impacted me the most as I now have a sense of humor about life, especially the unplanned!

**How important do you think (Study Abroad/Internship/Other) is in your learning experience here at NIU?**

Studying abroad has really defined my graduate experience at NIU. My concentration is Southeast Asian Studies, so being able to travel to Cambodia to immerse myself in language study as well as conduct my thesis research was an essential component to my learning experience at NIU.

**What were some of the memorable experiences you had on your trip?**

Some of the most memorable experiences for me were being able to travel to the villages throughout Cambodia and visit the schools. During these trips, I was able to truly practice Khmer (the language in Cambodia) and learn about the culture through my interactions. In the capital city, Phnom Penh, people often tried to speak to me in English. So my experiences in the villages were great because I was able to learn the language through trial and error in the villages. In addition, going to the schools was incredibly memorable because I was able to learn about a different education system and see the value that many families placed on education. People there did anything in order to attend school because they saw that as the key to development. Children there were eager to go to school because they were eager to absorb knowledge. That really impacted me and inspired me to take full advantage of my education.

Another memorable experience was visiting Angkor Watt, which is a series of ancient temples in Cambodia. It was incredible to see architecture built in the 12th century and explore the ancient culture.

Finally, the most memorable experiences I have are of small things that Lauren and I had to learn and adjust to. For example, in the United States I am a vegetarian, but I decided to eat meat in Cambodia when it was offered to me. I will always remember how I felt trying to eat meat and Lauren’s face when she was given a plate full of fish and fish eggs. Our reaction to being exposed to new food is probably one of the funniest, most memorable aspects of my trip.

**How can you apply your experiences on this trip to sociology?**

Sociology, broadly defined is the scientific study of people. Traveling abroad gives us a lens to see another culture but also gives us a platform to examine our own culture. My research was on the genocide education which is currently taking place in Cambodia. It was interesting to compare what I was studying to other conflict education movements worldwide. I think the experience not only granted me sociological knowledge about Cambodia, but it has also given me tools to view other cultures, including my own, differently.
How can you apply your experiences on this trip to your future career plans/goals?
I am planning on continuing to do work in Southeast Asia, so the language and research skills I learned from my trip will be essential for my future career. I am not entirely sure what I will be doing upon graduation, either working for the government of a nonprofit, but either way the study abroad was essential!

Would you recommend international experiences (Peace Corp, Study Abroad, general travel) to other sociology students?
I would highly recommend an international experience to other sociology students, in any form, as it gives students a different perspective on cultures including their own. This, in return, will help students understand any sociological phenomenon domestically or internationally. Studying abroad is truly a rewarding experience that would enhance any students’ education, but specifically sociology students since we are studying people!

Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your (Study Abroad/Internship/Other)?
I would just like to give some advice to students (undergraduate and graduate) who are considering doing a study abroad! I know an obstacle for me, and I’m sure a lot of other students, is the financial aspect. NIU has numerous scholarships and fellowships for students (in my undergraduate I received the Undergraduate Special Opportunities in Research and Artistry grant through the Provost’s Office and the Enhance Your Education grant through the Honors Department. In graduate school I received the FLAS fellow- and there are so many more!!). I would really encourage students to look for those opportunities because NIU is very unique in offering them!