



## My Side vs. Their Side: A Peace Corps Story

by Roz Wollmering (former US Peace Corps Volunteer)



### My Side



I entered the school brimming with ideas, innovative methods, and the desire to have an effect. It was the first day of school in Guinea-Bissau, the West African country where I'd been assigned as an English teacher with the US Peace Corps. After completing a demanding 12 weeks of training in language, culture and technical skills, I felt prepared for the challenge of teaching in a poor school system designed on a colonial model.

Inside, I noticed a strange absence of noise. A few students wearing white school jackets rambled about in the dimly lit hallway. As I neared the administrative office, I heard a mango drop to the ground outside and a sudden chorus of children's voices. Hoping to catch a glimpse of the fastest one carrying off the ripe prize, I looked out into the schoolyard and saw piles of old desks, broken bricks, and tree branches. They must be cleaning the school grounds, I thought to myself.

When I entered the office, the principal and his assistant were looking at a class schedule posted on the wall and discussing the large number of teachers that still needed to be hired by the Ministry. After greeting me warmly by inquiring about my health, my family back in America, and my life in general, they informed me that my teaching load had been increased by eight hours since the previous week. "No problem," I responded, "I love to teach."

The classroom where I was to teach was located a short distance behind the main building. Three lines of classrooms were arranged in rows like military barracks. Since it was the first day of classes, I hopped on my bicycle and coasted right up to the door of classroom #19—my classroom. "Always wiser to be punctual and prepared than tardy and unequipped," I told myself. Two students were sitting inside the room playing cards when I entered. I looked at the official enrollment number of 47 and asked earnestly, "Where are the other students?" The cardplayers faltered a bit and then mumbled, "They'll come, by and by."

"Well, let's begin without them," I suggested, with a disapproving stare at the cards. They shrugged their shoulders and offered to go find the students. It certainly didn't seem reasonable to me to teach two students and then have to teach the same material again when the others showed up. Be flexible, I reminded myself, and so I agreed.

One week later, there were 26 students outside my room, waiting for the rest of their classmates to appear. They refused to enter until all the enrolled students had showed up. I noticed that not only were students absent, but teachers as well. Meanwhile, the principal and his assistant were still discussing the schedule on the wall, moving multicolored pins, and deliberating how best to resolve the shortage of teachers.

That morning I'd stopped by the office again to make sure I'd understood correctly the radio announcement made by the Minister of Education the previous evening. I thought he'd announced that classes were in session and was quite relieved when the principal verified my assessment. He then asked me to teach an additional two hours a week. Lacking the experience to rebut his statement, "When there's a lack of teachers, we all need to pitch in a few extra hours," I nodded my head in consent. Considering that I wasn't actually teaching any students at the time, two extra hours didn't seem much of a burden, and I left, feeling only a mild premonition that I might regret it later.

By the end of the third week, I'd managed to convince, cajole, and beg my students to enter the classroom. What other teachers did was their decision, I figured, but as for me, I was itching to do something other than wait.

Once the students had entered, I discovered to my amazement that I couldn't get them to quiet down. Ignoring my requests to pay attention, they continued to socialize. Daisy painted her nails and chatted with Aminata about the new disco called *Temptation* that had just opened across from the mosque. Bebe took Nanda's notebook and wouldn't return it. Fatu gave me the peace sign and went outside to urinate. A few others followed.

Students wandered in late with irrelevant excuses like "It's hot" or "I'm tired." Nelson and Marcelino held competitive jive talks while their classmates gathered around encouraging first one, and then the other. Other students, whose teachers were absent, hung around the open windows, throwing crumpled-up bits of paper to their friends. Others simply came to stare at me, a white woman who rode a bicycle to school. They shoved up against the outside wall, clambered over each other's backs, and stuck their heads in for a peek, yelling, "White woman, white woman, there she is!" The next day, still more of these "window students" appeared to torment me.

Such behavior continued daily. Eventually I began to yell at them— "Get away from the windows!"—and resorted to pushing them out of sight. After a month at my post, I reigned over 30 hours a week of complete disorder in a pseudo-classroom kingdom. This is madness, I thought.

For the next month, I devoted the first 20 minutes of class solely to establishing peace and quiet. I was determined. I did this with gentle coaxes at first, but gradually evolved to using threats ("I'll call the school disciplinarian") and offering sweet enticement ("If you're good, I'll let you out early"). Late students were not allowed to enter, regardless of their excuses. It seemed the only way to control the chaos. Once I had my students' attention, I made them copy page after page of notes from the blackboard into their notebooks. I wanted to inundate their minds with grammar rules and vocabulary lists so they wouldn't have time to talk. Other times, I made them repeat sentences in unison as if they were Berlitz parrots. Audio-lingual theorists suggest that language is acquired through repetition of recurring patterns, a proposition effectively demonstrated when I overheard my students mimicking me: "Be quiet! Go sit down!"

When the drudgery of memorization and repetition began to bore even me to death, I resorted to playing *Bingo*, *Simon Says*, or *Do the Hokey-Pokey*. I went to elaborate lengths to make nifty prizes for positive reinforcement and spent countless hours designing educational posters for the walls. For a time, I concentrated on visual stimulation and drama to reinforce right-brain learning, but the posters disappeared overnight and the drama erupted one day during a production of a local folk tale: My fellow teachers disapproved of thrashing crocodiles, bellowing hippos and trumpeting elephants during school hours. The students whined like 8-year olds and threw tantrums when they could no longer perform or play games. I rather enjoyed their dramas, and figured they were reviewing English grammar and vocabulary by playing the games. But deep inside of me arose a persistent, nagging voice: "Surely, you can do more than baby-sit."

Gradually, as discipline turned my classroom into a boot camp, my classes began to develop a catatonic personality. Somber students stared back at me or out into space. Apathy replaced the boisterous noise I'd become accustomed to fighting. They refused to open their notebooks until I'd repeated the request three times. Orders and instructions mollified them, but now they didn't seem to have opinions, concerns, or even interests. Some simply put their heads down and

slept. Sit and listen they did, but participate, discuss and collaborate they did not. Their passive resistance soon infuriated me, and I yelled in frustration at them, "I am here to help you. Don't you understand that?" They stared at me in a dazed disbelief. "What do you want?" I implored them with open hands: "Do you want me to entertain you? To treat you like military recruits? To punish you?" They shrugged their shoulders and sighed, "Teacher, we are pitiful. That's life." "Go," I told them. "Go home. Get out." They refused, of course.

Against my better judgment, I finally called in the school disciplinarian. The moment he arrived, every student in the room jumped to attention. They greeted him in perfect unison with a resounding "Good morning, Mr. Disciplinarian." When he ordered them to sit down, an immaculate silence spread through the room. I was astounded. They looked so serene and innocent as they waited attentively for his words. Their perfect composure made them look like harmless babes, and I began to imagine that they would convince him of their purity and that I was the evil abuser. I began to wonder, in fact, if this wasn't perhaps partially true.

The disciplinarian picked out several students who were not wearing school jackets, and a few who had not buttoned the top button. He accused them of intentionally belittling their American teacher and expelled them for two weeks. He then read a list of seven students' names. Since these had registered for classes but had not yet paid their school fees, he expelled them for the year, adding an insult as they crept out of the room. He then turned to me and said, "If any of these students ever give you a problem, no matter how small, tell me and I will expel the entire class for the entire year." As I struggled to come up with a suitable response, he turned to the students, held up one finger, and challenged them, "Just one of you try it. Just one and I'll whip your ass." And then he left. I stood in horrified shock and embarrassment. I had just lost 13 students. The students said nothing. They stared at me and waited to see what I'd do next. I felt angry and stupid and offered a feeble apology. I fumed all the way home.

That night I dreaded going back to the school the next morning. I thought about ending my Peace Corps service and going home. I was sure I could find a justifiable excuse for a graceful exit. It was now the third month of teaching and quarterly grades were due in 10 days. All I had managed to teach were two review units. Two review units! Most students couldn't even meet the standards of the previous year! How did they manage to pass? I was tempted to flunk them all, but what would that accomplish? I looked in dismay

at the stack of 25 lesson plans I had diligently prepared during the late-night hours of the past two months and realized I would never use them.

So I switched strategies. That night I drew up a "No More" list. No more colorful visual aids. No more fancy vocabulary and grammar handouts. No more games. No more prizes. And no more school disciplinarian to resolve crises. My next unit began with the following dialogue.

*Teacher:* I am angry. I cannot teach because you do not respect me.

*Students:* No, no, Teacher. Please, Teacher, please.

*Teacher:* I don't want to teach you. I'm leaving.

*Students:* No, Teacher, no. Please, Teacher. You see, you don't understand our situation.

*Teacher:* Well, tell me, what is your "situation"?

The dialogue was theirs to complete and resolve.

### Their Side



It was Tino and Mando who came and told us that a skinny, white woman had jumped off a bicycle, run into our classroom, and tried to teach them English that morning. Tino and Mando weren't even in our class. They were just sitting there waiting to use the soccer field when she rushed in like the rains. They weren't sure what to say because she looked so strange. Her hair was all falling down, and she wore a dress that looked like an old bed covering one might have bought from a Mauritanian vendor in the used-clothing market. We all walked over to Nito's house and found a few more of our classmates sitting out back drinking tea. We decided, even though school hadn't really started yet, that we'd go the next day to see what this new American teacher looked like. Tino and Mando assured us that she was as ugly as a newly hatched, greedy-eyed vulture.

We knew that almost no one would be at school yet. Most students were still on the farms finishing the harvest, and others were still trying to register and pay their fees. The Ministry had changed the rules again. All registrations completed at the end of last year were declared invalid, so we had to wait in line, get new photos, show our papers, and pay fees all over again—either that or pay some official to put our names on the list, which actually was much easier than completing the registration process. We listened to the radio broadcasts by the minister, reminding parents about the importance of school. Everybody knew he sent his children to the private Portuguese School. Teachers at public schools never showed up until the third week. Didn't she know that?

As it turned out, we agreed to enter the classroom just when everyone else did. We always say: "Cross the river in a crowd and the crocodile won't eat you." From that first day, she never demanded our respect. She didn't seem to care if we wore our school jackets or not. She didn't write the teaching summary on the board like our other teachers, and she was always in the classroom before the bell rang. That meant we could never stand up and honor her entrance. She should have known not to enter until after the bell rang. And she never took roll call first, as she should have, so we continued chatting and doing our homework.

Of course, by this time, other students had heard about our white woman teacher and were coming by to look at her and watch our class. We couldn't resist joining in the fun. At times, we believed she was serious, for example when she told the students outside class to leave. But where were they supposed to go? The area in front of her classroom was the designated student recreation area. Instead of ignoring them, she berated them with gestures and scolded us in Portuguese. Her Portuguese wasn't bad, but it sounded so funny when she said "Spoiled brats!" that you just had to laugh. We laughed even harder every time she said "Peace Corps" because in our Kriolu language "Peace Corps" sounds like "body of fish." We called her the "fish-body teacher" after that.

Classes were interesting because they were so unpredictable. She kept switching her methods, and we were never sure what to expect next. For a while she insisted that the mind equips itself and a teacher must not interfere in the process. She called that "The Silent Way." Next came "Total Physical Response." We gave actions to everything and pretended to be desks, pencils, and other classroom items. We twisted our bodies and played "What am I?" Then we role-played imaginary dialogues between, for example, two books fighting to get into a book bag at the same time. One day she taught us the song "In the Jungle." We loved that song. No, you couldn't really call her a consistent person. Even so, "a cracked calabash can still be mended." Obviously, she cared about us because she worked so hard to prepare for class. Most of our teachers were so busy at home or working a second or third job that they often missed class, and when they did show up, they had never prepared anything. We've already learned more English this quarter than we learned all last year.

We wanted to do more activities and play new games, but she thought that we needed to write. Because we didn't have any books, she demanded that we copy information down on paper. But we

Guineans are an oral people. We learn by talking; we make discoveries by sharing our experiences; and we help others by listening and contributing to conversations. Our history is a collective memory, and we pass our knowledge on to others in speech. She wanted us to raise our hands, one by one, and talk individually. That to us seemed artificial and disruptive. Only wolves howl individually.

She confused us even more by saying pointless things with vigor—"Wake up! Discover yourselves!"—or asking questions that had no answers: "Why are you here?" or "What are you going to do?" Then she'd wait with such an intent expression on her face that we'd say almost anything to try to please her. We always enjoyed her facial expressions because they foretold what was to follow—anger, joy, disappointment, praise, or contentment. She really should have learned by then how to hide or show her feelings to suit her purpose more effectively, but she didn't seem to care. In some ways, she was just like a child.

We just didn't understand why it was our thinking that needed to change, and never hers. She wore a "bad eye" charm around her neck, so we thought she was superstitious, but when we asked her, she said she wore it to show respect for our culture. We asked her if that was why foreigners always wanted to buy our ritual masks and initiation staffs, but she didn't answer. She told us we didn't need World Bank handouts and International Monetary Fund debts. What we needed, she said, was to learn how to raise fish. Was she crazy? We need computers, not fish! Balanta women always know where to find fish. "Teacher," we told her, "you will come and go, but we stay here." How could she understand our culture? She had only seen the rains fall once.

After a while, the novelty wore off, and we got tired of even a white woman's ways. It's hard—waking up at daybreak, doing morning chores, and then going to school for five hours without breakfast. Her class was during the last hour and we were as hungry as wild animals by that time. Some of us lived far from school, and if our step-uncle or older cousin-brother told us to go to the market before school, we had no choice. We were forced to run to her class with only a bellyful of worms because we knew she wouldn't listen to our misfortunes even if we arrived two minutes late. It's true! In America, time is money, but here time is different. Time is just now, nothing more.

It wasn't only that we had responsibilities at home that came before school—sometimes we were sick. If we had malaria, we'd put our heads down and sleep. And if we had "runny belly," we'd run out of class when the cramping started. The dry season was so hot

that we faded away like the songs of morning birds. One day she yelled at us. We admit, we weren't cooperating, but people are like that. We forgive each other and just go on. "That's life," we'd tell her. "A log as long as it stays in the water will never become a crocodile." Many things we just accepted as natural, but she considered such an attitude "fatalistic."

Finally, she called the school disciplinarian on us. She should have done that much earlier, in our opinion. We played our roles by allowing him to throw out a few students, because we knew they'd be back as soon as he got some cashew wine money from them. Anyway, that's the right of elders in our culture, and we're taught to live by the established rules. We didn't understand why she apologized after he left, and couldn't believe it when she undermined his authority by apologizing for his "poisonous pedagogy," as she called it. Like a Guinean woman, she certainly had courage.

Today she did something different again. She came in and wrote a dialogue on the board. She asked questions about the dialogue that made us disagree. We had a lively discussion in English and then got into our groups and began designing solutions for the problem presented in the dialogue. We always say, "When the ants unite their mouths, they can carry an elephant." We know she'll stay, too. We saw it in her eyes.

---

*This essay is reprinted with the author's permission from the book "The Great Adventure: Volunteer Stories of Life Overseas" (1997/2002) USA: Peace Corps. It is available on-line with lesson plans and worksheets at the World Wise Schools website below.*

---

**Roz Wollmering** (Guinea-Bissau 1990-1992) is a former associate Peace Corps director. She currently works for Australian Volunteers Overseas.

#### **World Wise Schools**

[www.peacecorps.gov/wws/](http://www.peacecorps.gov/wws/)



World Wise Schools is a U.S. Peace Corps program which provides teachers with ideas, resources and materials to help promote intercultural understanding. Their website includes:

#### ▪ **Stories from the Field**

[www.peacecorps.gov/wws/stories/](http://www.peacecorps.gov/wws/stories/)

Cross-cultural stories by Peace Corps volunteers from Asia, Africa, Central Europe & Latin America.

#### ▪ **Lesson Plans**

[www.peacecorps.gov/wws/educators/lessonplans/](http://www.peacecorps.gov/wws/educators/lessonplans/)

A great set of global education lesson plans, class activities, student handouts and teacher guidelines.