Three Wake Forest undergraduates recount the lessons they learned about the world and themselves through their individual research opportunities. Read their firsthand accounts.

**Ashley Millhouse**

How 1994 Lives On: The Teaching of Apartheid in South Africa’s Classrooms
Ashley, Lucy, and Allison all presented their research and findings as part of the URECA Annual Research Day which provides a forum for undergraduate students to showcase their discoveries. For information about URECA click Here.

Their experiences were funded by the Richter Scholarship Program which provides independent study scholarships. For more information on the Richter program click Here.

Additional funding for Faculty-Student research is provided by the Humanities Institute’s College Collaboration program. For more information click Here.

Category: Research, Students, URECA, Wake Forest
| Tag: Allison, Ashley, china, homer, international, lan, Lucy, millhouse, research, south africa, travel, URECA, wales
Ashley Millhouse

The Spark
I’ve always had a love for South Africa. I went my sophomore year on a Mission of Good Hope service trip through VSC. I knew I wanted to go back, and since I’m not necessarily an “academic” person I thought it would be a really good challenge to try research.

I have such a love of being in front of the classroom, but I felt that in order to be an effective teacher I needed to go outside the classroom. I wanted to see the influences and effects the classroom lessons had on the students.

The Research

I conducted my research in the KwaZulu-Natal region of South Africa, located on the country’s eastern edge. I went to five different schools: one multicultural, one primarily white or Afrikaner school, an Indian school, and two Zulu schools. At these schools I talked with teachers and students, trying to understand their feelings and ideas about apartheid and apartheid education. My conversations there revealed two wildly divergent sides of apartheid education.

The multicultural and the primarily white school, the higher income schools, are completely achieving the history curriculum goals. In fact, they are
going above and beyond the outcomes-based education system South Africa has in place. These kids are very knowledgeable. They’re going on fieldtrips to museums and watching DVDs of Steve Biko, the South African freedom fighter. They really comprehend the history. The problem is that the national history curriculum for grades 11 and 12 is primarily focused on apartheid. I would say upwards of 70% is focused solely on the apartheid years, 1924-1994. This is a problem because many of these students have become desensitized to the issue. This is true for all races, the Indians or Coloured people, the Zulus, and the whites. Everyone was sick of it. They have been learning about apartheid since they were six years old and the kids have reached a point of saturation. The teachers told me that on the first day of school students would say, “Please tell me we’re not learning about apartheid this year.”

In the lower income schools, which serve primarily the Zulu and Indian populations, the situation is radically different. The students are not learning about apartheid, or history in general, at all. I say this because at the three lower income schools I visited they’re phasing out history all together, combining it with geography. This trend can be attributed, in part, to the fact that although South Africa has 11 official languages, their teaching media is English. Many of these students don’t speak English at home, therefore, they don’t have a proficiency in the language. When they encounter a subject like history, which requires a lot of reading and writing, what they’re learning doesn’t make sense and they don’t connect to it. Another reason lower income students are not connecting with history is that they have been forced by their economic situation to think about and plan for the betterment of their family. Many live with their six siblings in one room while their parents work in the sugar fields, a prominent industry in KwaZulu-Natal, and they have to think about how they’re going to feed their siblings. Their parents, who are usually not educated, are stressing the children’s education as a source of hope for the whole family. The reality is that history
will not get you a job in the South African economy. There is an over-influx of people wanting to be teachers, as well as international people coming over wanting to teach. This trend leads the students to focus on something that will get them a job, generally math or science.

So you have one segment of the population inundated with information about South Africa’s apartheid history and sick of it, and you have one segment of the population not learning about it at all. This will ultimately cause conflict within the country because each segment’s view of South African history is inherently skewed.

**Something I learned**

I think a lot of people forget about the importance of historiography. The way history is written really determines the outcome of the future. Even in America there are huge debates about textbooks and how they’re edited. In Texas there was a huge scandal over textbooks and the political leanings evident in their perspectives. What people write and teach matters. I was definitely one of those kids who did not want to go to school, who really undervalued the education I was receiving. But what you read in books, especially as a young child, informs you enormously, whether you know it or not.

On a personal level, conducting this research has pushed me in the direction of teaching. I’ve always struggled internally with whether I wanted to be a teacher. I think now that I have learned more about the challenges that surround one particular student population I feel like it’s my duty to teach. I’ve seen both sides of the classroom now. I see what South African teachers have been doing and I want to incorporate what I have learned in America with what I saw in South Africa to be the best teacher I can possibly be. So, this project has confirmed for me my calling to go into the field of education, whether I’m teaching or working in a nonprofit focused on education.

*Ashley is currently applying for a Fulbright Fellowship to teach in South Africa.*

**Listen up**

Don’t underestimate how intelligent young people are. They are very in tune to what’s going on, not just in the classroom, but in the world, and if you truly listen to them they have very valuable things to say. I think a lot of people discard what kids have to say because of their youth and inexperience, but their innocence often allows them to see the truth more clearly. In listening to the students, you could hear that they recognized the problem of overemphasizing apartheid. They would say, “I want to learn about international history, I don’t want to keep learning
about this time period. I feel like I’m being punished for what my parents’ generation did and went through by having to learn about it every single day.” If the Department of Education listened to their children they could create a better curriculum, one adapted to really impact their audience, because right now the audience is not listening.

Lucy Lan

I’ve always had a fascination with modern Chinese history because I am Chinese-American. I’ve grown up hearing stories from my parents and my grandparents about what it’s like to grow up under a Communist regime, especially under the regime of Mao Zedong. I began to wonder what people think about Mao in China today. I wanted to find out their perceptions across ethnic lines and geographical demarcations. When I say ethnic, I mean ethnic minority perceptions. In China today we have 56 ethnicities, and the majority is Hun, which makes up 91.6% of the population. The remaining 55 ethnicities make up only 8.4% of the population. I thought it would be really interesting to hear what these underrepresented people think.
Visiting China

I structured my research so that it took place over a six-week period, and I relied a lot upon existing literature including articles on Mao. Beyond existing academic sources I relied heavily on interviews with individuals. I went to 12 different places. I visited a lot of Red tourist sites, Shaoshan, for example, in addition to big cities, like Beijing and Xianggang. I thought it was also interesting to explore the visual aspect of the people visiting these tourist sites. What kinds of people are visiting and what’s the frequency?

**Findings**

I saw that, overwhelmingly, people who went to visit sites associated with Mao were rural people. You very rarely see city folk. Most of the time you see farmers. That has to do with the fact that Mao’s policies primarily impacted peasants who made up the bulk of the Chinese population in the 1950s. I think that China’s population today is largely rural, something like 50-60% still live in the country. Back then it was more like 90%. When Mao said, “I want to improve the life of Chinese people,” he was talking about the majority who were rural people. I thought it was interesting to contrast that with people from an intellectual background and the middle and upper classes versus these rural farmers who were overwhelmingly poor. I found that many intellectuals strongly dislike Mao. In my research, the major dividing lines were socioeconomics, and a large part of that distinction has to do with where your family was from. If your family was from a rural area, you love Mao, you think well of him. His policies positively impacted the way your
family lived their lives. But if you were from an intellectual class, a landowning middle class, then you don’t think very well of Mao.

Another interesting thing I noticed was a generational divide. I noticed that people born after the 1980s do not relate to Mao in China. Since Deng Xiaoping came to power in the 1980s, he shifted China’s economy towards capitalism, and Mao Zedong has been lost as a central figure in the Chinese mindset. When I ask my friends in China if they have learned about Mao, they say, “Oh, yeah, we read a couple paragraphs about him in our history book.” It’s such a contrast to when my mom was in school, when they had to recite the Red Book by heart. People of my generation don’t know about Mao, and they couldn’t care less.

**Personal Growth**

The traveling alone helped me grow enormously. I had never traveled alone before that experience. There were many times that I was scared, in Shaoshan, for example. You would not believe how rural that place is. You have never seen such a broken down bus. It was absolutely third world…in China! Sometimes you look at a map and the signs don’t match up with what you’re supposed to see. It was frustrating, but I learned a lot about myself and about how to deal with situations in which you’re not sure where you’re going or what you’re doing. I pushed my boundaries. I’m also really aware of how lucky I was to be able to do this research, to be given this inter-disciplinary opportunity. I’m majoring in Chemistry with a double minor in French and Entrepreneurship, but I did a History project and it taught me so much about the world around me.
For my project, I investigated the preservation of Welsh language and folklore. I was originally interested in this project because I am of Welsh ancestry. My mother is Welsh, and growing up she would tell me and my four sisters Welsh folk tales. She would sing to us in Welsh. I had that emotional connection to it, and as I got older I became more interested in the intricacies of the language and how all of these folk tales and the language itself managed to survive. Welsh is a very ancient Celtic language, and languages similar to it, like Cornish and Manx, have long been extinct. It’s really fascinating how it has survived, and now it’s growing, which is amazing. I wanted to trace that history and figure out how that came to be.

Experience
I spent June 2011 in Wales. Wales is complex in that even though it’s very small the different regions are very different in the way the language operates. For example the north of Wales is dominantly Welsh-speaking while the south of Wales is historically more infiltrated with English. I wanted to be sure to hit all the points and be able to speak at least a little bit to the culture of each area. Consequently, I stayed a week in south Wales, in the capital Caerdydd, then a week in Aberystwyth which is in the center of the country, and I closed with Caernarfon in north Wales.
I originally approached this topic in the wrong way. I was looking for factors that had contributed to the maintenance of the language over the course of the past 15 centuries when in reality there was no continual maintenance. The language was not evenly preserved the whole time. What I found was that the language was maintained through crisis and revival. Periodically there would be a political, economic, even religious crisis that dangerously threatened the existence of the language and folklore. Reacting to that inspired people to take action, to realize that their language would die if they didn’t do something about it. So, paradoxically, the language survived because of periods of crisis, and every time it was renewed the Welsh identity changed a little bit.

For an example, the 18th century Methodist revival brought in nonconformity, which previously had not been a presence in Wales. Because people were able to worship in Welsh, where previously they were only able to worship in English, there was a revival of the Welsh language. This moment also completely changed what it meant to be Welsh. Nowadays people immediately associate being Welsh with being Methodist, something that had never before been part of the Welsh identity. So every time the language was revived it shifted what it meant to be Welsh.

**Chance discoveries**

I never would have imagined that I could have traveled by myself across the Atlantic to a country where I kind of spoke the language but had never really spoken with anyone except my mother. To a place where I didn’t know anybody, then to boldly interview these people who had done translations.

I also learned that the most important discoveries were almost all due to chance. I started off months before I left emailing people, people at the three main universities
and principals at Welsh language schools. The most amazing resources, however, ended up happening out of sheer coincidences after I got over there. For example, I had been trying for months to contact members of the Welsh language society. They’re historically the inspiration behind all the revivals; they were always the ones who were pushing to save the language. It’s always a group of young people, and they’re impossible to contact. I randomly went to this underground church service and all the members of the group were there. I told them about my project, and they brought me to their protest the next day. I also randomly met Robin Gwyndaf, who is a very famous Welsh folklorist and interviewed 3,000 Welsh story tellers. So, the most important contacts came out of coincidence.

**Final Thought**
Stepping back from the specificity of Welshness, if you look at humans in general, all of our language and histories are so precious. They are part of the way we identify ourselves. Understanding the importance of preserving culture and language and understanding that each culture and language needs its own revival of language is important for preventing linguistic and cultural abuse and neglect.