

News Release

The Power of Doing

By Cassandra Morthera on Friday, November 15, 2019

Before students can have an opportunity for learning-by-doing, instructors are involved in a whole lot of doing. For Associate Professor Eric Castle and Assistant Professor Leslie Lekatz, a study abroad trip to Brazil last summer provided opportunities in both horticulture and animal science at the University of Minnesota Crookston.

For Castle, the trip was a chance for an international collaboration on natural play spaces for children. The connection in Brazil began in 2017 when a trip with colleagues took Castle to a coffee plantation where he met one of the management team interested in his research on natural play spaces. She recommended he meet a friend of hers who was the director of a preschool.



That meeting would lead to an opportunity for Castle to involve his study abroad students in a project to design a natural play space in Igarai, Brazil.

With a great deal of coordination, Castle managed to involve not only the staff at the preschool but also the community and university students from the area. Communication between the groups was facilitated by the fact that Castle speaks Portuguese along with translation help from the Brazilian university students.



The four UMN Crookston students working on the project were Savanna Weber, a sophomore majoring in agricultural education from Silver Lake, Minn.; Sabrina Leuer, a senior majoring in horticulture from Hamel, Minn.; Morgan Collins, a senior majoring in agricultural education from DeGraff, Minn.; and Jace Rau, May 2019 graduate in horticulture from Grand Forks, N.D.

First Castle's students solicited from the preschool teachers and the community. "My students took play pieces and attached photographs of different playground structures to them and created a key to help identify the photographs to the word in Portuguese," Castle explains. "Participants used the play pieces and the key to help position the structures they wanted on a map of the play area."

Following the information gathering, designs were created and presented for final approval from each of the stakeholder groups. "We started the process on a Saturday and presented final designs the following Thursday," Castle says. "It was intense but a powerful learning experience."

The designs were enthusiastically received and worth the time and effort it took to coordinate between all the groups involved. "I think we learned to be flexible and overcome communication barriers at all levels."

The experience gave UMN Crookston students the opportunity to work internationally and foster connections between other university students and the community. For Castle, it is the seventh time he has been in the process of designing a natural play space and the first time on an international project.

"We learned so much at every point along the way. From eliciting input to the final presentation, my students and I were in engaged in a unique learning experience I don't believe any of us will forget. There is power in learning by doing and this experience is proof."

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PHOTOS:

Photo, right:

Students, left to right, are Jace Rau, Morgan Collins, Savanna Weber, and Sabrina Leuer in Brazil.

Photo, left:

Sabrina Leuer, left, and Morgan Collins with their natural play space plans.

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