Unlike a typical travel or study abroad experience, doing an internship in a foreign country offers a deeper level of cultural immersion. When traveling, despite expanding their cultural horizons by meeting people from other countries, one will oftentimes fail to crack the tourist surface to know the true culture and society. While studying at a university or school with locals can provide extensive exposure, again there is a tendency to stick with fellow compatriots who can relate to one’s home culture and native language, or at least bond over their common different-ness from the norm.

When I arrived at Orpas in the periphery of São Paulo, I became immediately aware of this fact. I was dropped into a neighborhood for whose inhabitants foreigners were an extremely uncommon sight. I also was to learn what exactly it was that Orpas offered for the community. In Brazil, to accommodate large numbers of students and limited resources, classes are either offered in a morning or afternoon session, leaving children with substantial free time. At Orpas, they would spend the other session with activities of a more creative nature—such as music, theater, dance, and culture, among others.

Their new initiative to bring foreigners with AIESEC (a student-run international exchange organization) would amplify their offering of activities to include English and strengthen their marketing sector. I was to teach English (in addition to Oficina Cultural), which proved to be a challenge, as the children varied from ages 4 to 15, from different schools, meaning different English programs and levels. We were the first round of international volunteers at Orpas and to
compensate for our work we were given a room to stay in the back of the NGO as well as meals. Because of this fact, we lived and breathed Orpas, which had both advantages and disadvantages.

One of the benefits was integration in the community, which gave us the opportunity to better understand the children and their environment. While at times they drove me to the verge of desperation, the children were what made the internship worthwhile and unforgettable. Many could be very poorly behaved, but there was always an explanation behind it. In my second week I discovered one of the more hyperactive children crying alone during a recreation period. I asked him what was wrong and he explained that another student had insulted his father, who was in jail for drugs. Later I was to discover that the child that had made these comments lost both of his parents to drugs and lived with his godmother. Though I had no real consolation to offer the child crying, I invited him to play a game with another student and his mood improved.

One of the activities that I realized was a graffiti workshop. I had Mondays off so I would go to a collective called Dulcinéia Catadora, which I knew through work with the LACIS department at Madison. It served as a great compliment to the work I was doing at Orpas. There I met some graffiti artists who worked in the painting of the covers of cardboard books. I asked them to come to Orpas to teach the kids about graffiti and to do a demonstration. They exceeded my expectations by involving the children in the painting.

In addition to vastly improving my Portuguese and doing community work with children that was personally and professionally beneficial, I was immersed in a
culture and society unknown to the outside world and even many Brazilians, who knew extremely little of the slums in the periphery of their metropolitan centers. Although it was one of the most challenging experiences I’ve had, I never regretted going and feel lucky to have met so many wonderful and resilient people.