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LEARNING THROUGH STUDENT EXCHANGE PROJECTS

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Taru Pohtola is an English and German teacher working at an upper secondary school in Finland. Besides teaching foreign languages, Taru has been actively involved in many international projects over the years working, for example, with German and Tanzanian schools. Taru is a Fulbright Distinguished Awards in Teaching Program alumna, having spent the autumn of 2015 at Indiana University in Bloomington.

Introduction

Foreign countries, languages, and cultures have fascinated me ever since I was a young girl. I still remember the excitement of actually moving abroad for the first time as a young exchange student studying for my master's degree to become a language teacher. An academic year spent in Germany was a huge time of growth for me. This exchange year meant facing many new challenges but more importantly overcoming them.

Managing in different new situations in a foreign country granted me self-confidence and courage. In addition, living in different cultural settings and making friends with locals as well as students from all over the world opened my eyes to different cultures. My desire to explore the world hasn't stopped. When starting to work as a language teacher, I knew that I wanted to somehow enable and encourage my students to acquire similar experiences.

Martinlaakso Upper Secondary School, where I now work as an English and German teacher in Vantaa, Finland, had been cooperating with a partner school in Potsdam, a city near Berlin, Germany, for quite a few years before I joined the staff. When I started planning my first trip there with my students, it took some extra effort to find and contact the correct people, however, as some of the staff at both schools had changed or retired. After many emails and hopeful attempts, I was delighted when we finally got confirmed dates set for the first joint project.

I have had the privilege to arrange student exchange projects between our schools almost annually ever since. Together with a few colleagues at the German school, a colleague of mine and I have organized projects for our students that consist of a week's trip to Germany and a week's visit to Finland. As a key part of this exchange, we form pairs of German and Finnish students, and they get to stay with each other's families as part of these visits. It is important to note that we have a full program planned for the entire stay with different activities, both at school and in the surroundings. During their stay, the students also get to spend time with their host families learning about their everyday lives.

I have to admit that at first my only goal in the project was giving the students opportunities to practice the German language in authentic surroundings. I could not hope or expect anything more from a short project like this. However, I was blown away by the effects even a short project could eventually have. Each day our students shared myriad insights that they had made about Germany and its

culture. They built new strong international friendships, which they were excited about. They gained courage and self-confidence in everyday encounters with a foreign language in new surroundings. Some even set new future goals by saying that they will visit their new friends again or that they want to try living abroad in the future. Encouraging students to step out of their comfort zones seemed to have very powerful and positive effects on young people's lives.

When the students sign in for the exchange project, they often do not realize what to expect. Some are very interested in which sights and tourist attractions they will get to visit and wonder if they could stay at a hotel instead of with an unfamiliar family. It is easy to picture the exchange as a tourist trip because that is what they are familiar with. Typically, they must first encounter what it is like when contacting and interacting with their international partners before they begin to understand what the exchange is really about. At the airport, everyone is excited but also quite nervous while waiting to board the plane and embarking on this adventure. During the first few days in Germany, many of our students experience a bit of culture shock when the realization of actually being in a new place surrounded by a different language and customs hits. Despite our similar European cultures, there are certain cultural differences as well.

Very soon, however, this nervousness normally changes back into positive excitement. Since the week is extremely intense and full of activities both at school and outside school, it helps the students bond in a special way. Soon they start to find more and more similarities despite assorted cultural and linguistic differences. Normally the visit ends with students exchanging hugs and even quite a few tears at the airport for having to say goodbye to their new German friends. The exchange project continues after a few months when the German students arrive in Finland for a week's visit. Also sharing one's own culture at home is always very eye-opening since those involved are forced to look at every cultural encounter and event from another's perspective. Students are made to pay attention to things that they normally just take for granted.

International real-life experiences can be very powerful, even if they are somewhat brief experiences or very simple everyday encounters. Stepping out of one's comfort zone, learning to understand the world from another culture's point of view, and getting along with various people is crucial in today's world. When we actually meet people and build personal relationships across borders, this becomes easier.

Reflection Questions

1. What are the primary skills you would like your students to develop the most during cross-cultural exchanges and in general? How have these skill expectations changed since you started teaching, if at all? Are you successful in teaching these skills? If not, why not?

2. Have you created opportunities for your students to learn in real-life situations outside the typical classroom? If yes, give some examples. If not, brainstorm three to five ways that might be possible.
3. Are there people from other disciplines or programs wherein you could collaborate? What do you envision as your ideal international collaboration situation or program?