

Together We Made a Difference

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My paper explains how the one year I spent in the United States as a Fulbright exchange teacher helped me to grow both professionally and personally and how the fears I had of living and working in a country and culture I had only known from books and movies turned into the experience of a lifetime. In this paper I also intend to encourage other teachers to take this wonderful opportunity and see what I saw: that teaching the future generation is, indeed, a special job no matter which country or part of the world you do it in. Serving as a Fulbright teacher, however, is even more special: although it requires some extra commitment and tolerance, it helps you to make a difference.

1. The title

Coming up with a good title that catches the reader's attention has always been hard for me. So it was this time, too, until I realized that the sentence I most often recall from my exchange year is: "THANKS- Together We Make a Difference", which is the motto of King Elementary School, one of my host institutions in Oregon City, Oregon. To tell you the truth, when I first read it in the King School's staff room, its meaning did not completely come through to me. By the end of the year, though, I finally

understood what “making a difference” means according to the King School’s “dictionary”. My principals and teachers at both schools bore witness to this motto and helped me to realize that teaching should always include encouraging and supporting both students and colleagues. This has become my main objective in the work I have done since I returned from the United States.

As for the goals that I had set before going to the United States, they were to grow professionally as a teacher, to grow personally as a human being, and to represent my home country to the best of my ability. Well, it turned out that being a Fulbright exchange teacher was the best way to achieve those goals.

2. The big surprise

In 2006 I applied for the Fulbright teacher exchange program to teach in an American high school for a year. As a teacher of English, I could only apply for an ESOL teaching position. When I found out that E.S.O.L. stands for English for Speakers of Other Languages, and that I would have to teach students whose first language was Spanish or Russian, I became worried about the possible lack of a common language between the students and myself. Some time later, though, it turned out that the biggest surprise was still awaiting me.

In May of 2006, I discovered that I would be placed in an elementary school! This was, indeed, a big surprise. Elementary in Oregon means

kindergarten to sixth grade, which meant that I would be teaching students between 5 and 12 years of age. Well, it is a big difference if you compare that to teaching students between 14 and 18 years of age. Anyhow, my degree entitles me to teach elementary school, and my exchange partner is entitled to teach secondary school, so we both were ready for the big adventure.

3. Professional and personal growth

The first two months were the most difficult ones. That was the time when I felt lost in the “jungle” of paperwork, schedules, enrolling new students, and learning a totally different system of testing. By the end of the second month, though, I realized how useful the testing proved to be as it helped me to see what my ESOL students needed the most help with.

One of the best things about teaching in Oregon was that I had an assistant or - to put it formally- a “paraprofessional”. Words cannot express how much they meant to me. I wrote “they” because I taught in two different elementary schools at the same time: three days in one and two days in the other. My assistants not only helped me with paperwork, testing, and translating – as one of them was from Peru, and he could translate for me with the Spanish-speaking parents – but they welcomed me as an American teacher from the very first moment. They were there for me whenever I needed them.

Their professional and personal support, encouragement, and friendship were invaluable to me.

As time passed, I realized that the exchange was also a year-long postgraduate course as we had to attend Teacher Planning and Education Reform Days on a regular basis. While the Teacher Planning Days were a great opportunity to work together with colleagues who teach at the same grade level, gaining insight into the way American teachers cooperate and prepare their lesson plans, the Education Reform Days helped me to improve my skills in teaching writing. On these days we focused on a new approach to writing based on *Step Up to Writing* by Maureen E. Auman. I have been using these methods and benefiting from them in my daily work since then.

During my exchange I also completed two workshops that contributed to my professional growth: an assessment workshop for assessing ELL students and a class about the use of the Smart Board (e-board) in the ELL classroom, which I believe is the future of education. Last but not least, I also completed a Spanish language class at the local community college. This class reminded me how difficult it is to learn a foreign language, which I - as a foreign language teacher - should always bear in mind.

The Fulbright program gave me the opportunity to visit other schools, as well. During the second half of the school year, I visited two other schools. I observed three classes in the Oregon City High School: an Oregon Literature class, an ESOL class, and a Reading Workshop class. I also went to Holcomb Elementary School, which is

within the Oregon City School District, where I observed three ESOL classes with various age groups. I had conferences with the teachers both before and after the observation, which turned out to be a great experience. All in all, I found the school visits really useful because I think you can always learn something new by observing your fellow teachers.

As for my personal growth, this exchange greatly increased my understanding of cultural diversity, and it helped me to start my new life as a citizen of the world rather than just as a citizen of a country. This program made me realize that by teaching future generations you can really make a difference. My main teaching goal in the United States was to make the students understand what Senator J. William Fulbright emphasized, that without mutual understanding between the nations there is no future for us. And the best possible way to reach that goal was to be a Fulbright exchange teacher, representing the values of the Fulbright Commission.

4. Community activities

I feel really lucky to be able to report on two newspaper articles and an appearance I made at a School Board Meeting. In November 2006, a local newspaper asked me for an interview, in which both my exchange partner and I were asked questions about the Fulbright Program and about the experiences we had. The title of the article was *Gaffney and King Host Teacher from Hungary- Dispatch from Hungary: OC Teacher Thrives* and it was

published in *Upfront*. A couple of months later, on March 8, 2007, Portland's major daily newspaper, *The Oregonian*, published an article entitled *Oregon City Teacher and Hungarian in Job Swap*. This article focused on the differences between the Hungarian and American educational systems.

Last but not least, in October 2006, I was asked to appear at the School Board Meeting of the Oregon City School District, where I had the chance to talk about the Fulbright Program and to answer some questions about the Hungarian school system. It was broadcast on a local TV network, as a result of which many parents could receive information about the exchange.

I am really thankful to both newspapers and to the School Board for this opportunity because they also greatly contributed to making more and more people familiar with the Fulbright program and the opportunities it provides.

5. An unofficial ambassador

Being an "ambassador" of my home country, I found it really important to be involved in as many activities as possible both inside and outside the classroom.

As a Fulbright teacher, I found that sharing information about my home country and culture was a significant part of my job. Fortunately, my husband, a high school P.E. teacher, found employment as a P.E. teacher in one of the schools where I worked, which I think was just another

miracle in our life that year, so he and I had the opportunity to give a presentation about Hungary to the staff at both schools. Our presentation aimed at providing the American teachers with information about Hungary, its culture and history, the Hungarian language, the famous cuisine (we prepared some typical Hungarian foods to taste), and the Hungarian educational system. All the presentations were received with great interest and lots of questions. Our colleagues were pleased to learn more about another culture from people with first-hand experiences.

Seeing how positively the staff received our presentation, I felt the need to share more about my culture with other students and with their parents, as well. As a result, Hungary became one of the countries at King School's 'Around the World Literacy Night' event in April. With this event students and their parents had the chance to read about Hungary, to listen to Hungarian music, to make a Hungarian flag, to find Hungary on the globe, to look at photos and pictures about Hungary, and to ask me and my husband questions about Hungary. I was pleased to see how interested our students and their parents were in learning more about a different culture.

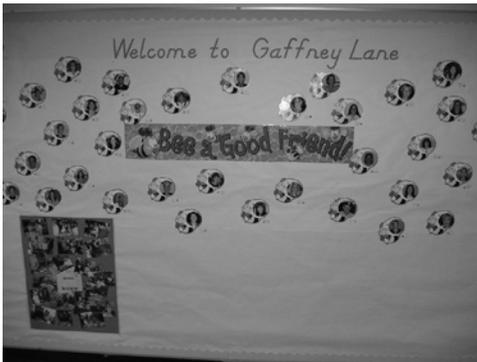
Last but not least, at the end of the school year I suggested to my ESOL students that we should do a *Learn About Hungary Project*. Thus, we did research on the web, we went to libraries to find books about Hungary, we read Hungarian folktales in English, we learned a song in Hungarian, and we made posters so that they could share what they had learned.

Being a Fulbright teacher, I found it also essential to share my culture with the local community in the United States. As for the people in our neighborhood and the colleagues with whom we became closer friends, we thought the best way to affect their understanding of our country would be to invite them into our home to have a typical Hungarian meal together while having meaningful conversations with them. All our guests were pleased to have a “taste” of Hungary.

6. Final thoughts

This year has enriched my life with new experiences, new friends, and a new thirst for knowledge. I am certain that I will be able to utilize this experience in all areas of my life: let it be family, work, or creating new relationships. I think I have become more tolerant and understanding towards other people, and I have also become a better teacher, having learned new methods and strategies. Finally, this year has helped me to get to know myself much better, as well.

I plan to continue my life as a “Fulbrighter” from now on. I am planning to attend Fulbright meetings and



conferences in my home country as often as I can and to help the commission with its mission to offer this great opportunity to teachers, scholars, and students all over the world. Also, I have been in touch with the people I got to know in the United States since my homecoming, and I will do by best to keep it this way, as TOGETHER we CAN make a difference.

Thank You again for this wonderful opportunity! I will always be proud to have once been a part of the Fulbright exchange program.