

Teaching at North Valley High School

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I spent the 2005-2006 academic year in Grants Pass, Oregon as an exchange teacher. I was asked to teach English at a high school, mainly to freshmen and sophomores. I also took part in speech and debate competitions, and I did my best to promote the Fulbright program. I organized a Hungarian night for my colleagues, and I also gave presentations on Hungary to the students. I am sure that teaching in the United States made me a better and more knowledgeable teacher. The experience also affected my personal life. I made friends with many people (Americans and people from other countries), and I realized that Americans and especially Oregonians are much calmer and happier than Hungarians. I envy their lifestyle and the chances that they have. I had the opportunity to travel and see other places in the US, so I could experience other lifestyles as well. All in all, I think participating in this exchange program helped me appreciate other cultures and people.

1. Why I applied for the program

When I applied for the Fulbright grant, I had already heard some stories from other Fulbrighters. Some of my colleagues had been to the United States before, and they told me how fantastic it had been to be an exchange teacher. I had American teachers during high school and as a teacher I worked with American Fulbright teachers. I thought that the Fulbright program would be beneficial for both participants. I teach English at a bilingual secondary school, where English is taught as a second language, and we also teach American and British civilization and culture. I thought that it would be beneficial to experience life in the United States so that I could teach American culture better.

2. Teaching at North Valley High School

During the 2005-2006 academic year I taught at North Valley High School. As far as I know I was the first exchange teacher at this school, so I tried my best to promote the Fulbright program.

Although I spent a lot of time on my own in my classroom, I made friends with some of the teachers, and I have to thank the principal, Ms. Linda Huggle, for her efforts to make my year easier and happier.

2.1. NVHS

The school is situated in a rural area in Grants Pass, Oregon. Currently about 700 students attend it. It was built in 1978 when the voters in the county school district approved a bond to build 2 new high schools. Before 1978, the students from the rural district attended the high school in town, Grants Pass High School. Like all public schools in the state, NVHS is funded by money that comes from the state of Oregon. The revenue to fund the school is a combination of income taxes and property taxes, with minor amounts from other sources. The school is funded based on the number of students they have enrolled at approximately \$6,200 per pupil. These amounts vary somewhat based on other factors like special education, ELL students, transportation costs and more.

They typically send about 50% of the graduates to college in the September after they graduate. Some others start college within a few years after graduation. Last year, 80% of the graduates indicated their intention to enroll in college the following fall.

The school offers many extracurricular activities. Sports are almost as important as learning. However, only those who get good grades can participate in sports. Boys can play football, soccer, basketball, golf, baseball, and racquetball. They can also do wrestling, bowling, equestrian, track, and cross country. Girls play volleyball, soccer, basketball, golf, softball, and racquetball. They also take part in bowling, equestrian, cheerleading, dance team, track, and cross-country.

They have Academic Teams like Forensics (speech and debate), Mathletes, and Academic Challenge (like Brain Bowl). The students are usually very successful in all of them; they win competitions or at least earn good places at tournaments.

The Band, the Choir, and the Theater have a very good reputation; they often perform at the school, which I could enjoy during my stay.

Other extracurricular activities include Virtual Enterprise, Key Club, Link Crew, Impact Crew, Student Government, Newspaper, and Yearbook. Some of these also have classes during the school day.

The parents also take part in school life. They have about 10 ASPIRE volunteers (doing college guidance), about 50 parent members of the Booster Club, and about 10 parent members of the Athletic Facilities Committee. There are also parent groups for each grade level, with anywhere from 5 to 20 members. About 10% of the parents are active volunteers.

2.2. Differences between the Hungarian and American school system

Although I knew a lot about the American school system before I went to the United States, I faced many differences.

First of all, in Oregon a teacher is allowed to teach only if he or she has a teaching license. For this I needed to hand in my university degree, a copy of my social security card, and my passport. After I received my driver's license, I had to show it at the district office. Then I had to go to the sheriff's office to get my fingerprints taken and to a health center to get a drug test. First I received a temporary license,

and after that an inspector from the district visited my classes and, finally, I received a license for five years.

The substitute teacher system was also new for me. Whenever a teacher misses a school day, he or she needs to call a substitute teacher, because the classes must not be dismissed. It does not matter if the "sub" cannot teach a particular subject; in that case, his job is to supervise the students. In Hungary it is the colleagues' task to find a substitute teacher.

The school I teach at in Hungary is a bilingual secondary school, where the students are selected, motivated, and disciplined. At an American high school there is no selection, the school is required to enroll everyone who applies. That is why I had many students who suffered from a lack of confidence due to failures at school, so they did not even try to work. I think teachers are challenged to motivate these kids in the US. (I know there are schools in Hungary, as well, where the students are unmotivated.) It was my biggest challenge, too. I hope I could raise the interest of some students, and that now they believe in themselves more.

However, students who have learning problems get a lot of help from the school. I can only adore the special education teachers who spend their time working with students who have learning difficulties. They should be even more respected than other teachers, as their job requires more patience and perseverance. Punishment at schools is also different in the two countries. In Hungary, the students' parents get notes from the teacher when the students do something

bad, while in the United States the students get a detention or they are suspended for a number of days. For students who do not like to go to school the latter may not be punishment at all. Another big difference between Hungarian and American schools is that sports are very important in the United States, while in Hungary being good at academic subjects is more important than succeeding in sports. The students who participated in sports activities wore their jerseys at school on the days they went to matches. Cheerleading is also important there; it is almost as important as other sports.

2.3. The classes I taught

At North Valley High School there are five English teachers, and I exchanged jobs with one of them, Robert Moeny. He mainly taught freshmen English, so I had three English 1 classes and one English Essentials class, which is for students whose reading level is below the standard. I also taught sophomores; this was an Honors English class for more advanced students. I was also asked to take care of the Forensics (speech and debate) class, although at first I didn't know anything about this subject.

During the English 1 classes, I taught English grammar and vocabulary each week. We also covered Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and Homer's *Odyssey*. I tried to incorporate many different teaching techniques to make my students more interested in the subject. We watched the movie versions of the two literary works to get the students familiar with them before reading them. We also did a

project on the Greek gods and goddesses. I also tried to make the "boring" grammar exercises more exciting by giving them funny sentences and texts.

Unfortunately, very often I had discipline problems, because some students just did not care about learning at all. I asked my colleagues what they usually did when they faced the same difficulties, because I wanted to be successful. It was strange to me that they send the students to EdLab or they write a referral to the assistant principal. In Hungary I cannot send a student out of the classroom.

In the English Essentials class I always gave the students grammar exercises and short texts to read, and I asked them to answer comprehension questions. They also needed to read a book each semester, which I asked questions about at the end of the semester. I also made them read aloud, which they did not like at first. Again, I had discipline problems, but these students were easier to deal with after a while, as they recognized their weaknesses and tried to become better and better at reading.

The Honors English class was easier to handle, because the students were motivated and they wanted to go to college, so they needed good grades. However, this was my biggest class, and most students took part in sports activities, so they missed a lot of the classes. In the class we covered some history of British Literature and Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. They enjoyed giving speeches, and they handed in an essay at the end of the school year. I think this was my most successful class.

Finally, I had Forensics. This is a special

speech and debate class where the students practice for competitions. Fortunately, there were students in this class who had already taken this course before, so they helped me get familiar with the subjects. I have to admit, I was not the best teacher for this class, but I learned a lot, which I'm going to write more about later.

2.4. Activities I took part in

Besides teaching at the school I tried to take part in other activities. As the Forensics teacher, I was asked to take the students to competitions. I also helped to establish a newspaper and to edit it. I wanted to introduce Hungary to the teachers and the students, as well, so with my husband I organized a Hungarian night for the teachers, and I also gave presentations to students in social studies classes.

2.4.1. Forensics

When I was asked to teach this class, I was also told that I might need to take the students to competitions. To be honest, first I wasn't keen on the idea, but the principal, Ms. Linda Huggle, came with us to the first meeting.

For the competitions, the students can decide which type of speech they would like to compete in. Most of them are individual events, but there was also a duo event (where two competitors present a story in ten minutes) and debate. Debate is one of my favorites, because two pairs compete against each other, and I enjoyed listening to their arguments on certain topics. The individual events include after dinner speeches (written by the competitor; they are usually very funny),

radio commentary (also written by the competitor), humorous or dramatic interpretations of a literary piece, oratory (presentation of a topic), poetry, prose, and so on.

We participated in six tournaments, and my students were successful in radio, duo, debate, and humorous interpretation. One of the students qualified for the national competition with a humorous interpretation of a book. She was a veteran of the class, and one of the best students.

I was also asked to judge at these competitions. I enjoyed it very much. Although I did not know much about the different events, that did not seem to be a problem. Many schools brought amateur judges.

All in all, participating in Forensics tournaments was one of the most enjoyable parts of my experience.

2.4.2. Newspaper

When I went to North Valley High School, they had not had a newspaper for some years. The principal talked to me about how the school wanted to start publishing one, and she asked me to help. So, once a week after school we held meetings; anyone could join the team. There were many students who wanted to write articles, so we had an easy job. We decided on the publishing dates and the topics, and then when the articles were done, we edited them. First the principal edited the whole newspaper (she was an expert on the publishing software), then the students learned to create the pages. The district provided some money for the school to make copies, so the newspaper was free for the students.

I also wrote an article about my experience, and afterwards many students and teachers asked me questions about Hungary. I was glad that they became so interested.

I was also happy to help with starting something new at the school.

2.4.3. Hungarian night

Since I applied for the Fulbright program to make Hungary more familiar to the people I would get in touch with, I decided to organize a Hungarian night, a small party for the teachers.

My husband and I designed an invitation card (it was in the shape of Hungary), and I invited all my colleagues at the school. About half of them were interested; some of them also brought their partners or their children.

For the night we prepared some Hungarian dishes (lecsó, pancakes, and pogácsa) so that people could taste them. We also made a presentation and created a slide show with pictures of Hungarian sights.

We started the presentation with a quiz about Hungary, promising some gifts for the people who knew the most about my country.

The presentation included some geographical data and some historical facts. I also talked about famous people, mentioning the Nobel Prize winners, some inventors, musicians, and sportspeople.

At the end of the presentation we checked the answers to the quizzes and gave out the prizes. The person who gave the most correct answers was the principal, who had been to Hungary before. Then we

served the dishes, gave out the recipes, and answered questions about Hungary.

I think the night was very successful, because it broke the ice between me and the other teachers, and it made the people more interested in me and in my country. Afterwards, I was often asked questions, and two of my colleagues invited me and my husband to their homes on Thanksgiving and at Christmas. I'm sure these people became more open to news from Hungary, and one day they might visit our country.

I know that the assistant principal came to Europe and visited Hungary the next year (unfortunately we did not meet), and she told me that it was my presentation that piqued her interest in our country. Another teacher was considering applying for the exchange program and coming to Hungary, but he was a special education teacher, so sadly he could not apply.

2.4.4. Presentations to students

After the success of the Hungarian night, the principal thought that it would be a good idea to also talk to the students about Hungary. At that time, there were three exchange students at the school, too, so we decided to go together to classes and give presentations on our countries.

The principal convinced the social studies teachers to spend one day on each of these countries, so we visited their classes. We also gave quizzes to the students, but the questions were more about facts the students are interested in (e.g. the minimum age for getting a driver's license). After the presentations, the students asked a lot of questions and some

of them told me that they might come to Hungary one day to visit me.

3. Fulbright meetings

I need to write some words about the Fulbright meetings. After arriving in the USA, we had an orientation in Washington, DC and a meeting in Seattle, WA during the fall. Both were professionally organized, and I am sure everybody enjoyed themselves.

In Washington, DC I had the chance to meet with my exchange partner, Rob Money, and his family. They were very nice and helpful; I learned a lot of information from them. I also got to know some people who were going to the same area as I was, so I knew I would not be alone as a foreigner. I also received plenty of information about Oregon, its famous sights and what life was like there.

I felt that the Fulbright Commission tried to make the stay of all the Fulbrighters enjoyable, and I knew that if I had a problem, I would have someone to turn to. They answered our questions and talked about the problems that might arise. It was a lot of fun to see so many different people from all around the world, and I really felt like I belonged to the Fulbright family.

During the fall Fulbright meeting held in Seattle, we (the exchange teachers) were invited to talk about our own problems and our own experiences in the United States. I think the idea of this meeting is a fantastic one, as on the one hand it makes you relieved that others have

similar experiences and on the other hand it helps you get prepared for the coming problems. Fortunately, I did not have a lot of trouble, so I think I was quite lucky to be in Grants Pass.

In Seattle we had the chance to visit two schools: a middle school and a University Prep School (high school). These visits gave us a wider perspective on education in the USA. In the middle school the students were mainly of Asian origin (Korean, Vietnamese, etc.); many of their parents did not even speak English. We visited some classes, where we also talked about our countries, and we answered questions posed by the students. They were interested and already knew some facts about the countries. We were impressed.

The high school was a new one, for students who plan to go to college. There we had the opportunity to see the facilities and also to visit classes.

We were also taken on a sightseeing tour in Seattle. During this trip I enjoyed talking to other teachers from other parts of the world, and it was fun to listen to their accents. I still keep in touch with some of them.

4. Living in the USA

As anyone can imagine, there are many differences between living in Hungary and living in the USA. During the orientation in Washington we were told that we might experience the so-called “culture shock”, which meant that we might not find life in a foreign country to be particularly easy. I

did experience some difficulty, as when I did not know who to call when something went wrong or how to discipline the students. However, after a while I got used to living there, and it was actually a culture shock to return home.

4.1. Keep smiling

“In the United States everybody smiles all the time.” I heard this statement several times before I went to the USA, but I did not believe it. Then, I realized that Americans do smile at each other. Whenever I entered a shop or asked someone to help me, the first reaction was a smile. Although we Europeans know that this smile might not be “real”, it certainly makes you feel better and makes your day happier. Most people were extremely helpful. In stores the shop assistants usually asked if I had found everything I needed, and they were always polite.

4.2. Dealing with everyday problems

When you start a life in a foreign country, you definitely have a lot of things to deal with. You need to open a bank account, get insurance both for your car and for yourself, and so on. In Oregon, all these were easy to do. People at customer services (at the bank, at the TV company, etc.) were always helpful and friendly and almost everything was done instantly. I am sure it is because people in the USA move a lot, and they might not have a lot of time to deal with these things.

I needed to get an Oregon driver’s license, and all I needed to do was to take a written exam and to show my driving skills. If you are lucky, you can get a license in about an

hour. Once you have a license, it is your ID, so afterwards nobody cares about where you are from.

It was also easy to buy a car, and the insurance companies were glad to help you get the best deal on insurance.

I also experienced that after becoming a member of the sports club or a customer of a store, you become a very important person there. They inform you of the novelties and the best deals.

Most people I met were willing to help me when I asked them. Once, I had toothache, and I asked the people at the school office which dentist they could recommend. They immediately called their dentist and asked for an appointment for me. Then the dentist’s assistant called me the day before the appointment to remind me.

4.3. Security

One of the first things that caught my attention in the United States was the high security level. I already knew that it is very important for the Americans to feel safe, and so I did not find it annoying. At the airport your fingerprint is taken and your iris is scanned. As I was a foreigner at the airport I was checked from head to toe. After getting my driver’s license, however, I was only checked like the other Americans.

I also realized that there are many police officers on the streets everywhere, but I knew they would not stop me unless I committed a driving offense. That is the reason why I did not find their presence irritating.

4.4. Taveling

If you are in a foreign country, you want to see as many sights as possible. Although my main concern in the USA was to be an exchange teacher, I tried to use my free time to travel around and see famous places.

I had an Internet connection at home, so it was quite easy to book everything online. In Hungary I had not tried online booking before, so at first I was a bit worried, but it turned out to be safe and sometimes cheaper. I found good deals on motel rooms, and I also booked my ticket to Alcatraz, to a basketball game, and to a concert, all online.

First, I traveled to many places in Oregon. I visited Portland in the summer, which is the biggest city in the state. There I met a former Fulbrighter, Joseph Pitkin, who spent the 2003-2004 academic year in Kecskemét as an exchange teacher. He invited me and my husband to stay with his family and showed us around. He told us that spending a year in a foreign country would be a fantastic experience, and he gave us some advice on living in the US.

During the winter break we visited another Hungarian Fulbrighter and his family in San Francisco and saw the sights. Then, during spring break, Los Angeles, Las Vegas and the Grand Canyon were our destinations. I enjoyed these travels, as I saw other parts of the United States. I could see how people in big cities lived, which was nice because Grants Pass is in a rural area. It was good to see the wide highways and even the traffic jams. I often wondered what it would be like if I spent my whole life in those cities. It requires a

totally different way of thinking, as it must be tiring to sit in traffic jams for hours every day, and you might not be able to spend much time with your family. I also liked that wherever I went people obeyed the traffic regulations. They are much more orderly drivers than European people.

5. How this experience affected me

As I already mentioned, I applied for the Fulbright teacher exchange program because I wanted to experience the American way of life, myself, in order to be able to teach American culture to my students better. However, this experience affected me in ways I did not expect.

First of all, seeing a more heterogeneous country than Hungary taught me to appreciate others. Although I consider myself an open-minded person, in the beginning I was sometimes aloof towards African Americans and Mexicans. So, I needed to learn to appreciate them and I made friends with some of them. I am especially proud of having made acquaintances with people from Columbia, Mexico, Peru, and India. Without this program, I might not have met so many people from all around the world.

Secondly, I think I became a better teacher. I like the idea of projects instead of frontal teaching, because it gives students the opportunity to talk in front of a group of people. In Hungary, students are not used to standing in front of the class and giving presentations, so after returning home I decided to assign presentation tasks to my students. I think

it worked, because the students became more motivated. Many of them used modern technology (a computer and a projector) to add pictures and videos to their speeches. After the presentations I evaluated their speeches and gave advice on how to improve them. I hope they are braver now and that giving speeches in front of others will not be a nightmare for them.

I hope the school year I spent in an American school improved my teaching skills. I think I am more patient now with students who have learning problems, and I am more appreciative of the diversity of the students. I now know I need to view them as individuals and respect their ideas and thoughts.

Moreover, I became more sociable and tolerant. I am thankful for my American friends, especially for Fritz Brune, a former Fulbrighter, who was my real mentor in Grants Pass. He helped me by giving advice on living and teaching there. He often invited me to his house, and he asked me how I was and tried to help whenever I had a problem. I think meeting a person who has had similar experiences can really help you to enjoy your stay in a foreign country.

All in all, I think spending a year in the United States made me a better person and a better teacher, as well. I hope that one day I will have the chance to visit the United States and my friends in the United States again.