

BRIDGING CULTURES IN THE USA

by Laura Shashua (*lasha205@gmail.com*)

What happens when you get ten EFL teachers together, all from different backgrounds, on a three week fact finding trip to the USA? Bearing in mind that the teachers come from Israel (three Jewish teachers, two Arab) and the Palestinian Authority (two from Bethlehem, two from Gaza and one from East Jerusalem,) you have a recipe for a vibrant, dynamic group ready for an educational dialogue about, guess what - not politics, but the Teaching of English as a Second Language.

All this was organized under the auspices of the US State Department's prestigious International Visitor Leadership Program, for which I was honored to be selected. The IVLP, as it is generally known, is the State Department's flagship exchange program, whereby professionals can learn about the country first-hand and cultivate relationships with their peers in the States.

For our particular program, there were three stated aims: to get to know the American education system in general, to explore how English as a Second Language is taught in a country where literally hundreds of languages are spoken in schools, and finally gain an understanding of American culture. We were taken coast to coast, from Washington DC to San Francisco, taking in Raleigh and Greensboro (North Carolina) and Rapid City and Sioux Falls (South Dakota) along the way. Our time was filled with lectures, meetings and conversations with ESL professionals at venues as diverse as universities, community colleges, elementary schools, cultural centers, refugee centers and private, independent language schools.

Since our itinerary was so full and varied, it is almost impossible to pick out the highlights. I'll try, however, to choose particular features that for me were a focal point of the trip.

We English teachers all speak the same language

As we progressed across the United States, one thing became abundantly clear. We in Israel are not the sole claimants to a standards based curriculum and we are as equally fluent in education jargon so as to be able to have a meaningful discussion with any professional on the other side of the pond. Meetings with the Department of Education in Washington, DC and the State Board of Education in North Carolina revealed that we also face many of the issues that are troubling American educators today: how do we raise low achievement outcomes? How do we motivate students? At an ESL teacher training session at George Mason University (DC) we

discovered that they, too, teach – and use – backward design. At Jane Adams elementary in Rapid City, SD, we saw small group teaching in action (*sha'ot partaniyot*.) At a meeting of the Literary Council of Wake County, Raleigh, we discussed and exchanged teaching ideas. In short, we were looking at ourselves in the mirror, transposed in place, but not in terminology.

“What about technology in education?” you may ask. I, at least, was under the impression that United States schools are standard bearers for the integration of technology in education. Although we did see schools that are wonderfully well equipped, it does, like here, depend on who is funding and how much the schools receive. We were told that many educational institutions get money from the private sector, who see it as an investment for the employees of the future. On the other hand, although there is plenty of hardware, it is not certain that the developing digital pedagogy in the States is any different from the trends that are developing here. Our US counterparts are experiencing the same challenges in education as we are: how to make the pupils into independent learners while using the facilities (or lack of) at their disposal.

ESL – not as easy as it sounds

Many teachers here in Israel are under the assumption that EFL and ESL are synonymous, or at least that there is very little difference between them. Nothing could be further from the truth, as we gathered in a number of visits to ESL classes. At a refugee center, the New Arrivals Institute in Greensboro, we joined an adult class. With the students divided into groups, we were told to ask those English 101 favorites: “What's your favorite fruit?” “What do you like to drink?” Trying to define the word *favorite* to a little old Nepalese lady who is probably half deaf to boot is probably one of the hardest things I have ever done in my teaching career.

Indeed, the challenges raised by the vast number of non-English speakers in the United States are almost innumerable. At the schools we visited, we heard how school districts and teachers try to integrate the children into the system. Depending on state policy, there may be dual language programs, where the pupils are taught in English as well as their native tongue. In other programs, the pupils are taught the essential vocabulary, giving them the opportunity to integrate into the English speaking classroom. Imagine then, working in a school where 72% of the student population are non-L1 speakers

(as in North Carolina) and then trying to achieve state standards. This concern was voiced by teachers and officials alike, and, according to the Department of Education, a survey is being conducted to address these issues.

Language notwithstanding, the integration of immigrants into the American way of life is no less a challenge. In our visits to various non-government organizations (NGOs) we saw refugees from Southeast Asia and Central Africa as well as general newcomers to the country learning a language and a culture vastly different from theirs. One particular class focused on the vocabulary associated with putting the garbage can out on the curb to be emptied; this, remember, is English as a *second* language. Time and again on our trip, we heard that English is not the official language of the United States, but rather the language of use. For them, English can never be defined as a foreign language; it is the language that the students will need to acquire to live in America.

“What tears us apart, holds us together” (Dr. Gary Weaver)

According to Dr. Gary Weaver (the School of International Service, American University, Washington DC,) there is no such thing as an American culture. Indeed, as we discovered on our travels, there is no one culture that defines the United States. On the contrary, such diversity *is* the United States.

If there is any one person who should be thanked for helping shape the America we know today, it is Martin Luther King (1929-1968,) the leader of the civil rights movement. Indeed, an awareness of civil rights is now woven throughout the fabric of the American education system. To make sure we got the message, we visited the massive MLK memorial in DC and while in Greensboro, NC, the birthplace of the movement, a visit to the

International Civil Rights Center and Museum filled in much needed gaps in my background knowledge.

In sharp contrast, we visited the Pine Ridge reservation in South Dakota. There, we learned how the Lakota language is being revived among the native American Lakota people. Lakota has become the language of instruction at school, and textbooks are being written in the vernacular, in the way that Hebrew was revived here in Israel. Smoking a peace pipe at the end of the day on the chilly windswept South Dakota prairie is not an experience I am likely to forget someday soon.

Concluding thoughts

In this article, I have tried to bring you some of the main features of our IVLP program. Limitations of space prevent me from expanding further, so you’ll just have to imagine for yourselves the myriad meetings with volunteer groups at multicultural centers, lectures on digital courses and MA TESOL distance learning initiatives.

On a personal note, one particular dream came true: I went to a baseball game and ate a hot dog. Several hundred calories later and none the wiser about baseball, I can only thank the State Department for affording me this incredible USA experience, which I am happy to share with my peers and my pupils in the classroom.

Oh, and by the way, you might ask about bridging the Israeli-Palestinian divide. That, my friends, is another, riveting story for another time.

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