

Project Documentation and Reflection on the Project

*"No Mercedes in the
Parking Lot"*

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1. Preface

1.1 Description of the Project and Introduction of the Main Topic

"Wait, so you're saying you're from Germany? But I didn't even see a Mercedes parked in the lot!" exclaims Xxx, an American High School student after I just told him I was an exchange student at Joseph High School, his school in Joseph, Oregon, from Germany.

Xxx's stereotypical exclamation is actually part of the presentation of our Interpersonal Communications project in front of the FCCLA¹ judges at State Convention. xxx, xxx, an Italxxx exchange student, and me, a German exchange student in Oregon, have planned and carried it out together. It was addressed at identifying national stereotypes regarding Italy, Germany and the United States, eliminating false ones and informing about other countries and their culture and thus increasing intercultural understanding and exchange. Our target group included schoolchildren from grades four through six at the Joseph Elementary School and Joseph Middle School. The highlight of the project from the children's point of view was that they got the chance to write letters to German or Italxxx students their age and thus have a foreign pen pal from the other side of the world.

We planned the project as a part of our work for the Family Career and Community Leaders of America (FCCLA) chapter of our school. FCCLA is an extracurricular activity at many American High Schools all over the United States and usually offered in the form of a club. Its main purpose is to encourage students to work with beneficial projects for their community or to educate themselves further in an innovative way that demands a lot of independent work. Those projects belong to the so-called Students Taking Action with Recognition (STAR)² Events, which include a wide variety of categories. One of these STAR Events is called Interpersonal Communications, which is the one we chose. These events are also the competitive part of FCCLA because they include the preparation of a presentation of the students' projects according to certain guidelines that will

¹ FCCLA (acronym): Family, Career and Community Leaders of America

² STAR (acronym): Students Taking Action with Recognition, for "FCCLA STAR Events Manual" (Excerpt) see Appendix p. VIII - IX

be shown and explained to FCCLA judges at a State Convention, where teams from schools all over the state compete. The judges accredit certain points that will be awarded in form of a medal (bronze, silver, gold) and the winners will qualify for the next level, the National Convention. The 2009 State Convention for Oregon was held in Portland.

Neither of the three schools (Joseph, USA; xxx, Germany, and Xxx's Italxxx school) had ever participated in a scholastic pen pal project and both European schools had not offered any form of exchange with a North-American school before, just like the Joseph School District had not included any active form of (intercultural) exchange in their school offers before.

1.2 Personal View on the Topic

As an exchange student in a foreign country you are often confronted with stereotypes and sometimes you will hear questions that surprise you and make you wonder whether there is a significant lack of knowledge about other countries and cultures in our world and if so, where does this come from? Is it simply a collective lack of interest in other countries and cultures? Or is the reason just a lack of offers and information? Being an exchange student who has not only always been interested in other cultures, but who has also already met so many people who showed that same interest and fascination, and not yet encountered a single person who would appear completely indifferent to intercultural topics, I refused to believe that a lack of interest could be the reason. So the conclusion was to address the other possible lack, the lack of offers and information. Of course, we already did that in our everyday life as an exchange student whenever we talked to anybody about our home country or showed pictures and such, but we wanted to intensify this role and create a new base for intercultural exchange.

For me personally this was a very interesting project because I got the chance to teach the children something new about my home country and try to arouse their interest in other cultures in general by showing them that there are so many exciting things to see and learn, if they only dare to think outside the box and beyond national borders. In my opinion this is not sufficiently included in the American school curriculum and maybe it has a greater part in

the German curriculum, but from my own experience as a student I still remember this part of studying foreign cultures to be very passive and rigid book learning, which was always very theoretical. I have always learned and understood better when I had the chance to experience it myself and with those experiences collect my own first-hand information and I think that is especially important when learning about other cultures. You cannot fully understand it by just reading scientific texts and facts or looking at statistics, you also need direct contact with the culture to actually get to know it. Just getting to know me as a German exchange student would be interesting for the American children, but as I was already in a different age group and just one single German person for them to talk to and ask a wide variety of questions, I thought it would be better if they got to know more German children who will be interested in the same topics and also benefit from such an experience themselves.

1.3 Educational Context of the Project

This project and its basic ideas or the topic of intercultural communication were not part of the American school curriculum in any of my classes, but it obviously was connected to FCCLA as an extracurricular activity at Joseph High School.

The German school curriculum for the "Oberstufe" (reformed upper phase) comes a little bit closer to my project and its topic; for example in my bilingual Social Sciences class we studied Sociology and ways in which to measure society including cultural aspects and their importance. In my English AP class we studied American culture (esp. American Dream) and obviously this is one of the two (if you include Italxxx as well, then it would be three) cultures that met in this project.

2. Realization of the Project

2.1 Factual Description of the Execution of the Project

After our overall aims were set, the question was, what were the right means to effectively reach them? At first we needed to focus on a target group and then the appropriate methods we wanted to use. My younger host sister Kari was in 5th grade and from living with her I knew that she was always

interested in finding out more about Germany when she thought it was funny, when she could see, touch, or taste it or when it was something she could really relate to or use. That is why I suggested we work with children around her age, because I expected that they would be interested as long as we approached them in the right way. Furthermore, the three of us and our teacher and adviser Mrs. Dotson agreed that cultural competence is something that should be learned from a rather early age on because children are more open-minded in that respect than adults who have already developed strong opinions and are suddenly challenged to alter their point of view which might have been taught to them all throughout their lives.

As grades 4th through 6th included quite a big number of students we decided for practical reasons to split the whole group into two smaller ones which would be focusing on one foreign country each. So I took over the 5th and 6th graders and realized the Germany part of the project with them while xxx and xxx did the same project with the 4th graders only with the Italxxx focus.

My experiences with Kari also helped us to pick the methods: For the visual part we prepared PowerPoint presentations with many pictures, and photographs, for touching I brought some German brochures and a German flag and for tasting I brought German chocolate. xxx and xxx baked original Italian pizza for the 4th grade students.

When we got more into detail with the presentations and lesson planning, we realized that the task at hand was probably more demanding than we had imagined at first. How do you introduce a group of very vivid young children to a completely new culture in a way that will motivate them and make them want more without being in the country or having a representative group of people or genuine atmosphere? How can I teach them the basic knowledge about my country, such as politics and history, which are important and needed to understand and get to know the country's culture without boring the children with dry facts?

The topics I ended up including in my presentation about Germany are: geographical facts/location, political facts, size of Germany in comparison to the US and Oregon, climate, recent history, culinary/German food, the school

system, basic language, sports and athletics, a comparison of Joseph and xxx, my hometown, sights in xxx (e.g. xxx xxx castle) and finally Fun Facts. Besides including lots of visual help (pictures, photographs etc.) I always tried to relate the topics to the U.S. or Oregon or something else the young students are very familiar with. Additionally, I narrowed down the dry facts that I was afraid could bore them, so that this information was limited to a minimum I hoped to be interesting for 5th and 6th graders. During the presentation I also asked the kids some questions and gave them the opportunity to tell me something about America and their culture. For example I asked what their favorite meal, food or snack was and then told them whether that was available in Germany. When talking about food I also handed out the German chocolate I brought ("Kinder Schokolade" and "Milka") which caused a lot of excitement and gave us the opportunity to take a small break. Before I started the presentation I told the middle school students that we would have a little popquiz afterwards and the winner would get a reward because I hoped that would motivate them to pay attention and focus which I know is not easy for children of that age. Furthermore, I had experienced and witnessed already that rewarding outstanding or above average performances is very common and popular in the U.S. The small reward I gave the children was some extra chocolate and a small German flag to take home.

When teaching them some basic German vocabulary I had the class repeat the words together after me. In some cases this posed a little challenge for the young Americans, especially with the "ch"-sound in phrases like "Ich heiÙe ... " or "Ich bin ... Jahre alt" or the "eu"-sound in "Deutschland".

The pen pal project was a little surprise I only gave away after we were done talking about Germany in general. But of course this surprise had to be planned beforehand as well as the other parts of the lesson and the project. I had contacted one of my former English teachers from Germany via e-mail (Mr. xxx teaching at the *Städtisches Gymnasium xxx*) and asked him whether he was teaching a class in the appropriate age group and if so whether he and his students would be interested in participating in the project. The response

was quick and affirmative: the German students were reportedly very enthusiastic about the idea.

Since I knew from the American students' Writing teacher that they had not done letter writing in class before, we discussed the form, content, letter phrases and other questions before they started. Additionally, I handed out a sample letter³ that the 5th and 6th graders could use as a support for the form and some ideas to write about. In their letters they also included some German phrases I taught them during the lesson, such as "Bis bald!".

Something else I brought with me for the lesson was my camera so that I could take a group picture of the class and individual pictures of each student to send to Germany along with some other photographs I had taken of Joseph and its landscape, e.g. Wallowa Lake, a postcard, and most importantly with the children's letters. This also gave the American children the idea of asking their future pen pal for a picture of themselves or of their hometown and was just one more reason for the students to be very excited about their impatiently awaited response letters from Germany.



This is a group picture my FCCLA advisor Mrs. Dotson took of the class, their teacher (in the back row on the right), and me (on the left), so we could send it to Germany.

³ Sample Letter, see Appendix p. I

The letters written by the American students were included into the class work even more than I had hoped, because the Writing teacher turned it into an assignment that was graded for extra credit afterwards. When I had collected the American letters just a couple days after the lesson, I was already pressed for time, because I wanted to have at least some German response letters before going to the FCCLA State Convention in April 2009, so that we could evaluate and draw conclusions from all aspects of our project and hence rate the success of the intercultural communication base we intended to create. By that time I had already found out that mailing between the remote small town Joseph, Oregon, and xxx, Germany, could take a really long time without ever being able to calculate it. I needed the responses and the German students were apparently already waiting for the American letters as soon as they had heard of the project idea, as my teacher from Germany told me. To speed up the process I typed all the American letters in my host family's computer and sent them to my corresponding teacher via e-mail, promising to send the original letters plus photographs via mail as soon as possible.

This method helped and I was able to read and evaluate some of the German letters before we had to present our project in Portland. Apparently the letter communication between the Italians and the Americans had not worked as well. We did not have a single Italian response letter by April and could only rely on second-hand information by the Italian teacher telling us about the Italian students' reactions. Xxx explained that Italian children do not have profound English language skills at that age level and that he was needed as an interpreter at times, which, among other factors, slowed down the process on the Italian side.

After my lesson with the fifth and sixth graders I ended up doing it again with the fourth graders who were taught by my host mum, Katie xxx. They had heard about it from the other students and after Xxx's and Xxx's Italian lesson for the fourth graders they apparently wanted more and asked their teacher, my host mum, to please have me come to their class, as well. One of the fourth grade students, Gabrielle Wells, had not gotten an Italian pen pal and was very disappointed and sad about that, so I organized for her to write

to a German student instead. I included Gabrielle's letter, which I thought to be particularly well done for a fourth grade student, along with some more interesting letters from the fifth and sixth graders in the Appendix⁴.

2.2 Personal Experiences over the Course of the Project

As I already explained, my expectations before doing the project were that the American children would be interested in finding out about Germany and its culture in general and especially in certain aspects such as sports and athletics, food and maybe the school system, but there were also parts that I was a little bit nervous about and even expected the children to be inattentive with. Likewise, I assumed that most of them would enjoy writing to a German pen pal, because it gave them room for some creative work and for them to tell a child from the other end of the world about their home and their life which would definitely be new to the Germans.

I, myself, was very excited about the project with the students and even enjoyed the preparation. Of course, I was also nervous as to whether everything could be done as I had planned it, and even started doubting the concept that it might too much, too long, and just too much to ask for from the young students who partly just got out of elementary school. But when I finally carried it out, it was a great experience for me because my expectations were not met; they were exceeded in many ways. The young students were listening to me and paying attention all throughout the lesson, and when I asked a question, hands were shooting up in the air. The children had lots of questions for me, as well, and not only about sports or leisure activities, after I told them that in Germany definitely not everybody was allowed to go hunting and only very few people played American football, which provoked some very appalled reactions by the fifth and sixth graders. When we came to the letter writing, the majority of the class was really jazzed and could not wait to start writing, which caused some unrest and fidgetiness among the children, so that I had to explain letter writing form and phrases numerous times and individually to some students. I encouraged them to include the German

⁴ Letters from American students, see Appendix p. IV-VII

phrases I taught them earlier and had them displayed in front of the class, but obviously that was not enough for them. Some few of the American students asked if I could help them write the whole letter in German and many others asked for additional words in German such as "dog" and just included these in their American sentences. In general I wanted them to write English letters and just thought it might be a nice little addition to include a German phrase like "Bis bald!", because in my opinion it would be too difficult and challenging for American fifth and sixth graders to write a whole letter in a language they have never learned or even heard before. I would end up translating all the letters for them and also influencing them on what to write and that is not what I intended. Language skills were not my focus in this lesson but rather the intercultural communication that was supposed to be on a direct and close level and not through an interpreter, if possible. This is why I repeated many times, that the students could write whatever they wanted to; my sample letter and the presentation were just some support in case they were looking for ideas or topics to write about. Nonetheless, I was still very positively surprised that the children showed so much interest in the German language and seemed so eager to learn more and more words in my mother tongue.

All this excitement and the positive reactions I received from the students and their teacher did not stop after the lesson was over and the letters were sent to Germany. Whenever they saw me in the hallways, the cafeteria or in town they came up to me and asked many various questions about the letters ("Do you know my German friend, his name is Peter and he is a soccer player? Did he get my letter from last week?"), about Germany ("Do they show the Super Bowl on German TV?"), about me as a German girl in the U.S. ("Have you ever had pumpkin pie before? Do you like it?") and many more. Some of them even hugged me very jovially.

I know that I did not earn this extreme attention as a person or at the utmost in very little parts as a person, but primarily in my role as an exchange student from a foreign country and culture. It was mostly the culture and the country the children were interested in obviously, and for me that meant that I had played my part successfully and reached my goal.

3. Reflection and Retrospection

From the German-American letter exchange I do know that it has been in almost all cases successful, meaning that the young students kept writing each other. Some changed to e-mailing, or even Facebook instead of letter-writing because that is obviously much faster, but most importantly they stayed in contact and told each other about their home country, town, culture and their lives. Some of the American students even told me that they planned on meeting up with their German pen pal, by either visiting them in Germany with their family or welcoming the German student and their family in Joseph. Of course this might be a very ambitious and imaginative plan mostly supported by the American child and not as much by the parents, but I view it as a success already that obviously a part of the American students dreams of such plans now, after getting a taste of another culture through this intercultural communication with German children their age.

For most of the American children I talked to, the farthest they dream about travelling is Hawaii, which would still keep them inside U.S. national borders. Sadly enough that usually does not change when they grow up, especially in rural areas and the region I lived in. My teacher and advisor Mrs. Dotson told me later that maybe I did not know what I had done for these children myself and explained to me that for probably more than two thirds of the class getting to know me and participating in this project especially with the letter exchange was the closest they would ever get to a foreign culture. This touched me and so I did a little research on Oregonians and Americans and their travelling habits.

As statistics from the International Trade Administration⁵ show, the State of Oregon accounted for less than 2% percent of U.S. travelers to overseas destinations in 2009. The total number of U.S. citizens who traveled overseas in 2009 can be transformed into a percentage of close to 10% of the whole

⁵ International Trade Administration: "Profile of U.S. Travelers Visiting Overseas Destinations: 2009", see Appendix p. X-XI

U.S. population. This percentage includes all kinds of travelers: business/occupational, leisure, friend/relative visits.

The few Americans I met who actually visited Germany were there either because they had relatives living there, or because they themselves or one of their family members had to work there for a period of time, for example on an Army base in Germany.

Germans, by contrast, are a far more traveled people, and not merely inside European boundaries⁶. In a global ranking of 2009, Germans are among the top five visitors to the United States⁷. The total number of Germans travelling to the U.S. can be calculated into a percentage of 2% of Germany's population. As a matter of fact, travelling is rather expensive, especially to overseas destinations, but you cannot say that Germans are on an average richer than Americans and can thus afford travelling to the U.S. or other overseas destinations much easier; money cannot be the determining factor here. But what is the determining factor then? How can this discrepancy be explained?

From my own experiences as an exchange student who was lucky to get to know both cultures very closely I constructed a hypothesis for the reason of this significant difference. My hypothesis is that the awareness of other countries and their culture is not as wide-spread and strong in the U.S. as in Germany which in my eyes hints at a different appreciation of cultural competence inside the U.S. but also at a lack of representation of the German culture in the world.

I do realize that I use the phrase "as an exchange student" quite frequently, but I think there is a reasonable explanation behind that. I believe that every person going into a foreign country automatically takes over a certain role and exchange students do that in a very intensive way because obviously they are more than just tourists who can catch a glimpse of another culture while travelling. Exchange students have the chance to really experience and live a different culture; they can even become a part of it in some ways and that is

⁶ Ref. Article: "Deutsche fliegen deutlich häufiger ins Ausland", Appendix p. XIII

⁷ U.S. Travel Association: "2009 U.S. International Visitor Arrivals – Top 25 Countries of Origin", See Appendix p. XII

what makes their abroad experience so precious. When these exchange students return to their original home they take all these things that they experienced and learned with them so they can share their knowledge at home and will never be the only ones to benefit from their cultural adventure. While the students are abroad they also always take over the role of young ambassadors for their home country. By that I do not want to say that they should be advertising or praising their home country, but by everything they do or say they will automatically create or alter the image of their home country and its culture as it is viewed in the host country. This aspect of your role as an exchange student that is automatically given to you can of course be used differently if aware of it. Considering the importance of intercultural communication in a globalized world and the fact that exchange students usually enjoy this aspect and intercultural communication one could assume that every exchange student would use their role to the best of both, host and home culture, and with their behavior and commitment act in a beneficial way.

Considering this perception of the role of an exchange student, I am of the opinion that our project was successful. Obviously we cannot vastly promote and improve intercultural communication on a global level, but we brought together two if not even three different groups of children and thus established a new platform for intercultural communication at an early level that has not been there before. It will not yet make a big difference in the whole picture but it definitely affected these young students and their schools whose officials were very approving of our project and asked for a continuation to pass it on to following grades.

Very positive and avid responses also came from the FCCLA⁸ judges at the Oregon State Convention in Portland, who saw our project as very beneficial, not only for the community of Joseph, but also for foreign communities and appreciated that we had not addressed just one but several of the FCCLA purposes⁹. After our presentation and several questions the judges decided to award Xxx, Xxx, and me with a FCCLA gold medal, which qualified us for the National Convention 2009 that was held in Nashville, Tennessee in the

⁸ FCCLA (acronym): Family, Career and Community Leaders of America

⁹ FCCLA purposes: see Appendix p.VIII

summer. Unfortunately, Xxx and I had to leave the United States and return to our home countries before the date of the National Convention because the AFS exchange program ended on a fixed date.

Nevertheless, State Convention was already a great experience for us and the whole team, and although we had put hard work into our project, we had not imagined to be this successful, partly because it was our very first - and for Xxx and me also the only - FCCLA project we ever realized. This appreciation and the gold medal meant a lot to us, because it was another sign showing that we were on the right way of making a difference with our project and sharing what we could benefit from already: cultural experiences.

4. Outlook

Although you might think that it is quite self-evident and natural, I think it is still important to note that my exchange year as a whole has shaped me in my personality and in my views of the world. As I already hinted at in a previous chapter, I had the extraordinary chance to become part of another culture and not merely be a rushed visitor who can at the most observe from the outside and from their own culture's point of view.

This second way of experiencing a different culture was not new to me since I had travelled a lot already with my family or with smaller exchange programs. Maybe having this chance to see so many different cultures from my very early childhood on and my family background (my father is Greek and my mother is German, so I am both, Greek and German) have contributed to my being very interested in other cultures, other countries, and travelling in general. But I would say that before my exchange year I mostly enjoyed visiting the countries and seeing different aspects, because it was exciting and new and sometimes even exotic. When travelling, I always looked at things I saw, cultural aspects that struck me, from a German perspective and in some cases from a Greek perspective, but I could never really put myself into the new position of another culture and do it backwards: look at myself and Germany or Greece from a different culture's point of view.

This is an important cultural competence that I have gained through my exchange year. The difference is that I could take over both roles that I have

mentioned before: I could completely immerse myself into the American culture and thereby intensify the cultural experience and after a while look at Germany or the world from an American perspective and I could observe and take in everything that I could sense and view it from my German (or sometimes even Greek) point of view.

But for me - and I think this is valid in general – this was not just something to pick up along the way, something that was easily given to me. It involves tough situations as well, and in my own experience those were mostly in the beginning of my exchange year. In my opinion, it is the first step, similar to a prerequisite, that you have to put yourself completely out of your comfort zone and leave behind almost all things that you have known and have taken as guidance before in order to accomplish such a development. Obviously, that cannot only be easy, fun and exciting; it might just as well be intimidating and confusing at first. For me, the development came in little steps and phases, and one step towards this cultural competence that I think I have gained was actively and intensively dealing with cultural questions on both practical and theoretical levels, and a perfect example of that would be the FCCLA project we conducted.

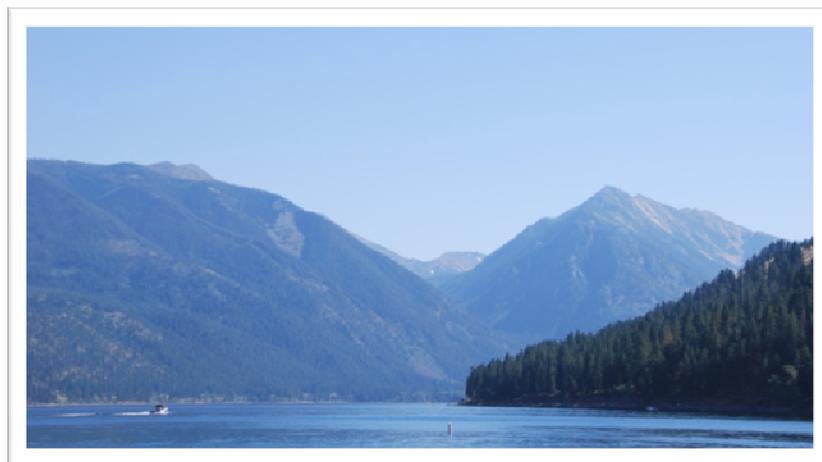
Even if I was the one teaching and telling the students about Germany, they were definitely not the only ones who learned something from the project. I learned and profited from working with them in many different ways and that is something that I do not want to lose. I want to keep learning and enhancing my cultural competence and also help and support others in developing their own cultural competence.

One way that I found to continue this venture is volunteering for AFS Intercultural Programs¹⁰, the exchange organization I chose for my own exchange year in Oregon, by helping to pick the new AFS exchange students and preparing them in little AFS seminars. Additionally, I sometimes help out with the assistance and mentoring of the foreign exchange students here in Germany. I hope that I can keep up this voluntary work in the future, during my studies at university as well.

¹⁰ AFS: American Field Service , community-based volunteer organization, est. 1914/1915

Apart from this and a lot of travelling, something else that I really want to do is study abroad for a semester or two, if possible. That would give me another chance to challenge myself on a cultural level and to gain one more precious cultural experience. I do not have any specific plans on where I would like to study abroad because I will have to decide that according to the possibilities my German university has to offer.

I believe that every single experience we make, whether it is at home or abroad, alone or as a part of a group, shapes us in our development, beliefs, and opinions, some more, some less. Of course, I cannot truly look at myself in an objective way and analyze my personal development, beliefs and opinions, but I definitely feel that I have been influenced in all of these areas by my abroad experience in the United States. I do not see this as a disadvantage and maybe it is not even possible to judge this kind of influence at all. In some ways, it is a natural consequence that necessarily follows from such an intense abroad experience. I do not think that it turned me into a more biased person in favor of the United States; I rather believe that collecting these impressions will turn me into a more open-minded, culturally educated person, which I think is a very important asset considering global developments that put all of us not only in the role of national, but also of global citizens.



This is one of my very favorite places: The Wallowa Lake with the Wallowa Mountains in Joseph, Oregon.

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6. Selbständigkeitserklärung

“Ich versichere, dass ich die Arbeit selbstständig verfasst, keine anderen Quellen und Hilfsmittel als die angegebenen benutzt und die Stellen der Arbeit, die anderen Werken dem Wortlaut oder Sinn nach entnommen sind, in jedem einzelnen Fall unter Angabe der Quelle als Entlehnung kenntlich gemacht habe. Das Gleiche gilt auch für beigegebene Zeichnungen, Kartenskizzen und Darstellungen.“

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