ENHANCING A STUDENT EXCHANGE

WITH A DAY-BY-DAY ACTIVITIES FOLDER

Anne Cottagnoud

B.A. Indiana State University Evansville 1984

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Date   _____

Project Advisor   _____

Project Reader   _____

To my parents.

ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the use of a Folder to document series of activities designed to enhance and maximize learning during a student exchange. Swiss high school students visited their American partners and conducted activities before, during and after the exchange.

The Folder was a teacher-prepared booklet that engaged students in the four phases of Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Cycle: experience, observation and reflection, abstract thinking and generalizing, and testing learned concepts. It also encouraged the Swiss students to ask questions of American host families and American students in order to learn more about American culture. The Folder made use of seven specific activities: brief writing activities, essays, collaborative tasks, cut and paste, free activity, comparing, and drawing and observation.

The thesis presents examples of students' comments for each activity, an evaluation of the use and limitations of the Folder as a learning tool, and suggestions for modifications of the Folder upon which the thesis is based.

ERIC DESCRIPTORS:

Cultural exchange

Exchange programs

Student exchange programs

Teacher developed material

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to describe the use of a day-by-day activities Folder in a a cultural exchange project involving Swiss and American students.

To get the most out of the exchange the students were asked to engage in a variety of activities during the two-week-long exchange. These activities involved interactions with the partners and with the host families as well as students from the French club and the other students at Northampton high school. The main assignment was filling in a day-by-day activity booklet called the Folder. Those Folder activities were designed to help the Swiss students look at different aspects of American life and culture.

Cultural exchanges are important in second language acquisition because studenst realize firsthand that what they have learned in the classroom can be used in real life, real encounters. An educational exchange usually implies a sense of reciprocity. In this case, nine Swiss high school students visited their American partners at Northampton High School in Pennsylvania, from March 25 to April 7, 2004 but, unfortunately, the American students were not able to return

the visit due to the high cost of travelling abroad. The term educational home stay can also be used in lieu of educational exchange.

When deciding to prepare an exchange for a class of language students, the language teacher must prepare the students for what to expect during their home stay. The teacher must also take advantage of the time spent in the target culture to have the students reflect on the experience they are going through. Designing activities to be done before, during and after the trip will make the exchange all the more meaningful.

During my English classes prior to departure we worked on learning more about ourselves and while on the actual exchange we focused on learning about others. The wrap-up activities took place upon our return. In this thesis I will review the different activities, in particular those documents in the Folder that was meant to help the students observe their surroundings, make notes, compare and contrast, draw conclusions and profit from their exchange as much as possible. I will assess the activities in the Folder trying to find out if they were helpful for the students, from the students' point of view as well as the teacher's. And lastly, I will make note of changes I will make in the Folder for future use.

Background

Looking back at 18 years of teaching English as a Foreign Language in a Swiss High School, I know that I could go back as far as my early childhood to understand why I became a teacher as well as what kind of teacher I became. All

of these are issues that I do not need to address on this paper but there is one that is most probably the starting point to all of it.

When I was nineteen years old, I became a college exchange student in the USA. I got my degree in English and Spanish but most of all, I learned to love the English language and this country.

This love is the center of my teaching career. It has been my goal to have my students experience something that could be the most similar to what I had myself gone through. I wanted them to experience the English language and the American culture even though we were miles away and even though half of them would never either use the language once out of school or even visit the United States.

Nevertheless, I saw it as my mission not only to teach English but also to provide my students with some insights into American culture. Over the years, I have gone through different phases in order to do so. My two summers at the School for International Training (SIT) were also the result of that search for an ever better teaching practice. When I applied at SIT I had been a teacher for 13 years and I had attended many teachers' workshops in my field. At that stage of my life I felt the need to renew myself as a teacher: not only to get new teaching ideas but also to look deeper into myself both as a teacher and as a person. I wanted not only to learn how to be a more efficient teacher and come back home with new tricks and activities, but also I wanted to be able to monitor my teaching while measuring it with different approaches and frameworks.

Communication has always been something I favored in my classroom. Of course, in a classroom we are all well aware that we could converse much faster and easier in our mother tongue. We also know that our language practice is only an approximation of real communication as such interaction usually takes place between people who really want or need to connect with each other. Nevertheless, being in a French-speaking country I also know that my students only get three periods a week during which they can engage in English langue practice, so I try to make the most of our time together. My students understand they are only allowed to speak English in the classroom. I enforce this rule from the beginning and I can really say that after a short time they are more than happy to cooperate.

At the beginning of my teaching career I thought that all the communication that could happen in the English classroom had to be generated by me, the teacher. I was the sole provider of interaction and I became an expert in what I called the "ping-pong" teaching method for lack of a better word at the time. I asked questions and my students answered, one on one or in chorus. After a few years I was ready to give my students the opportunity to communicate among themselves by working in pairs. They were engaging in a "real" classroom communicative activity.

The next step of my communicative activities saw my students from several classes write to each other. They wrote either postcards, little stories, personal ads or even poems. This time around, the students engaged in communication with students from within the same school, although most of the

time they didn't even know who their partner was. I also made sure to mail them the postcards they had written from one of my trips to the United States so it would almost be like receiving some news from an American pen-pal. We even got one of our poems published in the collection of poems sent to the well-known Magnetic Poetry company. Again, the communication was meaningful and it had a purpose.

Later, I went down the pen-pal trail, the trail of joys and tears. Out of all the pen-pal partners I found for my students over the years I don't think that any one of them was as successful as I would have wished. Perhaps I was too demanding. My students always seemed eager to write but most of the time they had to wait for an answer. I explained time and again that we were very lucky to have the opportunity to have overseas partners even if the pace of the back and forth letters was quite slow. I realized that after all I had a lot of freedom in my program which enabled me to fit in an activity such as a regular letter exchange while my American teacher partners did not have such latitude. Still, I know that the students who had a dedicated partner will always recall that pen-pal from Long Island or that e-pal from North Carolina.

In the last few years, I became interested in using computers in the English class. One colleague had started using the computer room with her students, running one short DOS grammar program. I also got the computer bug and we teamed up to look at what was available on the market . We had our school purchase CD-ROMs on different topics and finally convinced our superintendant

to provide our computer classes with Internet access. Again, I was able to carry out some degree of communication with students from other countries.

Later, I enrolled my students in a program from the University of Helsinki in Finland and they were at last able to relate on-line with other students of English from around the world. The founder, Ruth Vilmi, manages her web-site, The International Writing Exchange (http://www.ruthvilmi.net/hut/Current/iwe.php), so that her university students write and form partnerships with other students around the world. Each week all the participants have to send in an essay and interact with each other. Everybody was on the same weekly schedule and that makes the exchanges very consistent and beneficial. It is definitely the best Internet activity that I have come in contact with.

On my first year with Vilmi's program, we even had quite a few successful Internet Relay Chat (IRC) meetings between our students, a chat system that enables people connected anywhere on the Internet to join in live discussions. Again that solidified my belief that English class is a great means of interaction between students as long as it is done purposefully.

At last, I had become the facilitator of my students' communicative activities and not the sole provider of such interactions. I felt that with that web program I had come full circle. I had finally found the reasoning behind what I have believed in for a long time which is that in order to have a successful partnership you need to have a purpose, a valid one. You must really want to talk to your partner; you must have real issues to discuss; you must feel that you are

talking to a friend, a partner or a complete stranger and not merely trying to do an assignment and get a grade. Here, for the first time, I felt my students wanted to have those conversations with their Finnish, Chinese, Polish or Korean partners and in order to do so they had to use the English they had learned in the classroom.

In the end, with all the different experiences I engaged in I finally came upon what was to be the utmost in communicative activities, a face-to-face exchange. Such an exchange would provide for language practice that I was looking for, as well as a brushing up against the American culture that I enjoyed so much. My students would have to use their knowledge of English to get in touch with their partners prior to going on the exchange. While in their host families and school they would also interact with the people there. Finally upon their return they could assess what they had learned.

The Exchange

My first exchange took place in March of 2002 with only three students since the international situation had worsened after September 11, 2001. I was adamant about taking a group of students to the State of Georgia because I didn't want terrorists to dictate what I could or could not do. This first exchange was as much a political statement as it was a school sponsored event. The exchange went extremely well although very few activities took place before, during or after the trip. My students got in touch with the partners provided by my American exchange teacher, an English World Literature teacher who was looking for

communication between her students in Georgia and students around the world. She had posted an ad at Epals.com (http://www.epals.com) a non-profit web-site for educators seeking partners around the world .

She answered positively when I brought up the idea of an exchange although French was not even part of the curriculum at Mt Zion's high school. In a typical exchange situation the two partner schools are usually learning each other's language. However in our first exchange, the American students benefited from having a foreign student in their homes, not for the sake of the language, but only because they were interested in learning about the world.

I got some very positive feedback from my three students from that first exchange. Of course, they had chosen to go on the exchange while the rest of the class went on another trip in Europe. They had raised the necessary money and had emailed their partners in order to start their e-pal relationship. I had not designed any specific activities to help them do so although we talked about possible topics of conversation when they started to think that talking about their free time activities was becoming a bit redundant. During the exchange I went to a few classes and talked about Switzerland to grade school children but my students did not act as guest-speakers in their classes. They followed their partners to their different school activities and they stayed with them for most of the day. Still, my students and myself took a few trips together in order to learn more about the area and its places of interest.

After that first exchange, I made a few notes about what I would change or do differently if I ever went on another exchange. I knew I could have done a lot more to make sure my students got the most out of the exchange. I thought about designing activities prior to departure and also about activities to be done with their exchange partners or while at school. With the help of the Internet I was sure that communication could be of a more sophisticated level than plain emailing. I began thinking about tandem production where groups of students from different locations might work together on the same project in order to get better acquainted prior to the actual visit. I also gave some thought as to the best use of our time during the actual exchange. I wanted to ensure that my students benefited as much as possible from their stay. Again, I thought about designing activities that would involve both the American and the Swiss students in common projects. And finally, I wanted to have a wrap-up activity that would bring them home again after the exchange and allow for some reflection on the whole exchange.

I began thinking about an activities Folder and as of September 2003 I was ready to launch my second exchange.

Rationale

I had several questions related to develping an activities Folder that I thought I could test out during this second exchange. For instance, while designing an exchange between Swiss high school students and American high school students, how would my Swiss students benefit from using a Folder asking

them to record events, cut and paste, interview, write essays? Could I help them with the activities to better spend their time while engaging in conversations with their partners, their host families, people at school? What are the questions and concerns I need to addres while designing material for such a Folder?

My Audience

The exchange programs in my teaching context are mostly geared towards Germany as German in the second language in my state and a primary language of my country. To my knowledge there has been only one such trip from the three high schools in my city that was organized for an English-speaking country. The main reason for the lack of such exchanges resides in the fact that it is quite difficult to find a partner school that would be interested in coming to the Swiss Alps in order to practice their French. While searching Epals.com, a teachers' exchange web-site, I noticed that most of the American schools looking for exchange school partners for their French classes mentioned France as their first choice and very seldom the whole of the French-speaking countries. I hope that by reading what I have to say about getting an exchange going with an English-speaking country, some of my Swiss colleagues will want to experience the same thing. If I could entice American teachers in French classrooms to consider us, in the French-speaking part of Switzerland, as a potential destination, all the better.

Furthermore, I would like to convince my fellow teachers of English of the interest and importance of a good preparation for such an exchange. Not only will the students benefit from the actual visit to the host country but they would also

take advantage of effective preparation prior to departure as well as a set of designed activities while staying with their host partners. The Folder of activities that I describe in this paper can be used to enhance the learning from such exchanges.

Moreover, I would like my Board of Education to reconsider their position of not providing substitute teachers while the regular teacher is away with a group of students for the purpose of an exchange. It is our Board of Education's policy to ask such teachers to make all the necessary arrangements to fill in their position while they are away and that, of course, is a deterrent to organizing such an exchange. For both of my trips I had to teach most of my classes prior to departure and upon my return, thus resulting in my teaching double loads of classes before and after the exchange. I was even told that I should be happy my paycheck was not reduced while on the exchange because, after all, I was not teaching my classes during those two weeks. I believe that the amount of time I spent preparing the activities in the Folder as well as the time and effort that my students devoted to completing it were just as valuable as regular class time. My students improved their language and their cultural awareness and I am sure the activities I designed were just as interesting and meaningful as any in-class activities.

Finally I hope that my fellow teachers of a foreign language, be it French or Spanish or English, will contemplate taking their students on an exchange because of all the beneficial outcomes that can result from it.

Overview

The description and analysis of my use of the day-by-day activities Folder is organized into four parts, from Chapter 2 to Chapter 5.

Chapter 2 looks into the theories behind educational exchanges as well as the reasons for wanting to have the students engage in activities during the whole process of the exchange. I look into the Experiential Learning Cycle (Kolb, 1984) as much from the students' perspectives and activities as from my own perspective as a language teacher involved in an exchange between my students of English in Switzerland and students of French in the United States.

Chapter 3 presents an overview of the three phases of the exchange project: the preparation prior to departure, the activities during the actual exchange and the wrap-up activities upon our return to Switzerland.

Chapter 4 describes the Folder, including each category of activities along with my goals and objectives. I give concrete examples of the questions asked as well as my students' answers and feedback. I also give my own evaluation of what I learned from using an activities Folder to document aspects of such an exchange, limitations and the evaluation of the whole process, as well as modification of the Folder I would make I were to repeat the experience.

Chapter 5 concludes the description and the analysis of the Folder of activities and it reflects on my own journey on the Experiential Learning Cycle (Kolb 1984) first while designing the Folder, then during our sojour in Pennsylvania and finally while writing my Master's thesis.

CHAPTER II

THEORY AND REVIEW

In this Chapter, I describe the theory that underlies and supports my use of the Folder.

Communicative activities

As I said in the Introduction I have come a long way as far as favoring communicative activities in my classroom practice. I had started out thinking that I was supposed to be the *teacher* presenting the *subject matter* to the *learners* and had been teaching in that rather conservative way for many years.

In my teaching context of English as a Foreign Language in a Swiss high school we had just left the Grammar Translation Method and I was not quite convinced that the Audiolingual Method (ALM) would provide for all that I needed. There was some leeway to what it was possible to do in a classroom and this is how I became interested in communicative activities. I cannot say that I was following the ALM approach to its complete extent because I had never even heard of such a name or approach. I was just continuing in my path of an EFL teacher looking for new ways to help my students learn the language.

I have since read that it is not uncommon for teachers to "forgo addiction to any one method" (Fantini 1993, 49) and even that "… effective teachers learn to meander back and forth across the limits imposed by a number of methods, even when they ostensibly favor a particular one" (Fantini 1993, 49). I felt that this was very much my case as a developing teacher and I believe that the more experience I gathered the more I felt that I could choose what approach to use for even specific area of the language I wanted to engage my students in.

I had firmly believed at first that if I provided practice for my students by asking questions and having them answer to me one on one, then they would know how to answer when asked by someone else. Of course this did not provide for real communication. First of all the students were seriously prompted to give one type of answer. Also at times the answers were made to fit the questions without really taking into account what a real speaker of English would have said in that case. Furthermore I saw such exercises as like drills to help my students master grammatical points rather than real attempts at communication. This approach was also consistent with the method we were using at the beginning of my teaching.

During those first few year of teaching I was also starting to challenge the learning of the language for the sake of knowing about the language. We would often, in my teaching context, talk about the form of the language and not necessarily about the message that the language was supposed to convey. I got interested in what Widdowson called the difference between the teaching of use and the teaching of usage (1978,19). He claimed that "learners who have

acquired a good deal of knowledge of the usage of a particular language find themselves at a loss when confronted with actual instances of use." According to him when a teacher focuses on teaching the usage of the language, for example by having the students drill one particular grammatical item, it does not guarantee that the students will be able to use the language when they are going to have to do so. On the other hand he also remarked that teaching to use the language will not provide for a formal knowledge of the usage. There should therefore be a subtle balance between teaching use and usage.

After I was a teacher for a few years my school started using a new textbook and for the first time the students were prompted to engage in pair activities. They would reenact dialogues and create new ones. In short they were interacting among themselves. This was still not a real communicative activity because the speakers were not natives of the language and the task was not meaningful in the sense that it was done in a classroom setting and not for the purpose of really going out to the post office to buy stamps or mingling at a party to make friends. However it was definitely a step in the right direction.

Experiential Learning Cycle

It must have been around that change of teaching material at my school that I started thinking that after all I did not need to be the only provider of the language for the students. There had to be other ways of teaching the English language than having the teacher engage in a one-on-one conversation with the 25 students of the class. Although it meant practice for that one student, the

remaining 24 were only benefiting from hearing the exchange until it was their turn to be asked a question.

Granted I was there for the purpose of teaching the English language and that meant many different things at once such as presenting the language, providing controlled practice and supporting my students efforts to learn the language, but I could also let them take the learning into their hands and use the English language without me being involved. They could very well learn from an interaction with a partner, look at how much they understood, derive some learning from it and try to apply it to their next interaction. They were in fact engaging in the Experiential Learning Cycle as described by Kolb (1981, 235).

> The experiential learning model is cyclical, with four distinct phases. The learner begins with concrete experience, progresses to the level of reflective observation about the nature of those experiences, formulates abstract concepts and generalisations based on those reflective observations, and then tests the validity and viability of those concepts in real-life situations, thus leading back to concrete experience once again.

What I was myself doing was to gradually move from a teacher-centered classroom to a student-centered classroom. The subject matter also gained importance as it was getting to be a real means of communication between two people engaged in the same activity for the purpose of communication. I went from being the only provider of knowledge to a provider of the basic or important tools necessary to gain that knowledge. Also I was starting to realize that it was not only necessary for me to teach but that I also needed to look at how my students were learning. While the pair activities took place I had some time to

pause, observe what was going on, amend the activity that we were doing and plan how I would engage in it the next time.

Little did I know that I myself was riding the never-ending spiral of Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Cycle! As a teacher I first had a look at this model during my two summers at SIT. My focus there was based on enhancing my students' learning. But after all, I am of student of teaching, have always been, and will always be. Just like my students, I was a learner going through the four phases of the Experiential Learning Cycle.

As I have mentioned before I have never been a real partisan of only one teaching method or approach. Although the Experiential Learning Cycle (Kolb 1984) appeared to describe what my students or I were going through I realized that I could not really fit all our experiences into such a strictly confined, four-phased learning process. Fortunately there has been some more research done in the field of Experiential Learning and Jarvis (1987, 1995) provided for some other potential learning directions building on Kolb's framework. Jarvis opened the possibility that learning did not necessarily result from observation and reflection but left room for those who did not profit from the experience. He also left the door open to non-reflective learning, for example through memorization, contemplation or practice.

Exchanges and the Experiential Learning Cycle

The following step in my development as a teacher was to continue my exploration of the Experiential Learning Cycle and to see how it could be

implemented during face-to-face exchanges. I could then finally have a series of communicative activities between a native speaker of English and my students for the purpose of a meaningful conversation. Instead of basing their learning English an abstract concepts, my students use every moment of their excahnge program to experience, observe and reflect, formulate some general concepts and plan their next experience. And I as their teacher would go through the same phases alongside them with issues pertaining to my teaching prior to the exchange as well as during the exchange and upon our return.

Theorical Perspectives while Designing Activities

As Batchelder (1993a) said in his article "Preparation for Cross-Cultural Experience," there are many formulas for cross-cultural preparation. He proposed to ask five questions and then to conduct a series of exercises to address the issues raised, here noted in parentheses:

1. Who am I? (Self-awareness)
2. Where do I come from? (Awareness of U.S. culture, beliefs, values, etc.)
3. Where am I going? (Area information, the host culture, its expectations)
4. What for? (Purposes: learning, growth, language, interest in host country, self-motivation, others)
5. What am I willing to attempt? (Self-image, willingness, openness to participation, responsibility, effort, standards of performance, motivation, etc.) (Batchelder 1993a, 59)

While designing the activities that were to be conducted before our trip as well as during and after our sojourn, I also found it important that my students should learn about themselves before going on an exchange to learn about

others. During the pre-departure exercises we looked closely at self-awareness as described in the first of Batchelder's five questions. We also touched upon question three while gathering information about the host culture either before our departure or while we were there. The Folder activities, as described in Chapter 4 The Folder, were a mix of answers for points three and five.

While designing the Folder activities I was reminded by Batchelder (1993b, 101) that students in a host country

> … recognize the importance of language in a communication skill and are genuinely concerned about their capacity to communicate and understand. At the same time, it might be fair to suggest that many of the same students do *not* regard other important cross-cultural elements as skill areas at all: observing, listening, information gathering, problem solving, cultural awareness, self-awareness, and human-relations in general.

The purpose of the Folder was to supplement to that lack of regard. I wanted my students to not only communicate and understand but also to pay attention to the many other things they were going to be in contact with during their exchange. There would be activities promoting observation and the gathering of information as well as leaning about the culture and the people they interacted with, in fact all the interactions particular to a foreign student living in a new environment.

CHAPTER III

OVERVIEW OF THE EXCHANGE PROJECT

In this Chapter I provide an overview of the entire exchange project and situate the Folder within this process. There were three phases: before, during and after the trip to Pennsylvania.

Before going on the trip I needed to prepare my students for what they were going to experience. I knew that before learning about others we should first know and learn about ourselves. I designed three activities to help my students discover what was important for them, who they were and what the important events that had shaped their lives were. Before going on the trip we also looked at ways to help their interactions with their partners or the people they were going to meet. Both sets of activities were designed to help the students get ready for the exchange. They were going away for the first time and would be immersed in a new culture for two weeks.

So as to get the most out of the exchange the students were asked to engage in a variety of activities during the two-week-long exchange. These activities involved interactions with the partners and with the host families as well as students from the French club and the other students at Northampton high

school. The main assignement was filling in a day-by-day activity booklet called the Folder. Those Folder activities were designed to help the Swiss students look at different aspects of American life and culture.

Upon our return, the students wrote essays on topics pertaining to the exchange and prepared a PowerPoint presentation that they were to give to the whole class. I wanted the students to reflect on the whole exchange and then share what they had learned with the rest of the class.

Activities before the Exchange

The first part of the project started at home, three months before going on the exchange. I wanted my students to get ready for the exchange by looking at themselves first before opening up to their host country. I thought it was important that they should know who they were before they tried and learn about another culture. At first I thought I could have the students from both the US and Switzerland engage in the same activities but that proved impossible so I concentrated on my students alone. We did several activities all designed to help us get a better perception of who we were. The first one required each student to represent each 26 letters of the alphabet with a meaningful word or expression describing who they were and what they believed in. They subsequently created a web-site at http://www.geocities.com and chose ten of the words to be represented by either a link, a picture or a short text they had written. I wanted my students to represent who they are with words and the alphabet as a means of having them explore themselves and their culture.

Our second and the third activities were linked with our literature class. I was still trying to get my students to look at themselves and what had shaped them up to now. We looked at who helped the main character of the book we were reading become who she was, and how the people around her, her parents and her husband, had an impact on her life.

My students engaged in a parallel process by listing the important people in their lives and researching why they were or had been important. It gave them a sense of belonging to a group, their first group, their family and then their second group of people, their friends. I wanted them to better understand where they were coming from while reflecting on important people in their lives. We also looked at the significant events that had happened to the main character of the book and how those events had shaped her life. My students then wrote their own chronological life events lists, first on a chronological timeline and then in an essay form. Although difficult for some, this exercise helped them realize that however uneventful their lives might have seemed at first there were still events that were important enough to be mentioned.

As part of our getting ready activities we also looked at ways to start a conversation and worked on the presentations my students were going to give while on the exchange. I wanted my students to be "ambassadors" of their country while in their exchange and it was important to look at ways to interact with people as well as get ready to speak in public about their own country.

Activities while We Were There

During our stay I wanted my students to engage in as many activities as possible so as to better understand their partners, their host families and, of course, American culture. These activities would additionally involve getting to know the Northampton area as well as other parts of the US on several field trips.

On the first day of our sojourn we did some warm-up activities with host partners so that the two groups of students could get to know each other. We, the two exchange teachers, wanted both groups of students to interact not only partner to partner but as an opportunity for the two *groups* to get to know each other. The partners would have numerous occasions to get to know each other but I felt it was necessary to provide some meeting time for the entire exchange group. This early set of activities provided for the first contact between the American students and the Swiss students who were not each other's partners during the exchange.

On a field trip with all the partners, the school's French club and students from the French classes we also made sure we provided contact for all the participants by giving them an activity sheet that they had to go through and then present to the rest of the group. This activity enabled the students from the French classes or the French club to interact directly with the Swiss students. It had been one of my goals to foster as much contact as possible between my Swiss students and American students.

The presentations my students had prepared were given according to a timetable the exchange teacher had set up. The Swiss students experienced the American classroom not only as students sitting at their desk but also "giving" a class, asking the American students questions about Switzerland or about life in the USA and answering some questions as well. Typical questions were about how boys and girls interact, what to do for fun and of course the drinking age in Switzerland. One Swiss student told me that she could really see the difference between her first presentation and her second one a week later. One week of immersion had given her the necessary self-confidence to speak in public in the English language.

I tried to seize every opportunity for interaction between my students and Americans and on different occasions while travelling I sent them on "errands." It happened in a university, in shops, in the street or at school. I felt it was important that even as we were together as a group of Swiss students and with their teacher, we did not forget the main reason for going on an exchange: get to know American people and American culture. Typically I would ask them to go up to people and ask for information such as a street number, a place to eat, a shop, the metro, directions or the time and price of a play. On one occasion, in the cafeteria of a university in Washington, DC and I asked my students to pair up and talk to students in the crowd. They came back knowing that tuition is very expensive in American universities and that in order to be accepted you not only need your high school diploma but also a high score on the SAT. This "errand" helped them realize how different our higher education systems are since a high

school diploma is the only requirement in order to be accepted in a Swiss university.

Before we left I prepared a Folder with a page for every day. My students were supposed to work on it every day and we worked on it several times together. This Folder had many purposes. The most apparent purpose was to be a keepsake of all the activities and events that took place during our visit to Northampton. But as a teacher I had other reasons for wanting my students to work on that Folder. The activities were of many different kinds, some easier than others, some freer, some collaborative or some plain observation. I knew I wanted my students to pause and look around them, observe their surroundings and compare them with what they knew or had and draw conclusions before continuing their observation.

Activities upon Our Return

The last task all my students had to tackle, whether they had participated in the exchange or not, was identifying and preparing a PowerPoint presentation for the rest of the class concerning a person, a place and an event of particular importance. They started by writing an essay on their chosen person, palce and event. They subsequently used those texts as a basis for their presentations. The nine exchange students had the material to talk about a person they got to know or an interesting event from their trip to the US. The rest of the class found it more difficult to write something meaningful. I integrated this task into the textbook that I am using for my English class. In addition to doing a writing exercise, my

students also learned how to use the PowerPoint program, something and that

could prove useful for their other classes.

CHAPTER IV

THE FOLDER

> ➢ The Folder was helpful. It's our garden of memories.
>
> A student's feedback

In this chapter I describe in detail the Folder and analyze its effectiveness. I will begin with the rationale for a day-by-day activities folder for my students during our homestay in Northampton, Pennsylvania. I go on to the process of developing a Folder, taking into account not only my goals but also the doability of the Folder activities, especially my students' interest in it. I also describe the final preparation of the Folder and provide a schedule of the activities during our homestay period. In addition, I will describe the categories of the Folder activities along with the topics that were addressed. For each category I will discuss my expectations, my students' writing and feedback, and end with what I would do differently if I were to use the Folder again.

Rationale

I had two central criteria for the Folder. One, which I learned from my first exchange, was to have my students benefit as much as possible from a face-to-face encounter with Americans. I started looking into a series of activities that would enable them to maximize the experience. The first step was of course to get to know their partners beforehand through emails. I was hoping that this time around, compared to all my other attempts at emailing, my students and their e-pals could engage in a meaningful internet correspondence. My second criterion was to have students work on collaborative projects before the beginning of the actual exchange. These two sets of activities would help them get acquainted with each other and therefore the face-to-face exchange would fare better overall. They would take place before our departure for the exchange in March 2004.

A. The Process of Developing the Folder

The development of the Folder is an involved story. I had started thinking about possible activities to be done during a homestay as soon as I had come back from my 2002 exchange with Mt. Zion, Georgia. My thoughts were twofold. First, I wanted my students to have a souvenir of their stay in the US. Second, I also wanted them to look, observe, compare, interact and reflect while living with their host families.

I was sure that all my students would take numerous pictures and bring back souvenirs but I wanted them to file those souvenirs in an organized way

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rather than just in a keepsake manner. Also I felt that they might miss out on some things and I could perhaps help them look at specific aspects of their stay in America and reflect on what those meant for them. I did not want to take the chance, for example, that they would be guests in a school for two weeks and not even know the names and positions of the people who worked there, or that they would not observe an American kitchen and compare it to their kitchen in Switzerland.

In order to make sure that they would all address the issues that I wanted them to look into I decided to put together a few questions. At first, I was not really worried about the form of the project but rather the content. I came upon an interesting link on the Internet "Exchange Edmond Michelet/Wayzata High School" (http://michelet.paris.iufm.fr/2001/index.html) and I saw that a French school, the College Edmond Michelet, had prepared an exchange with an American high school and had, among other activities, put together a portfolio. With this, the seed for having a complete document, that my students would carry around with them and fill in as we went along, was planted in my mind. I kept thinking about the different activities but was still not sure about the form of the whole project.

There were a few factors that I knew I had to keep in mind. The first one was not to overwhelm students by the task. I saw no point in staying with an American family and spending several hours a day doing homework. I wanted to keep the work easy and doable in a reasonable amount of time. I thought that my

students could probably spare fifteen to twenty minutes a day to reflect on what they had learned or seen or experienced.

In fact, in my tentative program of activities, I had set up some specific times when we would get together and work. I did this because my exchange teacher had told me that the American families were worried that the exchange students would have too much free time on their hands, which could prove disruptive for the studying habits of some of the host students. I immediately replied that I could definitely think of activities that we could do together, the Swiss students and myself, during the exchange.

From previous experience, I know that the other teachers of a class going on an exchange always complain that the students not only miss class during their stay but are also quite resistant to any teaching a few days prior to the exchange as well as a few days afterwards. They have to keep working with the students who are not leaving the class and thus the exchange students miss a lot of class time and have to make up for it upon their return. I figured that we could probably work a little on a new mathematics unit, a French literature book or an Art History class.

After giving it some thought I realized that trying to get my students to do mathematics or French in the US did not make much sense. I knew I would not be able to give them much help and answer their questions. However, I also knew that if the task was in English then I would have no problems trying to keep them busy. So, I was able to tell my exchange teacher that I could definitely take my

students aside for some time during the day and give them some sort of homework that they could do while their partner was getting ready for his or her next school day. This whole question of having my students do homework at the same time as their partners became another reason for wanting them to answer questions, look into problems, find information or interact with American people, all of which eventually became part of the Folder.

The second factor was to make sure that the questions or activities were meaningful and that they related to topics the students had already discussed during their three and a half years of studying the English language and culture. With this in mind, I decided that the first questions should revolve about the family, the school, the country, as well as young people's free time and extra-curricular activities. The second set of questions would focus more on discovery activities. Since the students were going to visit places, meet people and do activities with their partners, therefore they should be able to describe, recall and extract some vital information from those activities.

At this point, I realized that I did not want my students to only gather information or collect souvenirs. They did not need to travel to the US to find answers to most of the questions I might ask and they could just as well organize their pictures or souvenirs without my help. After all, they were in an English-speaking country and my priority was communicative activities. I intended to design activities that required my students not to find the information on their own but to rather ask their partner or their host family for the answer.

The third factor for my questions was to foster interaction between the Swiss students and their American partners. For these activities I wanted them to actually do things with their partners. This idea stemmed from an idea that my host exchange teacher had sent me. It was a form that she had given her host families to ease some of the anxieties in hosting a foreign student for the first time. This form was apparently used by the German department of Northampton High School for the exchange that they conduct every other year with the German American Association. Even though some of the information pertaining to the exchange students seemed out of context for my own students, the section on "What To Do For Fun" looked worthwhile. It reads as follows.

Figure 1. Host Families Handbook, Northampton High School

What to do for fun
- Attend a sporting event
- County or state fair
- Go to the zoo
- Cook together, make chocolate chip cookies or hamburgers
- Introduce them to your neighbors, friends, and family
- Play miniature golf
- Make a scrapbook

In the same vein, I believed cooking together might be appealing for both partners as well as for the rest of the host family, I told my students before our departure to bring a traditional Swiss recipe for their host families. They went home, asked their mothers for a favorite family recipe, and typed up the

ingredient list and the different steps. As it turned out my partner teacher and I had planned to have a potluck farewell dinner. Both her students and mine were asked to prepare something together for that party. Some of them chose to use the recipe that my students had brought from Switzerland. Later, I heard from a girl in my group that translating grams into cups had been quite a difficult task. Apparently, her cake had double the amount of sugar that she was supposed to have used. But nobody at the Farewell Dinner noticed anything; her cake was gulped down just like the remainder of the desserts.

Final Preparation

As the time for departure approached, I was accumulating activities, but the final days were also quite productive. As we approached the final days before my 2004 exchange to Northampton, Pennsylvania, the partners had been selected, they had made contact, we had attempted some sort of collaborative activities using the Internet, and we had taken care of most of the practical aspects of the trip. We were ready to go but I still had not put together The Folder. Along the way I had decided to name it The Folder because the term Portfolio, which may be more appropriate, is used in our school system to keep a log of all the documents that a student has for a language course, so they already had a portfolio for their regular English class. By naming it The Folder I was also referencing to the computer term "folder." Since we planned to use the computer room and a PowerPoint presentation to wrap up the whole project, that name sounded like a logical choice.

Although the Folder had physically not taken shape yet, I had already made a lot of notes about the items that I wanted to put in it. It was only now a matter of typing, finding the best layout, and printing it. I decided to have a page for each day and between two and three activities per day. Originally, I wanted to have my students write a few lines as if they were writing a diary. However, a few days before our departure my exchange teacher told me that we would all receive a welcome bag upon our arrival which contained, among other items, a diary. I did not want to ask my students to write a diary in their Folder if they were to receive a diary to do just that. So I adapted the top part of my day-by-day page and had them write a few lines in their diaries, not in their Folder.

The Folder began to take shape. I got together some colored paper, thicker paper for the front and the back pages, as well as the actual plastic binder that was to hold all the pages together. Next, I spent six hours in the school's computer room, laying out each page, printing each one in a different color before putting it into the folder. The Folders were ready to be handed out the following morning, at the airport, on our way to the United States.

Getting Students to Use the Folder

My students had to start right away with filling in the activities on the first page which had to do with the train trip, the plane trip and the mini-bus trip. I thought that if they started right away on it then it would seem natural for them to keep writing in it every day.

When I gave the students their Folders I added a heavy dose of warnings, advice and suggestions. For example I told them that they should always have their Folder with them, that we would work on them on different occasions and that they should be ready to spend some time on it in the evening while their partner was doing his or her homework. I also mentioned that since it was to be a day-by-day activity book I wanted them to work on it consistently and not upon their return to Switzerland. They were definitely allowed to get some help from their partner and I would even encourage it. I also told them that this Folder or portfolio had many purposes. The most apparent one was as a keepsake of all the activities and events that took place during their visit to Northampton. At the same time, as a teacher, I told them that there were other reasons for them to work on the Folder. The activities would be of many different kinds, some easier than others, some freer, some collaborative or some plain observation. I told them to pause and look around, observe their surroundings, compare them with what they knew and draw conclusions before continuing their observation. I explained that the activities were also based on our regular schedule. In so far as possible I would have them do the activities during our trip. Finally, I told them that they would receive a grade after completion of the Folder. Of course, I had to clear that with my principal, as it is not customary in our school system to have some students get a grade while others do not do the task.

Upon our return to Switzerland, I asked the students for their feedback in order to have their assessment of the Folder. They were to answer twenty

questions about the Folder. They had a variety of views, which I will outline later in this chapter.

Folder Activities: An Overview

In the following figure I present the Folder activities in chronological order as they appeared in the students' Folders. The first column represents each day of our homestay and is linked, in the second column, to the schedule that we were following while in Northampton as I was trying to follow our schedule in the stream of the activities that the students were to do. Each activity is then named in the third column and appears with the same title as in the actual Folder. The fourth column "Categories" lists the relevant category for each activity. The fifth column is the code that I will use hereafter to describe the subsequent categories.

Figure 2. Overview of the activities present in the folder accompanied by the schedule of the exchange trip.

Day	Schedule	Activities in Folder	Categories	Code
Day 1	Departure from CH Arrival in PA	1. Write a few lines in diary 2. Time in Ch and the US with activities 3. Paste a document from the day	1. Writing 2. Comparing 3. Cut and Paste	**W** **C** **CP**
Day 2	Ice-breaking activities Lunch at school	1. Write a few lines in diary 2. Host family details 3. Essay My first day 4. Paste photo of family	1. Writing 2. Collaborative Task 3. Essay 4. Cut and Paste	**W** **CT** **E** **CP**

Day 3	Pizza party Bowling night	1. Write a few lines in diary 2. Map of the country with questions 3. Map of PA with questions	1. Writing 2. Collaborative Task 3. Collaborative Task	**W** **CT** **CT**
Day 4	Sunday spent with host families	1. Write a few lines in diary 2. Draw a picture of house 3. Draw a picture of bedroom 4. Essay What I see from bedroom window	1. Writing 2. Observation + Drawing 3. Observation + Drawing 4. Essay	**W** **O + D** **O + D** **E**
		FREE PAGE	1. Free Activity	**FA**
Day 5	Half day at school Swiss students visit Bethlehem, PA	1. Write a few lines in diary 2. School staff: names and what they do 3. Daily schedule at school essay Extra-curricular activities 4. Write on free page about prom	1. Writing 2. Collaborative Task 3. Collaborative Task 4. Essay	**W** **CT** **CT** **E**
		FREE PAGE	1. Essay	**E**
Day 6	Full day at school Beginning of Swiss students' presentations	1. Write a few lines in diary 2. Essay Describe the activities done with family up to that day, how different are they from what you do with your family, 3. Essay Activity you liked best 4. Cut and paste a document to illustrate	1. Writing 2. Essay 3. Essay 4. Cut and Paste	**W** **E** **E** **CP**
Day 7	Full day at school	1. Write a few lines in diary 2. Essay Sports at Northampton HS 3. Does your partner engage in sports? 4. Paste something about sports	1. Writing 2. Essay 3. Collaborative Task 4. Cut and Paste	**W** **E** **CT** **CP**
		FREE PAGE	1. Free Activity	**FA**

Day 8	Field trip Washington DC	1. Write a few lines in diary 2. Essay Capitol and American government 3. Draw a map of the center of DC 4. Start thinking about farewell dinner and skit	1. Writing 2. Essay 3. Drawing 4. Collaborative Task	**W** **E** **D** **CT**
Day 9	Field trip Washington DC	1. Write a few lines in diary 2. Essay If I were the President of the United States 3. Paste document about DC 4. Think about your skit	1. Writing 2. Essay 3. Cut and Paste 4. Collaborative Task	**W** **E** **CP** **CT**
Day 10	Saturday spent with host families	1. Write a few lines in diary 2. Fill in chart about meals of the day 3. What did you like best 4. Ask for your family's recipe and write it down 5. Differences between American kitchen and Swiss kitchen	1. Writing 2. Collaborative Task 3. Essay 4. Collaborative Task 5. Comparing	**W** **CT** **E** **CT** **C**
		FREE PAGE	1. Free Activity	**FA**
Day 11	Sunday spent with host families	1. Write a few lines in diary 2. Draw or paste a dollar bill 3. Different coins and bills 4. Explain the Mall 5. What did you buy so far	1. Writing 2. Cut and Paste 3. Observation 4. Essay 5. Essay	**W** **CP** **O** **E** **E**

Day 12	Field trip all students Lancaster, Amish Country	1. Write a few lines in diary 2. Essay difference between young people in CH and in the US 3. Paste something about young people 4. Language of the young people, favorite words	1. Writing 2. Comparing 3. Cut and Paste 4. Collaborative Task	**W** **C** **CP** **CT**
		FREE PAGE	1. Free Activity	**FA**
Day 13	Full day at school Farewell dinner	1. Write a few lines in diary 2. Get ready for the farewell dinner, what to bring 3. Get ready for the skit, what to do and what to say	1. Writing 2. Collaborative Task 3. Collaborative Task	**W** **CT** **CT**
Day 14	Half day at school Departure for New York City Basketball game	1. Write a few lines in diary 2. Saying goodbye, ask partner to write a few lines 3. Paste anything you like	1. Writing 2. Collaborative Task 3. Cut and Paste	**W** **CT** **CP**
Day 15	Visit of Swiss Consulate Visit of UN Headquarters Visit of Roerich Museum	1. Write a few lines in diary 2. Essay Basketball game 3. Paste doc about basketball game 4. Reminder to send all the postcard of fundraising project	1. Writing 2. Essay 3. Cut and Paste 4. Collaborative Task	**W** **E** **CP** **CT**
		FREE PAGE	1. Free Activity	**FA**
Day 16	Visit Downtown NY Statue of Liberty Ground Zero Departure for CH	1. Write a few lines in diary 2. Essay The visit to the Swiss Consulate 3. Essay The visit to the UN 4. Paste any interesting document	1. Writing 2. Essay 3. Essay 4. Cut and Paste	**W** **E** **E** **CP**

Day 17	Arrival in CH	1. Write a few lines in diary	5. Writing	**W**
		2. Final essay What would you have changed in your trip?	5. Essay	**E**
		3. Paste a document from that day	5. Cut and Paste	**CP**
		FREE PAGE	1. Free Activity	**FA**

Categories of Activities and Topics

As you can see in Figure 2 there are seven activities in the Folder: Writing, Essay, Collaborative Task, Cut and Paste, Free Activity, Comparing, Drawing and Observation. Each category was used a certain number of times depending on its importance or on the schedule of events. For example, the Writing category appears seventeen times and was important as a diary type of activity. The Essay section is also very important with sixteen occurrences. There are almost as many Collaborative tasks as they show up fifteen times. The Cut and Paste section appears eleven times and there are five Free Activity pages. Comparing, Drawing and Observation come up three times each. All of the activities in the Folder required students' careful observation of people, surroundings, places or behaviors as well as a thorough comparison to what they knew beforehand or were used to in Switzerland.

The topics for the activities are summarized below in Figure 3.

Figure 3. List of the categories and topics for the activities in the Folder

Categories	Code	Occurrence	Day	Topics
Writing	W	17	Every day in diary	
Essay	E	16	2 4 5 5 6 6 7 8 9 10 11 11 15 16 16 17	My first day, What I see from bedroom window, Extra-curricular activities, Prom, Activities with family, Sports at NHS, Capitol and American government, If I were the President of the USA, What food did you like best, The Mall, What did you buy?, Basketball game, The Swiss Consulate, The UN, What would you have changed in your trip?
Collaborative task	CT	15	2 3 3 4 4 7 8 9 10 10 12 13 13 14 15	Host family details, Map US + Questions, Map PA + Questions, School staff, Daily schedule, Partner and sports, Farewell dinner and skit, Skit, Meals, Family's recipe, Language of young people, Farewell dinner - what to bring, what to do, Saying goodbye, Send all postcards for fundraiser
Cut and Paste	CP	11	1 2 6 7 9 11 12 14 15 16 17	Day 1, Photo family, Family activities, Sports, Washington DC, 1$, Young people, Anything you like, Basketball game, Interesting document UN, Day 17
Free activity	FA	5	4 5 7 10 12 15 17	Page just for you, write, draw, cut and paste or ask somebody to write something
Comparing	C	3	1 10 12	Time zones, American kitchen vs Swiss kitchen, Young people in CH vs in US
Drawing	D	3	4 4 8	House, Bedroom, Center of Washington DC
Observation	O	3	4 4 11	House, Bedroom, Coins and bills

The choice for the topics came from two different principles. The first one was to connect the activities with the schedule of events. For instance, students were going to spend their first weekend with their host families and they would probably have plenty to say regarding the house in general and their bedroom in particular after two or three days. They could address the topics related to the school and the staff after attending classes or giving presentations.

Another major topic was the world of the teenager. Their partner was supposed to talk about his or her free time or extra-curricular activities and my students could then observe and make notes of the language used by the young people, and most probably write in their essays that the language was very different than what we learn at school and in books. In fact, one student concluded that American youth probably used words and expressions that were different from mainstream language just like Swiss students. Another topic was to raise students' awareness of their surroundings, including the host's house, the scenery but also the state of Pennsylvania and the United States in general. For example, the topic of the state bird or state flower came from the portfolio I had seen on the Internet for the exchange between a French high school and an American high school.

The second principle for the choice of the topics was to make sure that students would examine some aspect of their sojourn, notice the difference, and reflect on what it meant. For example, I was interested in having them compare the activities that they were going to do with their host family with the activities that they would normally do at home with their own families. Along these lines, I

asked them to imagine being the President of the United States and to write an essay on that topic, which was another strategy to encourage comparison and analysis.

As for the actual topics themselves, they can be arranged in the following themes:

1.   Family (with the family members names and occupation)

2.   House and bedroom

3.   School (including extra-curricular activities)

4.   Sports (especially the basketball game)

5.   Food (with recipes)

6.   Young people (their language and activities such as Prom)

7.   Money (with the shopping mall)

8.   The United States and Pennsylvania (including the government)

9.   Miscellaneous (first day impressions and Farewell dinner)

For a more detailed list of the topics found in the Folder, see the Activities grid in Figure 3.

Categories of Activities

In this section I describe each of the seven categories of activities that I used in the Folder. I explain how I did them, how students responded and I go on to list changes I would make in the Activities for further use.

It is important to note that while assembling the Folder activities, I had not really thought about how many times to repeat each activity. I did know that I

wanted to have several activities a day (between three and four), that the activities be doable in about fifteen to twenty minutes, varied, linked to the schedule, and based on my students' prior knowledge. In addition, I wanted my students to use the Folder as a way to communicate with their partners, their family, the friends of their American partner and also the other Swiss students.

a) Writing Activities

The Writing Activities were a daily task during the two-week exchange. The students were asked to write a few lines in the diary they had received from their partners on our first day in Northampton. I told the students that I would not read their entries but I reminded them now and again that writing in their diary was part of the tasks they had to do.

I was hoping they would write how they felt, what they saw, what happened, what they thought of an event, a person, a situation, a place. I also thought that by writing a few lines every day they could choose other topics than the ones provided in the Essay activities of the Folder and therefore, that would round out their writing activities. I was not going to read their diary because I wanted them to be as candid as possible while writing it and I believed it would help them if they knew I was not going to read it. There are a lot of things that happen during an exchange that I, the teacher, do not have to know. The students needed to have their secret garden and the diary could be just that.

In fact, one student told me that she wrote in her Folder and in her diary in English and in another diary she wrote in French. Another student told me he

didn't know what to write in his diary since he was already writing everything that was happening in his Folder. For the most part the students said they had been quite regular in their writing in the diary although I am well-aware that some them might not have written a line knowing that I would not look at it.

Consequently, I cannot assess wether the Writing Activities were meaningful and helped my students take full advantage of their exchange. Diary writing has been used in language education as a way of having the students organize and process their thoughts or feelings in a new cultural environment as culture shock happens. At the same time daily writing tasks enhance learning in written English.

In the future, in order to better supervise my students' writing, I will ask them to share one entry that they found particularly engaging. I will also monitor their writing by providing them with something to focus on and observe. That topic-assigned writing will then resemble the Essay activity but will be designed to help students to focus. The difference will still reside in the fact that I will not systematically ask to see the entries in their diaries, but I will only ask for specific items.

b) Essays

In the Folder the Essays ranged from writing four or five lines to eighty or a hundred and twenty words. The students had to write a few lines almost every day but the longer Essays were scattered throughout the home stay. Even though the term "Essay" is a bit pompous for the shorter writings I will use it for lack of a

better word. Still, the Essays were my primary goal for having the Folder, putting aside the objective that it was also meant to be a nice souvenir of the trip.

In my teaching context we rely heavily on writing as my students will take their final written and oral examinations in a year. Most of the activities we engage in at home have an essay section. In writing the Essay I wanted them to put to use the mechanics of essay writing that we had developed during the year. We had looked at narratives precisely and I was hoping they would use that framework. I was also interested in seeing if they had noticed the differences between the American way of life and the Swiss one. In fact I was more interested in the content than in the format. I knew that they would most probably not write a first draft before putting the Essay on paper in their Folder. Since my main objective was to have them experience life in the US I had to take into account that they would not write as well as if they were at school in Switzerland.

The topics of the Essays were varied (see Figure 3) and followed the schedule of events. We started by writing about the family, the house, the school and extra-curricular activities. Then, following our trip to Washington DC, the topics revolved around the American government and the President of the United States with a fictional essay entitled "If I were the President of the United States." Later, the students wrote about the food they liked best, the mall and the items they had purchased. We ended the Essays with texts about New York, the basketball game we attended and our visit to the Swiss Consulate and the United Nations. The very last essay, and also the longest with one hundred and twenty words, was entitled "What would you have changed in your trip?"

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The arguments my students chose to develop in their essay on the President differed greatly. I was expecting them to talk about the President's involvement in Iraq or the government attitude's towards most European countries. Although some of them did talk about those problems, others mentioned the inequality between the people who have everything and those who do not or the health hazard of fast food restaurants. Also, one student gave specific examples about healthcare and Medicare for older people and I know that she just could not have come up with those terms and ideas on her own. She must have talked to her partner and most probably to her host parents in order to research her topic. The whole family probably spoke about the economy or the government at the dinner table and some of the elements of that discussion ended up in her essay "If I were the President of the United States." As a matter of fact, for some of the students the Essays, which I thought would simply be a writing activity, ended up in the category of Collaborative tasks.

This kind of family discussion embodies the exact situation I wanted most out of the whole exchange program, which is to have my students start a conversation about a controversial topic with their partners and get different views on what American people do, feel or live. In that regard the essay writing was a success.

Another student noted on her sixth day essay that there were "not many differences" between her life in Switzerland and the activities she was having with her host family. She continued finding only "slight differences" between young people in both countries but in her final essay she wrote about really enjoying

living with a family that had "different habits" as hers. In fact her reaction to difference was exactly the opposite of what I had presumed my students would tell me. I assumed that they would first all talk about how different everything was before finally realizing that people are the same wherever you may be. This student is the only one who showed such a contrast with my initial assumption and also with the rest of the students who felt, on the whole, that there were quite a few differences at the beginning and fewer at the end of their sojourn.

On the evaluation one student pointed out having done all the writing as I had assigned and finding it unfair that others had done it after the trip. That student even told me that I should check everybody's work as we go along to prevent that sort of behavior.

I have to say that one student did a very thorough job, almost what I had hoped for. The only downside is that he implied he had written most of it after he had come home. Since I had not really said that they absolutely had to write everything out on the spot I can't really reprimand that student. I never said they couldn't do it at home after their return, and so he did. But I know that by doing that he did not appreciate his exchange to the fullest. Experiences and reflection made during the sojourn have dynamic different from thoses made after the trip.

Other students fared poorly on the essay part, not so much because they could not do the task but rather because they did not spend enough time carrying it out. The essays of at least two students were sloppy, uninteresting and

incomplete except for the final essay of a hundred and twenty words "What would you have changed in your trip?" which every student took great care in writing.

Of course, most of the students found the essay more difficult to do because they "had to think a little bit more" although one student found the essay the easiest. Nonetheless, while looking back at my students essay writing I have to say that, on the whole, I am satisfied with their products and the amount of reflection they achieved. Another point to raise on the subject of essay writing for the Folder is that either the reflection, or the length of what was written, varied greatly among the participating students. They all did an excellent job on the three main essays of eighty, one hundred or one hundred and twenty words "My first day," "If I were the President of the United States" and "What I would change on the trip?" but fared poorly on the shorter essays, most of the time answering with either a list or a few words.

Nevertheless, I was expecting the task to be harder than some other task or activity because I know from experience how much it takes to sit down, reflect on what you learned and start writing. Looking at the Essays in the context of the Experiential Learning Cycle (Kolb 1984) I am aware that they experienced something, reflected upon it, drew some abstract conclusions and came up with new ideas to implement in another spiral of concrete experiment.

As far as making changes to the Essay section, I would definitely have to make sure my students write their Essays during the exchange and not afterwards. It detracts from the main goal of the Essays to write them after the

exchange. Also, since my students' longer Essays were better, I could have more of those while redesigning the shorter Essays so that the students would only have to write a list or a few sentences.

c) Collaborative Tasks

The Collaborative Tasks were activities that required the students to gather and write downdown information from people around them. They were not asked to write Essays but rather discover small facts about their partners, their families, their habits or the school.

My objective for the Collaborative Tasks was to make it necessary for my students to interact with their partners or their host families. I wanted to help my students with an activity that would require them to engage in conversations with their host families or with other people at school.

Again, as for the rest of the Folder, the questions followed the course of events and began with some host family details and several questions about the United States or Pennsylvania. After a few school days, there were also questions on the school, the staff and the school's schedule. The Swiss students also had to ask the American students about their views on sports or language and they were required to find out about the host family's favorite recipe. One of the activities, which I unfortunately had to cancel for lack of time, involved getting a skit ready for the Farewell Dinner. Both the American and the Swiss students were supposed to act out in a little skit recapping the highlights of the exchange.

Interaction with the family was necessary when the Swiss students were asked to write about the family's favorite recipe. In their answers they gave a good selection of American favorite food. Most of their answers included peanut butter. One student said that she actually baked some peanut butter cookies with her partner and some of her partner's friends and that it was a very nice activity that everybody enjoyed.

When I asked them to write about the language of the young people they had met, they mostly gave examples of words used by their partners or other students in the school. However one student gave some precise details of why some words are used, although she talked in a general way and not specifically about the language of young people. She said her host mother often used the word "however" because she doesn't want to be always saying "but." This student might have understood more about the power of words than the student who said in her evaluation that she had learned a lot of new words but she could almost not remember any of them three months later. As a teacher I was reminded that unless you use something you may very well forget it in not too long a time.

One student's evaluation stated that the Collaborative tasks were the easiest compared to the Essays that she found the most difficult. As far as the language is concerned the students were able to realize that the language we study at school is somewhat different from the language that is used by young American people. But they also noted that it is the same in Switzerland as we use a different register according to the situation or the people we talk to.

Since cooking was one activity that my teacher partner had recommended as something pleasurable I was happy to see that it seemed to be true. At the same time I felt that not all the students had tried to interact with the same energy. I thought that the student who had baked the cookies had really done something meaningful and cultural but on the other hand the students who went to a laser paint ball activity might also have had an interesting collaborative activity.

The Collaborative Task section will definitely be part of my future Folder although I need to make it more task-oriented. When I asked students to write about the school they listed the names of the people who had some kind of responsibility in Northampton High School. In the future each of them could go and quickly interview a different person. We would then be able to put all the information together and get a complete picture of what kind of people work for a high school in the United States. I am thinking for example about questions on prior schooling for the teachers, questions about the budget for the principal, an example of a new student form from the registrar office, or lunch menus from the kitchen. All that information could then be processed upon our return in our wrap up activities.

d) Cut and Paste

The Cut and Paste activity was the opportunity for the students to find something interesting to paste or tape on to pages in the Folder. They could freely choose an item although at time I assigned a topic that they had to

represent. In that case I was looking to follow the course of events. It was a lightweight activity designed to be a keepsake as well as something easy to do. I wanted them to have realia in their Folder and I figured that pasting something real from a restaurant or the school would make for an interesting reflection.

The instruction was quite straight forward. It was only Cut and Paste something, although it was sometimes linked to the schedule of events or the writing of the Essays, or the Collaborative Tasks.

The most unusual Cut and Paste item was the hospital bracelet that a student had to wear when he spent one night in hospital. Another student pasted the fortune that she received in her fortune cookie the night we had dinner together in Washington, DC. And yet another pasted the official immigration form that any foreigner is asked to fill out upon entering the Unites States. The same student also pasted the wrapper of her favorite snack, ButterFingers, and a small wrapped soap from our hotel in Washington, DC.

This activity was without question my students' favorite activity. In fact all but one of them ranked it as one of their favorites. They felt that they could freely choose what to paste and that it was not something that the teacher was making them do, although it was.

I was expecting my students to Cut and Paste a lot of different items and while discovering their Folders I found quite a few amusing pieces of realia. On the other hand, I was somewhat disappointed that a few of my students only pasted pictures for this activity. Of course "a picture is worth a thousand words"

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and in may places it was just the right thing to paste but on other occasions it seemed that they could have tried to be a little more daring. One student had only pasted pictures from his digital camera and I thought that he had missed out on collecting other souvenirs from his exchange.

I will definitely keep the Cut and Paste activity but I may be a little more direct in the kind of items I would like them to cut and paste. I think they need to be more daring in their choices and I would not accept pictures unless I had specifically requested one.

e) Free Activity

For the Free Activity the students had a complete page to do what they wanted.

The page was blank except for the instruction. On top of the Free Page I wrote JUST F♥R Y♥U. I meant for that page to be open to anything that they wanted to write about, draw or cut and paste. I also told them that they could ask their partner or someone else to write something in it. To me it was an opportunity to do something different. The instruction was quite simple as it read "Feel free to add, write, cut and paste, draw on this page! You might even ask your partner or another friend to write something on it. HAVE FUN!"

Most of the students pasted memorabilia from the trip although one of them asked a teacher as well as the people sitting in class or having lunch with her and her partner to write a few words in her Folder. Another pasted the notes that students passed her during class or down the hall.

This page was chosen twice as being the students' favorite activity. One student wrote that she felt very popular in America because boys stopped her in school to chat with her and she said that sadly in Switzerland nobody would ever talk to an exchange student in our school. This comment was made several times in the students' reflections on young people in Switzerland or in the United States. According to the students' evaluation the Free Page was "great" or "the best" because they could use their imagination and they didn't have to follow any special requirement. They really felt that it was their page and not some homework that the teacher was asking them to complete.

Students seemed to have used the Free Activity page in different ways. Some of them only pasted pictures throughout the Folder and again I found it was not maximizing the potential of that activity. They did not take full advantage of all the possibilities they were offered such as writing a short text or pasting a souvenir. On the whole I much preferred the students who made it out into an interactive page. I was pleasantly surprised with the student who asked her teachers to write in her Folder and I felt it was brave and inventive of her.

I can certainly keep the Free Activity page as it is in the future, as a way for my students to do whatever they want with it. According to their evaluations, that freedom is something they enjoyed. But on the other hand I may tell them what I would rather not see there, a mere photo album. I do not want The Free Activity page to be a simple collection of pictures or just a few words jotted down rapidly but rather another record of my students' interaction with American people.

f) Comparing

The Comparing activity section appears just three times in the whole Folder although it was one of the activities that I thought would be the most interesting for the exchange. The reason for such a small number of occurences is that I am only counting the actual comparison between Switzerland and the US even though the whole Folder is in a way a comparison between Switzerland and the United States.

Of course the whole purpose of the Folder is to open my students' eyes to the differences they might encounter in any subject or area possible. And in that regard it is impossible to be writing about their host family and not compare it to their own family in Switzerland. The same goes for every other activity in the Folder.

Each Comparing activity asked the students to draw parallels between Switzerland and the United States in such areas as time zones, kitchens and young people.

All the students commented on the difference between young people in the United States and Switzerland. They found other young people at school to be extremely friendly to them. Several students also talked about how much they enjoyed living with an American family, how welcomed they felt and how sad they were to leave. Comparing Switzerland with the USA was the best according to one student because "there are a lot of differences in every kind of thing, and I like these differences."

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Furthermore, the students looked at their own school and said that, at home, they would never have addressed a foreign student without being formally introduced first. In the American high school they were treated just "like stars," having people come up to chat with them, ask them questions, pay them compliments or pass them notes with phone numbers to call. They said that now they would be more open when they returned to their school in Switzerland.

However, as far as comparing is concerned, there was one student who hardly wrote about the differences between the two countries or between the people. In fact he was the one and only student who did not do a very good job with his Folder. Some of the items were missing, the Cut and Paste is made of pictures exclusively and the quality of the writing was poor. He said in his evaluation that he "didn't use it in the USA, I don't know why, nevertheless, I pasted some pictures when I was back." This student experienced a greater culture shock than the others mostly because he was paired with a very quiet American boy and I believe he started comparing the fun that his friends were having with their partners to his own situation. This is a comparing activity that I had not foreseen when preparing the Folder. To sum up, I think that student was having a harder time feeling at home in his host family and that it made it difficult for him to complete his Folder and be proud of it.

I have learned a lot from that situation and will better prepare my students for such a situation if I ever get another exchange together again. I will have to consider the issue of culture shock with greater care. There is always more to an exchange than meets the eyes and this is also true of any kind of activity.

Although my students had a very long series of activities to do, I need to account for their state of mind in the completion of those activities. It seems that the student who was feeling a sense of inadequacy with his partner did not manage to put his heart in his Folder at least as much as the other Swiss students did.

As far as the Comparing activities are concerned I might want to make it clearer to the students that in fact the whole Folder is addressing differences. Many other topics can be accessed through a Comparing activity, for example the difference between schools in Switzerland and in the United States to name just one and therefore I could add a few Comparing activities in my next Folder.

Summary

As a result of this project and my reflections upon it I have come to a number of conclusions about the Folder. First, the rationale for having a Folder was that my students benefit as much as possible from their two-week-long exchange through different sorts of activities on different kinds of topics. According to the students' evaluations, I should continue to have a Folder if I ever go on an exchange again. Although most of the students said that the Folder had not been helpful, they still mentioned that it was a good idea to have one. It is possible that they answered in this way because it was the very first question on the Self-Evaluation form. The fourth, fifth and sixth questions of their assessment form dealt with the students' objectives for going on the trip, the accomplishment of those objectives and whether the Folder had helped them reach those objectives. It is interesting to note that even though they had previously said the

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Folder was not helpful, three students believed that the Folder had helped them reach their objectives for going on the trip. Four students later said in the survey that they would not change the Folder because it was either OK, good or perfect. This shows me that the first question: "Was the folder helpful?" may have come too early in the assessment and I might have collected some different answers if I had asked my students to reflect on the activities of the Folder before asking them if it had been a helpful tool. Therefore, I conclude that a Folder of activities is a helpful means of enhancing learning while on a student exchange.

Second, the strong point of the Folder is, in my opinion, the reflection that it generated for the students. They had to observe and reflect before being able to write down their essays or make comparisons between Switzerland and the United States. One student answered in his evaluation form that he thought I, the teacher, had wanted for them "to have a real reflection" about their trip, "enjoy" themselves and be able to "keep a good souvenir" of the whole project. And, in just a few words, this student was right.

Third, the interaction between partners was an essential component of the whole project. Another interesting item is the fact that one student felt "most proud to have being for some days a member of the Family and for talking about interesting subjects with the parents" while another student's "favorite experience was the discovery of a real American family." These statements confirmed my assumption that the interaction between the Swiss and American partners was going to extend to the rest of the family and would give my students more opportunities to live, observe and start to understand the American way of life.

Fourth, teacher input on the students' work was too limited. The weakest point of the day-by-day-activities Folder was the lack of teacher control on the writing activities of the Folder. I need to reassess if it is important for me to have my students write all their essays while on the exchange. Similarly, I need to find out if I want to redesign the Writing activities, the diary entries, so that I have a better grasp of how the students are coping with culture shock or with the exchange overall. I definitely need to be more directive as far as to what I want them to do in the activities. Of course, this means re-designing the whole Folder, taking out some topics or activities and putting some new ones in.

Fifth, I would also like to take advantage of the community around my students to help them engage in more Collaborative Tasks. These tasks could involve the partner and the host parents but also the siblings, the teachers and the staff at the school as well as people in shops, newspapers or offices. As far as the skit is concerned, I still think it would have been a nice activity that the two exchange students could have performed together at the Farewell Dinner. I would definitely need to help them to go through with it but I think we could start practicing in the French class. All the students enjoyed the little skit they put together with the French Club partners on the trip to Lancaster and there is certainly something to be done there.

Finally, following the stages of the Experiential Learning Cycle (Kolb 1984) I put together and tested the Folder, then I reflected upon it weighing its significance, good points and bad points, and I ended by extracting some abstract elements that I will hopefully put together in a new Folder to be tested again. This

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process made me, the teacher, go through the same steps as my students. I was again made aware of the many spirals of the learning process. The description of the experience was an easy task compared to the reflective process and furthermore, the abstract conceptualization. Trying to make sense of what my students had gone through, or had written, proved difficult at times. Nonetheless, I can confirm that the whole process was also enjoyable and worthwhile. After spending some time designing the Folder and actually having my students use it, it was interesting to link my practical experience with a theoretical framework. I was able to revive my prior knowledge of the Experiential Learning Cycle (Kolb 1984) gleaned during my first summer in Approaches class and I realized what a powerful framework it is.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

As a teacher of English as a Foreign Language I have become increasingly interested in fostering communication between my students and the English-speaking world. The utmost experience was for me to take my students on a two-week-long exchange with an American high school. It has been my assumption that a day-by-day series of activities would greatly enhance the learning process of the students involved in the project. The activities, based on acute observation, well-thought reflection, interactive sessions or careful comparison fell well within the framework of Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle (1984). According to Laubscher (1994) in his book about out-of-class experience for students abroad, the key to understanding the host culture is to collect data about observable differences in behavior. He says that the students must become amateur ethnographers in their first step in the experiential and developmental learning process.

The Folder was designed to help my students become better acquainted with the culture they were immersed in. The activities helped them focus on certain areas of the culture and the students could then, after careful reflection, come up with their own abstract conceptualization of one experience before

engaging in the next. It was difficult for them at times to achieve the abstract conceptualization that they were supposed to base on experience and careful reflection. This finding is corroborated by Coleman's affirmation that

> The weakest link in the experiential process of learning appears to lie in the third step, in generalizing from particular experiences to a general principle applicable in other circumstances. (1976, 58)

I believe that my students need to generalizing, as it involves both awareness and skills. Through careful reflection, they can process an experience and gain more from it. Looking at the difference between life in Switzerland and life in the United States will not only help my students understand the target culture but it will also make them more aware of their own culture.

In my teaching context we pay a lot of attention to learning the mechanics of the English language. At the same time our observing how such learning happens is not a standard procedure. Therefore, we tend to encourage the same from our students. We ask them to master the language but we as a rule, we don't ask them to reflect on the different phases they went through as a learner.

Of course, I have always believed that a friendly teaching environment was more conducive to learning and that there is more to teaching than drills or learning something by heart. This alone was the beginning of my search for an ever more holistic approach to teaching. Ever since my two summers at the School for International Training I have become much more aware that teaching requires more than just observation or repetition or copying. The learner must be

taken into consideration because his level of well-being can serve as an amplification or impediment to learning.

The fact that reflection has been another challenge for my students does not therefore surprise me. Prior to the exchange, I had designed some reflective activities for my students in order to prepare them for the reflection I wanted them to go through in the activities of the Folder. Since I could only devote a short amount of our class time to such activities, I don't think I was able to make it clear to them that careful reflection is a necessary step of any learning. They might have understood at the time that for that particular activity they had to reflect back on a specific event but I do not think they understood that for any experience such reflection is a necessary undertaking in order to learn from it.

In the future I intend to carefully go through all the stages of Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle (1984) in activities with my students. I have come to realize that I have also been concentrating on the Concrete Experience and the Reflective Observation phases of the Cycle. It is, therefore, not surprising that it was my students' path as well. I thought I could do away with the complete framework but it is absolutely necessary to not only practice the Concrete Experience and the Reflective Observation, but also the Abstract Conceptualization and the Active Experimentation.

At the time of the exchange, I had to be careful that our trip should not be only a tourist visit of a part of the world where the target language is spoken. The activities of the Folder had to reference the work done prior to the exchange and

the topics studied in language class prior to departure. The exchange would then act as the bonding element between what had been learned at home and the reality that was lived abroad. No only would the student grasp some first hand knowledge of the target culture but he would also realize that he held within himself the necessary tools for communicating in the target language.

The Folder found its place between the activities done prior to the exchange and was followed by the activities done upon our return home. It contained different activities pertaining to several topics. The activities were balanced so as not to require too much time, therefore taking away from the contact time between the Swiss partners and the American partners. And the topics were chosen according to what was had been previously learned in class but they were also based on the schedule of events that we followed while on our two-week exchange.

The students showed a lot of enthusiasm about the whole exchange and the Folder although they mainly regarded the Folder as a keepsake. Even if they appeared not to understand the learning strategies behind such a recording of activities, they responded quite well to the evaluation of the whole process. They even commented that the Folder should definitely be a part of a future exchange.

As teacher I have gone through my own Experiential Learning Cycle (Kolb 1984) first with the exchange itself and then while writing my Master's thesis on the effectiveness of a day-by-day Folder of activities. I can say that I have learned

much about my own teaching and reflecting, being in that regard quite close to my students' struggling with the third phase of the whole process.

At first writing my Independent Professional Project did not require too much of me. I was only describing the course of events, what had happened before, during and after the exchange. I felt that I could master that part of the project.

Later the reflection that took part later proved more difficult for me. At the beginning I had a hard time making sense of the whole project. What helped me a great deal was the reading of pertinent literature. I felt that those writers, the ones that I quoted but others as well, were able to describe exactly what I was feeling, what I thought my students had gone through and what I would have liked to say myself. I would read an article and feel that it was exactly what I was trying to put into words. The thoughts I had were there, but I lacked the form.

At the same time, I felt cramped by my limited ability to write with a high enough academic standard. In my every day use of the English language, I am only required to master a beginner to upper intermediate level of English. I felt at times that I would never be able to achieve such a task as writing my Master's thesis. Part of that assumption lay in the fact that it was a new endeavour for me. I feel confident enough that I can perform as a teacher of English as a Foreign Language but, for the first time, I was challenged in my very knowledge of the English language. I was no longer measuring myself to my students' knowledge of English but I had to write for the community of English teachers, my peers, and

for a degree at an English-speaking institution. And I had to come to terms with the fact that I am not a native teacher, that I do not write as well as one and that I needed to see the written words of others in order to be able to recognize what I would have liked to say.

As a result of my reflection on the Day-By-Day Activities Folder I can first say that the process of developing and assessing the use of the Folder has increased my abstract conceptualization skills and my eagerness for another round of active experimentation. I cannot wait until I have another opportunity to bring my Swiss students for visit at an American high school. I know that the the Folder will continue to enhance their learning of the English language and the American culture.

Furthermore I am hoping to improve the activities on the Folder but I have also been reminded to pay more attention to the process of the actions taken by my students or by myself. The Folder should not only be a mean of recording activities, collecting data or working on improving English skills. It should also foster careful reflection along with cultural awareness.

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