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AH ALUMNI NEWSLETTER

Number 14 – December 2008

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RON'S COMMENTS AND OBSERVATIONS

It was a productive summer—and a challenging fall.

The American Home. When I first got to the AH last June—with the Fulbright group—I didn't notice any changes. In fact, I think someone had to point out to me that the exterior doors were new. They do look more Russian than American—but they are a lot more “energy efficient” than the old doors had become, and, most important, they all open outward. This could save lives in case of an emergency evacuation. Continuing with the safety vein, we now have a collapsible ladder that will make it easier to get out of the attic through the window in the teachers' office should the stairs be blocked, new (easier exit) windows have been ordered for the basement, and emergency lighting will be installed in the basement over the holiday break.

We all of course hope that none of these safety measures will ever have to be put to use.

English Program. Lena Belova and Olya Solovkina are back from their maternity leaves. Both of them are working with the American teachers. We “upgraded” their titles from “assistant” or “consultant” to “supervisor”—keeping in mind, as former AH teacher Ted Walls notes in his essay below, that teachers need guidance and support, not “control.”

There are several advantages to having two staff members working directly with the teachers, especially at the beginning of the fall term. From a practical standpoint, because both Lena and Olya have small children at home, we can anticipate that one or the other of them will regularly need to take “family sick leave.” When they are both available they can obviously provide more assistance to the teachers—and they can provide different perspectives. Finally, as they discuss in their contribution below, they have a lot to do beyond directly assisting the teachers. When they get on top of their current “to do” list, one of the things I'll ask them to work on is a list of “realia,” including photos and video clips, that they would like to add to our collection. I'll send the list to the readers of this newsletter.

One thing we should definitely have is a set of “slides” of signs, etc. with basic English vocabulary, matching our slides of basic Russian vocabulary—see my comments below. I don't think we need slides to help teach the Roman alphabet. Russians are already surrounded by that.

It is obvious that the AH's English program could not exist without the American teachers. Over the years more than 100 intrepid souls, most of them young and inexperienced, have tried their hand at teaching English to more than 10,000 Russians of all ages. Testifying to the success of the program is the fact that we are still going strong after 17 years—with more than 400 students a term enrolled and with a waiting list.

It looks like this next term we are going to have to put more names than usual on the waiting list. We started the fall with nine teachers—with some “overflow” classes taught in the kitchen. Almost immediately one of the new teachers had a family emergency and had to return to the States. We had hoped that she would be able to make it back to Vladimir for the spring term—but that hasn’t worked out. Another teacher, Sara Beach, we knew was only going to be with us for the fall term. She put in 2 ½ years of very much appreciated hard work.

I managed to line up two new teachers, one of whom (Liya Mikhaylova) is already in Vladimir—where she will soon be joined by Austin Wallace. Their bios are available at www.serendipity-russia.com/newteachers.htm. Briefly, Liya emigrated to the States when she was 10 years old. Her English is clearly American, albeit with a slight Russian accent. Her Russian is also very good. Austin taught English for two years in Korea. We are expecting them both to be first rate members of this year’s team.

Unfortunately, as the fall term was coming to a close, two more of the new teachers informed us that they weren’t going to finish out their contracts. (It takes more than a month to make all the visa and “work permit” arrangements for the teachers now. This obviously makes it extremely difficult to replace anyone who gives us less than one month’s notice.)

We know that some people have more difficulty than others adjusting to Russian-American cultural differences, and that not everyone is a “natural born” teacher. But, as Ted discusses in his essay below, with assistance—and a lot of hard work—most people can become decent teachers and, again as Ted notes, get a great deal of satisfaction from helping their students improve their command of the “international language.” In addition, as Nicole Green’s essay illustrates, there are solid practical advantages to “hanging in there” and doing the best possible job.

To partially offset the loss of the two additional teachers, and as an experiment that we’ve been considering for a while, we are going to have a former student of Alexei’s, Lena Somova, teach Z1 and Z2—with help from the American teachers. Galya and Alexei both think that a Russian—with help from “native speakers—should be able to do a good job with these two levels. (It is clear from her generally very low attrition, among other things, that Sara has a special affinity for teaching the beginners. See her “blank slate” essay below. But there aren’t a lot of Saras out there.) Hopefully, this experiment will go well. I’m confident that the “new Lena” will give us—and, most important, her students—her very best effort. (See her brief note below.)

In short, necessity may, in this case, be the mother of a good, consistent approach to teaching the two beginning levels. We’ll let you know how things work out.

“Educational Materials.” Alexei is working on updating the tourist map. It’s a “must have” for all visitors who don’t already know the city well. He is also working on getting maps prepared for the “Brief History of the Vladimir Region.” Hopefully in the not-too-distant future we’ll be able to get that up on the Serendipity website—with a full set of illustrations. It’s already a valuable resource.

Thanks in part to contributions from this year’s Fulbright scavenger hunt where one of their tasks was to take photos of cognate words, we have a very nice collection of “slides” that can be used to help teach the Russian alphabet—and another set of photos of basic vocabulary. (See Alyssa Silverman’s comments below.)

As noted above, Lena and Olya are pursuing the unending task of organizing, updating, and expanding the English program materials. Contributions are always welcome. For example, AH supporter, Catherine Fryszczyn, recently sent another box of donated books for the library. (According to the Russian staff, she has sent some very interesting reading material.) Catherine originally contacted me about the possibility of teaching at the AH. That hasn’t worked out for her, but she has still made a special contribution. Vince White, another individual who has never been to Vladimir, has also made substantial contributions to the library, including sending us a large number of copies of National Geographic. Then there are the contributions made by those of you who have taught, participated in the Fulbright program, studied Russian, or just visited the AH. Your support is greatly appreciated.

Suggestion: In addition to any other “realia” you might want to send, when you’ve finished reading a magazine that you’ve found particularly interesting, especially one with a lot of photos, you might want to mail it off to the AH. Any duplicate copies will be shared with area English teachers who attend the regular workshops we offer.

Send to:

Lena Belova
Letnepervozinskaya, 3
600000 Vladimir
RUSSIA

As noted in Alumni Notes, former teacher Sarah Rorimer has mailed some realia.

Fulbright Program. Overall, our third program went exceptionally well. A hitch developed when the local Federal Migration Service—in operation only since last January—decided that one of the participants had violated the terms of his visa when he asked some allegedly provocative questions of a young Russian reporter. We—especially the teacher in question—endured an unsettling couple of days. But after we presented our case—and a number of people came to our defense—the FMS relented and allowed the teacher to finish the trip.

While the experience was unpleasant at the time, it will undoubtedly be one of the more interesting stories told about the trip in the years to come. And, hopefully, the arguments presented to the FMS will be taken into account in the future. Trying to restrict what can be discussed during educational exchanges clearly runs counter to a major purpose of these programs. For some very positive comments on the trip, see the Fulbright section in this issue and the blogs—which you can access from the Serendipity-Russia home page: www.serendipity-russia.com.

We did some new things—and modified some old things—with this program. On the “new” side of the ledger, we provided each participant with a “mobile phone.” This had just recently become a practical possibility. A decent phone costs about \$50 now, you pay only for time used, and you can add money to your account at any place that sells mobile phones. I thought the phones would probably get only limited use—but that they would provide everyone with a sense of security. Someone who spoke English would always be only a phone call away. It turned out that the phones were used a lot.

For example, we found out that you can receive international calls with no charge to your phone. A number of the teachers took advantage of this to stay in touch with family and friends throughout the trip. The phones were also used to arrange various informal meetings and to stay in touch with host families. In short, we can’t imagine doing without them from now on out.

We substantially modified the scavenger hunt. Last year we thought we might be asking the groups to do too much—and found out that we had not given them enough tasks. Alexei did a good job of remedying that this time around. The participants seemed to enjoy the challenges. (See especially Meredith Clason’s blog.) I think we can be even more creative with the next group.

Once again, Professor Percy Gurvitch’s personal observations on Soviet and Russian history elicited the highest praise. We’ve begun video taping a series of “lectures” by him. He’s given four out of a planned twelve so far. These will be made available on the University of Chicago website Meredith Clason mentions in her Fulbright comments below. Hopefully future Fulbrighters will be able to find the time to view at least a few of the lectures before the trip. The full series will make a valuable contribution to our understanding of Russia for many years to come.

For comments from the Fulbrighters themselves, see below.

Tourism Project. Bruce Wicks is continuing his efforts to help promote tourism development. This past summer he managed to spend a few days in Vladimir. He was also able to make a side trip to Kamchatka where he met with tourism officials and faculty.

While he was in Vladimir, Bruce met with city officials, and he checked out a small canoeing operation that wanted help expanding their business. He also collected some information on an Orthodox priest who has reportedly learned the secrets of an historic style of icon painting. Bruce wasn't able to meet with the priest. But, with the help of additional information Alexei collected, he has checked out some possible funding sources for the priest's operation. Developing information for the canoeing business was a class project this past semester for a group of Bruce's University of Illinois tourism students.

The City Administration wants Bruce to be a major presenter at their next tourism forum which is scheduled for September. And the new director of the Oblast Tourist Information Center has indicated that he wants to cooperate with us on specific projects. In short, there is plenty of demand for Bruce's expertise

The City Administration covered all of Bruce's expenses while he was in Vladimir—and they have promised to do this for future visits. We need to try to come up with a new source for travel funds in order to keep this project going.

Translation and Editing. We've been translating restaurant menus into English for some time now. We've also translated a variety of other texts, including the narration for several videos, some of which have been recorded by American Home teachers. Most recently, we prepared the English version for a video about last summer's Fulbright group visit to School No. 3, and the text for a PowerPoint presentation on the Children's Palace for Creative Activities, which the Fulbright group also visited.

Normally Oxana, or sometimes Natasha, does an initial translation which I then edit. But this two-step process is no longer necessary for the menus. There is a lot of repetition of words and phrases in those which Oxana and Natasha have learned.

This past summer the Fulbright group visited the GULAG Museum in Moscow. It was a sobering experience. It's difficult to believe that so many people suffered so much. The museum had a very professional looking brochure –but it was only available in Russian. After I returned to Vladimir, we contacted them and asked if they would like an English translation. They replied, "Yes, definitely!" With help from Natasha, I did the translation. Hopefully, the next time we visit the museum, their brochure will also be available in English.

We would like to see more Vladimir-area businesses and organizations use our translation and editing services. When the translating into English is done by most non-native speakers, the results are more often than not less than ideal. For example, a beautiful collection of photographs of Vladimir was recently published with both Russian and English text. To put it bluntly, the latter was poorly written. Sometimes, in fact, it wasn't even intelligible. With the help of the American home, this kind of problem can and should be avoided.

Potential Projects. Our visit to the Children's Palace of Creative Activities brought home the need for more such facilities. They are able to serve about 4,000 area children out of more than 20,000 young people in the community. It is widely acknowledged that a lack of things for young people to do, especially in the summer, is resulting in growing problems. A model Community Center could go a long way toward improving the situation. But, unfortunately, the current international economic crisis will undoubtedly make it difficult to obtain funding for a project like this. But this does not mean that we are going to give up on this project. An unexpected opportunity may present itself—serendipitously.

Another, more doable potential project also came out of the Fulbright visit. I am always on the lookout for activities that can enhance tourism—and give at least some young people something interesting to do during the summer. One possibility would be to develop an archery program that could be incorporated into tourism related activities and also developed as a competitive sport. It turns out that Scott Reed, one of the participating Fulbright teachers, used to teach archery. He is in the process of trying to line up some support for an exploratory program.

The more challenging the times, the harder we have to try to find ways to get things done.

Fall tour. Just three people went this time -- but this was better than canceling the trip. As noted below, they had a very good experience. Hopefully this will help us recruit for the next tour.

Far from Normal. For the fun of it, in June I brought two T-shirts that said in large print on the front, "Far from NORMAL," and in small print under that, "Illinois." (For those of you who don't know, Normal, Illinois is where I live and teach.) The Russian staff liked the shirts. They are, after all, physically very far from Normal, Illinois, as well as "far from normal" in terms of their dedication and hard work. (See Carleton College professor Diane Ignashev's very positive comments about the AH staff in issue No. 11 (June 2007), as well as the relevant comments from all three Fulbright groups—and others.)

I gave the sample shirts I brought with me to the two intrepid organizers of our visits to Murom, Lena Pankratova and Natasha Zhylenko. They are also “far from normal”—once again in a very positive sense.

When I returned to the States, I had “far from Normal” shirts made for all the AH Russian staff. These were then hand carried to Vladimir in August.... (The Russian staff of course deserves much more than a T-shirt. I guess I need to win the lottery!)

Dreams Come True

Lena Somova

Note: As mentioned above, Lena will be teaching Z1 and Z2. By all accounts, she is dedicated and enthusiastic. Following are some comments from her.

When I was very young I can remember wanting to be able to write poems in another language—and to see Niagara Falls. I’ve been studying English now for more than 11 years. And I enjoy trying my hand at writing “poetry.” It may not be all that good, but I get pleasure from the effort. (I have also studied German for 3 years.)

Two years ago several of my friends and I got summer jobs at a place called Playland in Rye, New York. We learned firsthand about American culture, made a lot of new friends, and did some sightseeing—including fulfilling my dream of seeing Niagara Falls. (I wasn’t disappointed!)

I am now about to take a major step in what I hope will further the fulfillment of another dream. My goal in this case is to become the best possible language teacher. I have already taught for two years while attending the Pedagogical—where one of my teachers was Alexei Leovitch.

I am very much looking forward to teaching the Z1 and Z2 classes. I hope I will be able to satisfy the students’ expectations and meet the AH’s high standards.

A sample from one of Lena’s poems—written right after seeing the movie, “Dead Poets’ Society”:

*Dream and be free, be a person, we say,
Seize and enjoy every moment and day.*

The Rewards of Working with a Blank Slate

Sara Beach, 2006-Fall 2008

I've loved Z1 since the first class I taught in September 2006. I love watching my students' astounding progress over the course of three months. And I love that I get to work with blank slates. I have no lingering bad habits to correct: no one says "I can't play tennis" and cases of "I am work" are precious few indeed.

And I've been told that I've been able to keep attrition fairly low, which is great. Logically, Z1 is the level that should lose the most students. It's easy for the students to think they can drop by in the evenings twice a week and pick up a foreign language. But of course learning English turns out to require a lot of hard work and patience. I've never thought much about the number of students who stick with it, but I can tell you what I do to make learning as painless, productive, and fun as possible.

The ambitious students always ask me impatiently, "Sara, when will we be able to have a normal conversation?" I say, "You know, you can already talk about your family, your hobbies, your job, your home, your health, your weekend plans, the things you can do well and can't do at all. You can ask about the time, the weather, and how to get around a city." And I try to prove this to them by reversing the roles of teacher and student. I can easily play the role of an innocent abroad, and I make it a point to sit down and ask them for advice. "Is there a good restaurant around here? Where is it? How do I get there?" "I have a sore throat today. What do I need?" "How do you make salad Olivier?" "Americans think that all Russians drink vodka. Do you agree?"

We write a lot. My students write a journal entry on the first day about their family members and their jobs, and I think that being able to do this after the first lesson pleasantly surprises them. Thereafter, we write every week about our apartments, dream houses, daily schedules, food, birthdays, and so on. The sentences are simple, but they can be proud of filling up a whole notebook in English.

Like all classes at the American Home, my Z1 classes are personalized. Our examples come from our lives. It becomes much easier to remember new vocabulary if it's associated with your friends and classmates, and so the whole class knows that Yana is a singer, that Masha goes swimming at 6:00 am, and Artem drives his car to the American Home. And even though sometimes it can bring my fast-paced class to a screeching halt, I always think it's worth the time to provide my students with the most accurate words to describe their lives. Case in point: last year my Z1 class met on Thanksgiving Day, and I asked them all what they were thankful for. Everyone used our nice, basic English vocabulary: "My family," "My health," "My teacher" (aw!)—until we got to Natasha. Natasha didn't want to use just any noun. She wanted to say, "I am thankful for obstacles that make me stronger." I wrote it on the board for her to copy down. A year went by. Last Saturday night I got together with students from that Z1 class who are now in A1 and A2. We even managed to speak some English. And you know what they—all of them—wanted to drink a toast to? "To the obstacles that make us stronger!"

Sara's Great Adventure

NOTE: Alexei somehow managed to persuade Sara Beach to give a major presentation at a conference hosted by the "Pedagogical" (now Vladimir State Humanities University). The conference was on "Changes in Teaching English Under New Learning Conditions."

Lena Belova describes what happened—from her perspective:

Sara's workshop at the "Pedagogical" was scheduled for the second day of the two-day conference. On Friday early in the morning Sara entered a classroom and put all the materials she brought with her on the teacher's desk. It was 8:15 a.m.—15 minutes before the workshop! I noticed that Sara seemed agitated in the face of this new position of an educator—or "professor" as she jokingly called herself afterwards. As the audience was coming in and deliberately occupying back row seats, Sara managed to cope with her fears and merrily greeted the "students." Among the "students" were the Assistant Dean of the Foreign Language Department at the Nizhny Novgorod Linguistic University, authors of textbooks of English for Russian learners currently used in schools all over Russia, Vladimir area English teachers, and first year students from the Pedagogical's Foreign Languages Department.

Even though most people came to the workshop to listen to Sara speaking "native English" or to learn about new ideas for teaching English and not to participate themselves, Sara persuaded every single "student" to take part in interviews. In this role playing exercise each participant was either a famous person or an interviewer. This was followed by a debate. Those reserved, experienced, and hard-to-surprise educators and professors with sincere enthusiasm argued with each other and with the young people over "which city is better, Moscow or Saint Petersburg?" It really didn't matter whether the arguments were legitimate or fabricated, or that the target grammar was comparison adjectives or that there was a so-called generation gap in the classroom. Everyone was SINCERELY involved in this debate. I wish this could happen in every language class.

Sara's comments:

Lena is right—I had no idea what to expect from my audience, especially after I said good morning to the first two men in the room, and they responded with, "Oh, no, we teach German!" But we started off with a good laugh over stereotypes of Russians and Americans (see below), and things went smoothly from there. I was amazed by the interviewers' grilling techniques and the grace under fire of the interviewees. And when they started jumping out of their chairs to defend the honor of Moscow or Saint Petersburg, I really started having a good time.

In my opinion, we should continue to strengthen the ties between the American Home and the Russian educational community. I think visiting and speaking at various schools and colleges can contribute significantly to our mission of cultural exchange. In addition to the

information and ideas we can present to our Russian colleagues, it's important for us Americans to know about our students' educational backgrounds if we want to be better prepared and more effective teachers. I think the benefit will be mutual.

Some stereotypes of Russians—oversimplified by Sara for use in her Z1 class:

- Russians always drink vodka all day and all night.
- Russians always wear fur hats and big coats.
- It's always very cold in Russia, so Russians never eat ice cream.
- It's always very cold in Russia, so Russians never wear shorts.
- Russians always drink tea in the morning, in the afternoon, and in the evening.

Some stereotypes of Americans mentioned by the workshop participants:

- Americans all dress casually—the girls don't look feminine at all.
- They all have dirty shoes.
- They usually eat "fast food." (By this Russians don't mean just hamburgers and fries or pizza, they mean any ready-made, processed, or frozen food not personally harvested and prepared by their babushka.)

Note: Sara just completed 2 ½ years at the AH. She is now moving on to the next stage in her life. We wish her the best of luck!

Our Plans and Ideas

Lena Belova and Olya Solovkina, Teacher Supervisors

Old printed lesson plans. Frankly speaking, they have been lying dormant in the teachers' office for ages. The plan is to get rid of them after looking through them for good activities, pictures, etc. It is VERY time-consuming work, but we do hope that it is worth doing. (We are haunted by the possibility that we might find a super ESL activity that will change the world – or, at least, entertain and educate our students)

Collection of pictures. We are going to decide what types of illustrations are most often used and sort the pictures we currently have accordingly, throwing out the ones that there is no call for. We will then try to organize the collection, so that it will take less time for even new teachers to find what they need.

Grammar database. Currently anyone who needs to find an activity to reinforce a certain grammar point has to look through the lesson plans of the other teachers, grammar references and textbooks, some folders on the computer, etc. Our plan is to put together and to store all the best materials on each grammar topic in one place: grammar explanation – drill – communicative practice.

Conversational topics database. This will contain materials for each conversational topic covered in B, C, and D levels – quotes, texts, discussion questions, etc.

A-level grammar. Even after dividing the A level into three semesters, we've discovered that there is still too much grammar that has to be covered in A1. We are working on distributing the grammar more evenly.

The library. We've almost finished implementing Olya's idea for setting up a "most popular books" section. She "stole" this idea from the "bestsellers" sections in bookstores. We think this will make it easier for AH students to find books of interest to them.

Our mega-project. Creating a completely customized and flexible American Home curriculum that will meet the requirements of the AH program and students' expectations. Now the teachers have to search for materials in various sources; this makes the process of lesson planning rather time-consuming and even painful at times. We hope that the new "textbooks"—which will be based on what experience has taught us works in our program—coupled with the databases, logically organized illustrations and other computerized collections of things like games and music keyed to specific topics will make lesson planning at least a little easier.

Note from Ron: Helping with one or more of the above projects might make for a good internship for an undergraduate or graduate student. Anyone interested should contact me.

Some Observations—from someone who has been there and done that

Ted B. Walls, 2002-05

EDITOR'S NOTE: When Ted started at the AH, he had no teaching experience and had to learn how by actually doing it. Since leaving the AH—after 3 years of increasingly effective teaching—Ted has taught in Poland and now teaches business English in Moscow. His approach to his craft has clearly evolved over the years.

It is true that the very best teachers are born with a special talent that can't be taught. There is an essential quality of creativity and affection for the students which simply cannot be learned. But *effective* teachers can develop with experience in the classroom, hard work, and the help of others.

The fact is that in the beginning, you simply must devote considerable time to detailed lesson planning if you want consistent results. "Winging it" *might* work *sometimes* (that's a big "might" and a big "sometimes"), so the temptation is always there to take the easy way out. However, if you are serious about being an effective teacher this is the very last thing you want to do, because the results will have no consistency, and if something does work for you, you probably won't know why.

Learning to teach effectively is in many ways like learning a language. Current ESL theory holds that learners of a second language find their own path to internalizing it. Every student is

different, with a unique learning style and way of seeing the world. Some researchers (such as Noam Chomsky) go to an extreme, and say that formal language instruction has no direct correlation with language acquisition.

These things are hotly debated in academia—and nothing is written in stone. But we can say for sure that, the skeptics' views notwithstanding, formal language instruction greatly enhances the natural language acquisition process. Our goal in teaching, and in becoming effective teachers, is the same—to encourage the natural process.

If we look realistically, we can see that the true role of the teacher is to guide students through their own personal process of learning a language. Our students will always end up approaching their task in ways which suit them, no matter what we do.

The teacher's challenge is to persuade each student to willingly engage in this process of autonomous development. If we can get the students interested in the language and ignite their desire to be pro-active learners, their enthusiasm will provide the base upon which language acquisition can proceed in a natural way, facilitated by the teacher.

Teacher development works the same way. Just like our students, we will approach teaching in ways which suit us, and this is quite appropriate—as long as our students are able to learn what they need to know. And, like our students, formal instruction can make a major contribution to our learning our trade.

Teaching is a very rewarding profession. Especially when teaching a language, we can see our students make real progress. At the same time, teaching lets us be creative, and express our inherent talents. In fact, truly effective teaching requires creativity—and hard work. We can never lose sight of this if we want to successfully promote our professional development.

Adhering to cookie-cutter approaches leads quickly to burn out. And trying to conserve our energy by winging it doesn't work either. Finding out what works for us—with the help of others—and then putting in the necessary time and effort in order to be well prepared for class are what make effective teaching possible.

Students can easily sense the difference between a teacher who is well prepared and whose heart is in it, and one just going through the motions. Your personal enthusiasm for the job (or lack of it) will be a prime determiner of your students' progress—or lack thereof. So you had better get into it—or get out of it.

So how do we develop into effective teachers, all the while keeping that spark of magic? By doing three things: piggy-backing, reflecting, and acquiring needed tools.

Piggy-backing simply means learning tips and tricks which have worked for others. Teachers are always attending seminars, sharing ideas with colleagues, reading books, constantly on

the look out for something they can use directly or adapt. Some of them get quite giddy when encountering a new technique or exercise, and can't wait to try it out.

For new teachers, piggy-backing is essential. It will stimulate your imagination and creativity much more effectively than a "I can do it by myself" approach. This is not to say that we can't come up with our own approaches, and indeed I am a big fan of "doing my own thing." But you will waste a lot of time if you have to re-invent every pedagogical wheel. Most of what you learn in teacher training courses is, quite frankly, "intuitively obvious"—if you have any talent for the craft. But why wait years to make these intuitions explicit, when you can benefit from drawing on them now? Climb up on to the shoulders of those who've come before. Don't be shy—or bullheaded!

To be an effective teacher also means developing the life-long habit of reflection and self-evaluation. Experienced teachers are always preferred, because they have had time in the classroom to see what is effective for them and what isn't. They have developed their own style, and know how to get the job done. (However, this doesn't mean that everything they do works every time....)

Especially if you are a new teacher, you can help this natural process develop much faster by being *methodically* reflective about everything you do. You learn to set parameters by which to judge your performance, and to make your pedagogical assumptions explicit, so that you can see if they are clear and logical.

This means that you need to ask yourself a series of questions. For example, why do I do things a certain way? Always there will be some implicit "theory" you hold. By bringing it in to the open, you can fine tune it, perhaps changing this, adding that, throwing out a useless assumption.

In other words, we must take the time to think, read, and bounce our ideas off of others—if we want to be effective teachers. Then we must apply what we've learned in the classroom, see what happens—and then ask a new set of questions.

This is when knowing how to develop a good lesson plan helps. Making a lesson plan is really a matter of asking and answering a set of questions: What do I want to accomplish? How will I go about accomplishing it? What problems might I face? What are the limitations of the materials and the learners? Most importantly we ask, "How will I know if I have met my goals? Here is where a mentor is invaluable. A good teacher-trainer will be able to help you formulate effective questions, and then analyze the results with you afterwards. If this is done in a positive way, you will find it to be a very useful and enjoyable process.

Finally, we must acquire the necessary tools—things such as language awareness, classroom management skills, and graded speech.

We must start by developing a good command of what we are trying to teach. You can't try to learn the difference between a subject complement and a prepositional phrase the same afternoon you're going to present this to students. A responsible teacher will go through the grammar schedule for the entire semester, and get a handle on what concepts are going to be covered. Most curriculums build on previous knowledge and unfold the grammar in a logical way, so knowing the material for the level(s) you are teaching as a whole will help you give students a better understanding of each part.

In the classroom, will you put students in to pairs? Give them a pyramid exercise? Do fixed rotation? What is considered to be unacceptable behavior? What is the policy on discipline? What is your policy on turn taking? Where will you stand when you speak to the students? Where will you stand when you use the white board? How will you monitor the students unobtrusively? It is folly to not give these things careful thought before you enter the classroom. Poor classroom management will undermine the most carefully prepared lesson. Learn about these things from your mentors.

How about graded language? Is your speech too fast, or riddled with colloquialisms—or “big words”? Can you use your whole person to communicate? How's your pronunciation? Are your sentences too long? Do you always speak clearly? Do you use the same intonation patterns for every sentence, be it a request, a demand or an apology? Videotape yourself sometime—and have a look.

In short, being an effective teacher requires you to invest a lot of time and energy, and to actively seek the advice and feedback of others. This can be an intense process, therefore it is important to keep in touch with your enthusiasm and creativity, otherwise you risk burning out or “going negative”—which will just make things unpleasant for you and those around you. Strive to make your workplace positive, innovative and exciting. If you find yourself in the role of mentor, don't be pedantic, condescending or over-controlling—encourage the new teachers to find their way and keep their light. Just as students are motivated to learn when a teacher manages to spark their interest—maybe even light their fire—an effective mentor needs to try to get the novice turned on to teaching.

When all is said and done, students who develop a bad attitude and slack off for the most part hurt only themselves. Teachers who enter the classroom unprepared and possibly resentful do harm to their students—and possibly the program as a whole.

But before you give up on teaching, remember that there is nothing more rewarding than seeing your students improve their command of the international language of English—and knowing that that knowledge might very well change their lives for the better in the years to come.

The Unexpected Value of Learning to Teach English Grammar

Nicole Green, 2006-07

When I mentioned leaving the United States and moving to Russia for a year, my friends thought I had lost my mind. When I put everything in storage and my condo up for sale, they were certain of it. Everyone worried about what this would mean for my future. “You’ve always been so focused...aren’t you a little old to be running around like this?” “I’m sure it’ll be fun, but what are you going to do next? You have such a great resume and then...teaching English for a year? What is that?”

I packed my bags and off I went, not sure what to expect. For the first month, I felt excited and terrified. Excited to be living in another country. Terrified because I didn’t speak Russian, I’d never heard of a lot of the grammar terminology, and I had no idea how to teach. The fear soon dissipated somewhere in the midst of week-long birthday parties, trips to the banya and invitations to make blini, to go to musical concerts, to walk in the park, to eat ice cream, to celebrate the New Year.

After returning to the States, I went to a job fair in Washington D.C. A recruiter from a financial planning company walked up to me. “We saw your resume and we know you can teach...we’d like to talk to you about working for us.” Confused, I noted my less than stellar math ability and lack of financial background or MBA. “That doesn’t matter; you know how to explain ideas. That’s all you need to succeed.” This pitch was followed by similar ones from companies selling products ranging from computers to medical equipment.

The proven ability to engage and communicate was a key factor for companies that thought my resume was of interest.

What did I end up doing? My current job involves working for a small business as a corporate trainer, teaching a “Critical Thinking” class around the country. I was surprised and pleased to find that what I thought might have been a professional gamble for the sake of pursuing a personal interest turned into an experience that gave me extra marketability.

I miss walking around in my tapochki, drinking tea and gossiping about the day’s events. My inner idealist still thinks about working for an NGO. But for now, I can say that I’m happy where I am. My time at the American Home was directly responsible for a series of unique job opportunities I would never have considered.

Note: Nicole earned her bachelors degree from the US Air Force Academy—and she has an MA in diplomacy from Norwich University. She spent four years on active duty in the Air Force before teaching at the AH.

FULBRIGHT PARTICIPANT COMMENTS

Discovering Russia Through a Fulbright-Hays Group Project Abroad

Meredith Clason, Associate Director, University of Chicago Center for East European and Russian/Eurasian Studies

It started as an exploratory email message: an introduction, some history on two previous summer programs in Russia, and an inquiry re whether CEERES would be interested in collaborating on a third Fulbright-Hays grant application. While weighing the exciting but labor-intensive prospect, my first thought was: what's in it for CEERES? I knew without looking at the application materials that writing a proposal for federal funding is no small venture but, if successful, could be rewarding in many ways, not the least of which would be its impact on CEERES' K-12 outreach efforts.

There was really no time to ponder this request from Ron Pope, a faculty member at Illinois State University and President of Serendipity-Russia. The deadline for the proposal was a mere six weeks from when Ron first emailed me. The next 48 hours involved research on the Group Projects Abroad (GPA) program, the application procedures and obligations of the institution submitting such a proposal—and filling in our Director who was, at that time, traveling in Dagestan. Another month of writing, editing, obtaining signatures from University of Chicago administrators—and suddenly we were waiting on the decision of the Fulbright-Hays staff and reviewers.

Between the time when the proposal left our hands and news of our success reached us five months later, we had firmed up both the pre-departure workshop agenda and the in-country itinerary for our proposed month-long program “Discovering Russia: Challenging Stereotypes and Media Myths.” And we had run a competitive application process for potential participants. The happy news that we had been awarded funding kept the momentum going as we notified the selected applicants and made plans to rendezvous in Chicago and travel together to Russia.

I accompanied the group as the Curriculum Specialist, a role which facilitated what I considered to be a multi-faceted project with the general goal of expanding CEERES' outreach program. The myriad personal rewards of traveling with the group, including some lasting friendships, are too numerous to mention and, in any case, fall outside the scope of this piece. Here I want to focus on the professional results, which also exceeded my expectations:

- As a National Resource Center, we are always seeking linkages with cultural and educational organizations which focus on the CEERES region. The relationship with Serendipity-Russia and The American Home in Vladimir is a gift that will keep on giving. Serendipity-Russia can provide opportunities for our students to study Russian or teach English, as well as facilitate high school exchanges and cooperation on future programs

such as the Fulbright-Hays Group Projects Abroad. They can also continue to produce extremely valuable support and teaching resources, such as the brief history of the major communities we visited in the Vladimir region, the city map each of us was given on our arrival, and PowerPoint presentations. (For example, the collections of signs with cognate words and basic vocabulary are especially useful. See Alyssa Silverman's remarks below.)

The video taping of Professor Gurvitch's "eyewitness to history" observations will provide Fulbright participants—and many others—with an invaluable resource. (See Ron's comments.)

As for the in-country portion of the program, I cannot say enough positive things about the superb planning and attention to every logistical detail. The planning and care demonstrated throughout our month in Russia by the American Home staff was truly exceptional.

- It is part of CEERES' mission to serve as a resource for elementary and secondary teachers and students. A large part of my goal this summer was to build relationships with the thirteen K-12 educators selected to participate in our GPA. I spent a great deal of time listening and learning about what these educators do and what they need and how CEERES can best serve as a resource for them and their students.
- While fostering awareness of American culture is not central to our mission as a National Resource Center, meeting Russian educators and students has taught me that CEERES can facilitate putting American teachers and students in contact with Russian teachers and their students in a way that fosters a valuable "direct contact" exchange of cultural knowledge and understanding that can't be gained through textbooks and lectures alone.
- Finally, at the heart of the Fulbright-Hays GPA program is the transformation of the knowledge gleaned by the participants into useable teaching materials that will enrich their own classes and can be directly shared by them with others, as well as collected by CEERES and posted on our website. The fact that each participant must create pedagogical materials that will be available to the public – free of charge – will hopefully have a significant impact on both the amount and the quality of information about Russia being covered in American classrooms.

In short, I know that the experience offered by this Fulbright-Hays GPA left an overwhelmingly positive and lasting impression. I know that these enthusiastic and dedicated teachers are currently working on some wonderful projects. They are the answer to my initial question, what's in it for CEERES? Through their creativity and hard work, CEERES will be able to significantly expand our online resources for other teachers and students. And I am confident

that the relationships I have built with this vibrant set of educators will lead to future yet unplanned projects.

(CEERES is currently working on the infrastructure that will allow us to make these curricular projects available on our website. Look for these expanded resources by spring 2009 at ceeres.uchicago.edu)

Additional Comments

Traveling to Russia provided an outstanding opportunity to gather authentic information for the students in my combined class in Russian History, language and Culture. For example, the American Home had started a collection of restaurant, store, street, and other signs, which I was able to use and add to. These slides presented a fantastic way to help my students learn to read Russian, while exposing them to real life Russia. They had fun with the photos. They were pleased that they could read authentic Russian materials and recognize more words than they thought they could.

-*Alyssa Silverman*, Noble Street College Prep, Chicago—a public charter high school

I have been covering Russian topics in my World Civilizations course and my Advanced Placement Comparative Government and Politics course for nearly ten years. Studying in Russia this past summer has enabled me to enliven my curriculum by making it possible for me to go beyond the mere surface of the issues.

In World Civilizations, I am using a lecture I taped about the origins of Russian names to help my students appreciate the rich and varied cultural history of Russia. In Comparative Government and Politics, I have been able to enrich my lectures on Russian history with insights gained from Percy Gurvitch, who provided an interpretation of important parts of Russian history based on his firsthand experience; to use video taken at a huge dairy farm managed by two Americans to illustrate the challenges of transitioning from a command to a capitalist economy; and dissect statistical data provided by Dmitry Petrosyan to help my students understand the demographic challenges Russia faces today.

Most important, I have been able to share with all my students many interesting anecdotes from my experiences in Russia that demonstrate the generosity and good will of the Russian people. My students have really enjoyed hearing stories about our Fourth of July celebration at the American Home, impromptu singing and dancing in Suzdal, and Galya's excellent nursing skills.

Thanks to all for a great experience in Russia.

-*Stephen Dunn*, Lake Forest High School, Illinois

I thought the trip was a fantastic experience—better than I could have imagined. The Russian hosts, the staff at the American Home, my Fulbright colleagues, the rich schedule of lectures, visits to historical sites, kindergartens, orphanages, schools, monasteries, museums, businesses—all of this made for an unforgettable experience.

I brought back a wealth of information for my Russian History class—which, unfortunately, I have to wait until next year to teach—as well as to share with my community. Besides writing an article for my local paper, I presented a PowerPoint lecture to the company where my wife works.

I've sent a year's worth of back issues of Popular Science and Popular Mechanics to my Murom counterpart. She is using them in her English class for electrical engineering students. I plan on sending more magazines to her later this year. Currently, I am establishing email pen pals between Russian and American students, and they are beginning the first stages of correspondence. I just wish I had more time to devote to all these projects!

Ron Pope deserves much thanks for establishing the American Home and setting up the Fulbright program. This experience was very valuable in fostering communication between our two countries. On a personal level, it was transformative for me.

-Bruce Fischer, McFarland High School, Wisconsin

As global problems escalate, so do the challenges of teaching the complex issues of international relations. One of my life goals was to travel to Russia to learn firsthand about the culture, people, and history; as a result of the month I spent with my Fulbright group, I have been able to translate my primary accounts of Russia into meaningful lessons for my students.

The American Home in Vladimir provided a significant foundation for my increased understanding of Russian society. It is clearly an important bridge between Russia and the United States. The staff provides a warm and caring environment in which both Americans and Russians can learn about the similarities and differences between each others' languages, governments, economies, and social customs through useful, interactive lessons and informal interaction. It should be a model for international dialogue.

-Breanne Goldman, History and Consumer Economics, St. Gregory the Great High School, Chicago

While we were in Russia, several of us made a list of things that Russians did not have that we thought of as at least significant conveniences, if not necessities. The list ranged from Tupperware to animal control. In this connection, I realized that when I tried to explain special education to people, only educators on the university level knew what I was talking about. I observed a lack of programs for children and adults with disabilities in schools and in society in general. It was always on my mind while I was there. I wanted Russia to be able to benefit from

special education, but I had no idea how to contribute to that until I met Sergey Kolganov in Murom. Sergey is a social worker—one of the first to be trained in this field in Russia. He is employed at a rehabilitation center for children with disabilities. He approached me and asked if we could open a line of communication about special education programs in the United States. My project is to help Sergey understand the development of constitutional and additional legal rights of people with disabilities and to provide him with examples of successful programs here in the United States. I am currently answering questions he has about The American's with Disabilities Act via e-mail.

-Jackie Lesh, The Baltimore Lab School

The Fulbright experience was unparalleled. Of all the personal travel I've done and educational trips I have been on, the trip to Russia offered the widest range of experiences imaginable. The stay with Russian families was remarkable. It's not every traveler that gets to experience everyday life with a Russian family. I believe life-long connections and memories were made by many—if not everyone—on this trip. The visits to schools and businesses as well as lectures from Russian specialists provided us with a good idea of where 21st century Russia is headed. The trips to historical sites in Vladimir and to Suzdal, Murom, St. Petersburg, and Moscoow showed us something of where 21st century Russia came from. Thanks to Ron and the staff of the American Home, I could not have asked for a better experience in Russia. I am now able to pass on to my students the excitement and passion I have for trying to understand Russia.

-Scott Read, Creekview High School, Carrollton, Texas

I've never been much of a student of history but have learned about the world through my wanderings. A few years ago, I spent some time in Japan on a program similar to this Fulbright trip to Russia. When I put them both together, I have learned a tremendous amount. I feel that I now have some grasp of the broad sweep of history—with its cruelty and repression and its human triumphs all leading us to where we are today.

Russia was full of surprises! I'm still far from making sense of it all. And as world events continue to unfold, so does my understanding of them. Solzhenitsyn's death in August led me to read *A World Split Apart* (his Harvard address). And then there's the conflict between Russia and Georgia. The experience continues....

-Cathy Fielding, Librarian, Monroe May Elementary School, San Antonio, Texas

Trip Blogs: www.serendipity-Russia.com Scroll down the home page to the Fulbright info.

My New Job—and the Relevance of What I Learned at the American Home

Jenya Kislyakova

Note: Jenya filled in for Lena Belova as what is now a teacher supervisor. Alexei helped her find her current position at a private “commercial” school.

I have started a new job as an English language teacher at a children’s center called Mozaika. I teach English 8 times a week, not counting my private students. My Mozaika students are between 3 and 7 years old. The job is challenging. I have to supplement the main course with additional materials, and I have to be creative in order to hold the kids’ attention. I use all the interesting things I can find. I’m constantly learning. I’m trying hard to be the best possible teacher for the sake of my students.

Working with young kids is especially rewarding—I can see the results right away, and they are open to everything I want to try,

What I like best of all is that I can be crazy and creative. I move a lot every day. We jump, run about, do morning exercises (in the evening). You have to give kids exercise. They won’t just sit and listen for a whole hour. I can choose any activities and games, and the kids appreciate it. I have successfully adapted some of the games used at the AH, e.g., *tic tac toe* and *roll the dice*. Currently we are pretending that we are half a dozen little singing teapots.

Although my current job is different from what I did at the AH, I’m using a lot of things I learned there. I think the way the AH program is organized and run provides a good structure for teaching English in a variety of circumstances. One of the things I learned while at the AH is the value of analyzing and noting down which activities worked, which didn’t work and why. Other teachers’ advice is also of great help.

In this connection, several teachers and supervisors have already been to my classes. I now understand the way teachers feel when they are being observed in class. Sometimes the presence of a supervisor makes you feel uneasy, especially in front of a “problem” class, but I’m sure this makes an essential contribution to the teaching process. It just has to be done. I’ve also acted as a supervisor—I helped to train a new teacher for our program. Now there are two teachers of English at Mozaika, both have red-hair, and both share the same first name, Evgenia.

In general, I realize that it isn’t humanly possible to be a “perfect teacher”—but I very much enjoy this profession, and I want to keep improving.

Fall Tour

Les Eastep

The trip to Russia was akin to a "family vacation." Not only was it my daughter's birthday present but also the opportunity to visit the land of my great grandparents. Our guide, Nayda [Pyanikova], was so full of interesting information about the country, the people, the history, the government, and the culture that I had to take notes (and a few hundred pictures) to help in remembering so much. From the "small" city of Vladimir to the metropolitan Moscow (with traffic worse than Chicago at its peak hours), we were able to see and absorb so much more than we had expected.

The downside, unfortunately, was the weather: cool to cold, and cloudy days. The lack of sunshine was made up for, at least in part, by visits to the ballet, the folk concert and, of course, the dinner with a Russian family in Vladimir.

We used some of our free time to take a walking tour of St Petersburg—including a stop at the souvenir market next to the "church on the blood." In Moscow we spent time at the huge outdoor market near our hotel where we made our contributions to the local economy.

In the past few years I've visited China, the oldest country on earth, and one of the newest countries, Israel.

I thought I had seen it all.

It was, indeed, a privilege to visit Russia on the kind of trip that would not have been possible not that many years ago.

Russia has been struggling to catch up with the west for several hundred years, all the while establishing itself as a great power with a magnificent culture—a nation of very proud people.

A return trip is a must. There is too much history and culture to absorb in just one visit.

ALUMNI NOTES

Britt Newman, 2004-06

After leaving Russia in the summer of 2006, Alyona, Alex and I spent two years in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, where I completed my MA in Hispanic Literature. This school year we are living in Seville, Spain where I am working for the study abroad program of the University of North Carolina. Next summer we'll return to Chapel Hill and I'll begin the PhD program. Alex is

growing up with both English and Russian. His favourite cartoons are Cheburashka and Nu pogodi.

My experience in Russia has served me well professionally in ways both expected and unexpected. The teaching experience that I gained in Vladimir has made my teaching of Spanish immensely easier. I got the job I currently have with the UNC study abroad program and teaching English to Spaniards, largely because the selection committee was impressed by my having worked multiple years abroad. And even in my research in Latin American literature I've wound up taking a Russian angle. My MA thesis was on José Manuel Prieto, a Cuban author who lived in Russia from 1981-1995 and whose fiction deals largely with the experience of an immigrant in the USSR/Russia. I plan on continuing a similar line of research for my dissertation, looking at Prieto and at a group of bi-national Cuban-Russian writers, all products of the Cold-War ties between the two countries.

Brooke Ricker, 2005-06

Hi everyone! I am now in my second semester of a Masters in linguistics program at the University of New Hampshire, focusing on TESL. I am teaching freshman composition for international students and trying to keep up on my Russian while enjoying life in the northeast. I miss you all and hope you are doing well!

Sarah Rorimer, 2003-05

I have one more semester at Hunter College—expected graduation is May 2009. I'll be receiving an M.A. in TESOL. I'm currently working as a New York Teaching Fellow at a public school in Queens. We have kids from 78 different countries, but there is only one Russian speaker out of over 3,000 students!

As requested, I've sent a package of "realia" to the AH: menus, ticket stubs, and some advertisements.