FROM THE COORDINATOR

Varme hilsener,
“Varme hilsener” means “warm greetings” in Norwegian. I thought these words were apropos as I am writing this note just as the largest Midwestern storm of the winter kicks into full gear outside my office window. I recently spent an entire school year living, traveling, and teaching in Norway as part of the Fulbright Roving Scholar program. It was a lot of work and there were a few tense moments, as there always will be when you stretch yourself and accept a new challenge such as traveling overseas. This volume of Coastlines profiles the experience of our most recent COST student, Laura, who experienced a few tense moments herself as she completed half of her student teaching semester in Hangzhou, China. The way she responded to those challenging encounters was, to me, the highlight of her trip. Although she would probably tell you that it was the glow in the eyes of her third grade students, the joy of starting an after school English program in her school, or the magnificent landscape of the Zhejiang Province. This is my first year as Director of COST here at UW-River Falls. To past participants, stay in touch. To prospective students, stop by and check us out.

Med vennlig hilsen
“With Friendly Wishes” or “Sincerely Yours”,

Geoffrey Scheurman

NOTES FROM ABROAD

by Laura Byl

I knew going into college that I wanted to travel abroad at some point. I didn’t know how or through which program or if I wanted to miss the excitement and adventures that my friends would be having while I was gone. For me, a whole semester in a foreign country seemed too daunting and too long to be away from by friends and family but just a week or two over J-term or spring break seemed not nearly enough. Then I heard about the COST program which allowed me to travel, to teach, and was set up within a time frame that I thought was perfect for me. Another big bonus of the program was the fact that I would travel at the end of my college career when I would value it the most and during a time in my program when most students move home to student teach. So, I didn’t feel like I was missing as much. I figured I only lived once so I might as well go for it. I applied for the program in the fall of 2011 and began the paperwork and anxiously waited for my placement.

I received my placement before the summer began and had fun researching where I would be teaching. I was placed in Hangzhou, China and would be teaching at Anjilu Experimental School. In the fall of 2012, I began
my student teaching experience at St. Croix Falls Elementary in the third grade. After an accelerated experience of observing and taking on full class responsibilities within an eight week stretch, I soon found it was time to embark on the next segment of student teaching through the COST program. I finished teaching at St. Croix on a Friday. Then headed to the airport the next day and started teaching in China on Tuesday. It was a whirlwind of emotions to say the least. I was excited, proud of myself for achieving my goal, scared out of my mind and wondering why the heck I wanted to do this, praying everything would go ok, exhausted, and completely out of my comfort zone. I remember I just kept looking ahead and figuring out my next move to make it through the flights and airports. Once I was off my last flight, had my luggage and saw my new advisor waiting for me on the other side of the gate, I felt a little better but still felt alone and wondered how I was ever going to figure out this country, especially since I could not speak any of the language.

George, my advisor, brought me to my host family, helped me get settled in then said he would be back later that night to talk to my host parents for me. No one in my host family could speak any English and this proved to be quite a challenge. My host family and I got along for the most part but the language barrier and the expectations of each other proved to be too difficult and I eventually moved in with another host family. This second host family proved to be a much better fit for me because the mother could speak excellent English and they had a more relaxed lifestyle compared to the first family. Going through the experience of not being able to talk to anyone you are living with, even just to explain what you are going to do or where you are going was one of the hardest things I experienced. I have taken great value of being on the other side of the spectrum, being the minority, and having the inability to communicate with almost everyone around you. I think this will help me a great deal as a teacher and give me insight into certain situations.
One of the best parts of my experience was teaching at the school. I worked with two sections of fourth grade and two sections of fifth grade on their English language. Each section had about forty to fifty students crammed into smaller rooms than we have in America. I also started an English club during my experience. I met with third grade, fourth grade, and fifth grade students three nights a week to play language games and get them used to using English outside of the classroom. The students were always so eager to see me and seemed in awe when I was teaching them!! I could not have asked for a better cooperating teacher who became my friend in school and outside of school. Seeing and experiencing the ways Chinese students learned really opened my eyes to the Western ways of teaching. I know I will take the things I learned from teaching in China and incorporate them into my teaching style but there are also things I will leave there as well. I enjoyed sharing teaching styles and I really learned a great deal about myself, my teaching philosophy, and the context of how it feels to be a minority.

Besides being busy teaching, I got to be immersed in the Chinese culture and see some fabulous sites. The city of Hangzhou is very beautiful and surprisingly clean. They are known for the West Lake and have had the phrase "heaven on earth" tacked onto it. My favorite part about the city was that it was the best of both worlds because you were in the city but it wasn’t hard to find fresh air and be in the country as well. I was lucky enough to have a fellow American teaching in the middle school and we become instant friends. I also made some lifelong friendships with students that were studying at the University in Hangzhou through the Experience China program at River Falls. Meeting and making these friends in China made everything that much better. We were able to travel around together at night and on weekends.

Once I was home and able to reflect on my experience, I came to the conclusion that this journey was not an easy one. Being taken out of my comfort zone, placed in an environment where I knew no one, wasn’t able to speak the language, and had a twelve hour time difference from my friends and family, was a shock to my system. After experiencing all the ups and downs and finally arriving home, I know the experience has made me a stronger individual, more grateful for everything and everyone in my life; I appreciate America even more, and I like to think, I am a better person. People ask me if I could do it again, would I? Sometimes I am hesitant to answer but, I think I would say “yes,” because the COST program has changed me in many ways and has made me a stronger teacher.
HELP!

Check out the COST web page at: http://www.uwrf.edu/TED/COST.cfm

BULLETIN BOARD

A must for your COST experience

If you maintain a blog or any other Internet site in the public domain about your COST experience do not make personal comments about teachers and students in the schools where you are placed.

Writing unfavorable comments about the school and your placement teacher[s] on a blog site may result in unfortunate and perhaps detrimental consequence for you as well as the entire COST program:

1. Defamatory comments can result in legal action.
2. The school administration could refuse to take future COST students.

Please be discrete and tactful.

A message from the Director of Student Teaching

Your overseas Cooperating Teacher completes the Student Teaching evaluation form as a midterm and final evaluation. The University Supervisor may use any form from his/her home institution or simply write a narrative of the observation.

When you return from overseas, make an appointment with Mike Martin regarding certification requirements from the Student Teaching office. Student teaching grades are not submitted without US and COST completed and submitted end of student teaching forms.

Money Tips for Safe Travel

As you plan your trip overseas review these financial safety travel tips to keep your money safe and secure.

1. Limit the amount of plastic you take with you. No more than two credit cards or one credit card and one debit card (for cash withdrawals) are recommended.
2. Notify your financial institution that issued your debit and credit card that you are traveling.
3. Carry traveler’s checks. These are great for back up if your credit and debit cards are lost or stolen.
4. Get foreign currency. Get $100 in the currency of the country you are visiting. This will cover expenses before you have the chance to change money.
5. Safely carry your money. If you don’t have a hotel safe, keep your money, credit/debit cards, passport and airline tickets on you at all times. Don’t carry everything in a purse or backpack, use a money belt.

Lines of Communication

Communication between the student and the placement site contact is the responsibility of the student and should take place immediately upon receiving the placement letter. Travel arrangements are the responsibility of the student. Ask the receiving site contact about housing opportunities, the school in which you are placed, clothing requirements, travel in the placement site country (such as which airport to fly into, if you will be met at the airport or need to take public transportation to the site), etc.

Be sure to let us know when you plan to leave for your destination, when you arrive overseas, and when you return from overseas. Use the address from which you receive e-mails to contact us. Stay in touch and be sure to send us digital photographs of you with your students.

Meetings

COST Meeting for Fall 2013: 3:00 p.m. 9, 25, 2013
Lounge area on second floor WEB

Editor, Designer, Production: Nora Koch