

Final report - Switzerland 2014

Ellin Fulford

Information and support

- Previous to our arrival and at our first meeting, Patrick and Stefanie gave us all the information we needed to get on with our stay more than comfortably. Also they updated us when necessary of any changes to our schedule and checked in to make sure we were comfortable when they saw us. Although I didn't need their support too much while I was in Switzerland I felt quite confident that if I did need any assistance I could very easily contact either of them and ask for help.
- The people that I met at the PH were all very friendly and welcoming, there were always people around willing to translate or test out their English skills on us, asking us to join them for lunch or just saying 'hello Australia' as we past them in the corridor. At no point when I was at PH did I feel like an outsider or lost.
- At PH our classroom teachers were very kind, it was hard with some of them not speaking English - or rather us not speaking German - but this was never too much of an issue as there was always someone in the class willing to sit with us and translate where possible or at least the important parts so we always figured it out in the end. In particular I felt I learnt a lot from Art and English these subjects/teachers were very interesting and allowed us to really get fully involved. Cedric was a great German teacher and it was a great idea to get us comfortable with the language, I felt that despite my lack of speaking skills at least he could answer all my questions and help me to understand at least a bit of classroom and conversational German.
- At Elementa, Monica and her team were all lovely to work with. It was obvious from the get go that Monica felt very strongly about what she was trying to achieve with this school and it was interesting to get to see the way she works. However, being the principle and a grade teacher - and having many other commitments - I felt that it was difficult to be in contact with Monica, as I felt that I didn't want to bother her knowing that she had so much to do. This was manageable and didn't cause any problems really, it was only at times that I felt a little bit lost not knowing what to expect from experiences or what was expected of me. In saying that, I do appreciate that it is difficult to juggle so much and I also appreciate that the mentors seem to have a different role in the Swiss programme to Australia. Sarah and Felix - the other 2/3s of Monica's team - welcomed us into their classrooms, they offered us a great amount of freedom and assistance whenever necessary and made us feel very comfortable in their classrooms.
- Ben and Andre were great buddies, they introduced us to their friends and invited us out a few times to show us around and to social events, which was very fun. They were both helpful and very approachable, although we didn't see them a lot they were always friendly and looked after us quite well.

Living in Switzerland

- The accomodation in Baar was great, close to school and PH. Corinne made me feel very comfortable and welcomed and I felt at home very quickly, we got a long very well and had so much to discuss everyday after school. It was very nice living with someone doing the same thing I was doing to be able to discuss and compare our experience, she offered me great assistance when I was unsure of anything and always ready to answer all of questions. They made me feel completely at home, well looked after as well as totally free to do as I wished.
- The costs in Switzerland were generally as I expected, maybe even a bit cheaper. The only thing that I was confronted by was the cost of the train, although I was warned well in advance of this by the international office so really it wasn't a shock, as well the pass was so useful that I felt it was definitely worth the cost anyway. Most other things were quite similar to that at home, with a few exceptions - some things were more while others less so really it evened out in the end.

Overall programme

- The program at Elementa was fine, it was very flexible and gave us the option to experience the whole school. There were occasionally times where we spent a few hours in wholly German spoken classes which was hard and this time could of been better spent planning, although it was good to see how the students interacted in their everyday lives it was quite hard to get a real sense of what we were witnessing without understanding them or what they were doing, particularly as it did end up being a fair amount of time spent watching the class and not being able to assist in any way. It was really great to be able to see every side of the school, and seeing different teaching styles working together.
- The program at the PH was good, it offered us a range of subjects that really gave me a great insight into how teachers develop in Switzerland and what is expected of the students here. Being in classes at PH, interacting with students at different levels and different teachers, allowed me to get a better understanding of the curriculum and the way that the schooling system works here, which I found a little bit harder to grasp from my time at Elementa. Working along side the students at PH was a very interesting way of getting a real understanding of what it is like to work and study here in Switzerland.
- It was much harder than I had expected not being able to speak German in the classroom. I felt as though I was missing an integral aspect of how the classroom/staff room was run, not being able to fully understand the relationships between the students and the students and the teachers and the teachers with other teachers made it very hard to really grasp the classroom dynamics and personalities I was working with. As well, it made it very difficult to form a real connection with all of the students which I feel is always a very important part of being able to put together any sort of learning programme.
- It was very hard to teach the topic of Australia in just 3 lessons and I feel that this detracted from our lessons and made the task quite daunting. Although, we still had a lot of fun putting it together and giving it a go.

Personal evaluation of the stay

- This experience has taught me so many amazing things. In particular, this experience has taught me that it is so very important to truly know and understand your students, their personalities and their backgrounds. Although this concept is by no means new to me this trip has shown me a great insight into having to struggle past barriers; naturally presenting ones like language, as well as those that students put up when they feel uncomfortable opening up to you. This has taught me a great deal about earning your students trust and approaching these situations delicately.
- This experience has taught me an invaluable lesson about the power of communication. To begin with it was terrifying knowing that there were students I could not communicate with but as the days went past I realised that I was learning how best to understand the students without spoken language. This I feel is a very powerful lesson to learn, which of course I have not yet mastered, I think in the future this will make having students who are unable to communicate with me properly a far less daunting thing to overcome.
- This experience put me in a position which is completely out of my comfort zone and made me really consider why it is that I am doing this course, how to tackle new and difficult situations and, why I want to be a teacher at all. It has shown me that when I'm faced with challenges I need to overcome them and I have the ability to do so. It has made me evaluate what it means to be a teacher and, although it has shown me that I still have a lot to learn in my last year, that I am very excited to be able to face new challenges with my own classes.
- This experience has given me an amazing insight into a totally different way of training to teach and of the experiences/ expectation of a totally different calibre of teachers. It has shown me that I need to work hard, to keep myself organised and that I need to learn how to plan more effectively.

I would recommend to other students:

- To definitely undertake an overseas experience. Switzerland is an amazing country, everywhere feels comfortable, safe and welcoming and the education system is very interesting and worthwhile experiencing.
- That they learn some German before they get here, just a bit of classroom and conversational German.
- To feel comfortable in your host family, they have invited you into their home and are interested in making your stay in Switzerland a great one. Ask them questions, get to know them and their way of life. There is no better way of getting an understanding of a country and its people than being able to experience first hand family life in a new country.
- Don't have expectations, they will be wrong. This will be an experience like you've never had before, embrace it instead of trying to compare it to what you've imagined.
- Get the Swiss pass and travel as much as possible, it gives you great freedom and lots of opportunities to experience different things. Especially do things like go to the mountains and explore what Switzerland is famous for, as lovely as the cities are there is so much more to Switzerland than its cities!

Positives:

1. Everyone was so welcoming and helpful, I can't stress this enough, I felt comfortable and safe everywhere I went.
2. This experience has really affirmed for me that I have chosen the right career, I took this opportunity to put myself in a difficult position so that I could test my ability to overcome the hurdles that come with this job and I feel that it has given me a great insight into how to manage new challenges and has got me very excited to really work hard to do the best I can.
3. This country is, as I've already stated, absolutely amazing. I could never have had the same experiences had I been here in a different capacity, being able to have an idea of family life, school life and university life. Seeing the difference between big city and small village, mountains and hills, snow and forests. I have been surrounded by people who want to give me a real Swiss experience and that has been truly fantastic.

Negatives:

1. A month is not a very long time to get into the rhythm of school and university, I felt that trying to teach just a few lessons a week made it hard to really explore a topic and they felt more like stand alone lessons which I felt was not what was expected of me.
2. Although I know this was my own doing and it was mostly easy enough to overcome, I really wasn't prepared for the difficulties of not speaking the language in the classrooms. It came as quite a surprise and it really did detract from what I could learn from being in the classroom.
3. Coming from Australia to a very different program, and it seems expectations from students on practicum, it was hard to come into a new environment and really feel confident that I knew what was expected of me at times. Although we had great information and assistance it was still hard to determine if what we were doing was on the right track. Ultimately I think this mainly comes down to the difference in our course to the Swiss course and the role mentors play in our different systems but I found it was hard to figure out and something I felt I had to figure out on my own.

Finally,

I would like to thank you very much for giving me this amazing opportunity, I have really had the most extraordinary experiences over the past month and am so very grateful to everyone that I have met who have shared these experiences with me and who have helped me in that time and of course those who worked so hard to make sure everything was organised so well for us.