



# Experiencing Difference

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Last Spring, as part of our school's Immersion Week, thirteen students and I headed to Europe to explore the culture, history, food, music, and art of France, Switzerland and Germany. From climbing the Eiffel Tower at 11:30 at night and finding our way back to our hotel using our collective memories and a map, to a half-remembered tour of the beautiful art of the Louvre as our jet lag was kicking in, to the Bavarian tradition that demands that you stand up and sing if you drop your bread into the fondue bowl, to a Lake Lucerne cruise in Switzerland where we chose our future summer homes, the trip was full of fun, laughter, and great memories. But going into the trip, my main goal was to open my students' eyes to the wonderful surprise of difference—different foods, different greetings, different mannerisms, different uses of resources, different means of travel, even different toilets—with the hope that they would see that these differences should be embraced and learned from.

As might be expected, there were many questions throughout the trip, many of them barely hiding a complaint. “Why in the world do we have to pay for water at a restaurant?” “Why is there a bathroom attendant at the public restroom that we have to pay?” “Why do people stare at us?” (as they yelled excitedly to each other across the room). With each question or complaint, they got the same response from me: “Isn't this great? We get to see things from a different perspective!” Then we would have a quick discussion about why that difference might exist and how that difference might be a good way of approaching things. For example, paying for water leads to less waste, a bathroom attendant ensures that the bathrooms are safe and clean, etc. Though I got a few eye rolls for my enthusiasm, it was worth it when all of these more trivial lessons led up to a much more serious lesson—the consequences of intolerance—which came on our last day in Germany, when we visited the concentration camp at Dachau.

Walking through the iron gates that we knew so well from pictures and old news reels, with the words “Arbeit macht frei” (work brings freedom) shaped into the bars, the solemnity of our visit was clear. This was a place to honor those who had died, to educate those left behind, to reconcile and heal the peoples that had been affected. One of my students, obviously shaken, quietly put on his yarmulke and after a quick hug, slipped away to pray. We didn't see him again until it was time to leave. The rest of us went into the theatre for a brief presentation on the history of the place and the atrocities that took place there, and then set out to see with our own eyes what we had only read about or seen on the screen.

Walking down the tree-lined path, it wasn't obvious what had happened here. Even looking at the one remaining barrack with its rows and rows of wooden bunks, the history of this place

didn't sink in. It wasn't until we walked to the end of the gravel path behind a row of trees where the crematorium was located and saw the multiple ovens, and then stood in the "bath house" with its heavy doors and gas outlets, that it became real. Human beings suffered here. Human beings were treated like animals here. Human beings were experimented on here. Human beings died here. Someone's dad, or brother, or sister, or uncle died here. And it was here that my students made the connection: fear and intolerance of people who are "different" can lead to this. They walked through the area in pairs or threes, arm in arm, with respect, reverence, and empathy, struggling with their emotions and with tears in their eyes as they imagined the horrors.

The bus ride back to our hotel was quiet as the students processed what they had seen. All eyes were cast down or looking out the window. But that evening at dinner, they were ready to talk as we gathered together to share our different responses and what we could learn from the experience. Differences should be celebrated. Differences aren't necessarily bad. Accept, love, learn, and work together. Their thoughtfulness and empathy were moving. This was one lesson that couldn't be fully understood from reading a book.

A picture may be worth a thousand words, but in this case, an experience was worth a thousand pictures. And what a privilege for me to share this experience with such thoughtful human beings who will forever look at the world and at difference from a new perspective. "Never Again" says the memorial inside Dachau. After this experience, I am hopeful.

*To learn more about student immersion trips, visit Pam Baker's digital portfolio at <http://dp.hightechhigh.org/~pbaker>*