Reflections on the EU Centers of Excellence Education Trip to Brussels, June 17-22, 2012
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June in Brussels! I would have never guessed my 2012 school year would wrap up with a trip to the heart of the European Union. But what an amazingly intense and interesting trip! Between jetlag and our very busy schedule, I found myself asking what day it was. One of my fellow travelers quoted the name of the movie, “If it’s Tuesday, this must be Belgium”. While our trip was not as long or mad-capped as the 1969 romantic comedy, it was a whirlwind tour – with meetings starting early in the morning and going into the late afternoon or evening. After our meetings, groups of students and teachers would dash out to find a new restaurant or beer hall, often returning later than we had planned – deceived by the sun’s presence at 10pm! Now home and reviewing my notes and itinerary, a few speakers and visits stand out for me.

One of my favorite speakers of the week was our first of the day on Monday morning at the European Commission. Jakob Bork, a lobbyist, professor, and owner of europe360, a think tank, gave a fabulous, user-friendly introduction to the EU. In just under two hours he gave the most expansive and easiest to understand presentation on the EU. Because he is not an employed by the EU, he was the most frank about the ups and downs and future of the EU, which was refreshing and informative. He explained the structure and goals of the EU, and gave an overview of each body within the EU. Throughout the week I often referred to the diagram of the EU structure I had jotted down during his presentation.

That afternoon we visited the US Mission to the EU. I was surprised to learn that there are three US missions in Brussels – the US Mission to the EU, the Mission to Belgium, and the US Mission to NATO. The staff member who briefed us discussed the significant challenges the US – and its missions – faces as the EU has expanded, including when to approach individual countries and when to approach the EU when issues arise.
Another highlight for me was the trip to the European Parliament on Wednesday morning. We met with two members of the Parliament Committee on Foreign Affairs, visited the Hemicycle, and met with an attorney who serves as a translator (she speaks six languages). These meetings helped to understand in greater detail the organization and workings of the European Parliament. It was fascinating to learn about the many difficulties in developing consensus amongst a group of extremely diverse nations with different agendas and goals.

Wednesday afternoon the teachers in the group met with a policy officer of the EU Commission’s Directorate for Education in Culture. She described how the EU is working with the many different systems of education and attempting to develop quality education in all member states, encourage cooperation, and assist with implementing improvements. They are attempting to help the countries with struggling systems of education by integrating some of the policies of the more successful nations, such as Finland and Denmark. Of course, as in the US, they struggle with issues of income inequality, racism, and, in some countries, high rates of drop outs (called ‘early leavers’ in Europe).

NATO was our destination on Thursday morning. There we met with three officials from the US Mission, including David Gherenbeck, who handles arms control and non-proliferation issues. We were briefed on the evolution, structure, and goals of NATO, in addition to the changes in priorities from the Lisbon Summit of 2010 to the Chicago Summit of 2012. They outlined and discussed the three emphases from the recent Chicago summit, including Afghanistan, the capabilities of the alliance, and the importance of partnerships. I was surprised to learn that the US provides 80% of NATO’s budget!

During the week I asked myself repeatedly how I can use what I learned in my classroom. Of course, first and foremost, I will continue to encourage my students to learn languages, travel, and experience other cultures. Nearly everywhere we went in Brussels we met people who spoke multiple languages. Even the bartender at the Irish bar near the hotel spoke three languages fluently!

Beyond that, I gained an understanding of the EU’s evolution and structure, and brought home a variety of teaching tools, which will prove useful in our World History course. I can now explain the Eurozone with greater fluency to my economics students, and my travels helped my cultural understanding of the region which I will utilize in my geography class. Less concrete ideas that I often discuss with students and which came up in discussions during the week include consensus building amongst diverse groups, cooperation and weighing individual interests versus the interest of the whole, and the value of and need for economies of scale. I am pleased to have come home with both specific information that I can implement into lessons, but also more examples of those philosophical issues to use in class discussion.

But wait – there’s more! I also brought home weight – nearly 5 pounds. How could one visit Brussels and not indulge? I tried a variety of beer, my favorite being Lambic, ate Belgium waffles (I’ll never look at an Eggo again), and never turned down an opportunity to try a chocolate! Brussels is a foodie wonderland!

My thanks go to the UW EUCE for providing me with such an incredible opportunity for learning and development.