Brussels, Belgium for a week with a group of amazing students and educators!!! Where does one even begin to reflect? This much is for sure, based on my experience in Brussels, I will never be the same!

Through the European Union, our groups was granted almost unparalleled access to different representatives of the United States and the European Union as we toured the different facilities and were given opportunities to ask questions of hosts. These tours and Q&A sessions gave me professional development connections that have already benefited my classes this year. I also had the chance to share best practice ideas with other teachers from around the country in both formal and informal sessions throughout our tours during the day and our time exploring Brussels in the evening. The friendships and memories made during my trip will last a lifetime.

My adventure began as my made my way to Brussels, through Hamburg, without the ability to speak German or French. Besides some of the normal delays traveling through customs, I managed to meet up with the other Wisconsin educators traveling through the EUCE program with me. Our arrival in Brussels on Sunday morning (along with the advice to not nap) gave us our first opportunity to see the sites before meeting up with the rest of the EUCE delegation. My first trip out on the town gave me an opportunity to try waffles, frites and chocolate before heading back to the hotel. After introductions and directions for the week, a good night’s sleep was exactly what I needed.

Our day one site visits to the European Commission and the European Parliament gave us access to members of the European Union who were able to give great insight into the inner workings of the European Union, its history and how they see their mission in Europe. The
ability to tour the buildings and ask questions of our hosts was definitely a once in a lifetime opportunity.

The second day gave us a chance to see some other perspectives of the European Union in Europe as we visited the European Network Against Racism (ENAR) and European External Action Services (EEAS). As an educator, the amount of resources that I was able to pick-up to use back in my classroom was priceless. Even more impressive was that after our formal meeting Dr. Michael Privot (the director of ENAR) spent some time talking with me and offered to Skype in with my students back in Wisconsin to discuss help us discuss different aspects of racism around the world. I can’t even imagine trying to set up that connection without the help of EUCE and my trip to Brussels!

Starting with the third day of site visits we started to hear the other side of the story as we met with U.S. representatives from the U.S. embassy and U.S. mission to the European Union. Again, the ability to tour the buildings and ask questions of our hosts gave insight into how the United States views the European Union and its role in Europe. The amount of differences between how the U.S. and how the EU view each other was mind-boggling as one is reminded that the one’s perspective can mean everything. This was very similar in our last set of visits as we visited a private think tank in Brussels and NATO headquarters. The different perspectives that these individuals were able to share gave insight into how the European Union and the United States are viewed in Europe which helped to improve my understanding of how things are viewed in the United States.

Not only were the site visits during the day well worth the trip, but the ability to meet with different educators and students from around the United States through informal group work and “tourist time” each night put the trip over the top! I cannot express how grateful I am that I got to experience the best sites, sounds, and food in Brussels with some of the best people I have met. Not only were people willing to intermingle and meet new people each night, but the friendship developed by myself and the other members of the Wisconsin delegation will never be forgotten. The food was great, the historical sites were amazing, and the friendships and memories formed will never be forgotten.

Thank you to the EUCE at Madison and the European Union for the opportunity and experience and I hope that they continue to offer this opportunity to other educators in the coming years.