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# Cultivating a Global Connection

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News Archive

# Cultivating a Global Connection

A Hassenfeld Fellow's transatlantic teaching experience demonstrates the impact of experiential learning through cultural exchange



Westgate holds up a wishbone to the class via skype, so that Ripley Academy students can virtually participate in an American Thanksgiving tradition.

December 5, 2018 | Julia Rubin

In order to demonstrate an American Thanksgiving tradition, senior history and secondary education major Carolyn Westgate chooses two volunteers from the class. One stands to her left and one to her right. She holds a wishbone and tells the students to make a wish, then breaks the wishbone in half. "You won!" she says to the student on her right.

The players in this game are in a classroom at Ripley Academy, in Derbyshire, England. Westgate is in the Global Heritage Hall at Roger Williams University.

This transatlantic, educational exchange is one of the many opportunities for community-engaged learning that the Hassenfeld Fellowship Program supports.

Westgate's lessons are part of a longstanding partnership between RWU and Ripley Academy, launched by RWU Associate Professor of History Charlotte Carrington-Farmer, a Ripley Academy alum, and Jayne Doherty, the Ripley Academy Attendance Officer.

"I wanted to bring global learning into the classroom to not only show what life can offer if you work hard enough, but also allows our students a glimpse into an American life and classroom," says Doherty.

Doherty connected Westgate to Ripley Academy history teacher Paul Shaw in the Fall of 2017. Through the magic of Skype, Westgate has continued teaching his students about twice a month.

In today's lesson, Westgate is using techniques she has learned in RWU classes, experiential learning opportunities, and her own extensive preparation to teach a lesson on the "Myth and Reality of Thanksgiving."

Westgate, who often meets virtually with Shaw to plan, learned that his students had been studying Native American history and saw this as the perfect opportunity to dispel some common misconceptions about Thanksgiving.

Along with the wishbone activity, Westgate shows the class reimagined images of the first Thanksgiving and asks the students what they notice. "They look happy," says one student. "They're sitting with family," says another.

Westgate uses the theory of “multiple intelligences” to show that there is more to Thanksgiving than the information that is commonly told. In just one hour-long lesson, she teaches this message via video clips, art-making, interactive games, reading, writing, and discussion.

After telling the students the real story of Thanksgiving, with both its negative and positive aspects, Westgate explains to the class, “It’s a long and complicated history and we can’t make it such a simple narrative.”

Instead of giving a test at the end of the lesson, Westgate has the class design more accurate book covers for children’s literature on Thanksgiving. Shaw will mail the art to Westgate once it’s finished.

“I like to do something creative,” says Westgate, “so the book cover design is my assessment of what they’ve learned.”

Through the fellowship and RWU’s partnership with Ripley Academy, Westgate can apply a concept she’s studied – that students learn in different ways – to a real classroom all the way across the Atlantic Ocean.

As part of her senior practicum, Westgate will begin a full-time teaching placement at Middletown High School next semester, already possessing the skills and confidence of an experienced teacher. Her professor believes this global teaching experience will give her an edge in the job market.

“The unique opportunity to teach students in the U.K. will set her resume apart when she applies for jobs as a High School History teacher next year. She’s had to come up with creative solutions for engaged learning in order to teach effectively via Skype,” says Carrington-Farmer.

Over in Derbyshire, members of the Ripley Academy community are equally enthusiastic about learning from someone overseas.

“In every class I teach, the students ask what the camera is for and when I tell them it’s so America can teach them, they all want to know when they’ll be taught,” says Shaw.

Next semester, this international exchange will not only continue, but also grow. Westgate will introduce Ripley Academy students to her Middletown High School students via video conferencing and other forms of technology. She will teach the classes together, so that they may learn from one another.

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