

Exploratory Practice: St Petersburg Study Trip

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Abstract

This paper discusses a recent study trip to St Petersburg, Russia. 21 Finnish and foreign students and 2 instructors visited NCC and Finpro in addition to a full cultural program. Experiential learning or learning-by-doing (see Dewey, 1938; Gibbs, 1988; Kolb & Kolb, 2005) is a fundamental concept in education that is especially useful to describe the experience of the students discussed in this paper. The participants saw firsthand what is going on in St Petersburg, Russia, which broadened their perspectives and enhanced their learning. Such study trips are an excellent way to enhance learning.

Russia is a hot topic these days because of confrontations over Ukraine with the related sanctions and confrontations with the West. A typical feature of this Russian sanctions conflict is a general lack of trust among everyone everywhere in the media. With this in mind, in fall 2014 there is an increased interest in Russia among students in Finland. This article will discuss some of the features of the Tampere UAS Area Studies St Petersburg Study trip which took place November 21 – 25, 2014. This paper is not theoretical nor will it test some hypothesis. Instead, it will put forward some of the main ideas of organizing such a study trip and give an overview of some of the impressions of the participants.

Experiential learning or learning-by-doing (see Dewey, 1938; Gibbs, 1988; Kolb & Kolb, 2005) is a fundamental concept in education that is especially useful to describe the experience of the students discussed in this paper. Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle, for example, is based on cycles of learning in which students begin with a concrete experience, move on to reflective observation then abstract conceptualization, and finally, active experimentation. Exploratory practice addresses the concept of collaborative learning, teaching, and research leading to mutual intercultural understanding. This was an essential part of this international project (for both students and teachers), as well as designing activities such as study trips that make learning fun (Alwright, 2003, 2005, Allwright & Hanks, 2009). The pedagogical principles of experiential learning and exploratory practice were utilized on this project.

Visa-free boat trips

Visa-free boat trips are a viable option for study trips from Finland to St Petersburg. Based on observation, inexperienced group leaders in Finland often make mistakes when applying for and preparing Russian visas. For some strange reason, they cannot seem to follow deadlines which if missed lead to late fees and greatly increased visa prices. The visa-free boat trip alleviates the possibility of making mistakes with the visa application. The Finnish company Time Travels (Aikamatkat) is a viable option for short term study trips to St Petersburg because they have extensive experience in St Petersburg as well as a well-organized team on the ground there which can arrange basically anything and deal with any problem that may arise. Russian visas are not required for a seventy-two hour, two nights in St Petersburg plus two nights on the boat study trip. For this particular trip, one day was spent doing study visits and the other two days were spent on

the cultural program. This year, the group consisted of twenty-one students and two teachers. Participants were from eight different countries. The group size was around double the normal Area Studies course group size. This was the 5th group that Markku Lampi and I have led to St Petersburg. Previous visits were to In the past we have visited Kone, Rumpu, NCC, Suomitalo, the Finnish Consulate, Finpro and Sokos Hotels.

Study visit: Finpro

The first visit that was conducted was to Finpro. Finpro is located in the House of Finland (Suomitalo) which houses many of the main Finnish organizations in St Petersburg. Finpro Advisor, Anna Vetrova, spoke to the group. She presented a general overview of how to do business in Russia for people from Finland. She also spoke about the work of Finpro and the recent changes in the organization. She gave pointers like always answer emails within a day so Russian partners will know that you are interested. She said that if you delay, it may be perceived as a lack of interest on your part. She also said that it is important to have advertising materials in Russian and to be able to speak Russian if you plan on establishing a long term business in St Petersburg. She said that connections and personal relations are important but that it is possible to establish a business in St Petersburg without that. She said that St Petersburg is like a big small town in the sense that everyone knows everyone and that if you establish a reliable reputation, people will hear about it through friends or friends of friends. She spent a long period of time answering questions and the session was quite interactive. She said that many Finnish food companies have production facilities in St Petersburg so they are not hit very hard by the sanctions. But, she did say that people feel the sanctions in the way of less selection in some stores and the exchange rate. Overall, it was enlightening and educational.

Study visit: NCC

NCC Housing is a Swedish construction company that has been in St Petersburg since the 1980s and is currently building a number of large scale construction projects in the region. The visit was arranged by project manager Anton Pavlov. During the visit, Project Manager Marko Santala spoke to the group about the company and his experiences in St Petersburg. He gave an overview of the company and then did a question and answer session. One interesting point that came up was that a new NCC apartment in St Petersburg costs a lot less than a similar apartment in Finland. At this point, the sanctions do not affect construction projects as far as importing materials are concerned. The sanctions have affected the exchange rate, which in turn affects the profit margin on the project. At the time this article was written, the ruble was at an all-time low against the Euro of 60 rubles per Euro. The facilities at NCC Housing were modern and state of the art and the participants enjoyed the study visit and interactive meeting.

Cultural program and follow-up

Of course, the trip also included an extensive cultural program including a canal cruise, stretch limo rides, the Hermitage and an optional tour of the Cathedrals of St Petersburg. All and all, many of

the participants said that it was the best trip that they had ever been on. The pre-assignment for the trip was to read or listen to the audiobook written by Jacob Abbot on Peter the Great. This was followed up by a presentation session about a month after the study trip where parts of participants made presentations about their experiences and what they learned while in St Petersburg.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed how experiential learning or learning-by-doing (see Dewey, 1938; Gibbs, 1988; Kolb & Kolb, 2005) and exploratory practice (Allwright 2003, 2005, Allwright & Hanks, 2009). can be used to enhance education via a study trip to St Petersburg. The participants saw first hand what is going on in St Petersburg, Russia, which broadened their perspectives and enhanced their learning. Such study trips are an excellent way to enhance learning.

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