

A trip down Memory Lane – Celebrating 23 years of exchange between the International Courses of Wirtschaftsgymnasium Humpis-Schule Ravensburg and International Business College (IBC) Fredericia

Speech delivered by Dr. Oliver Greuling at the banquet to celebrate the 150th anniversary of IBC Fredericia on 17 April 2023

The kick-off

After some initial and very positive e-mail contacts –dating back as early as 1999– the then headmaster Wolfgang Krapf, Thomas and I followed in spring 2000 the invitation by Flemming Nielsen and Kai Habekost, the then heads of the Fredericia-Middelfart Handelsskole, in order to negotiate the outline for an exchange. Together with Bodil Toft and Susanne Schroeder –who is watching from above and whom we all miss on this special occasion– we quickly realized that we were pretty much on the same wave-length and could do business together.

However, in my memory, the first exchange had a bumpy start. When Herr Nielsen received the three of us in his office for the first informal meeting he offered us a shot of Gammel-Dansk – early in the morning. The class which the Danish team had in mind for the exchange was *“not particularly keen on the project”*, Herr Nielsen bluntly said with Danish and for us rather sensitive Germans shocking openness. He said the students had asked, *“why should we go to a boring place like Ravensburg*

in the middle of nowhere, it is so far away and we have never heard of it”.

Herr Nielsen had responded to the class that for *exactly* these reasons Ravensburg was the perfect match: *“Just give me one reason why the Ravensburg students should come to Fredericia”*. Anyway, he could not convince them, he said.

We were worried that the project was doomed to fail before it started. Herr Nielsen seemed to read our thoughts and poured another glass. He then suggested that we should try to convince the class to come to Ravensburg. They were already waiting for us – right now!

So we made our way to meet the reluctant students determined to promote the project, boasting that Ravensburg might be a small and unknown place, but with its medieval charm and proximity to places like Munich, hosting the famous Bayern football club, it would be just the perfect location.

We gave our very best, until I noticed that all of a sudden Thomas’s English got somewhat distorted. Obviously, my hearing ability got impaired by the drinks. At some point the whole class was cheering to Thomas. However, he had simply switched from English to Danish, managing to successfully ship around even challenging Danish grammar cliffs, as he would later explain to me.

Thomas Wikenhauser – the icebreaker! And teaching with a drink before: this is why I will always remember this situation as our common ‘Mads Mikelsen moment’.

The exchange design

During the visit of the Danish delegation in Ravensburg together with Bodil and Susanne we managed to outline the exchange design which involved a stay for one week in each place, all students should be accommodated in host families, lessons at school with a focus on Danish and German studies respectively, company visits in Fredericia and Ravensburg were to be included and day-trips to other cities were to be planned. The working language should be English in Fredericia and German in Ravensburg.

For more than twenty years the basic framework of the itineraries has not been altered. Ever since both sides have been thriving to put in new elements so that the next exchange would offer a new thrill for everybody participating.

I remember that I only once rejected a proposal. When coming down to Ravensburg in autumn Bodil and Susanne suggested to go to the Oktoberfest. They both were convinced that *“this would be an experience the Danish students will never forget”*. I objected to the idea by replying that *“this could turn out to be an experience for us teachers that we will never forget”*. I hope that both have forgiven me by now.

The common goal for both sides was to bring young people together – almost 1.000, as we guess, which is probably a ‘European record’ as Preben mentioned in his speech at the reception at the city council in Ravensburg last month – and to learn from each other.

Learning involved many aspects, both for our Danish and German students and for us as the organizing and accompanying teachers. I would like to give you a random sample of the lessons we have learnt from the Danish exchange.

The Teacher and Students relationship

Most young people often behave like pretending the world belongs to them – which is somewhat true. Actually, there are no major differences between the Danish and German students. It is rather the small things.

We have learned that our Danish partners are more liberal when dealing with their students on the one hand. They address each other informally by their first names – as are we by the Danish students, or at least by a colloquial *‘Hej, tysk lærer!’*. They frankly speak about private issues with their Danish teachers which German students would rather not negotiate with a teacher.

Danish teachers are also more permissive than we are when some try to push limits. However, they are much stricter once red lines are crossed on the other hand. So it happened that a Danish student was sent home after an unhappy encounter with law enforcement officers between him and his German partner.

From my experience as a teacher trainer I am aware that this education style, a mix ranging from authoritarian to permissive by giving emotional warmth and also exerting control at the same time, is labelled as

‘authoritative’ in educational psychology. There is empirical evidence that this education style leads to a positive development of young people with respect to cognitive competences, pro-social behaviour and above all to a positive self-concept.

The results of this education style can be experienced on each exchange. Our Danish students are more self-confident than our German students – at least at first. We could experience that three weeks ago when they talked with Herr Erster Bürgermeister Simon Blümcke in fluent English about the differences between Germany and Denmark: *“lousy WiFi-connection, too much sausage,”* they said. Their English skills are so good that their German partners sometimes even feel shy to talk to them when they meet them for the first time.

This advantage might be due to the fact that there are –contrary to German television and cinemas– hardly any dubbed feature films available in Denmark as people prefer the English original versions. With the increased accessibility of staying abroad German students have managed to catch up in the meantime.

I remember before the third exchange we had an information evening for the potential next students and their parents in Ravensburg when some parents made critical comments about the English skills of the Danish students as they were no native speakers. *“Well, nor are we, that’s why we can learn from other”*, we replied. They were not convinced by that. Luckily, the second exchange was taking place that week. So we invited some of our students to give an insight about the current itinerary.

German student Chris and his Danish partner Danko kept talking freely about the advantages of the exchange in front of the audience of roughly 300 people – in German. Danko's German was super-fluent and –to everybody's surprise– he also spoke in flawless Ruhrpott-area dialect: *“Der Austausch ist ‘ne echt scharfe Sache. Mann, das musst Du Dir einfach ‘reinzieh’n!”*. I then turned to the critical parents, *“Well, this is how the Danish students speak German. Do you have any more questions about the quality of their English skills?”*. There were none.

Later Danko told me that he was a fan of the German series “Tatort” and his favourite detective was Horst Schimanski, a character of the same style as Bruce Willis in “Die-Hard”.

Compared to the outgoing Danish students the reserved German students keep a low profile, more or less. The only time when things are turned upside down is on the cable car to the summit of the nearby Pfänder mountain in the Austrian Alps: with a height of only a thousand metres. The higher the crowded cabin gets, hovering literally over Lake Constance, the more silence you can hear from the Danish students. Once released on the summit they are relaxed again.

The itineraries

We have enjoyed exclusive company-visits in Denmark where we have always been received by a warm welcome, comprising snacks and drinks for free. Let me name only a few.

We were allowed to see the production of reefer containers right on the shop-floor at Maersk, we were given a welcome at the exclusive Louis Poulsen show-room in Copenhagen, –the place where we Germans regularly fall in love with *“Den lille Havfru”*. And Klaus Anderson, managing director of Fredericia Shipping, who has always taken plenty of time to show us around in his company and the port explaining us how a shipping company tackles international competition. At dairy company Arla headquarters in Aarhus they frankly elaborated on the issue how the marketing department tried to cope with a boycott of their products in Islamic countries after the publication of a newspaper cartoon which was seen by some as blasphemy. There it was again, the Danish openness.

One of the funniest experience was the team-building activity at Legoland in Billund. “Playing good” with Lego bricks can help bringing people together, we could learn there. And, of course, we are in the know about the difference between *Blavand*, *Blataendt* and *Bluetooth*.

Culture

We also have learnt about Danish culture when being hosted in families. The first ten years even the Danish and German teachers were accommodated at their partners’ homes. So, we too, could experience Danish superb hospitality when having ‘*frokost*’ with our Danish partners and we also got an idea what ‘*hygge*’ meant, long before a magazine of the same name was published in Germany. After twenty years saying also

'tak for mad' after lunch or dinner has become common among many German partners who have participated in the exchange.

We have also met each other on private journeys for several times in Fredericia or Ravensburg. Hans-Joern Jagd's family and the Wikenhausers even swapped their homes for a summer vacation. That's rather friends, I think.

Hans-Joern Jagd was my first exchange partner in 2001. After my arrival at his place he surprised me when he said that he wanted to check how much energy he was harvesting as it was quite windy that day. Was he nuts? No, definitely not. In a co-operative with neighbours he operated a wind-mill next to his house, producing their own energy and, of course, selling the surplus energy by simply feeding it into the national grid.

The Danish pragmatic and hands-on attitude coming along with a liking for flexibility is very refreshing and definitely quite different to the German attitude. You might have heard that we are also *discussing* the issue of wind-mills in Germany. Maybe we still will be doing so for the next twenty years.

History

Finally, learning also comprised to know more about the history of both countries. On our day-trip with the first generation to Copenhagen, it was the 9 of April, our German students were puzzled as they noticed that all

Dannebrogs were on half-mast, and at noon we could hear the chimes of the churches.

We then learnt from Susanne and Bodil that this was to commemorate the invasion of the German Wehrmacht in 1940. Our German students were shocked. Then they asked us how we could possibly bridge this part of our common history. Thomas replied *“when going abroad you are always an ambassador of your own country. Hence bridging is possible with a Danish-German exchange like the one we are doing right now”*.

Outlook

The first exchange was definitely more than alright. Alas, it ended in tears. Bridging the gap was taken very seriously by some. In front of the Danish bus heading for Fredericia and just before we wished our Danish partners a *farvel* I spotted Danish student Sören who kept hugging German student Katharina firmly. They both cried desperately. Obviously, they formed more than only a friendship.

Later in the class-room there was no way of getting back to business as usual, i.e. teaching. When I came to the class many sat crying on the floor, inconsolable about missing their dear Danish friends already. The spokesperson of our class, Daniel, made his way to the headmaster Herr Krapf asking for permission that *‘the class may be officially excused from school due to emotional stress for the rest of the day’*. What could we do? We sent them home.

In these times of doubt and crises in Europe I wish our Danish-German exchange project no tears of sadness, but only tears of joy.

Our common exchange programme might have had a bumpy start.

Meanwhile it has become one aspect of our Unique Selling Proposition of the bilingual International Class at Humpis-Schule for which we are very grateful.

As Bodil once said *'bringing young people together is one of the most rewarding aspects for us teachers'*. Everybody who used to be or still is involved in the project surely is looking forward to seeing our exchange going on between IBC Fredericia and Humpis-Schule Ravensburg for the next 20 years – at least!

Thank you very much for your attention. – 'Mange Tak'.