

# Polar Bears, Hot Coffee, Wireless Schools, and Much More: Teaching American Studies in Norway

Lee Ann Potter

On a recent school visit, I taught a class of 22 high school students a lesson about the U.S. Constitution’s Preamble and the purposes of government. At the beginning of class, I was curious about what the students knew in terms of content and vocabulary, as well as how willing they would be to participate in an activity led by someone they did not know. So, to break the ice, I asked them to do a short brainstorming activity with a partner about why they think governments exist. Then, I invited volunteers to share their ideas with the rest of the class. Their responses included:

- Provide hospitals and schools
- Pave roads
- Keep order
- Make things fair
- Help the economy work
- Serve the greater good
- Protect us

I prodded them to elaborate on the last response, asking, “Protect us from what?” The students suggested “diseases, criminals, disasters, polar bears.”

Yes, polar bears.

Had I been teaching anywhere else, I might have thought the students were teasing me. But this particular day, I was teaching at the northernmost school in the world—Longyearbyen Skole on the island of Spitzbergen in Svalbard, at 78 degrees north of the equator.

In Longyearbyen, there really are laws that exist to protect people from polar bears. If a person leaves the city limits, they are required to carry a weapon, and when such an animal is sighted near town, police are immediately called to encourage its return to the wilderness.

My visit to Svalbard during the third week of the polar night (when nights last more than 24 hours)—complete with my first glimpse of the Northern Lights—was one of many highlights for me this year. I am in the midst of a one-year leave of absence from my position at the National Archives, serving as a Roving Scholar of American Studies in Norway, an opportunity made possible through a Fulbright grant. Although I am based in Oslo, I am visiting upper secondary schools all over Norway, teaching lessons to both students and teachers on topics related to U.S. history, government, culture, and geography. And I am certain that I am learning as much as I am teaching. The roving aspect of my job is quite unique—only the Norway Fulbright Foundation makes available such an experience.

Some of the schools have been in geographically remote areas such as Longyearbyen, Stockmarknes, and Finnsnes—towns I had never heard of until this year. Others have been in more urban or suburban areas including Oslo, Trondheim, and Tromsø—cities I’d heard of, but I’m not sure I could

have accurately located on a map until this year. Getting to the schools, I have traveled by bus, car, ferry, plane, train, subway, and creative combinations of the various modes. And I have traveled in all sorts of cold weather conditions, primarily in the dark (but this will change as the midnight sun approaches).

Every school, regardless of location or size, has had wireless access to the Internet and students have had laptop computers loaned or leased to them by their school or county. My class sizes have ranged from a cozy group of three to an auditorium-filled with four classes that totaled 120 students, ranging in age from 16 to 19 (Years 11, 12, and 13).

I am visiting English classes, and have found the students’ language proficiency to be excellent. In part, this is because English is not considered a foreign language in Norwegian schools. Since the late 1990s, students have been required to take it as part of their core curriculum beginning in Year 1 (kindergarten). Proficiency is also due in part to the wide exposure students have to American television programs, movies, and music. I met a teacher in Stockmarknes who confirmed the influence of this exposure when he told me that Will Smith taught him English. He admitted that he’d been a big fan of the early 1990s TV program *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*.

Although I expected some, the abundance of American influence on media here has surprised me. In one of my first



Lee Ann Potter teaches students at the Oslo Cathedral School in Oslo, Norway (Kevin McGuiness of the Fulbright Office, 2009)

school presentations, I told the students that back in the United States, I work at the National Archives. A student asked, “Just like in *National Treasure*?” I said yes, and found myself shocked to learn that nearly every student in the class at this school located above the Arctic Circle had seen the 2004 movie, starring Nicolas Cage, featuring the Declaration of Independence.

### **Dear Uncle Sam**

I have been integrating primary source documents from the National Archives into my presentations, and I am more convinced than ever that they are exceptionally effective teaching tools. The ones that seem to generate the most interest are the letters from children to government officials. I share quite a few of them in a workshop focused on the First Amendment called “Dear Uncle

Sam.” My objective is similar to that of the exhibit unit of the same name in the Public Vaults at the National Archives Building in D.C.: to illustrate how seriously Americans take their freedom to petition their government.

Although Norway’s government is a constitutional monarchy with strong democratic traditions—and numerous political parties (seven of which are represented in the Norwegian Parliament) that reflect a range of perspectives on issues—there is no tradition of writing to officials as there is in the United States. A colleague at the National Archives of Norway brought to my attention one exception. On a visit to her facility in Oslo, she showed me condolence cards and letters that thousands of Norwegians, young and old, sent to the government following the death of Norway’s King Olav V in January 1991. She explained

that such an outpouring was rare in Norway.

### **Nation of Immigrants**

I have received the most requests from teachers for my workshop entitled “Nation of Immigrants.” In this session, students analyze a variety of immigration-related documents (photos, posters, census schedules, passenger arrival lists, and more) from various periods in U.S. history. I have deliberately peppered the selection with documents that include names of, and information about, Norwegian immigrants. Among them are some of my ancestors.

Studying the documents, students see evidence that Americans have come, and continue to come, from all over the world. The documents invite students to imagine what an immigrant’s experience might

*continued on page 86*



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have been like in the past or might be like today. Finally, the documents encourage students to identify complicated issues associated with immigration and compare those the United States has faced in the past with those that both the United States and Norway face today.

In recent years, immigration to Norway has increased dramatically. This is due in large part to Norway's high standard of living, as noted by the United Nations last year when it ranked Norway number 1 on the Human Development Index (see <http://hdr.undp.org/en/>). According to Statistics Norway ([www.ssb.no/en/](http://www.ssb.no/en/)), immigrants currently comprise just over 10 percent of Norway's population, and 8 out of every 10 immigrants have lived in the country for less than 20 years. There is certainly culinary evidence of immigrant influence—Chinese restaurants, kebab stands, and tandorri kitchens exist in communities where the menus of other restaurants still feature salmon, lutefisk, and reindeer meat.

### **Show Me the Money**

Another workshop, "Show Me the Money," has generated interesting conversations about national identity and character. I ask students if they know whose faces appear on Norwegian money. In most cases, the students do not know for certain, but after they check their wallets, they find writers, opera singers, and artists. Next I ask them if they know who is on U.S. currency. Surprisingly, many of them have traveled to the United States and know that George Washington and Abraham Lincoln are on U.S. bills.

Next, I divide them into small groups and distribute to each group an envelope containing an assortment of currently circulating U.S. currency, including both bills and coins. I give the students time to simply study the money with small magnifying glasses; I listen to their comments and respond to questions.

Then, I hand each group a set of portraits featuring Washington, Lincoln,

Jefferson, Roosevelt, and the others, and ask students to do a brief matching activity. This is followed by a discussion about the role of each individual in history; the students note the contrast between Norway's money featuring authors and artists, and U.S. money featuring mostly politicians. And our conversation turns to the appearance, in terms of emotion and presence, of the historic figures.

At this point, I provide the groups with 3–5 quotes selected from primary source documents written by each figure (with the exception of Sacagawea, from whom no such sources exist). I ask the students to read the quotes and determine what character traits are reflected in their words. This is where the conversations get really interesting and I learn how strong the English vocabulary of Norwegian students is! We discuss to what extent self-reliance, loyalty, tenacity, defiance, optimism, and others are "typical" American characteristics, and to what extent they are traits that Americans admire.

We discuss stereotypes as well as the difficulties associated with making generalizations about 308 million people, and then we brainstorm what traits they think are "typical" of the 4.8 million Norwegians. One suggestion that has come up numerous times is "honest" and students insist that you can literally see this—Norwegians demonstrate it through eye contact. I think this may well be true, as I have found that Norwegian students are great at maintaining eye contact!

I have also found that Norwegian students, often wearing scarves and hats in class, are generally comfortable working in groups, responding to questions, and participating in discussions. They usually call their teachers by their first names and admit that their motivation for learning English is that it is the language of the Internet. I have encountered no behavior problems and when I have asked how typical this is, I have been told that the novelty of having a guest speaker from America encourages it. But, I have also been told that Norwegian students like

school, and it is this affinity that insures their good behavior.

### **Similarities and Differences**

I agree with the students that there is much to like: For starters, schedules vary. In many high schools, students are enrolled in 7 or 8 classes that meet 2 times per week for 90 minutes each. In addition, every fifth week, the students attend a single core subject for a full day. They take periodic breaks during the school day and it is rare to hear bells ringing to announce a class change. Most schools do not have a full service cafeteria, so students have the freedom to leave campus at lunchtime. I have been in schools where the teachers and students leave their outdoor shoes by the front door and spend the day wearing just their socks or slippers. I have been to other schools, in more remote areas, where sections of the school serve as youth hostels for students (whose families live far from campus) to live in Monday through Friday, in a boarding school fashion. The strong sense of community in these schools is apparent.

The upper secondary schools offer a variety of vocational options in addition to college track and International Baccalaureate (IB) curriculums. I have visited schools that offer tracks in hotel and restaurant management, media and communications, auto mechanics, child-care services, sales and marketing, carpentry, and more. The programs seem quite similar to certification programs offered in many junior colleges in the United States.

While there is a national curriculum in Norway, there are no nationally mandated methods. So, instructional approaches vary. In some schools, there is widespread use of technology. I have met teachers with their own websites, whose students post journal entries to their class blogs. And I have also met teachers who dismiss the Internet by saying simply that "The boys use it for games, and the girls use it for Facebook." But, more and more, students here

are required to submit their work via e-mail.

Every staff lounge I have visited has a prominently featured, serious coffee machine—some even offer exotic varieties and choices, similar to those of a specialty coffee shop. (I have certainly consumed more coffee this winter than ever in my life.) In most of the schools, there has been a single lunch period and all of the teachers tend to eat lunch together. The lounges do not separate teachers according to department, as they do in many U.S. schools. And I have gotten the impression that as a result, there is a great deal of cross-curricular communication.

I have been surprised, however, that the collegiality that I have witnessed within particular schools does not translate into a larger sphere. There are very few professional organizations for teachers, and I have found myself describing the value that organizations such as the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) provide, especially in terms of network-building and professional growth.

Overall, school facilities have impressed me. New buildings feature fabulous windows, atriums, and artwork. And older schools are clearly benefitting from Norway's successful oil-infused economy, as many are undergoing extensive renovations. One school where I taught, the Oslo Cathedral School, was an extraordinary combination of both old and new. Founded in 1153, the 857-year-old school now resides in a building erected in the first years of the twentieth century, and is well equipped with computers and projectors.

One significant difference between Norwegian and American schools is that the teachers very rarely have their own classrooms. Rather, they move from room to room much more than the students do. As a result, the classrooms do not tend to feature student work on the walls, nor do they reflect the personality of the teacher or the subject matter. While some rooms have been quite bare, all have had windows—and most of them can

open, allowing for fresh air to circulate.

Transportation to and from school reflects another significant difference between U.S. and Norwegian schools. There are no yellow school buses here. But, rather, public buses are used to transport students to and from school. And students pay for their use.

Some days, I have to remind myself that I am in Norway. But there are other days when reminders are not necessary. One such day was in Longyearbyen, when I was served reindeer stew for lunch that featured meat from an animal shot on the annual faculty/student-hunting trip earlier in the year. Another such day was in Tromsø in January. The high temperature that day was about  $-14^{\circ}\text{C}$  ( $6.8^{\circ}\text{F}$ ), and when I commented to the cab driver (who was taking me to the ferry terminal where I would catch the 16:00 (4pm) boat to Finnsnes) that I was still learning to accept darkness, prolonged cold, and snow-packed roads, he told me to just wait until summer, that the next day's high might reach  $-8^{\circ}\text{C}$  ( $17.6^{\circ}\text{F}$ ), and that a single storm dumped 2 1/2 meters (8.2 feet) of snow on the city just a few years ago. (Incidentally, utilizing the metric system and 24-hour clocks has taken some getting used to.) In addition to being honest, his response reflected a few of the other Norwegian character traits that students have suggested in my previously mentioned workshop: patience, acceptance, and sarcasm.

### **Changing Perspectives**

I applied for this opportunity to live and teach abroad for a myriad of reasons—some personal and some professional. Personally, it has been a wonderful experience for my whole family. Professionally, it has exceeded my expectations.

For starters, my assumptions about Norway and remote places have been challenged. I had created a website ([www.leeannpotter.com](http://www.leeannpotter.com)) to accompany my workshops. It clarifies objectives, features images of all of the documents I use in my workshops, and provides links to additional resources. I had originally

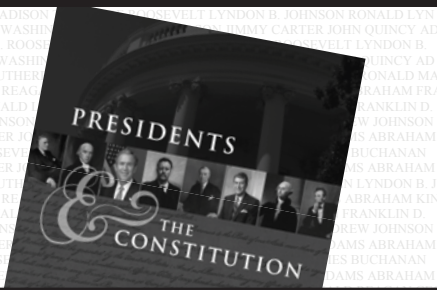
conceived it as a resource for teachers. But with the access that students have to the Internet, I have re-thought its purpose and function and I continue to be amazed that it has been available everywhere I have traveled. I have also used the site to post a blog, which I had never done before this year, and I have appreciated the way doing so has encouraged me to pause and think about the experiences I am having, process them, and describe them in a first person narrative fashion. The feedback I have received from family members, colleagues, and friends all over the world has confirmed for me the value of having friends who are educators.

Secondly, my perspective on the role that the United States plays in the world has been altered. It is certainly not just government policy that influences global opinion—it is everything we export: technology, entertainment, food, consumer products, ideas, and more. Although I have many negative opinions about the police action dramas produced in America that dominate nighttime television in Norway, I cannot help but think that my children may be learning more Norwegian than I am, because they watch their favorite Disney Channel programs in the language.

I am also pleased with many other ideas and actions that we have exported. There are two statues of American presidents in Oslo—one is of Abraham Lincoln, the other is of Franklin Roosevelt. I have not encountered a single teacher or student who does not know who these men were, or how they made a difference. Everyone seems to know about John Marshall, too. I have also met Norwegian high school students able to describe the U.S. Constitution in the context of the Enlightenment—and their discussion of the document reflected an admiration for the founding fathers—their ideas, and actions—that I used to think was uniquely American.

Finally, I have enjoyed meeting new colleagues, whose paths I would never have crossed, who feel as I do about education and the vital role that enthusiastic

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### The Fulbright Bill

As I was preparing this article, I e-mailed a colleague at the National Archives and asked her to take a look at the bill file for the legislation that led to the creation of the Fulbright Program in 1946 (S. 1636, which became Public Law 584; 79th Congress). She did, and she also scanned a few of the pages from the file and e-mailed them to me. From them, I learned that after Senator J. William Fulbright proposed the legislation, he was asked to appear before the House Committee on Expenditures in Executive Departments. He did so at 10:00AM on July 3, 1946, and his testimony (which is in the holdings of the Center for Legislative Archives at the National Archives in Washington, D.C.), runs for 34 pages. As I read his words, I was struck by something he said on page three of his testimony. He explained very simply that the program he proposed “carries in it the possibilities of great good to this country and to international understanding.” I do feel that my experience this year in Norway—more than 60 years later—is exactly what he had in mind!

I encourage you, my NCSS colleagues, to consider applying for a Fulbright opportunity! Check out [www.iie.org/](http://www.iie.org/). And to learn more about education in Norway, see [www.udir.no/Tema/In-English/](http://www.udir.no/Tema/In-English/).

*LEE ANN POTTER is serving as a Fulbright Rov-ing Scholar of American Studies in Norway until June 2010. She is on a one-year leave of absence from her position as the director of education and volunteer programs at the National Archives and Records Administration in Washington, D.C. Potter serves as the editor of “Teaching with Documents,” a regular feature in Social Education, and can be reached at [leeann.potter@nara.gov](mailto:leeann.potter@nara.gov). She would like to thank Christine Blackerby at the National Archives for her help researching the Fulbright bill file. For more information about the National Archives education program, visit [www.archives.gov/nae](http://www.archives.gov/nae).*