

A Marvelous Journey: Calling from Greece to a U.S. Classroom

Lana Holman and John Sucich

“I’ve got this idea. I don’t know if this is practical, but what if you called the students from Greece?”

That is where it all began. An idea that seems impractical can inspire an activity that makes a big impact on a group of students—an experience that they remember years later. John had figured out a way for Lana to “take” fourth grade students with her on a study tour of Greece.

The Beginning

(From John’s point of view.) It was just a couple of weeks into my fourth grade placement as a pre-service teacher when I made this suggestion, and I wasn’t sure how my idea would be received. Lana, the fourth grade teacher at Belmont Day School in Belmont, Massachusetts, was participating in a professional development program called “Greek Studies in the Schools.”¹ As part of the program, she would be spending two weeks of the spring semester in Greece. Her travel created an opportunity for a unique classroom experience, but would it work?

I asked Lana early on whether she would want to try to work a conversation with the students into her trip, with the understanding that she would not have to take on any large responsibilities. Lana did not object; she was glad in fact to have a way to stay connected with the class while she was away. I could tell immediately that she was as excited about the idea as I was. At this point, however, it was still just an idea, and it needed to be developed into an activity that enhanced the curriculum.

A unit of study on Ancient Greece is

a part of the fourth grade social studies curriculum at Belmont Day School. The students spend 10 weeks exploring Greek history and mythology. This year, Lana had decided to try a new project. Each student would create his or her own “ancient Greek magazine,” which would include an article for each topic of study. The articles would include: Vacation Destination (exploring a

place), This Week in History (exploring a significant event), Ask the Gods (interviewing a Greek deity), and Cities in Conflict (retelling part of the Iliad). During one week that I would teach, I chose to have the students write an in-depth investigative article about one of the sites Lana was going to visit.

Lana and I decided that my curriculum would span two weeks: the week before spring break, while she was still at school, and the week after spring break, while she was gone. I thought that since Lana was preparing for her trip to Greece, I would let the students do the same. Each child planned what he or she would take on trips to ancient Greece



John Sucich moderates a call from Lana Holman, who is in Greece.



Lana Holman addresses fourth grade students on her return from Greece.

and modern Greece. The students also researched the places Lana was going to visit. As they researched, they thought about questions they wanted Lana to find the answers to on her trip as well as pictures they might like for their magazines. But what they did not know as they left for spring break was that, when they came back, they would be speaking to Lana while she was in Greece.

In Greece

(From Lana's point of view.) Boston's Logan Airport was buzzing with activity as I looked for a familiar face. I had not yet seen another member of my Greek Studies class, so I just chose a vacant seat in the pre-boarding area. I opened my bag and inventoried my belongings for the fifth time since leaving home. Passport, ticket, notes, *The Odyssey*, questions from my students, calling cards, and the phone number for my classroom - it was all there.

I had one week to answer 52 questions about the places I was visiting in Greece. My students had spent valu-

able time researching the stops I would be making as I journeyed around the Peloponnesus: Athens, Cape Sounio, Olympia, Mycenae, and Delphi. I felt like I had been sent on a special mission, and there was no room for misinformation or failure. At that point, I feared misplacing the list of questions more than I feared losing my passport!

I carried their questions folded and tucked inside a multi-colored journal with a magnetic closure. At each hotel, I checked to make sure the questions were still with me, and I carefully read them over to identify which answers I would be seeking as I toured a new and fascinating place the following day. I also reviewed the sheet of questions on the tour bus and at each site. If our tour guide, Anna Marda, did not answer a question during her talk at a particular site, my hand would shoot up to recite my students' questions—giving the class a voice miles away from their classroom of origin.

"What is the most recent archeological find in Greece?"

"Why are many of the roofs in Athens red?"

"Do Greek ships still have the eye painted on the side?"

"Why would a dagger found in a Mycenaean grave have an Egyptian picture on it?"

The tour, and my search for answers, ended in Delphi. I read what I had written, and clarified some things by reading the notes in my journal or questioning Anna Marda one last time. I felt ready for Monday's phone call. Then something unexpected happened. I realized I was nervous. A new set of questions started swirling in my mind:

What if the call doesn't go through?

What if they can't hear me?

What if they've come up with new questions that I can't answer?

What if they are too loud or all talk at once?

What if I can't find a phone?

If academic answers were my quest the first week, a reliable phone became my quest the second week. I bought an inexpensive (5 Euro) international pre-paid phone card as soon as I arrived. There was a seven-hour time difference, and the ideal time for me to call my class was during my dinnertime. Those dinnertime phone calls had me scanning roadsides as we walked to a restaurant. The availability of a public phone was key to the project and a valid concern. Luckily for me, it worked out, and there was a phone waiting in the perfect spot. I could not have planned it better myself.

Any concerns I may have had about my students faded with the first “hello.” The children were well prepared and handled the situation in a mature, self-controlled way. They took turns, spoke clearly, and listened carefully. At times, it was so quiet on the other end of the line; I thought I had lost the connection. I was assured they were just taking notes.

I made one call per day to the class over five days. We lost the connection only once. It was during the last call, as I began to answer the last question from the final student. Not to worry, I could easily supply that answer first thing Monday morning, in person. I hung up the phone, folded my tattered and worn sheet of questions, and placed them one last time into the safety of my journal. I remember the night was warm as I looked down the street of Athenian shops and restaurants. My mission was complete. It was almost time to fly home and come face-to-face with my students at our press conference on Monday.

In the Classroom

(From John's point of view.) “Mrs. Holman is going to call us from Greece every day this week, and each one of you is going to get the chance to talk to her and ask her your questions!” I began our morning meeting the week after spring break with this big announcement. At this point, I may have been more excited about this opportunity than the fourth

graders. All our preparation would now be put into action. Lana had been in Greece for a week already, and she had supposedly done all her research. All that was left was for her to call in and answer two questions from each student, with six students talking to her each day.

The first thing for me to do, in order to set the tone for the week, was to lay out how the phone conversations were going to work. The students needed to know that they could not chitchat on the international phone call—they were going to have to ask their questions promptly, then hand the phone to the next speaker. We spent part of the morning practicing how each group of six students would line up, where they would stand when it was their turn to use the speakerphone, and how they would go back to their seats without interrupting the next student.

We also talked about how the rest of the class needed to be silent while each student spoke, and while Mrs. Holman replied. The students agreed that taking notes during these long-distance conversations might be a useful thing to do while they were sitting at their desks. At this point, the students were curious, but I did not detect any great enthusiasm for this project.

Finally, the day arrived for the call. The minutes ticked by slowly that Monday afternoon. At this point, I had not spoken to Lana in more than a week. I was sure she remembered that she was going to call us, but I did not trust that all the technology would work. What if the speakerphone function on the classroom phone didn't work? What if the calling card failed? I was anxious during that afternoon's spelling lesson (which was based on words with Greek roots). Never had I been more eager to have a lesson interrupted.

A few long minutes after the scheduled time of 1:30 p.m., Lana called in. Hearing their teacher's voice on the phone from Greece—that was the moment when students' eyes lit up. Suddenly, the class was excited about this project. The students asking the

questions that day lined up perfectly. Everyone else in the class was very respectful, sitting silently or standing in line without talking.

None of the calls lasted more than fifteen minutes, so there was a lot more to do than just get information from Lana over the phone. The students needed to prepare their final magazine article, the investigative piece. In fact, part of the investigative piece was happening while the students were speaking with Lana—they were taking notes on her answers and using those notes to supplement the research they were doing in class. The final piece of this last article, though, would have to wait until Lana returned to school and conducted her press conference for the students. We needed to prepare for that event.

In addition to the articles, the students were working on posters of the sites that they had investigated: Athens, Mycenae, Cape Sounio, Pylos, Olympia, and Delphi. The posters included some of the facts the students had researched, some original unanswered questions about a site, and a map showing a site's location. These posters were displayed in the hall for the rest of the school year.

Geography and Modern Greece

I also wanted to make sure the students saw the connection between the ancient Greece they were studying and the modern country of Greece that Lana was visiting. One afternoon, while waiting for Lana to call, I used the classroom SmartBoard (an interactive white board) to illustrate Lana's trip. I had a copy of her itinerary, and I told the students where Lana was going and when she would arrive at various points. Together, we found the sites on the map and traced her route around Greece, noting which places had undergone the biggest changes since ancient times.

The week during which Lana was in Greece went by very quickly (probably more quickly for her in Greece than for us in the classroom), but the fun was not over yet. We eagerly awaited Lana's “press conference,” which would mark

her return to school. I led up to the press conference with a few lessons on making sure students understood how to integrate the who, what, where, when, why, and how into their articles. I also held a mock press conference to review the ground rules of interviews and how to ask questions that would elicit answers that might then provide information needed to form a story. We also discussed ways to incorporate quotations into writing.

Homecoming

(From Lana's point of view.)

On the Monday morning after my return to the United States, at 9:00 a.m., the students filed into Coolidge Hall at the school, press passes and reporters' notebooks in hand. I watched from behind the podium as they took their seats and waited for John to announce me. After brief opening remarks, I began to take students' questions. The first question came from Sarah.

"Was there a special reason for building the Parthenon out of white marble?"

Forty-five minutes and many questions later, I brought our press conference to an end with the poem *Ithaka* by C.P. Cavafy (1863-1933), a work that came to summarize our experiences together. It reads, in part and translated from the Greek:

Keep Ithaka always in your mind.

Arriving there is what you're destined for.

But don't hurry the journey at all.

Better if it lasts for years,

So you're old by the time you reach the island,

Wealthy with all you've gained on the way.



A "WANTED" poster for Homer, the the Greek epic poet, by Mariam

Not expecting Ithaka to make you rich,

She gave you a marvelous journey.

The students had two days to complete their investigative articles and include any final details they had gleaned from the press conference. Their magazines would go to press the following week in preparation for our culminating event, a Greek Lunch where students would celebrate their academic accomplishments with their families.

The Greek Lunch also gave John and me the opportunity to share with families how we included the students in my trip to Greece. John had taken photos of students while they were on the phone, and he had recorded our phone conversations. I prepared a brief PowerPoint presentation that included a question and answer from each student, illustrated with a photo of the student on the phone and a photo of the place discussed. Needless to say, it was a big hit!

I admit that before I left, I had worried I might get to Greece and feel burdened by my task. This did not happen; instead, my task brought a seriousness of purpose, inquisitiveness, and an added excitement to my journey. My experience was heightened as I looked at these ancient places through the questions of my students. Experiencing a place for oneself is satisfying, but experiencing it for 24 fourth graders is both intense and gratifying.

A colleague on the study tour photographed me at Olympia with pen in hand, poring over my questions and searching my notes for answers. She showed me the image on the screen of her digital camera and said, "This is how I will remember you." It is a telling photograph for those who know the story behind it. If you know the story, you know I am not the

only one in the photo. Look closely and you will see the shadows of 24 students from Belmont, Massachusetts, brought to life through the thoughts and questions they sent with me. 📷

Notes

1. Greek Studies in the Schools is a program of Newton Public Schools and Brandeis University in Newton, Massachusetts.

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JOHN SUCICH, a graduate student at Lesley University during this project, is currently a fifth grade teacher at Belmont Day School.