History Abroad: How Do Denmark and the U.S. Measure Up?

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Abstract
By viewing bias itself as a product of history, educators and scholars can understand it better in their own times. By studying the historical path of the United States and Denmark, scholars can see that the nature of history can have subtle but important impacts on common education. Even when educators are aware of potential bias, history itself warps its dissemination.

Keywords
Denmark, United States, historical bias, history education

Disciplines
Cultural History | English Language and Literature | History | Intellectual History | International and Comparative Education | Public History | Social History | United States History

Comments
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The International Bridge Course is a unique opportunity for Gettysburg students to engage in a faculty-mentored research project of their own design over a three-semester period. IBC scholars began their research in semester one, carry out continuing or comparative research while studying abroad in semester two, and complete their research and submit their final project in semester three. Credit is awarded in semester three via an independent study. In this way, students, under the continued mentorship of a faculty member, may truly integrate their study abroad experience with the coursework they have taken on campus.

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History Abroad: How Do Denmark and the U.S. Measure Up?

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Case Study: Denmark

Denmark provides an interesting case study to the deserving scholar. It is a much smaller country than the United States. It resides in a distinctly different part of the world, one shaped greatly by the events of the 20th century and beyond. And it is a country of high international standards: 12th in education, 1st in transparency and democracy, and 1st in happiness. With much to emulate, Denmark serves as a prime example for investigation, both to see if its admirable traits include historical honesty and to see how conditions affect the bias of such a small nation.

Danish History

Danish history has two major differences with American history: its length and its expansion.

Denmark traces its history to the Vikings, who terrorized most of the European world throughout the Middle Ages. In particular, Denmark traces its heritage to Harald Bluetooth, the king who established Christianity amongst the Danish people. From the Viking period to the Reformation, Denmark was an expansionist state. Danes were raiding through Europe and the Middle East, exploring the Atlantic, serving as mercenaries, and conquering lands and kingdoms.

...A Dane ruled in the British Isles shortly before the Norman Conquest. And the Normans themselves were descended from people who had invaded and settled in Normandy. Settlements were founded in Iceland, Greenland, and the Americas. Trade networks were established throughout what would become Russia. And the Danes dominated the North and Baltic Seas.

However, by the end of the Renaissance Period, Denmark had begun to fall from grace. Sweden broke away and declared independence. Meanwhile, larger European nations pushed Denmark out of many colonial outposts in the New World. Sweden consequently tried to expand southeast against Denmark, drawing Denmark of the will to fight. Defeat followed defeat. During the Napoleonic era, the Danish fleet, the second largest in the world, was utterly destroyed by the British, and Copenhagen was occupied.

The final nail in Denmark's expansionist history was the loss of the duchies of Holstein-Gottorp in Germany, along the Baltic and into Sweden. During the Kalmar Union, Denmark, Norway, and Sweden were ruled by the same royal branch, uniting most of Scandinavia, pushing Denmark to its greatest heights yet.

For my research, I relied on several resources. I joined the DIS Ambassador program, which allowed me to meet and discuss issues of interest with Danish students and teachers. I also obtained several resources with different teachers and different levels of knowledge. I was keenly aware of the way in which my impressions of Danish teaching methods. I also relied upon several personal interviews with Danish, ranging from a newspaper reporter to a high school student. There was the extensive literature I studied and used while abroad from my own experience and identity course.

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In the U.S., my main source of information was my observations in the field. Once a week, for two hours, I would observe two classes taught at Littlestown High School. I consulted with several high school teachers, as well as my professors at Gettysburg College. I also relied upon several personal interviews with American students and teachers, ranging from a newspaper reporter to a high school student. There was the extensive literature I studied and used while abroad from my own experience and identity course.

Other Sources

References

The teaching of history is always fraught with bias. From political bias to class bias to race bias, history is always the eye of the beholder. This bias can be observed in causal conversations as well as in academic debates. But is this concept as universal as we believe, or do Americans suffer from a particularly virulent breed of bias? By examining a country whose history has taken a markedly different trajectory, we can explore how people deal with the historical hand they are dealt.

Classroom Observations: Denmark

I visited two separate Institutions of high school education: GI. Helleur Gymnasium and KBV West Gymnasium. The Danish Institute for Study Abroad has an outreach program, DIS Ambassadors, where American students travel to high schools and discuss issues in the U.S. I spoke on several occasions about American policy on topics like gun control and culture, immigration policy, and creativism. I also observed several history classes at the GI. Helleur Gymnasium.

The DIS Ambassador visits were very informative. The students were able to readily engage me with an English. And they shared their own opinions and experiences readily. They were also aware of events in the United States. On of the classes was on the Second Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. Indeed, the U.S. as a major topic for many Danish students.

The classroom experience was of a very high quality. The teacher was engaged in a very high level of discussion with the students. Lecturing was used, but it was interspersed with much interaction between students and teachers. Some lessons were completely free to discuss and work with your peers.

In addition, some classes were left to their own devices. Students were expected to complete their work on their own, allowing the teacher to take a hands-off approach to learning when appropriate. Such a degree of freedom was impressive, since the students seemed to be using the time effectively and meaningfully.

The Danish curriculum was more international than its American counterpart. The Danish students could converse well in English and had a fair understanding of American laws and current events. However, the teachers in the United States are more important to Denmark than in our own. The teachers in Denmark are of a high level of education. They are no longer in the process of change. The American education is marked by inferior to that abroad.

The challenges facing the class were greater: greater economic disparity and greater amounts of material to cover. As Americans, these students would have to get a good understanding of the way of life and the values of the culture. The learning of Denmark was marked by inferior to that abroad.

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