

# The Seven Wonders of an Exchange

Csaba Köves

*Krúdy Gyula Secondary School*

*Calapooia Middle School*

8600 Siófok, Koch Róbert u.8.

830 24th Ave. SE Albany, OR 97322

[krudy@krudy-siofok.sulinet.hu](mailto:krudy@krudy-siofok.sulinet.hu)

<http://www.albany.k12.or.us/calapooia/>

[kovescs@hotmail.com](mailto:kovescs@hotmail.com)

Adviser: Sue McGrory

*Applying for a program is never easy; being a lucky applicant is a privilege and from that point on it is up to them what extra they can gain or add to an exchange. Every single situation is different and unique on the one hand but they will probably teach similar things on the other. I do not think doing a white-collar job can be drudgery but the intelligentsia also needs regeneracy. One of the possible ways of recreation is an exchange no matter what kind of profession comes to consideration. It is simply not possible to ignore the fact that this essay was written by a teacher with stories from the classroom though it could give some ideas to anybody from other professions, too.*

*I decided to write about not just the year I spent abroad but the previous and the following periods of digesting the manna we were fed with imported from the Olympus of mutual understanding right away. The more activities you are involved in the more joy and satisfaction you can get. My desire is to provide as much useful information about the extras of an exchange as possible in order to tell you the seven plusses that played an important role in my journey, the seven wonders of my exchange.*

## 1. “W” as Wielyd Booklet

I believe it is extremely important to get ready even for a party. When inviting guests, we are supposed to calculate the portions of the food and drink they are going to consume etc. We are talking about a lifelong journey here that requires extra preparation and concentration from the beginning. One has to be organized, smart, careful, and being able to come up with something new. My preparation for the exchange besides getting the necessary documents and paperwork extended to creating a 27 pages long booklet for my partner that contained useful facts about my school, our home, the town and the country as well. I also attached some tables about the approximate conversions from SI to US customary units with samples and vice versa. Data of the Office of Immigration and Nationality played a role, too. Under the sub heading: “Useful Tips” I dealt with driving habits (extremely important for the careful and polite American motorist compared to crazy Hungarian drivers) and other customs with a sample price guide as well. The first couple of pages included the basic facts about my school, the names and photographs of the English-speaking teachers and the regular bell schedule. From page 4 to page 7, I provided a brief summary of the school’s history, the school programs and detailed information about my partner’s future classes. There is a short extract below from page 4, which can give you an insight:

Established in 1956, our institute is one of the biggest schools in Somogy County with a fabulous past and traditions in the field of catering and commerce. Krúdy Gyula Szakközépiskola és Szakiskola has a high quality of training since students can spend some of their training hours in a kitchen lab facility dedicated exclusively to culinary education. The facility includes a well-equipped bakery, restaurants and demonstration kitchens. For students interested in commerce the school provides an office, computer rooms and commerce labs. Students can actually cook next to experienced chefs or deepen their understanding of commerce with the help of certified instructors. Shortly there are eight different vocational trainings in our school organized in three different levels.

On the following pages, I tried to explain some Hungarian terms connected to education used either in our country or in our school: “... the school management had decided to join the Human Resources Development Operational Programmes implemented under the EU Structural Funds.” or “The school’s main festival is the high standard of ‘Krúdy Napok’ (Krúdy Days) taking place in October. There is an amateur drama group in the school and they usually perform excellent plays in the town’s theatre within the scope of the Krúdy Days.” I also underlined some typical Hungarian school expressions such as “ellenőrző” (students file) or “napló” (register). Between pages 8 and 15, my partner could study the history of Hungary and Siófok with some pictures and Hungarian websites in English.

About our condominium, we gave many instructions from operating the heating system to cooking since customs vary even in the same country. Among other advices, we underlined important information in connection with several things: “There are radiators in every room, which you may have to de-aerate. It may occur when adjusting the boiler to winter mode.” We attached labeled pictures of the radiators, the boiler and other devices, too. It took me several hours to construct my booklet but it was worth the trouble and my wife was supportive, too.

## 2. “O” as Oases in the Desert of Routine

Doing our job is fun but even when someone enjoys themselves at their workplace, we sometimes need to find an oasis where we can refresh ourselves. Teaching itself is a wonderful profession but it can be even more delightful when one can entertain others or themselves with something unusual. In my host school, I gained a huge amount of information, knowledge, and experience what money cannot buy. I loved the flexibility of the curriculum one could enjoy school and school district wise. It gave me lots of joy and new ideas to come up with. Beside of the great number and variety of opportunities, the technical background of the school and my classroom were impressive. That was something I fell in love with when I entered the school; my own classroom: the playground of an adult with dictionary slides and workbook jungle gyms.

I cannot be grateful enough that my host institution started building PLCs (Professional Learning Communities) in the year I worked there. I could not learn from the idea of PLCs only but also got tons of inspiration, and learnt how to team-teach. In the social studies group, we established the curriculum for the following year that gave less freedom to the teacher on the one hand but it would help the students to learn more effectively on the other. Building PLCs was a big plus but I needed even more extras. Let us see if I could fulfill my desire.

I visited some classes during either my preparation time or my own period in order to talk about European and Hungarian history and culture. Students had prepared with ideas on their board and asked interesting questions throughout these visits. I had taught and made my students to look for information and facts about my country (society, history, school system, students, teaching, and learning) since September in my own periods, too. We had projects in connection with Hungary with all of my classes. My colleagues were interested in the Hungarian school system and eager to learn about it as well. I was more than happy to answer those questions, and I had the opportunity to talk about our way of teaching during formal conversations and meetings such as the PLC trainings.

This contribution was still not enough from my viewpoint so I combined my hobby with a project. One of my ideas, one of my adrenalin bombs was cooking during Home Economics which was a class taught by my friend, Mrs. Robbins, where students learnt how to make some delicious dishes of the world. Therefore, we decided to teach some Hungarian dishes. While I was cooking, I presented a slide show about Hungarian meals and a short movie about my country, too. The students kept asking questions while I was entertaining them with some tricks they could see on TV before and that turned out to be quite impressive. The “show” was a great success and satisfied both my students and the MC so I repeated my presentation some times in my host school. The local newspaper, the Albany Democrat Herald made an interview with me a week before this project. When they learnt about my plan, they came back and took pictures during my cooking:

[http://www.democratherald.com/articles/2008/11/26/news/people/5peo01\\_hungarian.txt](http://www.democratherald.com/articles/2008/11/26/news/people/5peo01_hungarian.txt)

After the success of this project, I visited another school (Albany Options School), and together with Mrs. Robbins, we could represent the same food show there, too. This time I had special fun since the students in this school were troublesome youngsters who enjoyed our time spent together and became interested in cooking at least for that time we worked together. What I can remember after completing the project is that I felt wonderful and it gave me extra strength, which lasted for a long time.

From the oasis of cooking, I jumped to another one in the second semester. I decided to cover a Hungarian book, The Paul Street Boys, with my students in order to get a better understanding and knowledge about education and society in Hungary. Everybody was supportive and with the help of my mentor, we purchased several copies of the book, so we were able to read it every day during language arts periods with my students. I consider this project a great success since the children enjoyed reading the book and were keen on learning about the Hungarian way of life, which was especially unique because of the story being a century old. The technique what I applied made them more curious since they had to wait one day for the next chapter or part of it. After each chapter, we had a test and some fun exercises such as drawing scenes from the story; the results of those activities were more than satisfying.

### 3. “N” as Nobody Can Do It Alone

It became obvious at the beginning that without friends or relatives, family members or fellow teachers the mission is almost impossible. We had been told about culture shock before we started our exchange but you have to experience it on your own if you want to understand the challenge. For me and for my fellow teachers from all over the world the moment did not come when we arrived in the States; we did not feel the shock when we started teaching but a little bit later. In October, I felt I needed some special help because

I was simply down. I had many problems to face even that my colleagues had been supportive and friendly since I first met them.

At that time the first meeting with the Fulbright staff and the foreign teachers helped me a lot because I realized it was not only me who faced serious difficulties and felt like going home. I was not happy at all that others suffered but somehow the fact created an atmosphere that is typical of a family where everybody has something to deal with but together the members of that family can solve the problems and heal the wounds. Unforgettable moments tied us for the rest of our life and those moments still cheer me up. I could have stayed in my bedroom after the official meetings and programs but we needed each other so our first regional meeting became a non-stop break for the most of us where we could feel the support from the others and that we were not alone. Needless to say that we made some bar owners happy downtown Seattle.

Not long after the regional meeting our American friends organized a party in Portland where several grantees appeared with or without their families. The house where we came together looked like an international restaurant with special dishes from all over the world. We did not stop keeping in touch after these meetings via internet and some of us could personally meet the others later on. This relationship helped me to deal with my doubts from the beginning.

I taught social studies and language arts in Calapooia Middle School, Albany, OR in the academic year of 2008/09. In my hometown, Siófok, I am a high school educator teaching history and English, so it was easy on the one hand with the same subject area but hard on the other with the different age group. From around the end of September some of my students became disrespectful or that was how I felt after teaching them for a while. I had to take my time to realize that we have a more formal society in my country, and I had to learn to respect the American way of interacting with children. In Hungary, the kids say hello in advance, give way, and stand up upon their teachers’ arrival in the classroom. I had to learn and accept that educators and grownups have to take the first steps by smiling, greeting the students, and shaking their hands in the US. There was a time when I stressed a lot, but all of a sudden, everything settled down. As I said, both the formal and informal meetings with fellow Fulbrighters helped me a lot. In the meantime, I was very lucky and completely satisfied with the town and the school in the remarkable state of Oregon since I started to understand that this program is not about teaching and being in the classroom only. A way before Thanksgiving I was captain of the ship and could continue sailing towards the island of success with my students. I was eager to find the plus factor both inside and the outside of the school. Before underlining these again, I would like to pay a tribute to those who supported me at my workplace.

My mentor and other teachers helped me with grading, what assignments to give, and how to operate the Pinnacle system we had used there since September. I tried to figure things out in connection with the Pinnacle on my own as well but I needed the help since we had not used an electronic register in Hungary. I met my mentor once a week, but if we needed more time to discuss something important we talked to each other more than once in her classroom. Besides, we had informal meetings in the staff room, where we sometimes had our lunch together. We were invited for Thanksgiving to her house and before they had had a Hungarian dinner at our home. I also went to football and basketball games with her husband and their son, so I would say we had a good and meaningful relationship.

The school organized a new teachers meeting every month where we could share our problems and successes. There were some teachers I could talk to about my problems and they helped me whenever they could. My mentor and other teachers provided me lots of information in connection with the curriculum, books and other materials we taught from. Without the strong support of the administrators, my colleagues and friends in the school, I could not have achieved what I actually did.

#### 4. “D” as Duplicating Yourself

We should not be confined to our home or work; we must take the initiative or accept others’ invitation to join communities, parties, field trips or whatever else one can think of in order to make our life more colorful. Sometimes it is very hard to imagine how one can be everywhere and has their finger in every pie but for the exchange period you must try to duplicate yourself, you have to socialize in every possible way even with sacrificing your own family’s time and patience. As I mentioned earlier, my mentor and her family kept entertaining me some times and since I love sports, I became familiar with American customs such as tailgating which was completely a dark horse for me and that is how I happened to be a football fan for at least a day. Getting ready for a match and cheering up for your favorite team is different in Europe and in the US; tailgating played a more important role in socializing in my host country. First, I did not get it why we went to the stadium at dawn but then when I saw the endless caravans of vehicles with fans barbecuing and drinking in front of them in a gypsy style, I started to understand that it was much more about having a party than actually going to a football game. Tailgating meant being with your friends and relatives in a special way although I could not take my wife and children with me since that day was long and would have been tiring for our young son.

If you are on an exchange with your family, you still can manage to be with them and others at the same time. It was important for my students that they saw me when they were competing or practicing and my presence helped me to build a much better relationship with them later on. It was

also important to spend time with my three-year-old child so I combined the two with taking my son to the basketball practice for instance where we could play and be together but I was still visible for my students, too. Being with my family or one of my family members created the picture of a human being in their mind. In this case, I did duplicate myself. There were several events like a band concert or a drama play when my whole family was curious about what was going on so we visited these together. At the moment of typing these words, I am with Csaba Jr. who is playing with other children after playing with me for half an hour. From my viewpoint, it is up to the person what he or she can make out of a situation and can duplicate himself or herself indeed. Even grading is possible in the playground if it is not windy.

There were several occasions when I spent time with my colleagues alone but that is what people sometimes do when they are not on an exchange anyway. No matter it was a semiformal dinner or an informal drinking Friday afternoon I was everywhere because I felt like having fun with my colleagues. On these days, I realized differences between my home and host institution that was culturally related. In Hungary, male teachers tend to go out without women while in the States it was co-ed with one exception. I played cards with some of my male colleagues during which activity I learnt that phone calls from wives around midnight happen in both cultures and the rules for poker do not really differ. No matter how much time I spent with others though, my family remained in the center of my life.

#### 5. “E” as Exploring the Host Country

This fantastic program has influenced me many different ways since the fall of 2007 when I applied for it. It has helped building my self-confidence and positive thinking. I went to the US with my family, so it was not me only who had to adjust to a new culture. Since the whole family is open-minded and travels a lot, the adjustment was not that hard. There is no doubt about it that the academic year of 2008/09 was a great experience for everybody. My wife had the opportunity to learn English, our daughter enjoyed being in a nice high school, and our son learnt a lot, too, though it was tough for him without the grandparents. My family and I could make friends both in the school and outside of it. We traveled whenever we could and learnt a great deal about the society, culture, customs, and habits of the Americans.

After settling down we organized our life and tried to find activities according to the age group and interest and of course found the time we could spend together. For my wife the best way to socialize was to find people who she could talk to so she went to a language school what was set up for foreigners for a low fee. Beside this, she made a friend with a Hungarian mother and from that time on, they paid visits to each other’s houses, which proved to be fun for the

two small children from the two families. Thanks to this relationship, Csaba Jr. had a comrade but we wanted more for him so my wife also took our son to a cheap pre-school where he could play with other children and his mother was present as well. Our daughter attended a high school where she had exchange student friends from all over the world. In addition to this, she joined a teenager club where they met every Monday. We were lucky with her education since she spoke English well before we arrived in the US and she could make friends easily.

As we all need a rest in the afternoon and on the weekends, we must allow time for recreation, trips and fun as well, no matter where we are in the world. Living in Hungary with my family, we usually take trips or visit relatives in order to get away from our daily routine. In the US, we visited some of the world most famous tourist attractions and remote places as well. The aim of these trips was not having fun only but getting to know the country as well. Before starting our exploration, we already had our plan. According to that plan, we spent our two weeks winter vacation in four different states and visited top tourist sites such as Las Vegas, the Hoover Dam, the Grand Canyon, Los Angeles, Death Valley and the attractive Pacific Coast. It was a tiring but unforgettable trip with lasting memories, funny and annoying moments. In the spring break, we went to San Francisco, the Red Woods and Yosemite National Park. This adventure was more relaxing and allowed us to spend more time to discover. At the end of our exchange program, we had two another trips. First, we had fun for three days at Smith Rock State Park and the unique Painted Hills in Oregon. We also went to Chicago for almost a week where we visited our friends and explored the city of skyscrapers. Beside these travels, we regularly went to two state parks in Oregon and had several picnics, which was not part of our habit in Hungary. Since we lived half way between the Pacific Coast and the mountains, about 60 miles from each, we went to these two places many times as well. I kept a diary of the happenings and posted it with a great number of pictures on my blog:

<http://kovescsaba.blogspot.com/>

On the weekdays, we did sports either indoor (having a YMCA membership) or outdoor mainly cycling and trekking. We also tried to get familiar with American habits such as shopping, window-shopping and spending money no matter we needed something or not, which was easy to cope with for my wife and our daughter but for the two boys of the family so it often happened that the males waited for the females in the playground. The latter was also part of the American customs that is taking your children to the playground and having a light meal or even a barbecue at the same time.

On every weekend in January, February and March, we went skiing and every one of us was looking forward to having the winter fun. In Oregon, there were some well-kept ski slopes where I could teach the whole family skiing and that activity proved to be an excellent program especially when we took our trip there together with some other exchange students.

## 6. “R” as Representing Different Cultures

As we are interested in the new culture, we start living in, our hosts may be curious about us and about our way of living. Cooking did not play a role in the school only but somehow it proved to be an essential part of our exchange through we could represent our habits and customs. We tried to seduce my colleagues and other friends with preparing delicious Hungarian dishes whenever we had the opportunity. Since cooking is not simply about eating but much more about the wine culture, the cuisine and the habits it was and it is still one of the best ways to talk about a country or an ethnic group. With my mentor and her family, we had a food battle where each side tried to impress the others and I believe we both managed to do so. We were invited for Thanksgiving that is completely strange for Hungarians and could get a better picture of this American festival, which already helped me to explain it to my Magyar students later on. My explanation became more authentic compared to previous demonstrations and my students were more eager to hear it. Of course, we all knew about the turkey, the mashed potato, the corn on the cob and the pumpkin pie but there is a big difference between reading about them and actually being able to taste these foods.

The Hungarian feast contained typical mouthwatering Magyar dishes, which made some other staff members curious about our cuisine as well. The Home Economics teacher became our friend and I provided many recipes for her and vice versa. Whenever I had the chance, I took pastry with me to the school and my colleagues kept asking for more of the fantastic Somlo Sponge Cake, the Magyar apple pie or the biscuits what were made with passion by my wife.

There were many other interesting things in connection with eating among those I would like to underline that the Americans thought it was strange how we ate using our cutlery in a sophisticated way and vice versa, it was interesting for us how well they could eat without using a knife. These seemingly unimportant moments brought us closer to each other and led to more meaningful conversations about everything from politics to sport. We learnt from each other and the grown ups wanted to hear facts that I had already told my students about and what the journalist of the article on Mr. Köves had already noticed and included in her writing:

*Koves' students at Calapooia are learning about his world as he learns of theirs. On a classroom bulletin board is a map of Hungary and some Hungarian words and phrases. Students did research projects and discovered Hungarians are responsible both for the ballpoint pen and the Rubik's Cube.*

As I mentioned earlier I got several inputs about the American way of living and the school culture as well. I took my part in the Fun Run when the school year started. It was part of the school's culture and I learnt that it was

important because the run proved to be a good icebreaker for newcomers, pupils and teachers alike that helped to join them in the community. It was easy for me since I am a runner although it was not about competing but having a good time. If you are not able to participate to programs like these as a competitor, you can be a judge or a helper; the point is that you should be involved.

Kissing a farm animal was extremely strange for me, which I was not keen on doing but at the end, I found myself kissing a goat in front of the whole school. When I talked about this experience upon my arrival in my home school, my colleagues looked at me as I came from a different planet. Well, it is not wise not to taste Moose steak English style up north in a hunter's house even if you think it is disgusting. It was optional to kiss those animals but I knew it from the beginning that it was going to happen.

## 7. “S” as Searching for More Manna

Before arriving back in Hungary from the exchange, I had already missed it. ‘It’ meant everything connected to what we experienced in a strange country. The Red Woods in California, the chats with my colleagues both formal and informal, the meetings with my fellow Fulbrighters, the smile of my students, and the challenges of our everyday life spiced with being the observed and the praised. I knew it from that point on that it cannot be the end but rather the beginning of a new, more meaningful life and teaching, a lifelong journey of new challenges and discoveries that will help me to help others. This journey cannot be selfish; this should be beneficial for all those students and mates of mine who believe in the power of education and the future itself. Since we came home, I have been thinking about the possible ways to continue what I started, sharing what I have, learning what I do not know, and traveling places where I can further develop. Parts of this idea were the numerous presentations I gave and face-to-face conversations where I could share my experiences.

One of our biggest projects of my present day school was an exchange program organized by the Leonardo Program, which gave us the wonderful opportunity to take 12 students to Sweden for a month. Another project provided something similar for others in Finland from our school as well. I was more than happy to join the chosen ones and guide them through the country of the Vikings. As you could learn it from the previous chapters, cooking is one of my hobbies, which I was able to practice again and

besides I had the chance to steal ideas from my Swedish colleagues since I could visit some lessons what is more I was asked to team teach. Of course, the most beneficial side of the program was that of the students’ experience and growth. It was priceless to see how much they enjoyed themselves during the workdays or when something fun happened to them. Both our cooks and servers did a great job in the school’s kitchens and in the restaurants of the town where they were supposed to practice for a week.

We organized a Swedish-Hungarian dinner, which was such a big success that the local newspaper interviewed us with our photos. Both their professional and social development will last forever. Many of them flew, skied, rode a snowmobile, went to an ice hockey game or even played bowling for the first time at the age of 18. All of them realized the power of being able to speak a foreign language which ability is not very common in Hungary, at least not in Somogy County’s secondary schools. I hope that all of them learnt how colorful the world can be if compared to their villages’ or towns’ homogenous society in term of the mixture of races and cultures.

I felt wonderful though it could not be done without sacrifices. This time I had to leave my family home and that was extremely difficult but manageable. In addition, I was compelled to leave my students in a lurch, although most of them understood the situation and backed me up. I missed them of course on the one hand but I believed in the benefits of the whole project on the other.

For this program students from low income families could apply so as I pointed out earlier only two of them had flown before this journey, only one of them had ever skied before what is more some of them went abroad for the first time. This program provided both educational and leisure experiences for them, which, according to their financial background, had seemed impossible I suppose. It was also unique for them to be in the newspaper for the very first time. Just like in the case of my Fulbright grant I kept a diary and informed my Hungarian colleagues, the relatives and friends with several photos, educational and funny stories about our four weeks adventure that anyone could read on the school’s homepage: [http://www.krudy-siofok.hu/leonardo\\_sved\\_2010.html](http://www.krudy-siofok.hu/leonardo_sved_2010.html)

As they say: “Once a Fulbrighter, always a Fulbrighter”, but it is more than OK to join another programs wherever in the world and continue the mission of being the citizen ambassador of your country, the messenger of new methods, the eye opener teacher or mentor for your students or colleagues.