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E-volunteering placement report Bob Powell Morocco: Dar Asni 2. November 2020 to March 2021



Motivation for e-volunteering

2020 was a very strange year for everyone. All but essential travel was totally restricted so any plans for foreign travel were reduced to shredded tickets or booking forms. But first, a word about 2019. In our autumn of 2019 - African springtime - my wife Maggie and I had visited South Africa - again. We had been on a volunteer placement with People and Places (P&P) in 2015, in Port Elizabeth, but this latest trip was mostly a big birthday treat for us both. While planning our fly-drive route I realised that we would be passing through Hazyview and I knew from reading the P&P web-site that the charity Good Work Foundation (GWF) had set up innovative digital learning centres in that town and some outlying villages around Kruger. (**Note from people and places to learn more about this programme take a look at** [people & places: responsible & ethical volunteering, tourism and travel \(travel-peopleandplaces.co.uk\)](http://travel-peopleandplaces.co.uk)) We set up a visit to see the work in action and were really impressed with what we discovered. On our return home, the possibility of contributing to

1 Naboth's Nursery, Canterbury Road, Faversham, Kent ME13 8AX
tel +44 (0) 8700 460 479 | email info@travel-peopleandplaces.co.uk

www.travel-peopleandplaces.co.uk

that project in some way was frequently in our minds; then the coronavirus pandemic arrived. As recipients of P&P newsletters, we saw and responded to the call for e-volunteers. There was little difficulty in deciding the project that suited our profiles: former language teachers with fluent French. So, instead of possibly heading for South Africa, we decided to focus on a country in north Africa where our skills might also be gainfully applied even from our own home.

I was fully aware that my wife and I were two of three people who were to provide, for the first time, online classes to the young women studying in Asni 2. Everything that was being done was a new experience for everyone concerned.

Pre-placement preparation

I had good briefings from Dianne and a preparatory Jitsi meeting which included introductions to another volunteer and the Education For All (EFA) local contact Karima. Then there were several exchanges in order to find suitable times for the conversation classes. The plan was for one hour per week but this eventually increased to two hour slots in order to accommodate more students - and I had plenty of free time so adding an hour was a productive step for me too. P & P, rightly, made sure that I had an up to date DBS check since my previous ones had expired.

There was plenty of guidance about the work of EFA and, in particular, the special circumstances pertaining during the Covid-19 pandemic which meant that the girls were working in two cohorts spending one week in Asni and one week back in their homes. The EFA web-site provides a lot of useful background to the project and one can get a real feel for the lives of the students through the films that are available for viewing and the various posts. P & P also provided helpful notes on the project and the aims of e-volunteering in Asni.

I was sent photographs and personal statements of the students I was to teach by Education for All. This seemed a good idea but there were problems with this, mostly to do with the poor quality of the images and texts. I did not feel it appropriate to complain about this at the time since great effort had been made to inform me before starting the volunteer work. However, what I was able to read presented language at a level that did not correspond to the real performance levels of the students. It took only one class contact with the students for me to realise that these texts had obviously been prepared with the strong support of their English teachers and learnt by heart. Furthermore, possibly because of the difficulties presented by the pandemic, it turned out that I hardly saw any of the girls whose details I had received prior to beginning. (**Note from pandp : we initially believed it would be a good idea to provide these backgrounds which are prepared by the girls with support from English speaking volunteers – which are then placed on a notice board in their home – however we have stopped doing this now – as Bob rightly observes the ey mislead in terms of the girls spoken English abilities – and also – due to the ever changing school time tabling{which neither we nor Education for All have any control over} we are unable to guarantee that every girl will attend the English lessons)**

In my zeal to be fully prepared I had researched the Moroccan Baccaauréat examinations, including English, so had a good overall idea of the topics in the girls' syllabus. However, before beginning my work, Dianne wisely reminded me that my 'lessons' were not intended to duplicate or interlink with the work of the Moroccan English teachers but rather were to be used as conversation classes.

Experience of the work

Overall, I found this placement extremely interesting and rewarding. The positive personal aspects can be listed as:

- the opportunity to do some volunteer teaching when travelling was impossible;
- something constructive to do during a national lockdown;
- the new experience of teaching online using a different platform from that I was used to;
- resurrecting and adapting certain teaching skills for distance learning;
- encountering interesting students having a very different lifestyle from my own;
- developing more focussed conversations once I had more knowledge of students' communicative needs;
- enjoying the reward that comes from seeing progress being made by diligent, hard-working students;
- sharing some amusing moments with students and knowing, therefore, that the learning experience provided was seen to be enjoyable;
- producing short films which, hopefully, will be of benefit to others about to embark on similar experiences.

It was also good to be 'in at the beginning' of this new project and to be able to share my experiences with P & P and other volunteers, with the other person carrying out the same activity in one of the other houses, and with potential future volunteers during the P & P social events I attended.

There were a few issues that needed to be addressed during the project. I reported any initial difficulties to Dianne, with copies to Karima, and we considered ways of improving the situation. Some were solved via email exchanges and others raised during the review meetings were also addressed. I can summarise the main issues under the following headings: numbers, technology, timetabling and proficiency levels.

Numbers

My first lesson was with a single student, the others having been held back at the school for a test. Then, for the second lesson, it was a case of too many girls in front of one screen. In consultation with Dianne and Karima, it was decided to limit the numbers to three students. In a language lesson, the teacher needs to see the entire face of the person speaking e.g. for pronunciation practice, awareness of levels of comprehension, so reducing the number was essential. I realised, however, that there was generally another group of students listening in on the lesson behind the screen. This proves how keen they are to listen to and improve their English. I was quite happy that other students were able to benefit in this way.

Technology

Working online was not always easy. Indeed, there were several times when I felt really frustrated and I know that on at least one occasion the girls were really upset not being able to continue the lesson. A time lapse of a couple of seconds during conversation was usual. There were also interruptions and slowdowns; once or twice even complete freeze-outs, probably due to weak internet signals. The sound quality was generally poor so it was not always easy to hear what was being said in response to questions. Some computers were found to be better than others and the location of the computer was also critical. On top of this, there were sometimes extraneous noises of sawing and hammers, squeaky chairs, traffic, chatter and even the muezzin calling to prayer on one occasion. The rooms are open plan so acoustically rather echoey. Jitsi as a platform was okay but in

the final week we set up Zoom sessions and they seemed to be more reliable. Everyone offered advice when asked but we, students and teachers, also learnt 'in the moment', as we went along. For example, it was good that we all learnt to use the 'chat' facility but I did not use it much during the lesson time for fear of wasting time. It was invaluable, however, for trouble-shooting e.g. when no sound was forthcoming from Morocco. (Note from pandp: whilst there will always be some technical challenges – and indeed they vary from house to house – we have now identified – with the help of Bob – which are the best computers for the girls to use for Zoom calls -the lessons are held at the girls home – this is what the EfA houses are for them during term time – they do not have a designed computer room – and homelife goes on around their studies - -therefore extraneous noises will always be a challenge)

Time-tabling

Most of my placement took place during lockdown. This meant that I was totally flexible in my availability. I know from previous volunteering work that flexibility and patience are essential. I understood from my briefings that these classes were an 'extra' to what the students were getting and that I would have to accept changes. Talking with the girls about their daily routines I realised where Dar Asni 2 was in relation to the lycée (10 minutes walk away) and how they were managing to fit these additional classes into their incredibly busy schedule. I knew from my P & P briefings that, in the pandemic, they were on alternating weeks - one week in Asni and one back at home - but some girls appeared each week despite this arrangement so it was a bit difficult to keep track of who would be present when.

Having highlighted some of the time-tabling issues with Dianne, it was decided that it was possible for my wife to be given the housemother's telephone number. Such direct communication, using Whatsapp, in the second half of the placement was a real help. And I benefitted by receiving a weekly timetable which was much more reliable than in the previous weeks. (Note from pandp; this was a great idea and we have now put in process a whats app group for each volunteer – the girl's housemother Dianne and Karima – this appears to have overcome most communications problems)

There were a few times when the lessons were cancelled after I had set up my Jitsi session, on one occasion within four minutes of the scheduled time. Fortunately, I was available to re-schedule classes when time changes occurred. Sometimes, different girls appeared on screen from those expected. This was not a problem for me but it meant that continuity of learning was not always possible. The students I taught changed frequently at the beginning but eventually settled down in the second half of the placement from, January onwards in line with the timetabling.

Don't get me wrong, I enjoyed every class I took and the whole experience was far more positive than negative but I mention the timetabling issues above so that the fragility of the programme can be fully understood by potential volunteers. These classes really are an added opportunity for the girls but school lesson times, ad hoc tests, and the massive workload associated with their studies obviously take precedence.

Proficiency levels

I have already pointed out the fact that the spoken language skills of the students did not match the expectations that had been created by reading the personal profiles. These young women are remarkable in that English is their fourth language and they have only been learning it since the age of fifteen. They are also remarkable because they have developed strategies for communicating with very limited vocabulary. And they are, after

initial shyness - (especially with a male teacher? Note from people and places having worked with EfA for some years we are proud to say that EfA trust our screening and preparation processes and are now keen for us to recruit male volunteers – this will help the girls confidence in interacting with men – that said the girls are naturally shy and trust does need to be built)) - prepared to 'have a go'. It is my impression that they do not have many opportunities to speak English during their normal lessons. They rely heavily on the written word and memorise phrases. However, they do have grammatical knowledge from their French lessons and volunteers can make use of this if it helps clarify the use of English. But these lessons, rightly, should be about the comprehension of English spoken by native speakers, improving pronunciation and extending vocabulary - in short, making their communication more natural. Generally, their vocabulary is not extensive so even some of the basics need practising. The topic of focus was daily life: life in Asni, family life at home, describing their daily routines, going shopping, food, their hopes and aspirations. This quite elementary level of conversation was what was needed to strengthen their communication skills and confidence.

Future volunteers can build on these topics and provide more opportunities for the girls' spoken language to sound more natural, for example by improving pronunciation of key words and phrasal intonation. Most of our conversations were about the present or immediate future. It would be useful to explore a little more about the students' childhood or recent past events, thus offering practice of past tenses.

Resources

Very early on I realised that it was not enough simply to sit face to face and attempt conversation. There was need for visual support to clarify meaning, introduce new vocabulary or illustrate sentence structure. I produced lots of picture cards, word cards, emoji type faces; I also used real objects to simulate, for example, a trip to market. Photos were also very useful. It was wonderful that Dianne sent quite a few photos of her visit to Asni and I exploited these to the full. To see their puzzled faces when these were first introduced was a joy. What must have been going through their heads? 'But that's the shop where we buy chocolate and pizza!....

It may seem that the teaching tools mentioned above are more appropriate for children - these young women were, after all, around 17 or 18 years old. But the need for visual stimuli in language learning is well known. We all learn differently, irrespective of age, and, given these students' over-reliance on the written word, having a bank of cards, photos, etc., ensures that the lesson does not grind to a slow pace because of their perceived need to write everything down.

My wife had hit upon the idea of borrowing our youngest grandchildren's mini white-board. Together with a stock of colourful dry-wipe pens, this became a vital tool. Its size (40cm x 30cm) was just right for 'on the spur of the moment' clarifications. Every volunteer should get one!

One other thing that I need to mention is the sending of post-lesson notes. Not every volunteer may have the time to do this but I understand that they were appreciated. These notes were personalised and contained the new vocabulary and key phrases from the lesson with more examples for practice.

Successes, disappointments and highlights

I think my time with these wonderful students has made some difference to their confidence and proficiency in spoken English. It may seem a banal example but, having worked on 'politeness' language, it was very rewarding to hear, instead of a rather basic 'What?', the request: 'Excuse me Bob, could you please repeat the question?'. Similarly, they grappled with the 'tag' answers so that 'yes/no' questions were virtually always answered not with a direct 'yes' or 'no' but with, for example, 'Yes I do' - 'Yes, I can' - 'No, we don't' etc.

The highlight must be singing together with most of the students in Dar Asni 2 James Taylor's version of 'You've got a friend' during the final session.

One significant disappointment was not being able to eat any of the cake they had baked for my wife and me during this final 'party' session!

Would I recommend this kind of volunteering?

Of course. It was immensely rewarding. It provided a new impetus and purpose to my life in the dark winter months of a difficult year. I learnt such a lot about teaching online. I felt it was a privilege to be able to teach in this context. I can only hope that the students were able to see some benefits in our work together. They certainly expressed their appreciation in a very positive and thankful way which was reward in itself.

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