

# The Power of Partnership: The Romerike (Norway) English Teachers Network’s Collaboration with U.S. Universities

David C. Virtue, Mike P. Cook, Christian Andresen and Ole Tobias Mangen

*Western Carolina University / North Carolina, USA*

*Auburn University / Alabama, USA*

*Jessheim Videregående Skole / Norway*

*Lillestrøm Videregående Skole / Norway*

In this essay, we describe a 10-year partnership between the teacher education units at two universities in the United States and a network of high school English teachers in Norway, and we aim to ignite conversation about the planning, implementation, outcomes and continuous improvement of such collaborative, cross-national projects.

The Romerike English Teachers Network consists of all high school English teachers in the Romerike region of Viken County, Norway. The network is run by the department heads for languages at each school. The main goal of the network is to improve the teaching and learning of English in high schools throughout the region. Network activities include conferences and workshops where teachers share effective teaching practices; regular meetings of English department heads in which they develop curricula, plan and disseminate information; and e-mail distribution lists through which teachers receive updates and information about English teaching in Norway.

Since 2010, the network has maintained an active relationship with higher education partners in the United States—the teacher education units at the University of South Carolina and at Auburn University. The partnership has resulted in six study tours for network teachers in Alabama, South Carolina and Georgia (2010, 2013, 2014, 2016, 2018, 2019) and two study tours of Norway by faculty and students from the University of South Carolina (2013, 2015).

## Study Tours of the American South

The study tour concept was piloted in 2010 with a group of secondary teachers from throughout Norway and staff from Fremmedspråksenteret, the National Center for English and Foreign Languages in Education. The group visited schools and cultural sites in Savannah, GA and Charleston, SC, and attended lectures and workshops at the University of South Carolina. The partnership evolved into a sustained collaboration between the Romerike English Teachers Network, located northeast of the capital city Oslo, and faculty in the Department of Instruction and Teacher Education at the University of South Carolina. After study tours in 2013, 2014 and 2016, the project moved to Auburn University in Alabama, which hosted study tours in 2018 and 2019.

The study tours have all had a common format. The tours provide approximately 10 English teachers from the region (and, by extension, their students) with deep insight into culture, society and daily life in the American South. The program emphasizes the civil rights movement, Southern literature and cuisine, and life in schools as well as topics related to curriculum, instruction and assessment appropriate for secondary teachers. Table 1 depicts the itinerary for the 2019 study tour. Note the variety of activities that include lectures and workshops, visits to museums and historical sites, theater performances and even a sporting event. Group meals provide an opportunity for deep conversation about the experiences, intra-group bonding and sampling of Southern cuisine.

**Table 1.** *Itinerary for 2019 Study Tour to Auburn University in Alabama, February 9 – 17*

Day 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Arrival at Atlanta Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport</li><li>▪ Unpack and relax at the hotel</li><li>▪ Evening social time/dinner on your own</li></ul>
-------	--

Day 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Walking tour of campus center; orientation meeting and lunch at Haley Center (review itinerary, distribute materials)</li> <li>▪ Group dinner/debrief</li> </ul>
Day 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Tuskegee Airmen National Historic Site in Tuskegee, AL</li> <li>▪ Group lunch in Auburn</li> <li>▪ Speaker: African American Protest in the Jim Crow Era—Dr. Rob Riser, University of West Alabama</li> <li>▪ Group dinner/debrief</li> </ul>
Day 4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Visit ELA methods class (CTSE 4150) at Loachapoka High School.</li> <li>▪ Tour of Loachapoka High School.</li> <li>▪ Group lunch at Ariccia with Dean of College of Education</li> <li>▪ Tour Opelika High School with Mike Cook</li> </ul>
Day 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Speaker: Tyler Whittenberg, Advancement Project, “We Came to Learn. A Call for Police-Free Schools”</li> <li>▪ Group lunch at Pannie-George’s Kitchen in Auburn</li> <li>▪ Visit National Memorial for Peace and Justice and the Legacy Museum in Montgomery</li> <li>▪ Group dinner in Montgomery</li> <li>▪ Four Little Girls: Birmingham 1963 at the Alabama Shakespeare Festival Theater in Montgomery, AL</li> </ul>
Day 6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Visit Birmingham Civil Rights Institute and 16th Street Baptist Church</li> <li>▪ Group lunch at Saw’s BBQ in Birmingham, AL</li> </ul>
Day 7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Lecture/instruction on graphic novel <i>March</i> by John Lewis – Mike Cook</li> <li>▪ Group lunch</li> <li>▪ Lecture/instruction about LGBTQ+ issues in the classroom – Ryan Schey</li> <li>▪ Group dinner at Ariccia</li> <li>▪ “Big Fish” at the AU Peet Theater 7:00 PM (musical based on the novel by Alabama-born author Daniel Wallace)</li> </ul>
Day 8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Auburn University baseball vs. Georgia Southern University</li> </ul>
Day 9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Depart for airport</li> </ul>

After the study tour, participating teachers share their learning within their own schools at local conferences, and in written publications. Occasional alumni gatherings provide opportunities for participants to build their own professional networks as they interact with participants from different iterations of the study tour.

### Short-Term Study Abroad to Norway

The project has evolved into a two-way collaboration, with U.S. teacher education students traveling to Norway in 2013 and 2015 for short-term study abroad programs that include visits to Norwegian schools and universities and tours of cultural and historic sites. The itinerary for the 2015 program is depicted in Table 2.

**Table 2.** *Itinerary for 2015 University of South Carolina Study Abroad Program to Norway, May 10 – 24*

Day 1–2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Overseas travel days</li> <li>▪ Meet host families</li> </ul>
---------	--

Day 2	▪ Visits to upper secondary schools (lunch at school)
Day 3	▪ Visit to lower secondary school (lunch at school)
Day 4	▪ Debriefing and project work at Jessheim Upper Secondary School
Day 5	▪ Visit cultural/historic sites in Oslo, including Aker Brygge, Folk Museum, and Kon Tiki Museum
Day 6	▪ Free day in Oslo for sightseeing and shopping
Day 7	▪ Norwegian National Day ( <i>Nasjonaldagen</i> ) celebration – May 17
Day 8	▪ Group excursion to Bergen (from Oslo S by train) ▪ Fløibanen (mountainside funicular) ▪ Group dinner
Day 9	▪ Morning fjord tour on White Lady (departs from Bergen Harbor) ▪ Explore museums/sites in Bergen ▪ Meet at Bergen Fish Market for group dinner
Day 10	▪ Visit school museum ▪ Return to Oslo S
Day 11	▪ Visit to primary school
Day 12	▪ Visit to University of Oslo ▪ Visit to kindergarten ▪ Group dinner with host families and organizers
Day 13	▪ Free day in Oslo
Day 14	▪ Overseas travel day

In addition to the 14-day program in Norway, the 2013 and 2015 students attended pre-departure class sessions on campus in March and April and a post-travel session in May. Undergraduate students enrolled in the course EDUC 360: Global and Multicultural Perspectives on Education in International Settings – Norway, and graduate students enrolled in a 600-level special topics course. Student learning objectives were:

- Identify some of the ways in which the field of comparative and international education draws upon social science knowledge, theoretical frameworks and methods of inquiry and explain the multidisciplinary nature of the field.
- Use knowledge and theoretical frameworks from the social sciences to explore, describe and analyze local, regional and global factors that affect education in the U.S. and foreign contexts.
- Evaluate educational policies and practices in the U.S and abroad in relation to cultural ideals, societal norms and other relevant criteria.
- Clearly articulate the extent to which his or her personal attitudes, values, beliefs and knowledge pertaining to education may have changed through studying education in a foreign context.
- Demonstrate intercultural competence and an appreciation for cultural diversity in society.

### Outcomes

The Norwegian teachers have expressed anecdotally and in exit surveys that the program expands and deepens their understanding of the culture and history of the American South and the civil rights movement. The teachers report that they enjoy the continued networking opportunities they have with fellow study tour alumni, and many have contributed in substantive ways to the study abroad programs for U.S. students. The U.S. students demonstrated their learning and achievement of objectives through written journal entries, their conduct and dispositions on site in Norway and a final oral presentation.

### Planning and Logistics

Collaborative planning begins about a year before the program is offered. Organizers meet virtually via Skype or Zoom to establish goals for the program and strategize funding and logistics. Approximately four to six months before the program, the organizers develop a draft itinerary, pursue funding for the project and recruit participants.

The Norwegian English teachers incur no costs for the program except for their individual meals and incidental expenses. The program has been underwritten by grants from the U. S. Embassy in Oslo and the county council and by direct support from the participating teachers' schools. Program organizers have applied to the embassy for grant funding in September and typically received approval sometime in October. The embassy funds have been sufficient to cover the cost of airline tickets, usually around \$1,000 per person. Other costs include lodging and meals, ground transportation, tickets and admission fees for excursions, honoraria for speakers and administrative overhead. The total cost of the nine-day program has ranged from \$25,000 - \$30,000 for approximately 10 participants.

The cost per student for the study abroad program in 2013 and 2015 was approximately \$1,800, excluding airfare and tuition. The program fee included all excursions, group meals, a stipend for host families and an administrative fee paid to the host school. The program fee paid by the students covered nearly all program costs, though the department offering the course covered some of the instructor's travel expenses to help lower the overall program fee for the students. Homestays were another cost-saving measure that helped make the program affordable. Many of the host families were alumni of the study tours to South Carolina.

The keys to successful planning and implementation are clear communication and collaboration. The programs in the U.S. and in Norway each require cooperation from many partners who provide organizational, financial and administrative support in various ways. In the U.S., the program requires institutional support from the College of Education, Procurement and Business Services and the Office of International Programs as well as the involvement of faculty and administrators at various school sites. In Norway, the network works closely with other English teacher networks in the county and has an excellent working relationship with Fremmedspråksenteret, the Fulbright Office in Oslo and the American Embassy in Norway.

### **Conversation Starters**

- In what ways does your institution collaborate with partners in other countries?
- In this case, the professional development program for in-service teachers abroad laid the groundwork for a study abroad program for degree-seeking undergraduates in the United States. How do international partnerships enrich the academic and outreach offerings at your institution?
- What suggestions do you have that may help us improve or expand our existing partnership?

### **Further Reading**

Virtue, D. C. (2017). Case study of a sustained educator partnership between the U.S. and Norway. In H. An, (Ed.), *Handbook of research on efficacy and implementation of study abroad programs for P-12 teachers* (pp. 13 – 33). IGI Global. DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-1057-4.ch002.