

From Norway, the land of the midnight sun, to tropical Cuba - an educational tour around the world

by Barbara Prashnig,

In mid May I left cold and rainy New Zealand to spend the next eight weeks overseas, giving workshops on learning styles and how to create the 'school of the future' in Norway, the UK and Cuba, combined with visiting schools. I have been on many such tours over the past ten years, but I never experienced such dramatic contrasts from one country to the other.

Norway, a country of 4.6 million people and very high education standards has an immigrant population of 349,000 which accounts for 7.6 percent of the total population as at the beginning of 2004, but immigration is increasing. (By comparison, New Zealand's immigrant population accounts for 19.5 percent, according to figures from the 2001 Census released by Statistics New Zealand.) This means the population in Norway is currently much more homogeneous than in New Zealand and it seems that this has an effect on educational achievements.

So far, traditional teaching methods have served students well, but educators are concerned about increasing under-achievement and discipline problems in schools. Therefore they have been looking for new approaches to learning and teaching. Our LSA and TSA assessment instruments are now available on the Internet in Norwegian as well as English. My book, *The Power of Diversity* which is also available in Swedish and Finnish, has been translated into Norwegian and has been on the market since January.

Over the past few years I have been working with teachers in Oslo and other cities and on this trip spent a week in Oslo, conducting my workshops in a fabulous historic venue: the fortress Akershus, built in 1299 and fortified 300 years later in order to protect Oslo from foreign warships. As the fortress is part of Norwegian war history, two war museums are to be found within its walls and the Military Academy is also located there. In the past I had trained several members of the Armed Forces in learning and working styles and this time they were my hosts for this training.

Participants came from all over

Norway and had a lot of fun learning about style diversity, learning tools and how to teach more effectively.

After this training in Oslo I had the weekend off before I had to go back to the UK for more training, so I flew to the far north to see the midnight sun. I stayed in Tromsø, a university town north of the polar circle which also has the northernmost golf course in the world. And there I saw it: the unforgettable midnight sun. Between mid May and end of July the sun does not set and it is bright daylight twenty-four hours a day. This is a very strange experience and upsets the body rhythm (particularly of visitors) because one can't really sleep much, and people are on the streets at all hours, celebrating their short summer.



Getting to know learning tools in Oslo

The drawback to these never-ending summer days with temperatures up to 20 degrees centigrade is the seemingly endless polar night which lasts from end of November to end of January where the only light comes from the moon or the magnificent northern light (aurora borealis) which I had seen in the far north of Sweden. It is hard to imagine three months of total darkness, freezing temperatures and lots of snow. I was glad I visited in June and not in December

when temperatures often drop below -20 degrees Celsius I would have loved to stay longer but on the Sunday I had to fly back to Newcastle where I was continuing with my seminar tour.



Midnight sun over Tromsø, view from Fjellheisen mountain top

For a whole week I was at Cramlington High where I conducted learning styles in-service training for the first half of their staff, the second half will be trained next year. This school is a model school for excellence in learning and using ICT, and some pioneering teachers who had been trained in learning styles earlier on, have implemented these new approaches for all their Year 9 students. I saw incredibly diverse learning going on in their refurbished social science block which now has become their 'Learning Discovery Centre'

During my tour through the UK I conducted learning styles training at several more schools and could see how the 'diversity concept' had been introduced and how it has changed and improved the learning culture of a school, even after a few short months. Compared with New Zealand, where this change has been going on for more than ten years, the depth and speed of change in using more diverse teaching methods in the UK is breathtaking.

From my observations this seems to be based on several converging factors: prescribing more and more exams has not raised achievement levels as hoped; educators were in desperate need of more diverse teaching strategies; accelerated



A learning styles classroom in full action at the Discovery Centre at Cramlington High

learning methods have been widely promoted to primary and high school teachers; and discussions have started around 'personalised learning' a new initiative from David Milliband, the Education Minister, to improve learning and teaching in British schools.

After six weeks and 21 one-day workshops in Britain, I travelled on to Cuba where I gave a presentation on 'Style Diversity in the Classroom' at the 11th International Literacy and Education Research Network Conference on Learning in Havana. My husband, who teaches at Manukau Institute of Technology, came over from New Zealand, and together we attended the conference.

Part of it was visiting schools and the contrast could not have been greater: high-tech environments, Internet use, electronic whiteboards and computerised learning in schools I had just visited in the UK – in Havana mostly bare classrooms with their latest technology - TV screens, VCRs and video tapes through which most teaching is delivered (see picture of this top high school below) No computers in classrooms or libraries, no Internet access, a small computer suite of 15 computers for nearly 1000 students at this high school where students learn the basics and can create their own programmes, or no computers at all.

Despite very limited ICT resources, and what's even worse, limited availability of school books, paper, pencils,

crayons, felt pens and other basic supplies, Cuban students have one of the highest reading levels in the world (according to Latin-American statistics 96 percent of adults are literate) and education is free and compulsory to grade 9.

Since the 1958 revolution, Cuba has



Jose Marti High School in Old Havana

been a communist country under the dictatorship of Fidel Castro, who eliminated all private and religious educational institutions. As in other communist countries, education is supposed to be equal for all children, but evidence shows that access to schooling is far from equal due to socioeconomic status and place of residence and children in rural areas are severely disadvantaged.

The total population of Cuba is 11

million. The majority is of Spanish descent and Spanish is the official language. About 66 percent of the population are white, 12 percent black, and 22 percent of mixed heritage. Immigration is non-existent but there are approximately 20,000 foreign students from Asia, Africa and Latin America. Many Cubans would like to leave their country for a better life elsewhere but it's nearly impossible to obtain a passport.

The many severe problems Cuba faces today have their roots in the history of communism and the trade embargo with the United States. During this week in Havana, we had a chance of experiencing the strange and sad effects of this historic legacy: three currencies – pesos for the general population, Cuban Convertible Pesos to replace US\$, used for trade and currency exchange, and US dollars or Euros (bank notes only) for tourists; many people speaking Russian; food stamps and limited supply of meat to the general population; satellite TV only in international hotels; many vintage US cars, lovingly restored and often only kept together by layers of paint; but no US products, no fast food outlets (!) and hardly any mobile phones. Yet people seem to be happy and make do with what they have got.

However, the most saddening and lasting impression was the state of the houses in Old Havana. Many of the once incredibly beautiful Spanish villas in the city and along their waterfront promenade (Molecon) are in such a derelict state that they are beyond repair and there is not enough funding to save them. A few houses and most old hotels have

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Primary school pupils outside their school in Old Havana, waiting for the next lesson

From Norway - continued from page 29 been restored but generally people live in these shells until they fall apart, moving from upper levels to the ground floor with the ruins still above them.

This has made us realise how lucky we are in New Zealand and how much people have to do with so little.

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Once beautiful, now derelict houses in Old Havana

Kinesthetic - continued from page 26 ing budgets, ordering supplies and determining break-even points.

Encourage students to dance: Make it fun with no embarrassment.

Use a variety of different play with young children: Exploratory play such as scavenger hunts, hide and seek and make-believe; exercise play including aerobics, running, chasing and dancing; group and team games such as relays and sports; adventure and confidence play using rope courses and trust walks.

Support physical education: Use flexibility and conditioning programs with purposeful goals. Play 'new games' often where there is no losing and everyone wins. Design activities that include everyone. Studies show between 30-40 minutes of daily physical exertion is most

beneficial.

Less sitting: Allow your students to stand, squat, walk or lie down when working. Einstein once commented that the best way for him to think, was to talk and stroll.

Energisers: Here are some ideas; Use your body to measure things around the room, play Simon Says, do team jigsaw processes with huge poster mindmaps.

Active games: ball toss for revising, retelling or idea generation. Rewrite the song lyrics to familiar songs with current content from lessons.

Cross-laterals: give students a 5 minute 'mental fitness' break during class to switch on both sides of the brain and enhance learning.

Stretching: Get students up out of their chairs to stretch and increase blood flow

Forget the Tech - continued from page 24 system or upload your own content instead.

The system also enables teachers to put resources in a shared area so other teachers from the school or the networked group of schools can pick up activities or lessons that suit their class. If they want to do their planning at home they can log on and set up their lesson there.

The project will continue over eight years and will continue to evolve as technology improves. Chris explained the company is working on a system to better integrate the various technologies used by schools. For example, the teacher could update attendance records on their tablet and these would feed directly into the schools Student Management System (SMS) package.

The education laws and greater centralisation of ICT decision-making in the UK make this type of scenario much more possible than is currently the case in New Zealand. Nevertheless, the examples shown by Chris provide an exciting vision of where the background work like establishing student ID numbers, data sharing standards, and use of packages such as SMS can lead.

And if you're worrying technology could take over - don't. Chris concluded his presentation with the message - forget the technology!

After showing an activity on an interactive whiteboard where a child selects the correct word from a list to complete a sentence, one of his potential clients leapt to his feet pointing out the system wasn't smart enough to tell the pupil if that was right or wrong. Chris's response - 'no - that's the teacher's job'.

throughout the body and brain. Do this as a whole class or in small groups where students take turns at leading the group.

Encourage sculpture and clay model building: visual-spatial skills are developed from clay work as well as patience and attention to detail.

Use kinesthetic models to explain key concepts: use balloons, blocks, marshmallows, straws, sand etc to demonstrate analytical concepts. Remember speed of teaching is not the goal, rather allowing students to build models and learn from the process.

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