

# FULBRIGHT TEA ALUMNI COLLABORATION: MAKING AN IMPACT

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## ABSTRACT

The Fulbright Teaching Excellence and Achievement (Fulbright TEA) Program I attended in 2022 was an opportunity for me to connect with other teachers with the same interests from Europe and Asia and to organize a project focused on creating sustainable futures. All the participants (teachers and their students) wrote articles about their educational experiences in order to share their best practices. All their articles were published in the national educational magazine I coordinate.

**Keywords:** TEA alumni collaboration • sustainable future • sexual partner preference • educational magazine



## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

As a teacher of English as a Second Language for almost 15 years, I worked in two vocational High schools: A Sports' High school, for two years, after graduating from university, and in a Technological High school, for the past 13 years. Roşia-Jiu Technological High School is a non-profit educational organization. It is a vocational secondary state school based in the rural southwestern part of Romania. The primary educational areas of the school are: Economic profile with a specialization as an administrative technician, Environmental Protection with a specialization as an ecological technician, and Vocational Education/Trade profile with a specialization as a merchant/seller.

The aim of our technical school is to engage our students in activities related to the integration of different types of education. We focus on their communication and entrepreneurial skills, so as to enable them to contribute to the development of our community and our society overall. We have been involved in projects which aim at reducing the school dropout rate and increasing our students' ability to pass exams. We make partnerships with different organizations in our community, including non-profit organizations; we cooperate with partners in the private and public sectors, as well as international organizations.

I have always been interested in taking part in different cultural and educational exchange projects. These projects have taken me to other locations in Europe, South Korea and Japan.

I have also applied for various European grants, such as the Erasmus Plus, which is a European Union life-long learning program that takes place in a non-formal environment. It offers stipends and opportunities for individuals and organizations, in order to support education, training, youth development and sports.

In contrast to formal education, which involves a structured educational system and is usually supported by the state, non-formal education involves activities which are not structured and take place outside the formal system. It is designed to develop a range of skills and competencies that are supplementary and outside of the formal educational curriculum. In the non-formal education environment, cooperation replaces competition, education is related to lifelong learning requirements of the individual and the group, and support of each learner becomes the objective.

Throughout my experience, I have focused on the integration of non-formal education within the formal education system and I have included activities based on experiential learning during my classes. Experiential learning is based on the theory developed by Kolb, who believed that knowledge comes from the transformation of experience. For example, the methods and techniques that are employed include lectures or presentations that allow space for asking questions or feedback, master classes, visits and learning through concrete experience and discussions or debates, such as group –building activities.

Apart from teaching, I have also been a member and a project coordinator in nongovernmental organizations (NGO) in Romania, leading me to start my very own Youngsters of Europe Association. The organization aims to promote and support the common interests of young people locally, nationally and internationally. It focuses on the prevention of social exclusion of children (inclusive education) and it examines the potential of other countries' traditional cultures (intercultural education). As a president and project coordinator of my NGO, I initiated partnerships with the High School where I work, which is a vocational school situated in a rural area, as well as with a large number of schools and organizations throughout Romania.

Within some of these European projects, I was a youth leader of student groups from my school which sometimes included disadvantaged families. These exchange programs proved fruitful because students had the chance to experience new cultures for the first time, meet and collaborate with diverse people, and be exposed to a non-formal type of education. This educational approach focuses on group workshops, gamification, and other topics of their interest which are not usually discussed within formal educational settings. My students were all grateful for these experiences and I was happy to have made a difference in their lives.

Starting from the belief that a modern conception of teaching is based on the use of active-participative methods and techniques along with the use of new technologies and authentic materials, I decided to apply for The Fulbright Teaching Excellence and Achievement (Fulbright TEA) Program in the United States of America. I had never applied for a Fulbright scholarship before, and luckily, I was selected for the 6-week TEA program.

The program took place from the 25th of January to mid-March 2022 at Kent State University. I flew to Chicago O'Hare airport for the second time in 15 years. Upon our arrival, the participants were quarantined for 1 week while doing some of the seminars and getting-to-know each other activities online.

## TEA ACTIVITIES

As part of the six-week Fulbright program, I took part in extensive professional development training, which included 45 hours of seminars on general pedagogy (e.g. student-centered learning, curriculum development, lesson planning, assessment, classroom management, and teacher leadership), 35 hours of training in teaching English and Media Literacy, and 20 hours of instruction in the effective use of technology in the classroom (e.g. low-tech options, free and open-source technologies, Web 2.0 technologies).

During the General Academic Sessions we focused on the insertion of media literacy and technology into authentic materials, which proved beneficial to our students back in our home school environments. The participants also discussed Leadership practices, did Lesson Plan workshops, peer reviews and final presentations, best practice in teaching methods, student-centered learning, and curriculum development. We also focused on the insertion of media literacy and technology into authentic materials, which proved beneficial to our students back in our home school environments.

The course was taught from a Relational Approach to education. For the *Cross Disciplinary* project, we chose a topic related to *Climate Change/Sustainability*, and then mentioned the learning objectives for our learners and the subject area. In pairs, we developed a brief 5-day unit plan according to our students' needs. I worked with another participant from Bulgaria, and together we designed a unit plan entitled *How Europe is Going to Change because of the Climate*. For the plan design, we focused on the *Science Common Core Standard* and the *ELA Common Core Standard* principles. After the presentations, we gave each other peer-to-peer feedback on how we could improve the unit plan.

## MEDIA LITERACY: FIGHTING MISINFORMATION

During The Media Literacy Seminars (MLS) we focused on teaching strategies on how we, as educators, could facilitate and teach the best practices in media literacy coaching in schools in order to increase our students' awareness about them. These strategies were based on experiential learning which included invited guest speakers (e.g., journalists, editors, professors, librarians, administrators). We addressed questions to the speakers that were related to bias, stereotypes, propaganda, disinformation, and media ethics. Some of the questions we considered included the following: "What media do you consume for news, education & entertainment? What are the social implications of the new blended and merging cultural phenomena? Have I been manipulated by the media? What is the desired impact of my media literacy project? How can I prepare my students for a future media landscape

we cannot imagine now? What are the numbers of women and minorities in media vs population in your country and how are they represented? What is the connection between media literacy and American citizenship? What “Fake News” is deceiving/confusing your citizens and students this year? How can you address these stories in a convincing manner? Will parents approve?” The TEA participants created in-class workshops for their students, inspired by the resources for Media Literacy which they were supposed to implement in their schools upon their return.

### **SCHOOL PRACTICE AND OBSERVATION**

In order to implement best practices in a school setting, I collaborated with Native American partner teachers to design lesson plans, activities and materials to deliver to the students at Streetsboro High School. Since two of the teachers I collaborated with taught Spanish, we decided to organize activities for the students to understand the resemblances between the Romance languages (in this case Romanian and Spanish). Therefore, I designed some slides containing similarities between the two languages, and others containing some language idioms whose meaning the students had to guess from the choices given. It was an engaging and fun activity for the students and they really showed interest in it. For instance, one of the idioms they found entertaining was “to be caught with the cat in the bag”, which in English means to be caught red-handed.

Apart from these lessons, I also made cultural presentations of Romania in order to support the students’ global understanding and their cultural competence. I presented the students with the details of our educational system, as well as pictures from Transylvania (e.g. *Bran Castle*, famous for the setting of *Dracula*, *Houses of Parliament* in Bucharest, the largest building in the world), and our traditional food.

I visited other schools where the TEA participants were distributed to teach (Hudson High School, Aurora High School), and we also went on a trip to the Amish community, where we were supposed to visit the school, but unfortunately we weren’t able to enter due to COVID restrictions.

All these visits were special and unique and enriched me in so many ways. During the program, I was invited to be a speaker at the Conference on Women’s Day, on March 8th, where I presented on the topic “Gender Data Gaps and Performance in Romania” along with two other Fulbright TEA participants, from Ukraine and Tajikistan, who also informed the attendees on women’s status in their societies.

## **BACK HOME: FULBRIGHT TEA ALUMNI COLLABORATION AND DISSEMINATION OF PROGRAM**

As an editor of a national educational magazine entitled “(Non) Formal Perspectives in Education”, which I founded in March 2021, I initiated a partnership with the Vocational High School where I teach so as to allow our students to get involved in other projects in which they could write articles on our activities and best practices for the local and national level.

The magazine is published biannually and addresses a wide variety of projects, such as: Methods of Preventing School Dropout, Social Inclusion, Ecological Education, Media Literacy, Gender Equality, Inclusive Education, Bullying Prevention, The Importance of Using New Technologies, and Human Rights.

The 3rd issue of the magazine was published in May 2022, upon my return from my Fulbright TEA, and it focused on Ecological Education. As an organizer, I signed partnerships with hundreds of teachers all over Romania who encouraged their students to take part in this project and send in their articles to be published.

The goal of the project, which was entitled *Implementation of ecological education in nonformal education*, was designed to address problems of our ecosystem, such as global warming, plastic pollution, and extinction or threats to biodiversity. These are issues that are essential for the education of young people and are aimed at spreading awareness about the importance of ecological education and participation in activities that lead to solving environmental challenges. It was fulfilling to see so many participants involved in this topic. The project illustrates how we can learn from each other and therefore inspire more effective methods of implementing ecological education in nonformal education systems.

After completing this successful project, I wanted to do more to disseminate what we learned during the Fulbright TEA program while continuing the collaborations I had developed with alumni from the program. Therefore, the 4th issue of the magazine consisted of a collaboration with my Fulbright TEA Alumni, who had engaged their students and their colleagues to take part in the international project from March- June 2023.

All the teachers who took part in this activity supported and coordinated their students to write articles, poems, and stories, or to create detailed drawings or graphics. At the end of the project all the participants received certificates of appreciation for their involvement.

The aim of the project was to encourage the active participation of the students, as well as teachers, youth workers and other social categories to take part in programs for self-development. The project, which focused on the needs of the learners and of those who come from disadvantaged groups, had a clearly defined purpose and used a diversity of methods.

We encouraged the participation of students, disadvantaged groups, and those who were willing to engage in this lifelong learning process, to make a change, to acquire new skills and discover their abilities and develop new competences, including their critical thinking. The international project/contest aims to facilitate networking within and between communities and societies thoroughly.

Knowing how to integrate Media Literacy in teaching, enabled me to use these strategies during my lessons as they are a means of integrating the four language skills: reading, listening, writing and speaking. For instance, I start each lesson by asking my students to select five news articles of the day from different media (newspapers, magazines, social media) and use their critical thinking skills to decide which ones are reliable or fake. They enjoy the debate and cooperate with great interest. The activities I initiated were valuable for all the participants and was a way to exchange best practices and insights between our schools.

***The aim of the Fulbright TEA Alumni collaboration was to give young people opportunities to get involved in social activities that would enhance their potential in creating sustainable social and economic development, beginning with their communities and extending to the international level.***

## CONCLUSION AND REFLECTIONS

Though the 6 weeks I spent in the US as a Fulbright scholar was short, it was filled with enriching experiences, wonderful people, and future collaborative possibilities. The aim of the Fulbright TEA Alumni collaboration was to give young people opportunities to get involved in social activities that would enhance their potential in creating sustainable social and economic development, beginning with their communities and extending to the international level. Encouraging our youths to become leaders in their own communities is essential for building a dynamic educational curriculum as well as for promoting cooperation activities between schools, associations and non-governmental organizations.

## NOTES

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Adina with the Kent State University professors and organizers of the Fulbright TEA program

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**BIOGRAPHY**

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