

INSPIRATIONAL DEVON – A musical, literary and artistic journey for teachers of English (*notes by a participant*)

by Helena Miklavčič-Jakovac

Strangely enough, my journey to Devon began in a hotel in Topolšica, the venue of the Slovenian IATEFL 2017 conference. It was during a social evening when, to my utter amazement, I heard my name read out among the winners in the raffle which, as well as many other prizes, offered generous discounts on SOL courses in Devon (UK), Serbia and Slovakia. Winning such a prize had been a dream of mine for years, and now it had come true! I almost couldn't believe my ears, but when Dragana Stegić (an active member of the Slovenian IATEFL) congratulated me, and a day later sent me an email with more details about the prize, I finally fully grasped the pleasant truth and started taking the necessary steps to actually grab the opportunity that had been offered to me.

Thanks to the very friendly and efficient staff at SOL, my work was easy. I got loads of good tips regarding the sites on which it was most convenient to book flights and other practical matters from the Executive Director of SOL, Grenville Yeo. He was extremely helpful and encouraging when I had my doubts and also later on in Devon, when he had to personally take me to the bus station in the middle of the night due to the early departure of my flight. He gave me the feeling that at SOL every participant matters and is well taken care of.

On my birthday, the flight was booked (a wonderful present to myself!) and there was no way back. I was going to Devon – a place I knew nothing about, apart from the fact that Jane Austen's novel *Sense and Sensibility* is set there. It was going to be my first time in "real" England, as my previous visits had been to cosmopolitan London, scholar-



My host family's tea-cosy



Damien Hirst's statue Verity (ilfracombe)

ly Cambridge and touristy Brighton. As I tried to locate Barnstaple, the seat of the SOL headquarters, on the map, I felt privileged in being given the opportunity to get a glimpse of an authentic Britain.

Mark Andrews, the tutor and the heart and soul of the inspirational Devon course, got in touch with me and the other participants a week before the course began. His enthusiasm and energy emanated from the email, which (surprisingly) did not include a list of academic articles and books we had to read to be prepared for the course. Instead, he asked us to bring “nice things from our countries to share” and to decide whether we wanted to take surf lessons – two hours of immersion in the Atlantic ocean! “Surf lessons as a part of a teacher-training course?!” I thought to myself: “This is definitely going to be exciting!”. After watching the attached video of last year’s participants, cheerfully screaming and splashing about in the ocean, I knew I was in for something different from your typical teacher-development experience. And I was right!

Our tutor, Mark Andrews, met us at the airport and the course began right away. He was on his “mission” – complete immersion into the language and culture – from the very start. Living proof of the fact that you do not need a classroom or a textbook to teach, he pointed out interesting details about anything English (sports, pronunciation, origins of expressions like “hard shoulder”, climate, Paddington, etc.) on the coach journey from Heathrow to Barnstaple. Rather than telling us things, he challenged us to investigate them and, especially, to observe everything around us, to try to absorb the many bits of English that would be

surrounding us for the next eleven days – from menus, leaflets, signs and newspapers to snippets of conversation. He also inspired us not to be limited to English language only, but to notice anything different that is a part of the culture – from tea-pots, tea-cosies, clotted cream and marmite to English gardens, water taps and so on.

Once the programme of the course was handed out to us on the coach, my suspicions were confirmed: Mark Andrews is indeed an advocate of a hands-on learning experience! The programme was a list of places we were going to visit and explore, public works of art and galleries to admire, live folk music, a festival, an art workshop, local independent businesses, readings and more. And the best thing about it was that we were not going to be lectured about it all. No way! No dull lectures with Mark! Instead we were going to be taken to a variety of towns and villages where we would have the chance (usually a task/mission) to talk to the locals and get first-hand experience of the culture.

The coach journey itself offered magnificent views of thatched houses, brown brick buildings, lush vegetation, open skies, vast fields, cattle and sheep grazing like specks of white, brown and black in more than fifty shades of green. A stop in Salisbury, where we visited the 13th-century Salisbury Cathedral – a breath-taking piece of Gothic architecture and home to the best preserved copy of Magna Carta – and a peek at prehistoric Stonehenge through the coach windows were just another couple of reminders that I was indeed in England. Mark urged us not to forget that for a second and to use everything and everyone around us (especially our host family) as a source to learn from. We were invited to step out of our comfort zone, experiment, do new things



Mark Andrews, our tutor, explaining public art and literature connected to it



My host family's garden, me and one of their dogs

and dare to ask people questions even about “taboo” subjects like Brexit and the recent general election. We were also asked to observe ourselves and our reactions in new situations.

On our arrival in Barnstaple the host families were there to meet us. Together with my two housemates we were taken to a wonderful house surrounded by a beautiful English garden in which statues of birds and elves are hidden among the bushes and flowers and guarded by two friendly dogs. The house itself proved to be a goldmine of information about English culture, proving their love of gardening, tea, knick-knacks, pets (the list could go on and on!). On observing the handiness of having mugs hung on a board to quickly grab when making tea in the morning, it was explained to me that the word cupboard comes from its original simple version: a board for cups. I was also told about tea cosies – knitted garments for a teapot to keep the tea inside hot for a longer time – and even egg cosies. I heard expressions like “take umbrage” and “proud as punch” and took mental notes to research their use and origins. I was already infected by Mark’s philosophy – not waiting for the lesson and the handout to start learning, but using the whole enriching experience as a multi-faceted opportunity to improve my English and get a better insight into the culture. And this was only Day 1 – my lessons had not officially begun yet...

On Day 2, the official opening of the course was set outdoors in a small square. It was 14°C and drizzling, which gave us a taste of the typical climate in the UK! According to Mark, “there is no bad weather, only bad cloth-

ing”, so we proceeded with the planned activity. We were instructed to form a map of Europe by placing ourselves in proper positions according to where we came from – a seemingly easy task, but we still managed to get stuck! Desperate and unable to sort out the problem among ourselves (what babies we were! I can see it so well now!), we turned to our teacher (the source of all truth and knowledge and the solution to all our problems) for further guidance. He was unwilling to offer it, however, and left us to our own devices! He also seemed amused by our increasing frustration levels that led to some participants taking matters into their own hands and bossing others around, while others grudgingly obeyed their orders.

Later on (in the pub!), we were enlightened as to Mark’s hidden agenda behind the “map of Europe” task. Do we ever pay attention to group dynamics? Do we ever observe the roles our students (or we ourselves) usually take in group tasks? Do we let our students sort out their own problems and find their own way to efficiently work together? Mark’s premise is that “if we want to bring up responsible young people, we have to give them an active role in the classroom”. Thus we should “never do anything that we can get our students to do” and should “never give too many instructions when setting up group work”. Only in this way will we give our students the possibility to learn how to learn and learn how to work together. I was delighted by the ease and fluidity with which our tutor managed to sneak important lessons into playful activities. A shift in your approach to teaching is worth so much more than the kind of ready-made lesson plan you sometimes get in workshops.



Victorian school - the setting for one of our workshops



Magnificent view - Poets' Walk

I can assure you that there were many important lessons we were offered (I would hesitate to use the word “taught”) in the next nine days of the course, but they were always disguised as exciting, light-hearted activities. It would be too much to describe them all (as it would monopolise the entire issue of the magazine!), but let me list a few highlights:

- A visit to Pilton Community College – observing art, English and music classes and learning about the importance of a school having a vision, setting high standards, displaying the results of students’ work, maintaining strict discipline and having a system of rewarding students for their accomplishments.
- A talk about NESTS and NON-NESTS and the pros and cons of running an independent publishing house by Susan Holden in an independent bookshop in Bideford.
- A visit to an old Victorian schoolroom, where we donned the attire of Victorian students and teachers and were informed about Victorian England by one of the volunteers in the museum, followed by a fascinating workshop on teaching poetry.
- The folk music evening in a delightful teahouse in Barnstaple.
- Learning about literature and stories connected to the places we were visiting and a talk by renowned local novelist Liz Shakespeare.
- Exploring public art, especially Damien Hirst’s controversial statue *Verity* in Ilfracombe, and trying to find ways to use this kind of art in the classroom.
- Family day on Sunday and a visit to Tintagel, which is inextricably linked to the legend of King Arthur and has you immersed in history, myths and stunning scenery.
- A skilfully executed workshop by the best storyteller and teacher-trainer ever, David Heathfield, who demonstrated the value and importance of telling stories in the classroom and offered practical tips on how to do this effectively.
- Retracing the steps of poets such as Alfred Tennyson, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Makepeace Thackeray on Poets’ Walk while enjoying spectacular views from the top of the cliffs around Clevedon.
- Learning about Rudyard Kipling and his poem *If* in Westward Ho! – the only geographical name in Britain with an exclamation mark in its name.

Back home now, getting ready for the new school year while reliving my Devon experience through writing this article, I am fully aware and deeply grateful to IATEFL, SOL and especially Mark Andrews for taking me on this enriching journey which has contributed not only to my development as a teacher, but also to my personal growth.



Public art romance - Poets' Walk detail



Kipling's poem If as public art in Westward Ho!



King Arthur's statue - Tintagel