

The Dutch Method: Better sex education

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The Fulbright Distinguished Award in Teaching program experience has been a thought-provoking opportunity to review my own cultural assumptions, examine social norms in a new culture, and engage in concentrated study that I would not typically have time to do. The combination of an open-ended research process and the structure of the grant requirements has allowed me to immerse myself in productive inquiry that will have immediate impact on my school community and long-lasting influence on my ways of thinking. From the formal Ministry of Education contacts to meeting students in various schools, my interactions and connections provided valuable context for academic findings and the conclusions I, in the end, can draw.

I found an apartment in the ancient city of Maastricht, Netherlands, which has a modern, international university focused on research. The articles that piqued my curiosity in my initial research originated in the Psychology and Social Sciences department at Maastricht University, connected to the study of behavioral health interventions. Faculty and graduate students with experience in evidence-based program development have generated a comprehensive body of work that underlies the curricular decisions of teachers throughout the Netherlands. The original work to develop an evidence-based sexuality education program for the Netherlands was done by Fraukje Mevissen, and working in Maastricht gave me access to her extensive network, expertise, and academic support.

### **Program highlights**

Meeting the principal authors of the research that started my inquiry gave my research automatic credibility that supports my process and conclusions. It also bolstered my confidence

in pursuing the project given the skepticism of some of my school community, knowing that leading international experts both validate my inquiry and my conclusions. My faculty advisor introduced me to several key people in the sexuality education community in the Netherlands, as well as herself being the author of the original Long Live Love curriculum that is so widely praised. The program developers and teachers I met with welcomed me and gave generously of their time and expertise. From classroom visits to dinner parties in their homes, the personal connections that my Dutch connections offered were some of the most fulfilling parts of my experience, adding value to my research, of course, and also reflecting the Fulbright goals of increasing “mutual understanding” and international friendship. Becoming part of the broader Fulbright community, too, is another enriching aspect of my personal experience—the Alumni Ambassadors who helped us prepare, the Fulbright Center in Amsterdam, other grantees, and my DAT colleagues in the Netherlands are all part of my growing world.

The most material gift of the Distinguished Award in Teaching is the time and space it includes. Freedom from competing demands on my time and attention—for the library, readings, writings, visits, and time to process the information and complexities I encounter—is a luxury I have not enjoyed as an adult. My responsibilities to my family, my school, and my community usually absorb every bit of my mental energy and practical resources.

In Maastricht, my grant allows me to choose my own priorities and schedule meetings, school visits, excursions, and “executive time” at my convenience. My comfortable, low-maintenance apartment has space to work and few distractions. Since my obligations are reduced to working on my project and making sure I eat, my time feels endless and free. The contrast between my lifestyle on project and at home is the most distinct cultural shift I have

experienced, making it hard to discern what is due to being in the Netherlands and what arises from the change in my personal circumstances. From running a household, overseeing my family, teaching high school, and administrating full-time, I have had what feels like a 100% reduction in my duties. I feel a little guilty pursuing my own intellectual inquiry and nothing else. Interestingly, the historical and cultural differences between the southern Netherlands and Protestant Holland have shed some light on the ways that European history has influenced my home culture, upbringing, and moral priorities. Work, worth, reward, and guilt are intrinsic themes in my Fulbright experience, and connect to personal and and larger cultural expectations. Time and space to think about bigger issues like that must be included as a top program highlight.

Because I am usually the teacher, or the person in charge, I also relished being a “student”. Fraukje Mevissen, professor of social science at Maastricht University, was a great mentor for my project. I appreciated having a faculty advisor who was willing to treat me like one of her students, examine my work and provide feedback and direction, as well as welcome me to Maastricht and give me tips on things to see and do. She read my work, asked probing questions, and was frank when direction was required. Because her expertise is as a researcher in health interventions, she offered a highly analytical perspective on program design and implementation. The importance of using evidence-based protocols and programs has become more clear to me, and I will be able to leverage it in promoting my ideas. Another new strength!

My own sense of efficacy as a professional is encouraged. I feel more confident that I can present, articulate and support my ideas in professional and school settings with the Fulbright experience and the affirmation that comes with it. I plan to present my research

findings on sexuality education and make recommendations that hopefully will have immediate and long-lasting effect of my school and generations of students. This will involve building community with school families as well as curriculum review; one of the intangibles that is very different from the US to the Netherlands but that I can hopefully translate.

The program has impacted my personal outlook in many ways, highlighting for me my role in my home community and the possibilities I have as a global citizen. Being away helped me re-appreciate the benefits of home; living in the Netherlands opened a broader perspective on history, politics and culture of the US and Europe. The professional impact will be felt right away upon my return to my school, and I know that it will continue to develop. The parallel structure of the program project to my class, AP Seminar, will benefit and influence the class and my students going forward, and I will use the structure of the experience as a framework to present real-life application of research for my students. In a larger sense, my perspective on the way history influences the way culture develops, like the connection between Amsterdam and New York, or the Pilgrims and the Dutch through the centuries, has been forever changed. The program has impacted my life from the day-to-day routine to the philosophical, making the world both much richer and easier to understand.

### **Project description**

This project seeks to learn about how the Dutch integrate sexuality education in high schools and what contributes to their exemplary national public and sexual health outcomes and positive research narratives. In my school, sexuality education is inconsistent and has become a persistent topic of discussion. The significant body of literature evaluates the evidence and describes the successes of Dutch schools in this area, setting a high standard of

practice. I wanted to review curriculum and observe the classroom practices of teachers to understand how the subject is impacted by cultural attitudes, educational priorities, and individual teacher decisions. With a better understanding of the complexities of the Dutch program, I will have a more informed and stronger basis for making recommendations to improve the program at Woods Charter School.

Classroom observations and teacher interviews indicate that the cultural context is the most influential factor in conveying comprehensive sexuality education. The Dutch reputation for social freedoms belies the practical and prudent approach schools and families take towards sexuality education. This offers parallels to conservative culture in US; there is a significant and ongoing gap between the research and field of evidence and actual educational practice in both settings. Even so, classroom discourse on sexuality in the Netherlands occurs in a cultural context that allows candor and transparency about topics that are socially or legally prohibited within US schools.

### **Project process**

As a school leader, I want to bridge the gap between best practices and actual practices in our school overall, and this particular topic has been brought to the fore by student research, activism, and communication. My topic developed from hearing an interview with a researcher discussing sexuality education in the Netherlands, and how effective and practical it is. This echoed with my experience working with student research into sex ed curriculum and student dissatisfaction with the program at Woods Charter School. Recent student projects examining the sexuality education curriculum and attitudes prompted me to consider my role in shaping school policy, curriculum decisions, and cultural priorities. The work of Grace Smith and Matti

Kauftheil, Woods Charter School student researchers, appears in the bibliography and provided initial impetus and subsequent support for this project.

In response to this background, my first step was to investigate published research on sexuality education, which is an established and well-documented field. Various academic journals publish articles on comprehensive sexuality education, abstinence-only education, and related issues, so I found many perspectives to review, as well as a generally-accepted conclusion—comprehensive sexuality education leads to “better outcomes” such as reduced rates of risk, disease, and health problems, reduced unwanted pregnancy, reduced abortion rates, greater satisfaction in relationships, and increased competence in young people.

The Fulbright Center in Amsterdam connected me with the lead developer of the Long Live Love curriculum at Maastricht University, Fraukje Mevissen. She offered her expertise and facilitated my access to the university database and library resources, as well as the latest edition of Long Live Love. Dr. Mevissen provided research on the efficacy of the curriculum and shared the Intervention Mapping protocol that her cohort in the Social Sciences department of the MU use to evaluate behavioral health interventions. This systematic approach lends an analytical veracity to my findings and supplies a framework for continued work in my school community, as we determine how to best implement improved curriculum in sexuality education.

With her professional knowledge of recent research and publications in the field, Dr. Mevissen shared instrumental articles, studies, and contacts. Through her, I interviewed Lisette Schutte and Suzanne Meijer of SOA/AIDS Netherlands, responsible for the latest edition of LLL as well as other publications and projects in sexual health in the Netherlands. They provided

observations about working in the field, the need for continued effort, and were enthusiastic about sharing the newly-revised *Long Live Love* program. According to these researchers, the cultural context and changes that Amber and I have seen in the US are also occurring in the Netherlands, with increased acceptance of LGBTQ+ issues and visibility, greater sexual independence, and the accompanying backlash.

Gee van Duin of Cartesius Lyceum was an invaluable ally, as a classroom teacher and professor of education, who invited me into his school and introduced me to colleagues and students who contributed to my research. One such connection, Victorine van Pelt, welcomed Amber Moore and me to observe in her classroom on several occasions during unit on reproductive health and sexuality, and was especially helpful in outlining the cultural contexts, constraints, and influences in multicultural education at her school and in Amsterdam. Mr. van Duin provided several similar connections which gave me the opportunity to visit schools and university classes. The school visits provided invaluable context for understanding the many nuances of teaching about sexuality.

Amber Moore, 2018 recipient of a Fulbright Distinguished Award in Teaching, and I found substantial congruence between our inquiries, and engaged in collegial exchange throughout the project term. Amber's interest in deconstructing heteronormativity combined with the role of biology teachers in educating youth about reproduction, sexuality, and identity. We took advantage of our different perspectives within the field to expand our understandings about the workings of the Dutch educational system, cultural norms, gender expectations, and sexual health issues in Amsterdam.



Informally, students contributed their ideas and observations in classroom visits, hallway conversations, and chats between strangers on the train. Dutch young people were forthcoming and curious when they learned of my research, and candidly shared their opinions on the role of sexuality education in their schooling. I've learned to seize the opportunity to talk to people I meet about their views on and experiences with Dutch sexuality education, which sometimes contrast with the academic conclusions. The common theme? Talking about sex is "normaal"—thinking that it isn't, isn't.

### **Project results**

Findings in the US typically focus on risk reduction and public health concerns; more progressive programs also find improved sexual and relational satisfaction, acceptance of relational and sexual diversities and multi-faceted identities. Evaluation of abstinence-based sexuality education shows little efficacy, and while it fits some value systems does not confer the health and wellness benefits of comprehensive programs.

In the Netherlands, comprehensive reproductive and sexuality education is embedded in the science curriculum and includes information on contraception and abortion, contested topics in some communities. Teachers select curricula, and one of the most popular and widely-used, with periodic researched-based revisions in the past 25 years, is *Long Live Love*, which has several age-targeted editions and ancillary units as well.

The more I searched, the more I found of a body of evidence supporting comprehensive sexuality education as a public health, economic, developmental and human rights issue. My initial question - how do they do teach sexuality education in the Netherlands - was addressed in a characteristically pragmatic Dutch fashion. Evidence-based, thorough program design is

widely accepted and practiced in sexuality education in the Netherlands. The need for such curricula and place of sexuality education within schools are undisputed, and fall under the purview of experts in the field—teachers. The answer to my question was simple and straightforward, but raised a host of new ones: why can't we do this in the US? How can I bridge the gap between research and evidence and actual practice in my community? These queries point to the more complex and schematic cultural underpinnings of sin and virtue, gender and power, and rights and freedoms, defying a direct answer.

Through following up with the initial LLL curriculum developers, researchers who have evaluated its results, and teachers who implement the program, and by examining the robust body of literature on the subject, my question (*How do they do it?*) was emphatically answered, but the more complex part was how this information might be translated to my setting. At this point in my process, the focus changed. The answer to initial question, how they do it, was clearly delineated and documented in the research.

The obvious next question was harder to answer. If this is already proven and described so thoroughly (CSE=good), why don't we do it, and how can we? The differences between programs is actually in the cultural context, not the content or delivery of the curriculum. Coming to understand this essential paradigmatic disconnect has been the least conclusive and most existential part of my project. At the same time, it's the most important. Figuring out how to address the cultural incongruities between the Netherlands and the US will set the direction for better sexuality education programs in the US in general, and Woods Charter School in particular.

I have learned what makes the Dutch sexuality education programs successful, and observed implementation. I've interviewed teachers and students about their experiences. I've read all the latest research, and have a sense of the sturdy foundation on which it's based. The results of my inquiry, then, have to do with the ineffables and the contradictions regarding how we acknowledge, contextualize, and understand human sexual development—a much more difficult problem.

### **Relevance and applications**

Everything I have learned so far is background information for the real undertaking—working for change. I feel like I have a strong understanding of the rationale and evidence behind what I will be proposing at my school; the extensive literature review I conducted bolsters my premise. My work will start bridging the gap between theory and practice in my community by initiating an assessment of community priorities and facilitating a review of practice, policy, and curriculum regarding sexuality education.

There will be three strands in my initiative: conversation, curriculum, and culture.

1. *Conversation.* My first step on my return will be to share my research experience and findings in presentations to groups of students, the faculty, and parents. I know they are curious about why I am studying sexuality education, and this will be a great opportunity to educate them about what research indicates, what good curriculum involves, and why this subject matters. I will be able to use the distilled talking points from my presentation at the Fulbright Center in Amsterdam to convey the basic information about the Dutch approach to sexuality education and why it works. This will also be a listening period, when I can hear back from the stakeholders and learn what their views, goals, and reservations are about

changes in our school program. Furthermore, this is just the start of the conversation, as I will facilitate continued open dialogue going forward.

2. *Curriculum.* After the health teachers learn about the latest and substantial research on best practices in sexuality education, I will join them in reviewing a selected group of potential programs for their classes. While WCS prizes teacher autonomy, I am committed to sharing what I have learned and helping the involved parties make informed decisions in choosing or designing any program. Previous selections had been made out of convenience; future choices will rely on professional judgment.
3. *Culture.* Expanding cultural norms to include personal responsibility around relationships, sexuality and relationships may seem to lack specific relevance to the goals of American education. I anticipate that some of the members of my community will hold such views. The same logic that led me to the Netherlands to study effective sexuality education now progresses to this new level—changing the culture. While we are bound by the NC Healthy Youth Act of 2009 to teach that “abstinence from sexual activity outside of marriage is the expected norm for school-aged children” we can normalize information about health, relationships, and decision-making. Incremental change in how we discuss topics related to development, the body, intimacy, and reproduction will help destigmatize these topics, allowing better education on their complexities.

Beyond the school setting, I plan to extend and develop my work based on my Fulbright project, seeking venues to share my findings and working on the cultural paradigms that inhibit what research proves to be most effective, to the detriment of young people. Fellow Fulbright DAT grantee Amber Moore and I will submit presentations for several national conferences on

our return to the US and will continue our collaboration as researchers and advocates for comprehensive sexuality education. I'm also interested in creating a "new translation" of the renowned Dutch curriculum for comprehensive sexuality education, *Long Live Love*, which offers an evidence-based and scientifically validated approach that could serve as the basis for an American iteration. Fraukje Mevissen has professional connections with faculty there who may be helpful contacts and suggests a possible collaboration.

With some specific and some still-developing ideas about integrating my new understandings into practice, I am ready to engage with colleagues, students, and families and bring the fruits of the Fulbright award into my world.