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English 10

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Genius Hour Reflection: Foreign Exchange

**Summarize the purpose of your Genius Hour project in 140 characters.**

The purpose of my project was to gather all inciteful information about foreign exchanging as I possibly could, and brainstorm ways to make my dream a reality.

**Explain the process of your Genius Hour project. Be reflective. Be contemplative. Explain and describe your journey. (No Less Than Three FULL Paragraphs.)**

 My Genius Hour project was about foreign exchange 101. To understand where my desire to do this came for, we have to step back in time--to the 2013-2014 school year. My aunt, uncle, and cousin, all of whom I am very close to, decided to apply to be a host family for a foreign exchange student. After scrutinizing visits, interviews, and inspections, they were finally approved and found that their student was a 16-year-old boy from Germany. His name was Toke (pronounced Toe-ka). I became best friends with this kid (at least in my mind we were best friends), and looked up to him as my role model. He must have sensed my interest in foreign exchange, because he’d bring it up and we would talk for hours. Toke is the reason for my crazy desire to study abroad.

 To begin my Genius Hour project, I needed to gather information, because I knew absolutely nothing about foreign exchange. I started by Googling “foreign exchange programs” and began perusing through all the different sites. There was a plethora of knowledge within each of the sites, not to mention blogs of past foreign exchange students. Soon, I felt like I couldn’t hold anymore information. I mean, it was all I ever talked about with my family. I started applications for two different programs: AFS and YFU. AFS, the American Field Service, was founded during World War II as ambulance drivers in Europe. After the war they decided to keep the good relations with the recovering Europe and henceforth created a foreign exchange program to give high school students an opportunity to study abroad, not just in Europe, but all around the world. YFU, Youth for Understanding, was founded in 1951. It began when people proposed to church leaders in Ann Arbor, Michigan, that teenagers in Germany be brought to the United States to live with a family and attend high school for a year. The leaders finally agreed and ever since, YFU has been globalizing their studies and helping teens achieve their dreams.

When I went to get transcripts and letters of recommendation from my school I hit a major speedbump: my school would not count my time abroad as credits towards my diploma. I was flabberghasted. I understood that European countries didn’t count time abroad to America, but that’s because the American education system is extremely horrible. As Toke told me, “the stuff I’m learning in senior year here, I learned in like eighth grade in Germany.” In a book I read entitled The Smartest Kids in the World and How They Got That Way, the author/journalist investigated four different countries’ education systems: South Korea, Finland, Poland, and the US. The first three all rank in the top, with Poland making a remarkable and fast climb towards the top. The US, however, ranks below Latvia, Slovenia, and the Czech Republic. The difference between the US and other countries around the world is not lack of funding (the US spends more per child than other top performing countries), it is in the teachers themselves. To become a teacher in Finland is nearly equivalent to becoming a doctor in this country--meaning not anyone can do it. The other lead culprit in our poor education skills is sports. We push our high school students to achieve in sports rather than in academics and that is not okay. The athletic department is the highest funded division in most schools. And homework? “Oh, I was gone for football so I didn’t do it,” is an excuse most teachers have heard more than once (and those students don’t get reprimanded for not doing the work either). Sorry, I could talk for hours on this subject. So yes, it does surprise me that my school will not count my year abroad as credits here, even though I’m learning much of the same material, just in a different language. I decided to take a year off after I graduate high school, and do a GAP year before I start college.

Although AFS was a little more expensive and had less program choices, after reading reviews they seemed more reliable than YFU, so I decided to go with them. As time went on, and I kept checking back on the website, I discovered they kept adding programs. I was pumped. I realized that by the time I graduated, AFS would have nearly any program I thought of. One of my biggest concerns was money. How on earth was I supposed to raise between $15,000 and $20,000 for a year in Europe? Thankfully, the AFS website has some ideas about how to raise money. They had so many great ideas along with the standard bake sale ones. Most likely, I am going to use many of the given ideas in addition to a few of my own--I’m thinking about hosting a community wide running race. I have no doubt I’ll be able to raise the money in two years time.

I cannot truthfully say that I have decided which program I’d like to do, but I do know that I want to go the 2017-2018 school year. I know that I want to go to some place in Europe. I’d say that my project was a success. I have gained so much insightful information about foreign exchanging, gathered many ideas about fundraising, and had a great time doing it.

**The intention For Genius Hour is NOT only to learn, but ALSO to share your knowledge with others who can and will benefit from your learning. How did you share your learning? What do you hope the result might be? (No Less Than Two Full Paragraphs.)**

I struggled for a long time pondering how to share my project. If I created a blog, there’s no guarantee anyone would read, or even see it. That was out. I decided to spread by word of mouth anyone who was interested in a little knowledge about foreign exchanging should talk to me. I got a few stragglers. So then I thought, “Well, she told us to step out of our comfort zone a little. I’ll present to a class. Turns out not many people in my classes want to listen to anyone, not even the teacher, lecture at this point in the year. Subsequently, I chose my bio class (minus the unenthused kids who had no desire or respect to listen to me), and gathered the enthused children around my lab table and presented my project on my laptop.

The results turned out well, I believe. Everyone respectfully listened to me, at least. I hope that I sparked the interest in some of the kids to check out the possibility of foreign exchanging. I also hope that because foreign exchange programs are so expensive, and a scary idea, it didn’t intimidate anyone enough to completely shut it out of their minds. It is, I’ve heard, one of the best experiences one can have in life. Studying abroad creates lifelong friends, knowledge of other cultures, and independence sure to assist you further on in life.

**If you could do anything different with your Genius Hour project what would you do differently and why? (No less than two full paragraphs.)**

If I could do anything different in this project I would prepare my presentation better, and try to reach a greater audience. I wish I would have thought of presenting to a middle school or elementary class, because those children still have an imagination. Children that age are more open-minded to ideas like that, and I know I could get the gears turning around that idea in a few of those kids. I didn’t decide to present it until later in my project and didn’t have enough time to prepare--my fault for poor time management. Thankfully, it didn’t turn out horrible, but high school kids aren’t that into big changes in their ideals halfway through their four years.

Another change I would have made is dedicating more time and effort into it. I wish I didn’t spend my whole time researching about it (although that was the purpose) and did a little more time discussing it with real people. The foreign exchange kids we have here, for example, as well as Toke, I could have talked to about what it was like, what they would have done differently, different programs that are available, and if it was fully worth it. I could have gone out and started doing my fundraising, not just finding ways to do it.

**Reflect on what you did well during this Genius Hour process? Note your successes and accomplishments. (No less than two full paragraphs.)**

In the end, I was happy with my results. I believe I succeeded in completing what I intended to get done with my project. Although the bulk of my project was research, that research has already helped me extremely well. I passed a year of German (that is one hard language to learn), and I gained a mass of knowledge on the subject. Sharing it was also fun, the people I shared with really enjoyed learning about foreign exchange programs. I succeeded another way in getting ideas for fundraising.

In my eyes, my project won’t be complete until I go on and come back from a year abroad, but this reflection paper and our finished projects are due on the twenty-seventh, so I don’t really have time for that. I hope that after I come back from my program I can use this project/website to help present my trip abroad to younger students. By doing so, I will finally have the peace of knowing my tenth grade English assignment is finally complete.

I am incredibly thankful for the opportunity to participate in Genius Hour throughout the year. I have learned so much not only from my actual project, but in making my project/website work. I learned how to create a website, learned some neat tips on blogging, and most importantly, good time management. Before this, I used to be a horrible procrastinator, never getting anything done. Now, however, I know that I need to get my work done first, then go on to the fun stuff (if I even have time for that). The project part of it made me broaden my horizons, consider something I never thought I’d have the guts to do. I am thankfully everyday for the life lessons my Genius Hour projects have taught me.

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# “When I was 5 years old, my mother always told me that happiness was the key to life. When I went to school, they asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up. I wrote down ‘happy’. They told me I didn’t understand the assignment, and I told them they didn’t understand life.”~John Lennon