

2017

Connecting Students from Tajikistan to the World: A Teacher's Journey

Hamadony Muzafarov

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digscholarship.unco.edu/jeri>

 Part of the [Bilingual, Multilingual, and Multicultural Education Commons](#), and the [International and Comparative Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Muzafarov, Hamadony (2017) "Connecting Students from Tajikistan to the World: A Teacher's Journey," *Journal of Educational Research and Innovation*: Vol. 6 : No. 1 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://digscholarship.unco.edu/jeri/vol6/iss1/3>

This Practitioner Stories: Voices from Near and Far is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarship & Creative Works @ Digital UNC. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Educational Research and Innovation by an authorized editor of Scholarship & Creative Works @ Digital UNC. For more information, please contact Jane.Monson@unco.edu.

Connecting Students from Tajikistan to the World: A Teacher's Journey

Hamadony Muzafarov



Implementing English language programs for my students was a dream come true that opened an endless world of possibilities to them. Without knowing the English language, it would have been impossible for them to travel both physically and virtually to see the world, and build connections with people around the world. I try to make my students believe in themselves, dream big, and follow their dreams.

I grew up in Kochon, a village in Rasht District, Tajikistan and I know from experience how difficult it is to get a good education in this region. When I left my remote village in 1994 to study at the University in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, it was already my dream to become an English teacher and to work with young people in other remote villages. Currently, I serve as a national UN Volunteer Tajikistan and as a part time teacher. During the weekend I conduct English classes free of charge for fourteen school children ages 10-13. The classes also include life skills activities such as goal setting, responsibility, time management, self-

confidence, anger management, and how not to bully.

I wanted to become a teacher because I love working with young people, sharing ideas, and inspiring and educating the future leaders of our world. During my time as a teacher, I have learned much from the comments and feedback of my students and my teaching skills have increased. As a teacher, I try to create a safe and friendly environment for children. Outside of the classroom and my primary job as an English teacher, I conduct different educational activities and projects which assist, enlighten, encourage, and empower students. I try my best to enable them to be effective leaders in

their schools and communities. I live in Kochon Village of Navdi Community Center of the Rasht District (former Gharm district). This area is called the Rasht Valley and consists of five districts: Laksh, Tajikabad, Rasht, Nurabad and Sangvor. It is about 190 km east of the country's capital, Dushanbe, near the border with Kyrgyzstan. The total population of the Navdi community center is about 16,000 and the total population of the Rasht district is about 123,876 (as of January 2017). People have different types of jobs such as doctors, nurses, teachers and others, but mostly the men travel to Russia to find jobs and feed their families. This is in part due to the recent global economic crisis which negatively affected job opportunities in the area and increased the number of people without jobs.

In 2010, I received a grant from the U.S. Embassy in Tajikistan to fund my capacity-building work with teachers. As a result, I have conducted training for English teachers. With the support of the Regional English Language Office, which is located in Astana, Kazakhstan, I created a Teacher Resource Center where English teachers in Rasht District could find updated information and teaching materials to use to enhance their teaching skills. In addition, I created a Facebook page for English teachers where I share updated information which they can use in their lessons to make them fun and interesting. When the lessons are more engaging, it is easy to teach and learn effectively. Since 2011, more than one hundred teachers have participated in the trainings. I ran my private learning center from 2006 until 2016.

Female school attendance in my region has been historically low because many families think higher education for girls is useless. However, in 2010, I had the opportunity to obtain funds from the U.S. Embassy in Tajikistan to implement an Access Program. The English Access Microscholarship Program is designed for pupils from poor and vulnerable families and I created a pilot program for talented female students to study English (<https://tj.usembassy.gov/embassy/dushanbe/grant-programs/english-access-microscholarship/>). One of the first women to be accepted into the pilot Access Program was my first female student, a private student from 2006-2011, and she has since traveled to study in the U.S. and is now a teacher in Dushanbe. Through my tutelage and encouragement, more than fifty alumnae of our educational programs have applied to institutions of higher learning to become English teachers, physicians, or other professionals. Two of these students went to the U.S. through exchange programs, which was novel because no one from my village had ever been to the U.S. On an individual level, these girls are clearly success stories. At a macro level, one can see how teaching female students in a conservative society has been groundbreaking, because now there are many girls who regularly attend my classes, and many who have become successful.

I believe that a teacher's impact on the community is one clear measure of success. As of today, over 100 students have graduated from the Access Program, 60 from private tutoring, and the lives of 3,990 other students have been touched through the programs

offered at the Center I established with the help of the U.S. Embassy. I have always emphasized the importance of girls' rights to education everywhere and the importance of community service, and as part of my efforts both of these ideas are being implemented in our community. In 2011 and 2013, a group of my former students applied for a grant, with my help, in order to promote community services. They obtained the grants and facilitated training on women's rights, English language clubs, and summer camps to help others increase their knowledge about participation in civic life. Through these projects, over 30 female and 20 male students were trained and they then trained their peers.

I also believe that providing students with a global mindset is both important and necessary. At the end of our programs, students wrote evaluations about what they had learned. Many stated that they had a better understanding of international issues, whereas before they were insular and only thought about the issues in their day-to-day lives. Once, we celebrated International Day of the Girl Child by creating informative pamphlets distributed to over 600 girls in three schools. The first step in preparing my students to become global citizens was to teach them about other cultures. I emphasized that people everywhere have the same fundamental challenges and concerns: taking care of family, jobs and education, safety, and the environment, for example. Likewise, similar things like love of family and friends, beauty, art and music inspire people all over the world. Building worldwide connections with people in

order to address common problems and share ideas and possible solutions is a great way to become a global citizen. This is why I encourage my students to apply for educational exchange programs.

To help my students become global citizens, I used different materials such as newspapers and television news reports to inform them about what was going on around the world. I also used materials that I acquired while traveling, including brochures about different places I visited (menus and plane tickets for example). These materials helped me teach about and discuss different cultures, including etiquette, religion, communication, relationships, and the rule of law in various countries. I also talked about the ways in which money, politics, culture, technology, and the environment affect the world.



I enabled my students to communicate with people in other countries through several virtual cultural exchanges to foster mutual understanding between students in Tajikistan and around the world. I partnered with Bridges to Tajikistan, a nongovernmental organization in the

United States, to host a Skype session with its founder so our students could talk about Tajikistan and learn about American culture. Also, my school participated in the Kidzwish Global New Year's Project for 2016 where our classroom partnered with another school from Boston for an exchange of goodwill. We made and sent greeting cards to students in our partner school which included a wish each student had for the world in 2016 and at least one small plan to help make that wish come true. After that, we hosted a Skype call with the people at our partner school so we could see and talk to them.

We also participated in a Virtual Valentines Project in which my school was partnered with a gymnasium in Baranovich, Belorussia. We made and sent Valentine's Day cards, made a video, hosted a Skype call, and learned about the city and country by doing research. We also had Skype chats with students in Kenya during which we shared our knowledge about Tajik culture. In addition, my school was selected by Opportunity Education in Omaha, Nebraska, U.S. to be a sister school with a school in India with which we started successful pen pal programs.

Another effort to connect my students with students in other countries included contacting forty-three English teachers who participated in the Oxford summer school to create opportunities for Skype video calls. Every month we hosted a cultural day for one country. Before hosting each Skype chat, I taught my students about that country's history and culture. In my opinion, these kinds of programs helped my students to learn and explore the world and become global citizens.

As a teacher, I also strived to create a safe and friendly environment, learn about different learning and teaching strategies, and encourage critical thinking and problem solving. Inside and outside the classroom, I challenged my students and fellow teachers to do the same. In my English lessons, I built on all four language skills: reading, speaking, writing, and listening. Outside of the classroom, I facilitated different projects and events so that parents and other teachers could participate in our students' learning process. I believe that we should keep parents informed about their children's school performance as it gives credibility to our work as teachers and to our students' efforts. Although some students may be initially reluctant to involve their parents, they always end up proud showing their work and what they have learned. My students used self and peer evaluation/assessment worksheets to figure out their strengths and weaknesses and to monitor classroom behavior.

Many teachers in Tajikistan believe that strictness and instilling fear in students is an effective approach to teaching. I believe just the opposite and never want my students to fear asking a question about something they do not understand. Being positive and taking care of students inside and outside of the classroom increases motivation and engagement. I used games to motivate and engage, even the weakest students. I also praised students for their work, despite their possible mistakes, and talked to them individually if they misbehaved. I had attainable goals and clear objectives which helped me design lessons that would be easy for students to follow. Clear objectives also helped

my students understand my expectations of their work. Additionally, they knew that I always wanted them to discuss the alternatives to what seemed like the obvious solution to a problem. Finally, I used weekly participation grades which rewarded desirable behaviors, attitudes, and work habits.



Outside the classroom, I conducted trainings on my methods for other teachers that were based on community need, with pre-workshop and post-workshop assessment sessions. Participants completed a questionnaire in which I asked about their current knowledge on topics that I wanted to focus on during the trainings. It helped me determine my goals and community priorities prior to each training. Afterwards, these assessments indicated whether the project goals and objectives had been met or not. I asked participants to give feedback, comments, and suggestions on the evaluation forms so I could assess what participants had learned. Many teachers have come back to me long after these trainings to share how the methods are effective in their classrooms because of the safe and friendly environment we have created

for students. Many English language specialists and heads of local government often visited my English programs to see how the projects were going and to talk to students about their progress in language acquisition and to learn about my students' work.

In the traditional society of Tajikistan it is challenging for girls to reach even secondary school. One of my goals is to fight the uphill battle of providing education for Tajik girls. Girls in rural areas are often pulled out of school in their mid-to-late teens and forced to get married. Despite this, I have successfully worked with girls from rural, underprivileged backgrounds by building trust with parents where I launched an all-girls group. Once I earned the community's trust, I started gradually mixing girls with boys to foster gender balance in my classroom. My first female students have become "trailblazers" in the community, have confidence, and share their knowledge with other girls in the villages. They have learned English so well that they have become competitive for highly sought-after slots in American exchange programs. With the support of Bridges to Tajikistan in 2015, a Leadership Development Club for Girls was created and one hundred schoolgirls attended seminars on women's rights, gender issues, parenting, environment, sewing, debate and peer training. The project included Female Speaker Programs where positive role models were invited to visit and discuss the importance of education and disadvantages of child marriage.

With my community's support, I have been able to provide after school activities for youth. I dedicate my life to education and to giving young people in

Rasht Valley opportunities for a brighter future. Many of my students are now studying at Tajik State Pedagogical University in the region and simultaneously work at a local school because of their excellent knowledge of English. They recently invited me to visit their classrooms and it was rewarding to see how they are using my teaching methods, such as playing games. Some schoolgirls created peer-to-peer rooms at their school where they offer free English lessons.

An additional problem in our educational system in Tajikistan is that inexperienced teachers who still use Soviet-era textbooks and methods often teach many of our students. Because teachers in primary and secondary schools are required to have completed no more than a secondary level of education, many students are being taught by instructors who lack the education necessary for teaching. This contributes to low outcomes for children in basic literacy and math skills. To aggravate the situation, in many areas of Rasht District, teachers have limited access to proper teaching materials. The result is boring and ineffective instruction. Students learn to repeat what the teacher says, but there are few interactive lessons and there is little, if any, creative thinking.

I have dedicated my career to improving this situation. One of my goals was to improve my own teaching methods. To do so, I participated in many educational exchange programs

sponsored by the U.S. Government for teachers both in Tajikistan and the United States. Using methods learned in these programs, I now share those methods with other teachers throughout Rasht Valley.

To improve my fellow teachers' level of knowledge, I shared with them strategies on being an effective teacher. We worked on developing interesting lesson plans, using different games in the classroom, making their own teaching materials, and learning how to provide assistance for students who may need additional educational support. I also worked with local teachers to improve their English and computer skills. I strongly believe that we can change our society by working together. We as teachers can encourage each other and raise the standard of education in the Rasht Valley of Tajikistan. We have to remember that, everything that is big now started with something small. Seemingly small steps now create big changes later. In my work, I am guided by the following idea: If I were able to educate at least one pupil, he/she will shine the whole village.

Hanadony Muzafarov is a globally renown, award winning educator dedicated to the education of girls and women in Tajikistan. Most recently, he was a Global Teacher Prize/Varkey Foundation top 50 finalist in 2018. To learn more about his work visit www.hamadonymuzafarov.blogspot.com.