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Chinese New Year Lesson Plan

In the beginning of the semester, the director of housing advised us that to feel at home in Florence, we should participate in activities as we would at home. At the time, I was ready to take on an internship giving tours at the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, an experience that would have doubtlessly furthered me along on the path to a career in art history and looked great on paper. But I was already feeling homesick, and even a little school-sick. And what a strange feeling it was! I can honestly say that I never missed home before coming to Florence. Wherever I traveled, there was always too much to see and do, too many new people to meet for me to really long for home. Nowhere was this more true than here, but Italy is so amazing that whenever I see or experience something wonderful, I think to myself that Brian or Ashley would like that, and wish that my brother and sister were here. So why not take the housing director's advice? When I was living at home in San Francisco, I taught traditional Chinese ribbon dancing at a public school where most students speak Chinese at home, but can manage English when they need it. I myself was a student of this school, but cannot claim the same level of comprehension of the Chinese as most of my former classmates. After some thought, I decided to trade my internship at the Museo for one working with Italian elementary school children.

I am now teaching English as a second language at a wonderfully friendly little school in Figline. I anticipated that this opportunity would not be so different from my teaching experience at home, and essentially it is not: in both cases, I work in the capacity of a teacher with students who do not necessarily speak the same language I do. But in Figline, my major obstacle is that I cannot intuitively relate to the experience of the children there. I grew up in San Francisco and even attended the elementary school in which I taught; I knew my students' parents, had some of their older brothers and sisters as classmates, and understood what they felt because I had grown up with the same experiences. In Figline, I do not always understand where the children are coming from, what they are trying to communicate, or what they are capable of learning. But I do assume that they have no inherent limits, that what they consider their boundaries today will not always be the case tomorrow. I have been consistently impressed by the enthusiasm and energy that my Italian students bring to class and the unflinching effort they put into learning English. Some days, when I awaken to the squeal of my alarm at 6:30 in the morning, I wonder what I am trying to accomplish by going to Figline, and contemplate taking a "sick day." But by 12:15, when all of my classes are over and done, I feel good about my morning and realize that I may be benefiting from my visits even more than my students are! While the children get to practice their English with a native speaker, they unknowingly reveal to me the difficulties of learning English as a second language. I am truly beginning to understand the difficulties of living in a world dominated by an accidental need to speak English. And they love to talk, in both English and their native Italian. They tell me much about their lives: what their families do on weekends, what they like to do out of school, even what they like to eat! My interactions with them have created a small, cloudy window through which I may get a glimpse of what life is like growing up in Italy. During every visit, my students inspire me to be a better person by having patience and helping those in need, because they often need assistance—with major things like the language, as well as banal things like sharpening a pencil—but I know times will come when the person who needs help will be me.

It is a little early, but I am already preparing the final lesson plan for my third grade class. My students have shown so much of their culture to me that I would like to share part of my culture with them. But I do not hail from the trenches of stereotypical American culture. My family does not celebrate Halloween or Thanksgiving or even Christmas, despite my grandmother's best efforts to instill my mother with a dose of Catholicism. No, my culture is not solely American, but Asian American, and the biggest holiday in my house is Chinese New Year. My Italian students will love learning about this cultural celebration because they are always enthusiastic about learning new topics. This exposure to Chinese American culture will

truly be something special, a very minor aspect of a greater American landscape to which they will probably not be exposed in Italy, at least not any time soon. But they rightly deserve this lesson; they have taught me through a truly unforgettable experience, and after all, when am I going to have the opportunity to teach English to such an absolutely wonderful group of Italians again?