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My Year in France



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From the Editor

B. Dawn Medlin is the Chair of the Department of Computer Information Systems, and is an Associate Professor in the John A. Walker College of Business, Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina. Dawn has taught courses in website design, e-commerce, security, and global information technologies, and has published extensively in journals such as the Journal of Information Systems Security, the International Journal of Human Resources Development and Management, the International Journal of Electronic Marketing and Retailing, and the Journal of Information Privacy and Security. Dawn has a long standing association with colleagues in New Zealand and was kind enough to sent to the readers of BACIT her reflections on a sabbatical year in France.

During the 2007-2008 academic year I was fortunate enough to be selected to teach at a university in France – the University of Angers. There were several interesting facts surrounding my selection. First, I had never spoken a word of French, and second, I had not taught in the discipline areas that they needed at my home university (the Appalachian State University in Boone NC). Their needs included Marketing, Management and Finance and I teach in the Computer Information Systems department.

But to begin this story, I must tell you that a colleague was the one who initiated my involvement in the program as he declared to me “this is something that you must apply for” and at that time I did not think to answer to him “But why me? when you were the one who had attended the meeting!” But the truth was that I had intended to go to this meeting, but being the good absent-minded professor that I am – I simply forgot to go.

Lucky for me, even though I spoke no French and taught in the Computer Information Systems department at a university in the mountains of North Carolina somehow they decided upon me. You may say it was fate or all the stars were aligned – but whatever the case, I knew that I was blessed to be the candidate of choice. So late in August I left for Angers with my French language book in hand and my strong U.S. southern accent.

Throughout the months in Angers I not only taught three new courses but I was able to travel quite extensively to other neighboring areas such as the Louvre Valley, Paris, Mont St. Michel, Normandy, and Caen, I had always heard growing up in the United States that the French did not particularly care for us Americans – but I found out very quickly that this story was very far from the truth. In fact, I can honestly say that I made some of the best

friends of my life in France. The French were always accommodating and very polite in correcting my French pronunciation, but did so in a very sympathetic and not a sarcastic way.

The students at the University where I taught were double majoring in Business and English. As the professor I learned that I was to stand on a stage and lecture for two hours without a break. In contrast to American classes where our students are actively engaged in classes, these undergraduate students were aghast when I strolled off the stage and wondered through the aisles. This was probably the first time that a professor had come so close to them in class and actually asked for their opinions on a subject. Prior to me changing the French class protocol I did ask the Dean for permission to teach "the American Way," and not the "French way," which would have meant that the students for two hours simply took notes with their heads bowed and their fingers worn. I honestly cannot imagine either being a student in this environment or a professor. Another difference is that in the states the students must either buy books for class or rent them versus the French students who only had their notes as guides for tests.

My first class was a quiet one with no answers so I decided that on the second day I would reward them by tossing out bags of M&M candies if they spoke up. After a few probing questions with me off the stage and tossing candies – all of a sudden I could not stop them from talking and telling of their opinions. After class that day they told me how refreshing it was to be able to freely share their thoughts in my classroom. Never before had they seen such a professor as me!

I came to love my students and my life in Angers. It was filled with history as I lived on a cobble stone street that included on one end of the street the notable structures of the magnificent twin-spiraled Cathedral of Saint Maurice (12th-13th century) and at the other end of my street was the massive Castle of Angers (early 13th century), with its moat and soaring towers. Historically speaking, the court of Rene on Anjou, known as the Good, regent of Sicily and Jerusalem resided here. A man of letters and benefactor of the local community, he was fond of fetes and tournaments where were often held at the castle, The religious wars later led to the decline of the castle and Henry III ordered it to be demolished in 1585. The cylindrical towers of the pentagonal stronghold began to be torn down and the conical roof and the upper part were dismantled. When Henry IV came to the throne the destruction came to a halt and Angers was the scene of the engagement of Cesar of Vendome with Francoise of Lorraine. It was restored in 1950.

Today the castle of Angers houses a tapestry museum that includes the famous Apocalypse series of Nicholas Bataille who did the weaving and Hennequin de Bruges who did the painting. It is 140 meters long and is known as one of the longest and largest tapestries in the world.

In France I walked in front of the beautiful cathedral and castle almost every day as I went to catch the bus to go to the university or to simply walk to my local grocery to purchase my fresh fruits and vegetables for the day. It was a spectacular view of history and I appreciated that the French saw a reason to save it. This is in such contrast to my life in the US where there are very few that walk and even more I believe that we love to drive our SUVs too much!

Another lovely trip was certainly the Loire Valley, which is an enchanted land of vineyards, flowers and rolling green hills dotted with more than a thousand chateaux and is often called the "Garden of France." There were many opportunities for hiking and bird watching as well as simply "just being." in these magnificent and beautiful gardens and chateaus. As you can see this was the life that dreams are made of.

And of course as an American it would not be patriotic of me not to mention my visits to Normandy where soldiers fought fiercely during World War II and in the summer of 1944. The fight between the Allied nations and German forces occupying Western Europe remains today the largest seaborne invasion in history, involving nearly three million troops crossing the English Channel from England to Normandy. This was a sight of white grave markers that I will never forget. In fact, the day that I went it was a beautiful blue sky and the white grave markers stood even more proudly in contrast.

From a technology standpoint it did take me several attempts and a nice French man who worked at the local Orange store to come to my apartment and to get my Internet working as well as my television. Just as there were several minor inconveniences that were mostly government regulations, and I did spend a few days calling from a British looking old style phone booth – but all in all it was a very easy transition.

So the question might be - would I give up all the ease with which I live my life in the U.S. to live in France again? Absolutely! and would have my bags packed by tomorrow. But of course I would give the same answer for the opportunity to go to New Zealand or South Africa as well. It is with a broader view than my own back yard that I hope to bring back to my students – the enthusiasm of learning something new and the bonds of friendship that wrap around our globe. So for all – I would hope that our answer would always be “Yes” I will go and learn about other cultures and appreciate the lives of others as I hope they will learn to appreciate mine.

I end with two quotes with which I agree:

Alvin Toffler: *The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn.*

And

Anatole France: *The whole art of teaching is only the art of awakening the natural curiosity of young minds for the purpose of satisfying it afterwards.*

I hope this is true for us old minds as well! Safe Travels.

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