

UNC World View
Connecting Conversations: A World View Podcast

Episode 5 – Annemarie Gradert – Denmark

June 2020

Interview by Charlé LaMonica, Director of UNC World View

Charlé LaMonica: Hello, I am Charlé LaMonica and welcome to the UNC World View podcast *Connecting Conversations*. Today as our guest we have an educator from Copenhagen, Denmark who will join us to share her unique teaching practice. Annemarie Lorenz Gradert teaches English and history at Gammel Hellerup Gymnasium. The school is a high school located north of Copenhagen. Having more than 900 students from approximately 120 primary and secondary schools, the high school offers special studies in the fields of social science, the humanities and natural sciences. Annemarie has been teaching for more than 12 years. Thank you so very much for joining us today.

Annemarie Gradert: Thank you, Charlé.

CL: We are really excited at UNC World View to learn from our teaching partners around the world. And we're particularly interested in exploring the way teachers are experiencing different kinds of classrooms during COVID-19. Before we start talking about your teaching practice, however, would you please tell us a little bit about yourself and why you became a teacher?

AG: Well, a little bit about myself. I'm originally from Guatemala and I've been living in Denmark for approximately 22 years. I became a teacher because I'm very passionate about the two subjects I studied at university. I have a master's degree in history and a minor in English, and I love working with young people so teaching high school seems like a natural career path.

CL: And I was wondering if you can describe to us your school and the makeup of the students you teach?

AG: As you already said, it's located at the north of Copenhagen and a very cozy suburb called Hellerup. We have around 1100 students, and it's a public school. So naturally, most if not all of our students live close by. A lot of the kids already know each other. It's not a place where there's any traffic, particularly, and we're close to the beach as well and to parks, so it's really a nice place.

CL: And so our most of your classes half young boys and half young girls?

AG: Yeah, yeah.

CL: And what are the ages of your students?

AG: Most of them are around the age of 17 or 18 when they starts and then they'll be done by 19 or 20. There are some kids who have taken a longer break after elementary school or have been in boarding schools, sports boarding schools or drama boarding schools, and then they'll start a little bit later. So some of the kids can be up to 21 when they're done with high school and that is completely normal in Denmark.

CL: And so this really interests me too. Thinking about your classroom and your school community and the fact that your students live nearby. Did you know these students before they became your own students?

AG: Some of them, yeah.

CL: Mm hmm.

AG: Because I also live in the same area. Sometimes it's a bit funny because you'll recognize some of the kids like you've seen them before. Or some of them have even gone to school with my own children. It's like a local place.

CL: When I think of comparing it to North Carolina schools, of course, we've got urban centers in North Carolina. And we also have a lot of rural schools where teachers have known students for years and years. So, the town in which you live and work and teach I'm sure has a lot of commonalities with some of the places in our state as well.

So tell us a little bit about what happened when the word came down that there was a pandemic. What was the reaction that you and your students and what action did your school take? Immediately teaching remotely or half remote and half face-to-face? Can you tell us a little bit about what happened in your school?

AG: Yes. During the initial stages of a pandemic all teaching was conducted online. Mainly, giving the students assignments, which they had to complete and turn in online. We have different programs we use. And then we also use the program called Teams which works the same way as Zoom so we could have sort of a more face-to-face contact with our students. It is more or less the same as Zoom, but it is considered safer in Denmark, as it is less likely to be hacked. It's the same thing, you know. And then you can put the kids in different small groups when you're in Teams and then give them assignments, which they have to solve and then it's not necessary, even to meet at home for the students. Because some of the parents were quite concerned about group work; with teams they could just have contacts over the camera. So I mean it works pretty well.

CL: How much time did you have before you shifted from face-to-face to remote?

AG: Well, it was almost immediately, because by the time we shifted it was around Easter time and they took the decision that now we have to close everything down

in both elementary schools, high schools, universities, everything had to be closed down. So we had to be really creative and start working really fast as to what kind of assignments are we going to give our students. How to make a balance so we don't give them too much work because sometimes when you're just writing or talking to your students over the camera then you'll tend to say, "Oh, you know, I don't know, they go to their home, you know, then they might as well read from page this to page that. But I felt like the first couple of weeks, some of my students told me, "Oh, you know, you're giving us too much work please slow down because we can't read that fast." Because you're used to, that you have these lessons that are just like an hour and a half. And then, of course, within that hour and half they'll be different things. Some of them have to go to the toilet or to drink water, whatever. And then you'll have a different lesson. There'll be some group work, there will be some reading time, there'll be some walk and talk time where they go outside to work or to the library. And since you don't have this possibility when you're working remotely then what I did was I was just like, "Oh just read chapter 10 and then you have these assignments. And then record yourself saying something and then send it to me." But then maybe instead of what they would have used an hour and a half in the lesson than it turned out to be three hours work. So it was a little bit difficult in the beginning, not to make them work too hard. But then I think after a couple of weeks, you sort of got the hang of it. Because of course, some students work faster than others. And you sort of have to find like this medium range workload so nobody gets left behind.

CL: Had you ever taught remotely before?

AG: Never.

CL: The same with many of our teachers as well. And I'm curious about access to computers for your students. Did have any trouble with students not having access to materials or computers?

AG: No, thankfully, no.

CL: That's so good to hear.

AG: And, you know, whenever a student doesn't have the possibility of—like if there's a family that can't afford a computer or something, we have this possibility at school, and I'm sure most of the schools in Denmark have the same possibility that we have some computers in stock. And then the students can borrow them for whatever time is necessary. If your own computer gets fixed or if they can't afford a computer than they can just borrow one from the school so there's no excuse not to do your work, because if you don't have a computer, you'll be you'll be given one.

CL: How through all of this have your students—I mean, you mentioned that they shared out with you that this is too much work—what other ways did your students react to the whole working remotely... kind of the loss of their friends? The mental

health of your students? How has that proceeded, because I know you are still in class and today we're talking, it's June 5th so you're not near the end, yet. Several weeks away or a few weeks away. I'm just wondering what's the, what's the feeling of the sentiment of the students and how they're handling this?

AG: Yes. Well, besides the workload issue that I told you before then, as I said earlier in the interview our students are between the ages of 17 and 20, so they were very, very patient and understanding about the whole thing. But they did miss being in the classroom and they expressed this need to see each other to us several times. They just recently returned to school; the third year students were allowed by the government to return earlier. They returned to school grounds around three, three and a half weeks ago and first and second year students like a week and a half ago. Let me tell you they were absolutely thrilled to see each other again because they've missed each other. And even though they had to maintain social distancing, because they are back in school they have to leave a whole desk of distance and we had to be creative with a schedule because sometimes we have to use like two classrooms for one class and logistically it was a challenge, but then it fit with that—since the third year students were allowed to school earlier then they had all the classrooms at their disposal and then by the time the first and second year students returned, then the third year students already have their studying break because their exams start before. So they were never actually there at the same time. So it was, it was a puzzle logistically, but then it worked at the end.

CL: I see. So three and a half week—here now in June 5th—three and a half weeks, your high school students have been back?

AG: Yes, exactly.

CL: Are all of the teachers back or some working remotely still?

AG: All the teachers are back. But we got this possibility of—like if you're in a high risk group, you're allowed to stay working remotely. Or if you have children that are in a high risk group, you're also allowed to stay at home and work remotely. We've had some flexible days where we had the choice to either work at school or take the students on field trips. It's beautiful spring weather right now. And since all the parts are open in Copenhagen, again, then, for example, I had a couple of days when I just taught my classes in a park instead. And then they had to bring blankets and then sit in groups separately so they could keep their distance. I mean you felt a little bit silly in the beginning, but then the students enjoyed it, and there were just so happy to see their teachers and to see each other again that we made it work.

CL: I think that's what good teachers to do, they just make it work. And the good news is that the relationship was really formed, I'm sure, with you and your students in the whole academic year. If this has started on day one it might have been a little bit more challenging.

AG: Exactly.

CL: So, so with this, Annemarie, and I feel as though as American teachers might be listening to you and thinking, “You know, this could be our future in terms of the way in which we are going to move back into classrooms,” because right now we have not moved our students back into classrooms. And now for most people the break will be till the fall; many schools will open in the fall in some way. So what unforeseen opportunities did you see? When you finally got back with your students and returned socially distant, what kind of opportunities did you see that COVID-19 and this whole working remotely thing created for your classes, for your students?

AG: Well, I think it's hard to say, you know? Because, I mean, maybe some of them have become better at organizing their time at home because they know that they have to turn in their work at a particular time. Whether there were opportunities and if they learned anything positive out of this experience and I would say just like appreciating each other's company a bit more, I think. Because I mean as far as technology goes, I don't think that they really learned anything because they're so they're so good that that—maybe if this had happened 10 years ago, then I would have said, you know, this is a specific opportunity to become better. I mean, just the way things are today, I don't really think it made any difference technology-wise. I think that if anything they became better at like making a schedule for themselves at home like, “I have to read from, I don't know, eight o'clock to 10 o'clock, then I have to do math from 10 to 11, then I have to eat lunch particular time, and then I have to keep on working on these other subjects.” Yeah, like being more organized, maybe, but I can't really see any other good thing came out of it. I think it's something that we're going to maybe see in the upcoming months, you know, to really see the results of these crazy couple of months.

CL: Right, yeah. I appreciate you sharing that with me because it might be. It might be months or even years before we see what kind of opportunities developed because of this. Trying always to find a silver lining amidst a pandemic is not always easy for sure.

So there were obvious challenges. Would you say the logistics was the most challenging? Or what are some challenges as you re enter, what did you as a teacher, need to be very cognizant of in addition to “you have to be six feet away?”

AG: You know kids who are less disciplined and have no parental help at home may get behind learning-wise. There's going to be some social discrepancies. There's going to—because Denmark is a very egalitarian state. Well, Scandinavia, as a whole, really. There's not those many class differences in Scandinavia. All the kids have access to the Internet. Even though they all have computers and so on, doesn't mean that they all have the same resources at home because maybe some kids have had parents working remotely from home, and that has just been a luxury because you've got your parents there as extra teachers. But then there's other kids who have just had zero help at home and then that's when you can really see the social

differences come to light. And this does affect some kids both how their mood is, how much homework they can turn in. As I said, they get behind in different subjects. And also as regards to mental health, you know, we have definitely been talking about that because there are some kids who maybe don't have that much support at home. Maybe they have a rough family life, or whatever. And their safe place is at school. That's where they have their friends and in a way, their adopted family. And if they don't have the chance to see their friends and their teachers, then it is going to affect them and not only socially but psychologically as well because they might feel isolated. And this feeling of being alone with your schoolwork, being alone at home. We're going to see the consequences of in the next months and years even but I mean, who knows, right? Nobody knows. But we are concerned, definitely, of the negative effects of this pandemic on our students.

CL: Absolutely. And I think that is a worldwide concern as well. The safety of school and the absence of this safe environment—in some cases, right. Even if it just affects one student it's something that we all care about deeply. So, when we talk about the work that you're doing—and so you're teaching history and English—are you teaching both of those subjects at this time?

AG: Yeah.

CL: And are these integrated classes or they two absolutely separate classes?

AG: Two absolutely separate classes.

CL: Okay, so I'm curious in terms of—as you teach and being a global educator, how really do you intertwine different cultures and build that into your curriculum? How do you connect Denmark to the world for your students? And I realize that's a very broad question, but if you could just speak to the way in which you approach integrating Denmark in the world in your classroom.

AG: Yeah. Well, first of all, if you think of the school strategy as a whole, then we have opportunities abroad, both in second and third year, where our students often schools and universities and they get the chance to meet young people from other cultures. Furthermore, we also have exchange student programs at the school. We've had students from all over the world, from as far away as Latin America and China and Japan, and so on stay with us for [inaudible] and follow classes. We will have language trips to Germany, France and Spain for the students who have these languages on A level. So our students get intensive training in their third language, and this is just a great supplement to the lessons that they have in the school, because there's nothing that can be compared to actually being there at that country and learning it from locals. And then aside from that I would say, when I teach history here, we of course have some obligatory curriculum about Danish history, but most of the of the syllabus will be about world history. And we've had people come and visit us from around the world, both educators and students. They're usually surprised. They'll be like, "How is it that you know so much about the Cold

War, or whatever, but it is because it is a priority. For us in our school and in Denmark, as a whole, as well, to learn about world history. Because we are, all of us, world citizens. So you can't stay in your bubble and be like, "We live in this little cozy country and that's all we need to know." The more you learn about the world, the better a person you become.

Besides that, we are also a UNESCO school. And what that means is that we have some special areas in which we focus on working to have a better environment, you know, sustainability is one of the things we focus on regarding UNESCO. We also have a big focus on global citizenship. We even have some classes that specialize in UNESCO work. And so these kids, the ones with focus on UNESCO, they have traveled further away. So we have had some classes visiting school in Japan, they've been in Tokyo. We've also had some classes, visit the United States, visited high schools and universities in Washington and Boston and in Texas as well. I went to Houston once with one of my classes and we were in College Park High and they were there, the with the students know they stayed with local families. They went to school for a whole week. And it was just a very interesting experience. We've also had some classes to go to Africa, to Tanzania and teach small children. They've also visited high schools in Tanzania. It has been you know a very big part of our strategy. We think that it's important that our students think globally.

CL: That's just outstanding. Now would you say that your school being under the aegis of the Ministry of Education, is your school similar to other schools in Denmark or do you think your school is uniquely dedicated to creating global citizens for Denmark.

AG: We are part of this school group, this UNESCO group. So it is not all high schools and Denmark take these long trips to Africa and Asia, and Latin America and the United States, but we're not the only ones. We're working with a lot of different high schools and elementary schools to focus on free global citizens, but I would say, off the top off the top of my head, I don't know how many we are in total, but definitely more than 30 high schools are part of this program.

CL: That's so exciting. We have done some programs at UNC World View with the UNESCO story circles in our symposium and I'm just so impressed by all of the work with the Sustainable Development Goals that UNESCO puts out. So that's very exciting that you're integrating that. I cannot thank you enough. I feel as though we could go on for a long, long time. But your teaching practice, your commitment to your students, the relationships you've built and the resiliency that education of your students, which means education is the way to make change and create global citizens is going strong even in the middle of this pandemic, Annemarie and I want to thank you so much for sharing what you're doing. So, as we close, I'm wondering if there's anything that you'd like to share out about your practice or your students that would be a message to North Carolina teachers, American teachers, in terms of the way in which you work with your students. Is there anything else you'd like to share out or any message to send?

AG: I would say that, even with a pandemic, I hope that we can that we can continue communicating, continue being connected in general, because it is so important that we keep in mind that global education is of great value. No matter if it's elementary school or high school or university. We are our students' support group, us teachers and the school system in general. So we have to continue working, continue being there for them, because global education is of great value in an increasing globalized and competitive world. And we're part of making that happen, and I mean, it means everything, learning about the world around you and—well I hope to see you in Denmark! That's what I would like to say before we say goodbye here. We've survived other pandemics before I'm sure we'll survive this one as well.

CL: Thank you, Annemarie, so very much for joining us today. Until next time, this is Charlé LaMonica for UNC World View with *Connecting Conversations*. Goodbye.