

Greetings from Bremen! – more specifically, from my desk at the Bremer Informationszentrum für Menschenrechte und Entwicklung (Bremen Information Center for Human Rights and Development, or simply “biz”).

I’m into the homestretch of my last week of a 6 week internship at biz. Technically it’s Semesterferien (“semester break”) for the German university system, but this month and a half has been anything but a vacation for me. From 10am-6pm Monday through Friday I work to further education in sustainable development (meaning the bettering of both human lives and the environment through the institution of respectful, healthy, and justly-profitable social and business practices). biz is an NGO that supports local interest groups, holds seminars and lectures, designs and distributes museum exhibitions, organizes speakers to give interactive presentations in local schools, and maintains a library specific to research and pedagogic work in human rights and development issues.

Interning in a foreign country comes with a unique set of challenges. My responsibilities range from those involving complex skills, like helping teachers and students find research materials in our library, translating the biz website from German into English, and sitting in on planning committee meetings for upcoming sustainable development events in Bremen to more traditional “intern”-labeled assignments like making photo copies, answering the telephone, and mailing programs and flyers to the community. Acting as a librarian for, say, university faculty researching blue jean manufacturing processes and implications in China is tough, but, as I’ve learned, even a mundane task like data entry carries new weight and offers unexpected learning opportunities in a second language. In both situations, I was held accountable for accurate comprehension and articulation. And in both I was pulled outside of my comfort zone, but eventually met with success – rewarded with new vocabulary words and a sense of confidence.

Working with German colleagues has also been incredibly valuable. From the start I was much more hesitant to interact with these new acquaintances than my vocal, outgoing self has ever been. My coworkers, however, were understanding and very welcoming, so eventually I figured out biz’s office norms – the tone used between colleagues, team meetings, packing organic lunches, standard dress (this level of casual actually took me some time to get in synch with), etc. – and adjusted to my environment. It does help that everyone in the office is sensitive to cultural differences, as they work for a human rights organization, after all! Though they are interested in hearing my American interpretations of things, their support of my German is also hugely appreciated. In addition to an increase in my vocabulary, I have noticed my sentences flowing more smoothly and me incorporating more creative structures and idioms. Even my thoughts are thought more frequently in German.

The biggest impact of my coworkers on me is their enthusiasm in explaining their individual projects to me and encouraging me to investigate these topics with further research in our library. In this way I have learned so much about human rights and environmental issues – issues that transcend cultures – and how educational organizations like biz can effect changes in attitudes that in turn lead to definite changes in government and business policies. So, all in all, it looks like I had a pretty worthwhile Semesterferien.