

The arrival of our special guests has been like a wind of change blowing through Gioia del Colle and the Italian stage of the Comenius project couldn't have had a more auspicious start: since the very first day, both the Liceo Classico and Scientifico gave a warm welcome to the foreigners and as many Italian students as possible were involved in the activities in order to make their stay more pleasant. Every student has been given the opportunity to express their own abilities and share their talent with the guests: from those who created wonderful videos to introduce our town to those who played amazingly in the auditorium and those who explained how to create a pc program out of nothing. They all did a fantastic job especially because they managed to involve actively the foreign students.

In my opinion, what really made this wonderful experience unforgettable was the astonishing affection and familiarity that quickly built between us. During our twinning experience, we were able to go beyond the first (unavoidable) embarrassment and the cultural barrier, to discover each other's habits, to appreciate our mutual interests as well as what made us different.

This is the main lesson of cross-cultural collaboration: differences are not necessarily disadvantages but can enrich and provide many benefits.

I'm glad to say that eventually, despite the various backgrounds of everyone, we were all able to speak the worldwide language of cooperation and friendship. And this is indeed the best goal we could have ever wished to achieve.

We are all citizens of one world, we are all of one blood. To hate a man because he was born in another country, because he speaks a different language, or because he takes a different view on this subject or that, is a great folly. Desist, I implore you, for we are all equally human.... Let us have but one end in view, the welfare of humanity; and let us put aside all selfishness in considerations of language, nationality, or religion.

## **Discussion**

There were a few lessons learned in the class which can be useful for libraries and librarians serving multicultural populations. First, people's behavior reflects their cultural background. This happens also in libraries. Therefore we have to be aware about cultural differences related to a person's relationship to other people, orientation to time and space, etc. When librarians try to learn to know their clients - as they should - we suggest, they also try to learn to know their clients' culture. This may give them the analytical framework to understand their clients' behavior and needs.

Second, we learned that there are differences in language and communication styles between cultures. Library services are based very heavily on language and communication. When librarians act in a multicultural environment differences in language and communication styles may cause misunderstanding and even lead to bad service. Good communication skills can, however, be learned. We suggest that these skills should be taught to librarians, as they should also be taught to other professionals working in the service sector.

Third, we learned in our course that the project that focused on sharing cultural information interested many students. This project was discussed by the students more than other projects. This is easy to understand. Every student worked with a partner from another country. To the students, Finland and North Carolina were not mere foreign countries on the other side of the globe but the countries where their partners lived. The students really wanted to learn about the cultures of their classmates. Collaborative work seems to generate interest in other cultures. We suggest that collaboration across cultural boundaries and sharing cultural information occur together. It happened in our course, it works in IFLA, and it could work also in a library practice. Libraries in multicultural environments could proactively support collaboration across members of different cultures by getting people together and providing information about their cultures.

Fourth, we learned that new information and communications technology will make other cultures closer to us and offer possibilities to overcome cultural boundaries. However, cultural attitudes toward technology may influence people's beliefs and use of the technology. For example, students in Finland rated some applications more highly than their classmates in North Carolina (see more in Sonnenwald et al., 1998). The

Internet and Internet-based services are available for public use in many libraries worldwide. On the one hand, we can see this as a benefit, e.g., in public libraries the Internet can facilitate an access to information about other cultures that would not otherwise be possible. On the other hand, we have to understand that clients' attitudes toward the Internet and their abilities to use it will vary. We have and will continue to have clients who appreciate books and face-to-face interaction with library professionals.

Today we live in the world where there is a need for collaboration across cultural boundaries both internationally and internally within countries. Cross-cultural collaboration may be facilitated through an understanding of others' cultures. In our class we learned that cultural differences are not necessarily disadvantages but can be enriching and provide many benefits. This framework may be applicable to library education, library research and library work.