

GEEA Study Tour to the Republic of Georgia

Reflection Paper by Donna Macciachera

I have had the opportunity to travel with GEEA on three Study Tours: Peru, Estonia and Latvia, and most recently The Republic of Georgia.

Benjamin Franklin said, “Tell me and I forget. Teach me and I remember. Involve me and I learn.” Traveling to these countries allows me to be the life-long learner that I am and allows me to share this knowledge with the students in my classrooms.

Many people around the world may not have ever heard of Georgia, a tiny republic situated between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea, known as the South Caucasus region bordering Russia, Turkey, Armenia and Azerbaijan. How many Americans can say they’ve visited Georgia? It is about the size of South Carolina but has a rich history and a diverse culture.

As part of the Study Tour, our small but mighty group of 10 economic educators met with Georgian teachers and visited Georgia classrooms to share knowledge and exchange ideas about presenting economic concepts. In this opportunity, we not only met new colleagues, but we also made new friends.

Few countries and peoples have endeared themselves as quickly as I experienced in Georgia. The essence of travel is not just seeing new places, but also the multitude of experiences we have.

I was fortunate to have traveled to Georgia while school was still in session. It gave me the opportunity to bring my students along the journey. I was able to provide them a vision of Georgia, while incorporating econ lessons into each of my experiences. Each student created a journal for my trip. Let me take you on the Journey!

Day 1 – I flew from Newark Airport at 12:30 am and landed in Istanbul. After a 5-hour layover, the next leg of the journey was to Tbilisi, the Capital of Georgia. I arrived at 2 am Georgian time. It is not uncommon that international flights to Georgia tend to land at terrible hours.

I kept my students abreast of all my activities. Including travel.

In their journal for Day 1, they answered questions about Georgia. Where is it located? What are Georgia’s dominant cultural traditions including language, cuisine and religion. The also had to research what impact Russia has on Georgia and what does the commodity of wine mean to the economy of Georgia. I asked then what foods I could expect to eat while there. Certainly khachapuri, cheese filled bread, was on the top of the list!

Day 2 – I asked the students to look up the relevance of the Clock Tower and explain how it ties to economics. I sent pictures to them every day. They were learning and seeing and relating all the information to everything we had learned in class! The Clock Tower reflects the spirit of a nation embracing creativity and individuality after decades of Soviet uniformity. It is a testament to their transition to a capitalist economy.

Day 3 – We presented many economic concepts to Georgian Teachers during a professional development workshop we conducted. Since my lesson was on international trade, I used this opportunity to have my students review the impact of trade which helps a country's wealth by enabling specialization, efficiency, growing markets, innovation and economic resilience. The Georgian teachers engaged in the Bag Trade Game and notably all said they would take this activity to their classrooms. My students created a comparative advantage problem using Georgian wine and Russian vodka as the premise for nations to trade!

Day 4 – We saw the daily protests in Tbilisi. The students saw pictures of the peaceful protests and researched these events that were sparked by the Georgian government's perceived alignment with Russia. It was a perfect way for students to review the concept of globalization. How does this affect a nation, such as Georgia. At a lecture at the University of Tbilisi, such topics as the US halting of aid to Georgia, tourism and economic dependence on Russia were evidence of the concept of Globalization.

Day 5 – International McDonalds are always a unique way to study concepts of economics. The students learned about the BIG MAC index, incorporating more lessons about varying prices across countries.

Day 6 – As we traveled the countryside of Georgia, visiting restaurants, stores, and wineries, evidence of the factors of production and a growing economy were abundant.

I used this opportunity to have my students review these inputs and identify some of the Georgian factors we're learning. The concept of entrepreneurship was palpable as we continued our Study Tour!

Day 7 – We were fortunate to visit wineries in Georgia. We really don't think about Georgia, when we think of wines. For Americans, we associated France, California and Italy as wine regions. However, we all learned that Georgia is one of the oldest wine producing regions in the world. With more than 500 grape varieties, I reminded the students this commodity falls into a perfectly competitive product market, and they practiced their graph making skills. Who knew Georgia produces more than 100 million bottles of wine annually. Their major export markets include Russia, China and the EU. They are slowly entering the US markets.

Day 7 – We travelled by train to Batumi, which is located along the Black Sea. Here we would again present to teachers and meet students. What do we as Americans really know about the Black Sea? It was a perfect opportunity for students to research this body of water and understand its significance in the region. We could see the power of capitalism and foreign investment in Batumi – hotels. Casinos and Skyscrapers were all evidence of market incentives.

Day 8 and 9 – The Bead Game was also a well-liked activity among teachers. This exercise depicts the concept of income equality. What contributes to a person’s wealth and how do people increase their wealth and income. It was time to review the Lorenz Curve and the Gini coefficient. Every day I emailed my students, keeping them updated on my experiences and tying everything back to concepts we learned. I realized how easy economics just flows into everyday life.

Day 10 – Our trip was coming to an end. If we had Georgian currency, the Lari, we would be exchanging it back to US dollars. In this lesson, students focused on exchange rates. We all were so familiar with our new rate of exchange – one American dollar equaled 2.72 Georgian Lari.

Day 11 – As we said our teacher goodbyes, it was bittersweet. We learned and shared so much. We all agreed the trip was an amazing experience and would be willing to invest our time and talents in another study tour. It is through the exchange of knowledge that we believe we are making a difference for others. Isn’t that the true meaning of being a teacher?

While a difference was made in our lives, we came to believe that we made a difference in others’ lives also.

Maya Angelou said, “Perhaps travel cannot prevent bigotry, but by demonstrating how all people laugh, cry, eat, worry and die, it can introduce the idea that if we try and understand each other, we may even become friends.”

I believe we accomplished our goal!

