

ePals: The World is Our Classroom

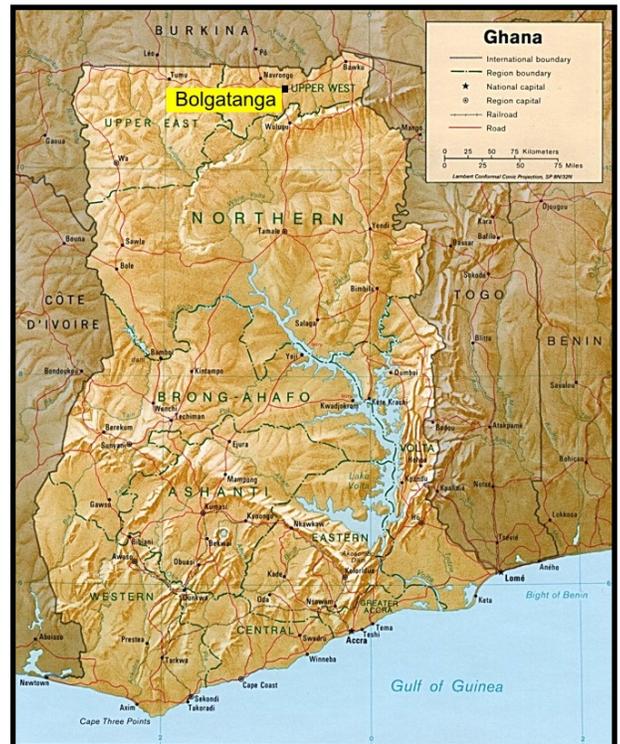
By Mariya



As a teacher, I always strive to expand my students' thinking about the world we live in. About two months ago I discovered a website called ePals where teachers can create profiles and connect with other teachers from all over the globe. You can read other teachers' profiles, which include a description of the school they work in, the age of their students, how long they've been teaching, and what languages they speak.

A teacher from Bolgatanga, Ghana expressed an interest in connecting his classroom with mine. He is a technology teacher who seeks to show his students the positive role technology can play. I messaged him through ePals and eventually we exchanged Skype information. We video chatted and discussed the plan for how we were going to bridge the gap between our two classrooms and countries. We shared some information about each other and I spoke to my students about the possibility of this connection happening.

To prepare my students, I showed them where Ghana was on the map and gave them a little context regarding the environment there. So often we get a singular view of Africa and I thought this would be a great opportunity to break down those stereotypes and meet real people from a country in Africa. We read current events articles about Ghana and a blog post from a traveler who went there and visited the region in which Bolgatanga is located (Upper East). In math, we imagined ourselves preparing for a trip to Ghana and considered all the costs that would go into making such a trip using real airfare prices and tour costs.



After a little over a month of preparing, we were finally able to set up our first Skype call. My students huddled around the computer and eagerly introduced themselves to the students from Ghana. They asked each other questions about their schools and the weather and what kinds of sports they play. There were moments of laughter and enthusiasm that really transformed the atmosphere in the classroom for those 40 minutes while we were talking. In the second half of the call, the students connected over music and sang songs to each other. After each song, the other group of students applauded and cheered for them!

When meeting separately with their teacher later on over Skype, we discussed topics to cover for our next meeting and decided on music – given the strong interest the students demonstrated. Both the teacher from Ghana and I asked our respective students what their favorite songs and artists were and shared that with each other. We listened through the songs and made comments about what we thought of them. For our second meeting we plan to discuss the music and give them a chance to share their thoughts and ask any other questions they may have.

The plan is to make this a weekly Skype session so that they really feel like they've made a connection with someone from another country.