



Messages from Josefa: Service Learning in Mexico

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Andy was afraid to go to Mexico. He needed the credits badly in order to graduate on schedule. To be truthful, his expectations were low: Mexico was far away from home and very different. Finally, he put his fears aside and signed up. What he earned, along with four credits, was a new understanding of both himself and his place in a new and different culture. This was the pivotal experience for him: one day, Andy was walking through a very poor section of Cuernavaca on his way to his community service site. He was feeling homesick and alienated; the poverty bothered him a lot. As he walked across the hillside full of, at least to his eyes, shacks, he imagined the misery of such a life. Suddenly, in the distance he caught a flash of red. As he got nearer, he saw that the red color came from a bunch of red balloons strung on a tree. In a moment, he saw that the red balloons were announcing a party, and that people on the patio of that home were laughing and singing and having a great time. Andy told me that at that moment he realized that happiness does not necessarily depend on material possessions, or on where you live, but on human interaction.

The importance of human interaction. What better phrase to describe my goals as a facilitator for student trips to Spanish-speaking countries. As a Spanish professor, I recognize that study abroad is an essential experience for language students. However, they often travel to a country and participate in the culture on the level of tourists, or observers. I want my students to participate in the culture on a deeper level. With this in mind, I have taken students to Mexico five times to study the language and culture through a combination of academic study and service-learning.

I have designed the course in several different forms, according to different academic schedules, including an interim period, May Term and the traditional summer course. For example, in the summer term of 2000 (which runs for six weeks) at Penn State Capital College, students can register for six credits of intensive Spanish I or II and up to three credits of

service-learning. The course meets on campus for three weeks during which students will learn about the culture and history of Mexico as well as practice Spanish survival vocabulary. The final three weeks will be spent in Cuernavaca. The language component of the course includes four hours of required instruction five days a week at the Cemanahuac Educational Community in Cuernavaca, Morelos, a total of sixty hours of classroom instruction in the language by native speakers. Students participate in classes at their own level of study, so course can accommodate students at many different levels, from beginner to advanced. In addition to their classwork, students may participate in optional grammar clinics, conversation opportunities and lectures. All students go on three required field trips of a historical, anthropological or cultural nature. Each student lives with a Mexican family which speaks only Spanish.

Outside formal study at the Cemanahuac Educational Community, students generally participate in several community programs, often directed by Bill and Patty Coleman through their non-profit organization, VAMOS. VAMOS supports a large number of projects in and around Cuernavaca including literacy projects, health projects; sheltered workshops and child-care. (The Coleman's philosophy is that any community intervention projects must be community generated and community staffed.) The students meet with the Colemans and discuss conditions in Mexico, and the unique nature of VAMOS projects, in order to understand their role as volunteers within a Mexican framework. The students contribute a minimum of ten hours of service in addition to their study of cultural, economic, social, and political conditions as a part of the course preparation in order to complete the service-learning component of the course.

Each year I have had a different emphasis for the service-learning component. For example, one year the emphasis was on teaching oral hygiene. During the semester prior to the trip, students met with a local dentist who gave them training in oral care. This same dentist arranged for a company to donate a quantity of toothbrushes and dental floss for distribution in Mexico. The students then met several times in order to review Spanish vocabulary of the teeth and gums, as well as to role-play a teaching situation and to prepare themselves for immersion into a different culture.

Service opportunities vary, such as participation in a nursery school program for the children of street market vendors. Most of these children spend their days playing in the limited space around the marketplace. Volunteers come to the market about four o'clock daily to pick up all of the children whose parents will allow them to come to the school. The children walk about three blocks to the building where they spend several hours, playing with toys or practicing their letters or numbers. Before the

children return to their parents, they are given a nutritious meal, including a vitamin tablet to help forestall the borderline malnutrition suffered in Mexico. My students generally donate bottles of vitamins and other supplies that they have collected on campus. This center is administered and staffed by native Mexicans. Students interact with the children only after being thoroughly prepared to participate in non-intrusive ways, such as playing quietly with the children, reading a story, or helping with school-work.

Another example of service-learning is a visit to a women's natural health clinic. This clinic is located in one of the most impoverished *colonias* in the area, Josefa Domínguez, a settlement of *paracaidistas* or parachutists, people who gravitate to a certain area and settle or squat on the land without permission. This settlement houses about eight hundred families without running water or dependable electricity. The people are very poor and without adequate medical care. For a resident of this community to visit a doctor, it is necessary to take a forty-five minute ride on a *ruta*, a small bus, to reach the center of Cuernavaca. The students experience the long, difficult and sometimes crowded ride themselves. Obviously, some residents cannot afford to see a doctor. It is for this reason that VAMOS has sponsored a project in natural medicine. Women from the community come to the clinic to learn the skills of massage, reflexology, accupressure and herbal medicine, among others. At this time, they use their knowledge to allay some of the suffering of their own families and friends. One of the women told me that their hope for the future is to establish clinic hours when members of the community could come for treatment. The students listen to a description of the activities of the clinic by the *curandera*, or natural healer, and then meet one on one with the women in order to learn more about the clinic. One year, the students shared their knowledge of oral hygiene, and the Mexican women shared a tangible example of their art, through natural herbs, a foot massage or accupressure treatment.

On another visit to the same clinic, students visited one of the homes in order to meet with the mother of a small child who had been hit by a water truck. Because there is no running water in the *colonia*, water is stored in barrels by each home, which are filled regularly by large tank trucks. One little boy, Fernando, suffered a crushed hand and a missing finger on the other hand when he was hit by one of the trucks. After meeting the family, several students (nursing majors) proposed that they save the mother a trip to the hospital to have the dressing changed by changing the dressing on the boy's hands during our next visit. The students went to a drugstore later in the week and used their Spanish to purchase the necessary supplies. When they returned, the students talked with the mother and son and changed the dressing.

During the visit with the Fernando,s mother, these nursing students had to listen to and understand her story as well as ask the right questions to find out what supplies they would need to purchase. In addition, they had to use their language skills to calm a frightened child who did not quite understand who they were or why they were there. A real situation.

In addition to community service and classroom assignments, students complete other work, such as reading selected articles from a collection placed on reserve. These articles explore the areas of economics, health, art, ecology, history and politics as they relate to contemporary Mexico. As the students read articles which outline conditions and problems they themselves are experiencing, the learning process takes on an added dimension. For example, one of the articles details the problems of borderline malnutrition in Mexico. In addition, the students keep a daily journal which helps them process the new culture that is all around them.

The following examples will show some of their thoughts about their experiences (translated from Spanish):

A sophomore Spanish major wrote:

When we were traveling through the city of Mexico, I was surprised at the people on the street with nothing to do. The people of the city opened my eyes to the problems of the country. I saw an old and poor man with only one shoe. I saw many poor people and workers without employment. I will never take for granted what I have. Sometimes I am jealous of my friends because they have a lot of money and two parents. Now I realize that my mother has given me so many things. I appreciate them a lot and realize how egocentric I have been. . . The natural medicine clinic interested me a lot. The massage was marvelous. The women were very nice. I feel that we took more from them than we gave, I hope they know we appreciated it a lot.

A senior nursing major, who helped to bandage Fernando's hand, comments on one of the trips:

What an experience today was. . . I only wish we could have done something even more productive today. I guess the next time I want to complain about something going wrong I should thank my lucky stars that I have what I have. No matter how bad things get for me it could never compare to how the people in Josefa live. I would love someday to do what Bill and Patty do. I think that it would be a fulfilling way to live my life.

A graduate student reflected that:

When I read “The Golf War” before we left, I thought the story of Tepoztlán was interesting, but it didn’t really mean much to me personally. What the sterile, journalistic article missed was what I saw the day I took the bus to Tepoztlán. The main entrance to the town was barricaded and inside, the town leaders swung in effigy from the town hall. I realized from what I observed and talking with the townspeople, that this struggle between the rich and the poor was the same story echoing all over Mexico from Chiapas to Tepoztlán to Josefa—the need for equitable access to land for basic human survival—much more of a story than a misplaced golf course.

For me, the messages from Josefa are clear. Our students can benefit in deep and lasting ways from such a service-learning experience. Performing community service is a unique method of providing an opportunity for students to benefit someone else while advancing in communication and understanding. In a service situation the exchanges are not formulaic, as students have to express their thoughts and experiences to a native speaker in a community setting. Language students find that they go beyond simply perfecting grammar and pronunciation, to a connection with the human spirit.