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Worksite

I spent five months (August 3-December 23) teaching English in Guadalajara, Mexico in a primary school called Colegio La Paz. It is part of a full program meaning that the kids can attend from preschool (at the Kinder) to high school. Most of the students do actually attend at least all twelve years at the school if they don't attend preschool there. However, most of them spend their entire childhood within the system. The teachers at the school are well educated, though I got the feeling that the English teachers in general had a higher level of education. When I asked another teacher about it, she said that usually the teachers who teach English came from wealthier families and grew up going to a bilingual school like Colegio La Paz. Often, they have traveled out of the country to learn English. One of the other teachers actually lived in Canada for more than twenty years and was married to a man who didn't even speak Spanish. On the other hand, only one of the Spanish teachers spoke any English at all. There was sort of a divide between the Spanish and English teachers and again another divide between the younger grade teachers and the teachers for the older grades. I think it is because we sort of plan the curriculum together and also because those are the teachers that we interacted with the most.

Each day is divided into two parts for the students: English and Spanish. One week they spend the morning in English and the afternoon in Spanish and then the next week they switch. That way they get an even amount of time in each class. The days are occasionally broken up by classes taught by other teachers like music, values, and

computers. While I was there another teacher from Oregon was also there. She was supposed to be there for the entire year and was the English teacher for fifth and sixth grade. Since the fifth grade class was so large I helped teach their English class and then I went with them to Spanish to work as an aide. In English I was responsible for teaching grammar and half of the reading lessons. The other teacher, Melissa, taught science and the other half of the reading lessons. During exams I helped write and graded all the exams (Melissa did sixth grade) and wrote up the end of the term evaluations for each student. In Spanish I helped individual students understand the material and helped the teacher with any other small tasks she needed.

When I first arrived there was a two week series of orientation meetings for all the teachers. The first week consisted of training workshops for teachers from all three schools. The second week was spent at our own school having shorter meetings and setting up our classrooms. At this point Melissa and I were pretty much left on our own. We regularly checked with Teresina, the fourth grade English teacher, when we had questions but no one came to our room to make sure everything was okay. The most help I received came from Melissa since she and I worked so closely together. Teresina also offered helpful advice nearly everyday. Despite the fact that everyone was helpful when I asked for guidance, no one stood over my shoulder telling me what to do. There were guidelines and curriculum that I was required to follow but Melissa and I were on our own otherwise. It was kind of exciting.

Another thing I was responsible for was substituting. The other teachers in the school, both Spanish and English, knew that they could count on me to take over their classes if they could not come in for some reason. Although I often found it somewhat

annoying to be pulled out of my own class because I was teaching, Martha knew that she could count on me to take control of other classes without her telling me exactly what I needed to do. Very often in these situations, the teachers did not have much material set out for me to take over because they had not anticipated being absent. In these circumstances I had to improvise a lot. I had to learn how to come into a class looking prepared, confident, and in control, even if I wasn't at all. Substituting probably gave me the most valuable training in classroom management because I had to take control of a classroom full of children who didn't know me.

In the United States, the schools I have worked in are very different from Colegio La Paz. Colegio La Paz is a private, religious based school and I have always worked in public schools here in the states. We were required to have them pray before lunch, we often had mass during school, and they had a class called "values" which was based largely on religious values. I imagine that many private schools in the states are more similar than public schools. One thing that drove me crazy was that assemblies or other meetings could happen anytime without warning. It didn't seem to bother the other teachers, but Melissa and I had a hard time adjusting to it. There is also not much communication around the school. Often no one knew what was going on during days that had activities planned. It took a lot of improvisation and flexibility everyday.

Clothing for the school was pretty simple. They gave me three different blouses and I was required to wear blue or khaki pants. Each day had a required combination. We were also given a jogging suit and a heavy coat as part of our "winter uniform." We wore the jogging suit on field trips.

Culture and Daily Life

The first two weeks I was in Guadalajara were by far the hardest. I missed my family, my friends, and my boyfriend horribly. I was sick from adjusting to the food (Don't consume a lot of dairy products until you have adjusted to the bacteria in them. It is very different.). The family I lived with spoke no English and the father was very upset that I was slow in adjusting to hearing Spanish all the time. I frequently had to ask them to repeat what they had said and apparently that really irritated him. The problem wasn't so much that I didn't understand the words they were saying, but they spoke very quickly. Much more quickly than I was used to from the Spanish classes I had taken at OSU. As I got used to it, things became much easier. I went out a lot on walks, trying to get to know my area. I began taking buses just to see where they would take me. This was probably one of the most beneficial things I could do just because I learned how to get around. I connected with another intern from UO who was teaching at a school called Francis Bacon. We ended up hanging out a lot. It was really nice to have someone familiar around me. She and I became really involved in a capoeira group that we saw perform once at Plaza del Sol and we made a lot of friends our age.

Capoeira is a martial art from Brazil. One of our instructors was actually from Brazil. While we were there we also got to participate in the batizado--the "baptism" during which we both received our first cord for our achievement in the art. It was an amazing experience. They have a batizado once every year, in November. Mestres (the masters who have been training most of their lives) come from all over the world. This time there were mestres from the United States, Brazil, and Mexico. Our group, Cordao

de Ouro, is worldwide. Mestre Virgulino is the highest ranked mestre and is the man that all the mestres in this hemisphere call their master. He is amazing. He is from Brazil but lives in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Ashley and I really got a chance to connect with him because he doesn't speak Spanish very well, but he does speak English. He seemed to really enjoy talking to us and he wants to help us open an academy in Oregon for Capoeira. He wants to send one of his students from Brazil. What an amazing opportunity! We are still working on that. Anyway, because we spent so much time with the guys from Capoeira (three times per week) we also got to go out with them quite a bit. We went out to several clubs with them.

I kind of regret bringing some of the clothes I brought. I brought several nicer shirts that I never wore because the school gave me a uniform. I wore just jeans or khakis and a t-shirt most of the time at home. I do wish I had brought more clothes for going out to clubs because I ended up doing that more than I thought I would. I bought clothes while I was there for that. I was really surprised by the way the women in Mexico dress. First of all, they all wear high heeled shoes all the time. They all wear tons of makeup in extremely bright colors. The clothes they wear are also very flashy. It was kind of amusing to see the mothers come to the school to monitor the traffic in their orange safety vest and high heels.

Guadalajara is a beautiful city. I went downtown to the historical center several times during my stay. The Orozco murals in Hospicios Cabaños and the Government Palace were amazing. We also went to an outdoor flea market type market called Tianguis several times. One weekend Melissa, Ashley, and I went to Mexico City for two days. We took a seven hour bus ride that left from a few blocks from Plaza del Sol at

11:00 PM and took us to a hotel in Mexico City. The hotel provided a nice breakfast that we got a coupon for from the bus ride. We walked from there to Hostel Catedral which is right in the main historic plaza in the city. We stayed there for 120 pesos a night! They also had a small restaurant where we ate dinner later. The first day we were there we toured the downtown area and went to the anthropology museum. We meant to take a tour with the hostel to see Frida Kahlo's house and the studio of Rivera but it was canceled. It was nice to just sort of walk around the city though. Mexico City is absolutely fantastic. It is the most beautiful city I have ever been in, even though it is very crowded. The second day we took the hostel tour to Teotihuacan to see the pyramid site. That was amazing. The tour also went to the Three Cultures Plaza downtown Mexico City where there was a massacre in 1968 just 10 days before the opening ceremony of the Olympics took place in the same square. We also visited the shrine to the Virgen of Guadalupe and the Basilica there. All were amazing pieces of culture that should not be missed if you get the opportunity to go. The entire tour only cost 200 pesos too! From that trip we met several people who were in our tour group that we spent the rest of the evening with.

Personal/Professional Growth

While I was there my Spanish obviously improved a great deal. I took grammar books and things to practice verb conjugations and vocabulary, but I didn't really use them as much as I had originally intended. I would have to say that aside from vocabulary, I didn't learn much Spanish that I didn't know when I left. However, I became much more confident in my ability to communicate. I was not afraid to talk to

people and ask questions like other people were. On several occasions I was able to converse freely and relatively fluently with total strangers--a man living at a bus stop, people in the grocery store, taxi drivers, and other riders on the buses. It made it much easier to feel like I was part of the culture. I think that people respected me a lot more, even if I made a lot of mistakes, because I was willing to try and speak to them in their native language--the language of the country I was living in. It would be like if someone from Mexico came here and didn't know any English. Right now there is a lot of tension between our countries. Many people do not like Americans (especially George W. Bush) and feel like Americans really hate the people of Mexico. It took extra effort on my part to show them that I was there to learn as much as I could about their culture, their language, and their people. Speaking to them in their native tongue was the best way to bridge the gap that already existed between us.

Personally, I have grown a lot. I have always been relatively independent, but this experience really threw me out of my comfort zone. I was in a foreign culture with very few people who spoke English. I was expected to teach English in a classroom of twenty eight children, only one of which spoke English as his first language (though they all spoke surprisingly well). I took chances by traveling around and out of the city. As the months went by I felt more and more comfortable until in the end, I was sad to leave. I tried something totally new and loved it when I got involved in capoeira. I pushed myself beyond my outer limits of comfort and it was all rewarding.

Professionally, I grew confident in my ability to stand up in front of a classroom full of children and earn their respect. I learned many new methods of classroom management, self discipline, and new methods of instruction. I learned how to work with

a team of people who came from a completely different background and educational milieu than I did.

It is good to be back home, but it is very different. Here, people are on time, they do what they say they are going to do when they say they will do it. However, they are also not as warm. I miss it being okay for me to hug everyone when I come into a room. I miss the friendly, smiling nature that everyone there seems to have. In the United States we are sometimes much colder to each other than I think we mean to be. I also really experienced the anger that many other countries, especially Mexico, feel toward our country. A lot of people in Mexico feel like we hate them because of our anti-immigration policies and Bush's push to eliminate bilingual education in the States. While I was there I felt that it was very important for me to represent our people positively. This is why I tried so hard to speak Spanish as often as possible and to learn as much as I could about holidays and traditions that were occurring while I was there. These are things that are important to them because it shows them that I am interested in who they are and not just in boosting my resume by teaching in a foreign country. I am so glad that I took the opportunity to have this experience. I have made lifelong friends and have grown immensely myself.