

## HISTORY SOUTH OF THE RIO GRANDE

One of my students (let me call him Steve) approached me in a panic at the airport in Guadalajara, Mexico, about an hour before our flight departed for Canada. Steve is one of my favorite success stories from an annual month-long study-abroad program that I created at Brock University almost three years ago. In addition to a richly intensive educational experience students earn a full year's credit in Spanish and a half credit in History from Brock.

I am proud of Steve. He came of age in just 29 days in ways so startling that I was surprised that he, of all people, was facing some sort of crisis less than eight hours from Toronto's Pearson airport.

Like other participants Steve had survived a rigorous month. He lived with a Mexican "homestay" family from whom he received not just three square a day but nurturing and affection that redefined how he understood that tired phrase, family values. He studied Spanish five hours a day, five days each week for four weeks. Then he weathered my History and Culture class, for which he studied two novels (*El Indio* and *The Underdogs*), a lengthy reading packet, and wrote two essays, one of which was experiential in nature. He did well, learned a lot, in particular his notions about the role of religion in society, the nature of poverty, and gender relations had been shaken to the core. He was proud of himself and it showed.

Additionally, Steve had endured various minor rites of passage and had established abiding friendships that, I believe, are unique to studying in a foreign land. How serious could his problem at the airport be? Not only that, but Steve had endured three full-day excursions (as part of the course that I taught on site), at least one of which found him stricken with a garden variety of turista (that is, bowel trouble). Further, he had organized a weekend in Puerto Vallarta and flopped into a luxury hotel room that he shared with five other students. All this from a kid who was so shy prior to our leaving Canada that his mom had handled nearly all pre-departure contact with me as well, apparently, as virtually every other trip-related decision for him. That was the old Steve. The new Steve veritably radiated confidence. So it surprised me slightly when he said, "Professor, I've got a problem with my ticket."

"No hay problema," I told him. "What's up?"

"I don't have one anymore."

"OK," I rejoined, assuming that he had left his return ticket back at his Mexican family's home. "Don't sweat it. We've got plenty of time to fetch it."

"But you don't understand. I don't have a ticket anymore."

"Well, where is it, then?"

"I guess I threw it away."

Seems as if Steve had never been on an airplane before this trip, so he had trashed his return ticket (I can imagine what you're thinking, and I can't figure out either how he thought he was going to get home). But that was a vestige of the old Steve.

As luck would have it, the ticket clerk had been a student at IMAC (Instituto Mexico Americana de Cultura), where she had learned English, the very school where my students had studied Spanish. She went out of her way to get Steve home.

I have a lot of Steve-type stories to tell. Sixty-three and counting, in fact. In years one and two of the program we visited Guadalajara, Mexico's second metropolis (behind the capital), its city of roses, with 32 and 31 students respectively. I chose Guadalajara because I know Mexico well, having spent a lot of time researching my dissertation and subsequent book (*Pancho Villa's Revolution by Headlines*, Oklahoma, 2000) there. Moreover, while working on a Master's degree in Oregon my Spanish professor had recommended that I take advantage of an open enrollment, on-going program similar (yet more expansive) to the one I have fashioned at Brock.

In my second year at Brock the idea for a group study-abroad program hit me. The first thing I did was tabulate costs. This was easy, if time consuming. The Spanish-speaking world is chock full of terrific language schools. Then I pitched the idea to my friend and colleague in Brock's Spanish unit, linguist Irene Blayer. If anything, her enthusiasm surpassed my own.

Then I approached administration. Well, let me just say that now, three years later, I know a lot more about how universities work (and, alternatively, fail to work) than I did. For example, I learned what I call, rule Number One: that all promises need to be written down, that there is no such thing as a "gentlemen's agreement." Enough said. But these were minor problems, in truth. And I was buoyed by a lot of support, especially from senior colleagues in my department.

That said, I gained not a penny from the university beyond stipends for me and a teaching assistant (remember, this was Ontario in 1998). To make a long story short, I received a green light to proceed, but was warned to keep the program in the black. Fine, I figured. I was sympathetic to fiduciary concerns. In the background I knew, for instance, that a couple other of Brock's study-abroad programs were losing money hand over fist and were destined for the scrap heap.

So we pressed ahead. Not only are we solvent today, but we are about as financially healthy as could be imagined. For a couple of reasons. First, travel to and study in Mexico is relatively inexpensive. Far less so, for example, than comparable programs in Spain or, say, Ecuador. Further, there's no middleman here. Brock was already paying my salary. Additionally, and crucially, Brock has made bursary funds available to all needy Brock students, on average dishing out about \$1,000 per grant. That's a sizeable chunk of the \$3,275 per student overall cost (which includes all tuition, flights, cancellation insurance, extended medical insurance, all room and board, and three full-day excursions). In other words, it's a good deal for the students, for me, and for Brock. We're open to university students from anywhere, providing they can manage the extra paperwork. The course I teach is easy to transfer to other schools because it's a regular Brock class, albeit taught elsewhere. The Spanish-language credit is trickier because students gain credit via Letters of Permission from their host institutions. Yet, thus far, these have not proved to be a problem. In fact, the demanding curriculum for all levels of the Spanish courses were designed both to reflect and complement Brock offerings by Professor Irene Blayer, who has closely monitored

student progress. Students complain bitterly, of course, about the amount of work, which is naturally music to my ears! This is a good way to see the world.

Pedagogically, the experience is for me unparalleled. I can lecture all day about Mexico (and I do), but living in the culture, if only for a month under artificial conditions, introduces students to a world of things that I cannot. Student behaviour bordered on stellar most of the time. Their energy and enthusiasm for adventure seemed nearly limitless. So did their ability to relax with a few (sometimes many) beer. Canadians, eh! But my TA, Carmen Robertson, confidante to all, simply laughed at my dismay, saying something like, "You obviously don't remember yourself at the age of twenty." In May of 2001 we are off to Quetzaltenango, Guatemala with a group of 35. We're on-line at: [www.brocku.ca/history/Guatemala2001.html](http://www.brocku.ca/history/Guatemala2001.html). Check us out!

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