

Mother-Daughter Team Go To Mexico*

By Katie Wilson

During a technical writing class last semester, I wrote a report over global learning and whether a global classroom would become a reality. The answer to that idea was “not yet.” Yet the whole report put the idea in my head of traveling to foreign countries and learning about different education structures. I became obsessed with the idea and began looking into opportunities for graduate students to study abroad. Unfortunately, UNT didn't have anything useful for me (they could only offer undergraduate credit, which I considered to be a waste of money). So I enlisted my mother's help, who was vitally interested in just getting out of the house. In her search, mom found a continuing education program through The University of Texas at the Permian Basin. Through their program, we could both receive 90 Continuing Education Units (CEUs), the promise of an interesting adventure, and an escape from our everyday lives. So we signed up for the program, and on July 6, 2008, we journeyed to Chihuahua, Chihuahua, Mexico.

Anxious Beginnings

Now, here's the thing about traveling to Mexico. The moment you tell anyone that is where you are going, they suddenly want to tell you all the ways you are going to die. First, the water will probably kill you, and then the drug dealers will try to make you carry their drugs and then kill you, and if it's neither of those, then it's the busses that get you. (I can't blame people for telling me these things. They did the same thing to mom and me when we went to New York, yet there are just some things you don't want to hear about until after you return.) I think the worst was my bank teller who said that I would see billboards in Mexico that would talk about being killed in Mexico. He agreed with these billboards (he didn't actually say I would die, he just implied it). Anyway...mom and I went to Mexico with all these warnings in mind.



To reach Chihuahua, we traveled 7 hours by bus. Now this isn't a bad way to travel except that instead of going through Customs as you do when travelling by airplane, you go through the Mexican Military. They are waiting for you in the middle of nowhere with machine guns and mean looks on their faces. I should point out that at first I didn't even notice the guns, I just happened to notice mom being jittery. When I told her to calm down, she pointed to the guns at which point I let her continue being jittery. However, I'm glad to say that my bus successfully passed through the Mexican Military twice without problems.

We finally arrived in Chihuahua even after all the death threats and the machine guns.

Señora Hamilton's Casa

We stayed with Señora Hamilton in her casa, where we found many things to appreciate about her house:

- It was right around the corner from Burger King. (OK, stop judging me! I have the wimpiest of wimpy taste buds that cannot handle spice. Had Burger King not been there, my mouth would have died from heat exhaustion.)

- It had a room called the “Princess Room,” where my mother, three other women, and I lived for the next three weeks. The “Princess Room” was so called because it had a walk-in-closet, a full-length mirror, and its own bathroom. The bathroom also had “the party bath”; so-called because you could comfortably fit 10 people in it.

Mom and I also enjoyed Señora Hamilton’s house because we did not have to cook or wash anything, nor did we have to make our own beds. I point out how well we lived as this was one of the topics that I wrote about in my report. That topic was how stereotypes of other countries are one of the problems that keep the global classroom from being a reality. However, what people usually forget is a difference does exist between what is said about a place and how a place actually functions. For example, people told me the water would kill me and the neighborhoods would be dangerous, yet that just wasn’t the case.

Class Begins

Mom and I entered Mexico knowing only how to say “hola” and “cómo estas.” As a result, we were put into the beginners’ class, which was just fine with us because Ivan, a 23-year-old, easy-on-the-eyes, graduate student, was our teacher. Now, aside from the teacher, I found it most interesting how the class was structured. For the most part, it worked like your basic beginners’ level class. One exception I noticed was that we did not pay for the books we used. In Mexico, they prefer to buy one book and make many copies (I’m pretty sure that’s very illegal in the United States), yet not having to pay for books suited me just fine.

Overall the teaching style for this class didn’t vary much from how beginner-level classes in the United States work: we repeated after Ivan, practiced phrases over and over, and played games to learn the vocabulary words. This disappointed me a little because I had expected a bigger difference. However, when Ivan started talking about his college experience, I realized where the differences between U.S. and Mexican education occurred. Ivan told us that in Mexico you had to choose your major and stick with it before you went to college and then, once you were there, the school chose your classes for you. This means no schedule of classes, no “rate a teacher,” and no last minute dropping a class because the teacher dislikes you. You take what you get and stay with it. I didn’t like this idea so much, yet I, like everyone else in my beginners’ class, had changed majors at least once.

Overall Assessment

While mom and I didn’t learn as much Spanish as we wanted to, we both appreciated the experience of getting out of our box and immersing ourselves in a different culture. As a technical writer, I felt the experience was one that should be experienced by all technical writers, especially considering that global access to the Web will require cultural understanding from all people before long (at least, I hope that it will). And, much to my checking account’s chagrin, this Chihuahua trip has only deepened my desire to learn more about how education works in all countries. Even now, I am looking for more programs that will take me to all the places I wish to go and, hopefully, make me a better technical writer for it.

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