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HOW DO YOU SAY “PENGUIN” IN K’AQCHIKEL?

Promoting Literacy in Guatemala

Stephen E. Stratton

When I first accepted my position at California State University Channel Islands (CI), I was attracted in part by the university’s simple mission statement. “Placing students at the center of the educational experience, California State University Channel Islands provides undergraduate and graduate education that facilitates learning within and across disciplines through integrative approaches, emphasizes experiential and service learning, and graduates students with multicultural and international perspectives” (California State University Channel Islands, 2005). As I began work building library collections and services for a new university, which opened in 2002, as well as the Broome Library, which opened in 2008, it quickly became clear that the faculty who had arrived before me took this mission seriously.

We quickly integrated our library mission into the mission of the university: “The John Spoor Broome Library enhances the university’s mission through active collaboration with students, faculty, and staff in developing collections, services, information and computer literacy skills.” The founding faculty and staff of Broome Library believed what Andrew Dillon, dean of the School of Information at the University of Texas, would later state: “Libraries cannot thrive without aligning their workings directly to the core mission of their host institutions” (Dillon,
Broome Library integrated the service-learning mission through internships and work with our rapidly growing archival collections. We added integrative approaches through our information literacy program, which was built into individual program courses and the educational outcomes of the university.

Given our Hispanic-serving institution status and the diversity of library staff, CI is a multicultural institution. We partnered with faculty to host events during international week, bought and hung the flags of the United Nations in the new building, and built collections around travel and international study programs and courses. However, we still believed we were lacking in direct international experience as library faculty. How, then, could the library better support this fourth mission pillar of the university? How could we bring an international perspective to the Broome Library?

As a start, I became involved with International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA). IFLA is an international, independent, nongovernmental organization. It is the leading international body representing libraries, librarians, and information users around the globe. Being appointed to an IFLA committee introduced me to libraries and librarians from other regions of the world and the work they are doing. Further, I traveled when possible to learn more about libraries in other areas. By traveling with CI faculty on vacations abroad or by providing lectures abroad with them, I was able to gain a global perspective on libraries, librarians, and library users.

In 2010, I was awarded a professional development grant to study Spanish in Guatemala. I had not worked on my Spanish since high school, and there was great need for that skill at CI. Language acquisition studies have shown that spending even brief periods abroad studying a language improves a student’s skill in the language (Carroll, 1967). I spent six weeks in Antigua, a small but vibrant city with an immersion language study program. When I was granted a semester-long sabbatical in 2012, I chose to return to Guatemala to continue language study, but also to expand my knowledge of its libraries, to seek information about its suitability as a destination opportunity for CI students, and to support development and growth of libraries in this beautiful country. Both visits combined to provide an exploratory opportunity.

One element of learning language in Guatemala is the opportunity language schools provide to stay in the homes of local families. Home-stays have been shown to improve language acquisition in students and provide better cultural awareness of the country than stays in dormitories (Hull & Lemke, 1978). During both trips, I stayed with the same family, an older couple who have an adult son living with them. Living with
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A family other than your own requires skills such as flexibility, empathy, an acceptance of differences in family interactions, and it also presents the challenges of communicating in another language (Dorn, 2005). Differences in food type and quantity, meal times, and sleeping hours created an initial adjustment period during my first visit.

Antigua is a city of approximately 35,000 people in the highlands of Guatemala. It is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Spain built the city in 1543 and named it the capital of the Captaincy-General of Guatemala, the colony that covered all of Central America. After an earthquake destroyed the city in 1773, the ruins were left behind and a new capital was built. The ruins are what make Antigua unique, along with other buildings rehabilitated in the Baroque style of the colonial capital. The city is surrounded by three active volcanoes and sits at an altitude of 5,000 feet, keeping a mild climate all year round.

I needed to apply corresponding skills while navigating through Guatemalan society in general. Guatemala is a multicultural country with one official language and twenty-three other nationally recognized languages, twenty-one of them belonging to the Mayan language family. Approximately 40 percent of the population speaks a language other than Spanish at home (Central Intelligence Agency, 2013). Be prepared to accept that you will not always understand the expectations or norms of the numerous cultures represented there. In addition to the variety of Mayan traditions, immigrant groups from Korea and India live in some cities, and a sizeable Garifuna population along the Caribbean coast adds to its multicultural nature.

Guatemala is approximately the size of Pennsylvania. Its population is about 15 million, 50 percent urban and 50 percent rural. Nearly one-third lives in the Guatemala City metropolitan region (Central Intelligence Agency, 2013). The majority of the rest of the population lives in the mountain highlands that range through the central part of the country. Guatemalans under age nineteen make up more than half of the country. The population boom resulted from the end of thirty-six years of civil war, which killed hundreds of thousands of Guatemalans.

Since California State University's chancellor had banned travel of any kind to Mexico (Schmidt, 2013), we needed to identify another location for students to study language and learn about the culture of people immigrating to the region the university serves. CI's Spanish faculty possessed no firsthand knowledge of Guatemala. The library does have a history of coteaching credit-bearing courses with subject faculty about a variety of areas for potential student travel (business, economics, communications, political science). Therefore, my secondary project goals were to learn about libraries, literacy, and available opportunities in Guatemala.
I equipped myself with contact names from librarians who had traveled to Guatemala, as well as those gleaned from professional colleagues from the American Library Association and IFLA. My first trip involved study at the Christian Spanish Academy, the only language school in Antigua fully accredited by the Cervantes Institute, a Spanish governmental agency that accredits language programs around the world. As a result, I became familiar with the region of Antigua and other opportunities available to me and, potentially, to CI students. On my following visit, I selected a language school in Antigua set up to benefit local libraries. Proyecto Bibliotecas Guatemala (Probigua) administers two bookmobiles that travel to small rural villages that otherwise have no access to books, and works to establish and maintain physical libraries in other communities (Probigua, 2011). I also contacted another non-governmental organization, Child-Aid, which provides direct training to teachers and librarians to improve literacy among students, instill a love of reading, create and support local libraries, and help young readers develop critical thinking skills (Child-Aid, 2013).

![Figure 9.1. Probigua bibliobus (bookmobile) (Credit: Stephen E. Stratton)](image-url)
Planning to study for three months in early 2012, I coordinated volunteering in advance with both Probigua and Child-Aid. This was more of a challenge than I anticipated. Emails and phone calls were well received, but I learned later that staff often wait until a person arrives before assigning any volunteer work. Admittedly, I departed for Guatemala not knowing exactly what my volunteer tasks would be. Understandably, since communication is the first challenge to conquer in any country, it’s vital to acquire a local cellphone that can receive emails and texts. Although most people don’t own a computer, and Wi-Fi connections are sparse or nonexistent in many regions, most Guatemalans own some type of messaging cellphone.

Public libraries are not a common sight in Guatemala. Many libraries open to the public operate as closed-stack facilities that do not lend materials. Several NGOs operate in Guatemala to build or expand library services. Guatemala has the second-lowest adult literacy rate in the Western Hemisphere and a mean completion rate of 4.1 years of schooling for adults, placing it below Haiti in this development measure (United Nations Development Programme, 2013). Rural education and literacy lag far behind levels in urban areas. Fewer than one in ten indigenous children in Guatemala finishes high school. Seventy-five percent of indigenous women cannot read or write in any language (Hallman, 2007). Indigenous Mayan people primarily live in rural areas and use one or more of their languages to communicate in the home and community. The previously discussed demographics and information needs of Guatemalans reflect an ongoing challenge to the two NGOs where I spent time volunteering, but not to potential volunteers. Because the need is exceptional, opportunities for librarians, library students, or interested student groups are wide and varied.

Traveling one day with John van Keppel, local director of Child-Aid, I learned how I could contribute. We visited several school and library sites around the central highlands, where I observed a teacher-training session in Campo Verde de Santa Lucia Utatlán. Guatemalan teachers and librarians must have graduated high school to qualify for their positions. While this level of education far exceeds the mean, it still often leaves teachers and librarians underprepared. Child-Aid works with local communities to build these educators’ skills. Local educators with knowledge of Mayan languages conduct these literacy-skills trainings.

Many Guatemalan schools require some instruction in the local indigenous language, and some teachers speak these languages better than Spanish. Most instruction is in Spanish, as required by the government, while some schools choose to offer some English. I learned that
Child-Aid hosts work groups from the United States that assist rural villages by building, maintaining, repairing, and improving schools and libraries.

Erin Conway, Child-Aid’s director of training and curriculum, helped start a library in the village of Santa Catarina Palopó (located in Sololá department, the government equivalent of a U.S. state). Her foundation, named Weave, Hope, helps underwrite the local librarian’s salary as well as purchase books. I choose to spend a week cataloging books with Ana Pascualal Lopez, the librarian at Ru K’ux Na’oj (“Heart of Knowledge” in the K’aqchikel language) in Santa Catarina Palopó. Lopez had been cataloging books by hand on spreadsheets created by Conway that were then entered in a computer spreadsheet. Neither Ana nor the library had a computer. The one-room library served as a gathering place for students before or after school.

Child-Aid trained Lopez in teaching and literacy methods, and she performs outreach to classrooms at the local school. She also encourages teachers to bring classes to the library for story time. Lopez posed ques-

Figure 9.2. Santa Catarina Palopó from the hillside toward Lago de Atitlán (Lake Atitlán) (Credit: Stephen E. Stratton)
tions during story time to encourage critical thinking in the students. Cataloging these books would help Ana have an accurate record of library materials, so she could begin lending books to students.

I had to record materials in languages with which I was unfamiliar. I have experience with Spanish, but reading K’aqchikel, K’iche’, or Tz’utujil was new, and I was unfamiliar with use of the apostrophe to represent glottal stops. I generally had to seek Ana’s assistance about which language I was encountering and how to proceed. The challenge was quickly evident in building and maintaining a paper catalog or a catalog on a spreadsheet accessible only to Lopez. Much time was spent helping students find books they wanted to read or to have read to them.

Understandably, it was unusual adjusting to a small town where Spanish is the second language. Knowing I would never understand K’aqchikel and wouldn’t have Internet access gave me a lot of time to simply observe and be observed. Interacting with children at the library brought me the most conversation. A young student and I had joint vocabulary lessons, as he was studying names of animals for his

Figure 9.3. Ru K’ux Na’oj, the library at Santa Catarina Palopó (Credit: Stephen E. Stratton)
homework. He would query me about names of animals in English and I would respond, then ask him their names in K'aqchikel. We conversed in Spanish, exchanging words for dog, duck, cat, horse—and then came penguin. He asked, “Como se dice pingüino en ingles?” to which I responded, “Penguin.” “Como se dice pingüino en K’aqchikel?” I returned the question. He thought for a moment and was silent. Then he told me in Spanish, “We don’t have penguins in K’aqchikel.” We both laughed, but it was true: there was no word for penguin because there are no penguins within the range of the K’aqchikel people. This simple exchange gave me a better understanding of this boy trying to place his culture and town within the world, but it also helped me understand him with empathy.

My experience working in the indigenous community of Santa Catarina Palopó increased my involvement in IFLA with the Special Interest Group (SIG) on Indigenous Matters. I had the opportunity to represent this group at the second Joint Conference of Librarians of Color, presenting a poster session about the activities of the IFLA SIG, as well as librarians around the world working in indigenous areas, indigenous librarian gatherings, and the concerns of indigenous peoples related to libraries and providing information. As an outsider in this professional world, trying to represent Guatemala or indigenous people, I will always be learning.

I had a wonderful time traveling through Guatemala with Rigo-berto Zamora Charuc, the founder of Probigua. Although I did not spend as much time volunteering with Probigua, I enjoyed the opportunity to see different libraries throughout the country. I journeyed to Pueblo Nuevo Tiquisate in the south to deliver books to the public library. It had a computer lab established by a Gates Foundation grant, and provides regular computer courses for local residents.

I witnessed the celebration of International Day of the Book (April 23) in the town of Chicacao. This was much grander than I had imagined, as all the students in the area schools turned out for speeches, entertainers, and music in the central park. Several people donated books to the public library. The International Day of the Book is widely acknowledged in Guatemalan schools and libraries.

I also visited the bibliobus (bookmobile) and provided story time to children in San Lorenzo Tejar. San Lorenzo, a small village outside Antigua, has no public or school library. As an academic librarian, I don’t often conduct story time or read aloud. I’m afraid my skills were a bit rusty, as I put one child to sleep that day. However, I was able to
entertain another youngster with several stories. After he left, I learned that he didn’t attend school regularly because his family needs him for farming. I was moved by his interest in trying to read along with me.

Once I returned to CI, I wanted to maintain regular practice in developing Spanish skills, as well as the momentum toward creating opportunities for our students, and continue relationships I developed with library organizations in Guatemala.

I started by sharing photos and speaking with colleagues. Of course, Facebook provided this opportunity during the project. Further, I offered presentations, first within the library, then to the campus, and most recently to community groups interested in learning more about Guatemala. To respond to the diverse questions I received, I resolved to read...
more extensively about Guatemala’s history and culture. One of our librarians suggested gifting duplicate materials to Probigua. The local Mexican consulate had donated a collection of curricular materials with many duplicates. We boxed them up and shipped them for Probigua to distribute as needed. However, shipping books abroad is expensive, because materials can only be sent by airmail. Library foundation funds paid for this. Still, of the ten boxes shipped to Probigua, only eight arrived, underscoring problems with the Guatemalan postal service. Future shipments will be handled through private carriers to guarantee that they arrive.

Designing and delivering a course for students has been more problematic. Discipline faculty have varied interests and none currently focuses on Guatemala in their research. However, the director of the Center for International Affairs has assisted me in developing a course focusing on libraries and literacy in Guatemala, which will be submitted for funding this coming year. The student fees board may provide funding to facilitate students traveling to Guatemala at reduced cost. Study-abroad trips generally involve groups of about twenty students and stays of a week to ten days. Since these courses are offered through general university studies, they are electives and don’t depend on support from any particular program or department. If approved, I may have the chance to travel with a group of students as part of the campus’s first trip to Guatemala. I hope that the itinerary will be enhanced by my Guatemalan contacts.

As I speak about Guatemala, libraries, and books, other professional opportunities continue to arise. This year I’m planning to speak to the Rotaract Club. The club’s advisors at Broome Library report that students are interested in projects in Central America and in libraries in particular. This corresponds well to the original funding of Probigua’s bookmobiles, which were older Bluebird school buses provided by Rotary clubs in the U. S. and Canada.

International librarianship is more than a one-time adventure. I have achieved a sense of connectedness to the work of Ana, Ru K’ux Na’oj, Probigua, and the librarians and teachers I met in Guatemala. Although several other foundations or NGOs work with libraries in Guatemala, I am adamant about supporting these groups in any way I can. Whether accomplished through continued book donations, securing funds from family and friends, or planning a return trip to Guatemala, this project has become an avocation enriching both my personal and professional life.
REFERENCES


RECOMMENDED READING


