

November 2010 Newsletter

Spotlight on Caitlin Schoenfelder, Convivencia Educativa, Puebla, Mexico

The classroom is full of snakes, the teachers explained to me. I soon learned what that meant. The girls only whispered one, maybe two words in Spanish and then retreated behind their hands. The boys engaged more, often translating for the girls. The students were, for all intensive purposes, monolingual Náhuatl, a language spoken by the Aztecs and in modern Mexico by the Náhuatl people – one of the largest indigenous groups in Mexico. Except for the teachers' voices, all I could hear was the barely audible hissing of the students' whisperings during my week working at the middle school in Macuilcuautitla, a small Náhuatl community in the Sierra Negra of Puebla, Mexico.

Through my PiLA fellowship with Convivencia Educativa, I travel to rural middle schools to coach teachers in a more interactive, motivation-based pedagogy and collect data for an evaluative research project. Vibrantly painted facades, corn tortillas, and a nearby



Caitlin with CEAC Students

space – whether dirt, pasture, or concrete – set apart by two makeshift goals to play *fútbol* are constants. But beyond these characteristics, I am struck by the uniqueness of each place. I have worked in an immigration-haunted community of only the very young and very old, where the students pack their backpacks after middle school graduation and join family in the U.S; a tropical, tourist-dependent economy where the students focus on learning bartering terms in English and can accurately predict rainstorms by the aggressiveness of the flies; and a cactus-populated, *Mixteca rancharo* where the cows produce more pity than milk, and where students taught me how to find fruit in the desert since the closest grocery store is 3 hours by car.

Each of these different environmental, social, and economic conditions dramatically affects the classroom, the teacher, and the role of education in the community. Every new place further complicates my understanding of Mexico, strategies to increase the level of basic education, the power of education to divide and reproduce, and my relationship to the hierarchies imbedded in all aspects of life here. I move constantly between the rural and the urban, the indigenous and the *mestizo* (mixed race), the economically devastated and the elite, the South and the North. My time here has made me feel simultaneously more grateful and culpable for the privilege of this mobility.



In the CEAC classroom

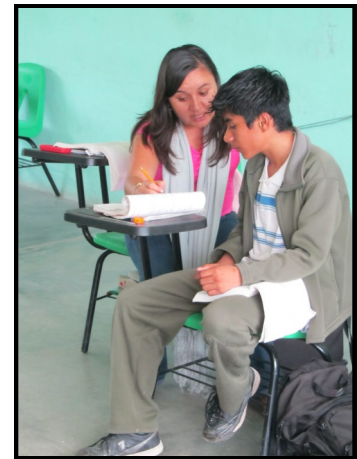


Caitlin, students, and teachers at a Dia de los Muertos celebration

Out of the many inspiring people I have met since arriving in June, the teachers working in Macuilcuautilta stand above the rest. Not one of the three teachers speak Náhuatl, although they are gradually becoming more fluent in the culture of the community as they struggle to retain and educate students. I have always considered education a basic need; but in this community it is a luxury. At the beginning of the school year the teachers walk to each of the students' homes to convince parents to send their child to school, a task which means walking to huts set hours apart from each other up and over steep mountain sides without any guide but narrow footpaths. Parents at times explain that the student would either attend school

or eat, but both are not possible due to their economic situation. In the case of female students, some parents reply that if their daughter had been a son they would send her; but, since she would be married soon, education was of no use.

The work conditions faced by these teachers are beyond just tough. Let alone struggling to get students to even speak in class, they have no running water, sleep on wood planks, and live 6-7 hours in a rickety old bus from their families. Nonetheless, through our series of evenings together I came to realize the absolute dedication they have to their students. They never rest. After school they leave their hut door open to students, informally mentoring and often feeding them. Then, once the students hike off to their homes, the teachers stay awake planning lessons and applying to grants often until midnight. One of the teachers told me that she would not leave this post until she saw one of her students move on to high school and then to university – which would be the first student in the history of the community to do so. I have no idea how these teachers manage emotionally and physically, but I left in absolute awe.



One on one work in a CEAC classroom

Gaining a brief glimpse into these communities and into the work of people such as the teachers in Macuilcuautilta has made my PiLA fellowship remarkable. Without a doubt, I will continue realizing all that I have learned from these experiences in my remaining months in Mexico and for many years to come.



Spotlight on: Maeve O'Neill, Libras de Amor, El Salvador

For the past 3 months, I have been working for Libras de Amor as a member of the team executing a new nutrition program in the municipalities Santa Catarina Masahuat and San Antonio del Monte, in the department of Sonsonate. With the tremendous amount of work needed to implement a new health program in a community, the unified efforts of all team members has been vital in starting a new Libras de Amor program in this region of El Salvador. I work with 2 doctors, 3 nutritionists, 1 nurse, 1 agricultural specialist and 1 specialist in income generation. But, the work done by each of these team members greatly expands past their specific titles in order to ensure that all aspects of the program are running smoothly. And, despite my lack of a specific specialization at this point in my career path, I have become a fully integrated team member assisting in all aspects of work including; weighing and measuring women and children, tabulating primary census data, evaluating and recording baseline nutritional data, intake of nutritional/health data from community members, and translating the first quarterly report to maintain USAID grant funding.



During the weekdays, I live in the small city of Sonsonate with my coworkers. So, I have been lucky enough to have 24 hour Spanish immersion! My full immersion here has allowed my Spanish to improve in leaps and bounds in the last 3 months and has led me to be at a level where I participate in group conversations and feel very comfortable executing all of my work assignments. On a daily basis, I travel out into the different communities in San Antonio del Monte and Santa Catarina Masahuat with my team members. Because our program is new in this location, our schedule of activities in the communities changes month to month. For the first month, we were collecting baseline nutritional data and community census data. So, this meant we spent each day weighing and measuring the height of all children under 5 years old and all females between 10 and 49 years old. I have learned how to weigh and measure effectively and efficiently and now weigh about 40-100 children per day! I also spent a significant amount of the first month working on compiling baseline community census data in order to assess the poverty levels and specific needs of the municipalities.

During the second month of my work with Libras, our program shifted to connecting further with the community members to determine what they hoped to gain from the Libras de Amor program and to share with them what Libras de Amor would be bringing to their community. So, in each community visit we lead a dreams'

workshop to motivate community members to express the positives and negatives in their community and articulate how they hope to see their community advancing the coming years. I assisted in this workshop by recording the ideas of the community members and completing further data intake to register all mothers and children with the program. Upon completion of the second month of the program in October, we had to report the baseline nutritional and census data and the community member feedback to USAID. I worked with my site boss to translate the USAID report from Spanish to English in order to secure the maintenance of USAID grant funding for the program.

My work in November consisted of helping to initiate the implementation of the 7 year Libras de Amor program in the municipalities. We have continued to visit each community to again weigh the children and assess their weight gain, to begin to assess early childhood development, to give individual nutritional consultations, and to give cooking demonstrations with a workshop on hand washing. I provided general team support by weighing and measuring children, assessing and recording the adequacy of weight gain, and assisting in the cooking dem-



onstrations and hand washing workshops. As my Spanish speaking skills have improved and I have become more knowledgeable about the work of the organization, my work on the team has continually evolved. Looking ahead, I will be given more individual responsibility to perform childhood developmental assessments, give workshops to female adolescents in the community, and conduct the baseline nutritional assessment of children from 5-10 years of age. I am really looking forward to taking on a larger role in the organization and further connecting with community members in my work. And, on a greater scale, I am excited to continue to watch my specific Libras de Amor program evolve and grow as it roots itself and becomes an integral part of the health landscape in the community.

Working for Libras de Amor and living in El Salvador has thus far been a truly rewarding experience. I feel at home doing hands-on work out in the field and actively interacting with a variety of different people on a daily basis. My experiences here thus far have furthered my drive to pursue a career in medicine and to eventually pursue health care work in underprivileged communities. Also, I already feel inextricably linked to Salvadoran and Central American culture and predict that I will not be able to get enough of it! I eat pupusas daily, feel at home flagging down buses on the side of the road, and don't think a meal is complete without "limón." And, I have even been asked if I am Salvadoran, which was one of the best compliments I have ever received. So, I am fully embracing and enjoying my fellowship year. I feel lucky to be part of such an inclusive and welcoming team at Libras de Amor and to be part of such a welcoming culture in El Salvador.

Letter from the Director

Dear Friends of PiLA,

191 applications arrived on December 1st—the largest number yet. While the work of processing and assessing all these candidates is a bit daunting, it is also rewarding and inspiring, as we read about the lives and aspirations of so many young people. So far, I have read some impressive applications and am excited to have the luxury of choosing among so many deserving candidates. This group of new fellows will make us all just as proud as this year's tremendous group.

This month's newsletter offers the chance to read about two such fellows, Caitlin Schoenfelder and Maeve O'Neill, who are truly placing themselves in the service of "all nations," or, in their cases, Mexico and El Salvador. The work at Convivencia Educativa and Libras de Amor is demanding and very hands-on and, as you will read, richly rewarding, as our fellows have the chance to give so much and to learn so much.

If you have not already donated, and you can see by our list of donors (p.6) that we are off to a solid start, I hope you will take this opportunity to do so: <http://www.princeton.edu/~pila/support/index.htm> We need your support now, more than ever. We would like to offer fellowships opportunities to as many of the qualified candidates that we can and thank you, in advance, for whatever you do to help us achieve this goal. Our fellows bring a lot to the organizations with which they work and enable them to accomplish more with their resources than they would otherwise be able.

Thank you for your support and your interest in PiLA.

Best wishes for a happy 2011,



Claire Brown '94
Executive Director

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