

November 2011 Newsletter

Spotlight on Sara Vogel and Meixi Ng, Convivencia Educativa, Mexico

Sara Vogel

The ribbon cutting ceremony had ended, and we were all in the garden of an indigenous primary school in the State of Mexico. A few moments earlier, educational officials, teachers, parents, and students made formal commitments to practice a new form of teaching and learning – one that would elevate student learning and the students' self-concept above all other priorities. Each visitor to the school was to plant a tree in a gesture that would symbolize the ideas we helped to germinate that day, a pledge which community members would cultivate and make grow in the coming months and years.

Being here in Mexico, I stumble upon delicate and significant moments like these frequently. Often, I even stumble through them: I helped the other PiLA fellow, Meixi Ng, plant a tree, only to realize there was a tree with my literal and figurative name on it waiting for me on the other side of the garden!

After two years discovering the challenges and triumphs of teaching at a high-needs middle school in East Harlem, New York, I find myself here in Mexico City supporting the non-profit organization Redes de Tutoría, formerly Convivencia Educativa (CEAC) as a Princeton in Latin America Fellow. Led by Dr. Gabriel Cámara, the organization developed the simple yet elegant method that this indigenous school in the State of México and 9,000 other low performing primary and secondary schools around the country are adopting to promote student achievement.

In the United States, tutoring is synonymous with supplementing what a child learns in the classroom with sessions outside of school. But the idea that CEAC and its affiliated federal government program – the Integral Strategy to Improve Academic Achievement (or EIMLE, for its Spanish abbreviation) – hope to bring to scale here in Mexico imagines one-on-one tutoring as the *primary* way to educate students at schools around the country where over 50% of the students scored for three consecutive years far below proficient on the standardized national tests.

In the schools that have adopted tutoring relationships, teachers hardly ever stand at a blackboard delivering content. Instead, someone with deep knowledge of a certain exercise, or *tema*, tutors a student who wants to learn it. When you work with a tutor, you can't hide in the back of the room, and you are always met at your level. In the last several months, Meixi and I have become advocates for this method. The metaphorical map in our office – we'll eventually get a real one – is dotted with pins marking



the places we've been: Turuachi, Chihuahua; Malinalco, Estado de México; Orizaba, Veracruz; Querétaro, Querétaro. We travel with advisers from EIMLE and record the educational revolution as it takes effect, one classroom at a time. We ourselves dive into tutoring sessions, sharing our *temas* with students and learning the exercises they share with us. We process the photos, videos, and audio we collect into stories we post on a website so that people outside of the education world in Mexico learn about the program's successes.

There is something quite surreal about this work. In Veracruz recently, the principal of a large secondary school assembled all of his students and teachers on the basketball court to salute the flag, to sing the national and state anthems, and to chant the school cheer in an *homenaje* to welcome us. Events we attend at schools suddenly become "international" affairs when we come to town. When the microphone was passed to me to say something – anything, on the fly, and in Spanish! – I saw the faces of 800 students, 1600 little eyes focusing on me and I thought, "Do they know I'm really not this important?"

Teachers and educational officials here exude respect and hospitality. And in the classrooms where our program works, the energy about this new pedagogy is palpable too. The staff in our office and teachers in classrooms around the country are turning schooling on its head, transforming everyone in the classroom into a teacher and everyone into a learner – and they are excited about it. From the seed of an idea that Dr. Cámara and his colleagues had years ago as they taught in the backwoods of the Sierra in Chihuahua, *relaciones tutoras* now blossom across the country.

And because Meixi and I and the other PiLAs that have come to work with CEAC over the years have also been infected by the *tutoría* bug, no doubt it will become an "international" movement too.

For more information about the work that Meixi Ng and Sara Vogel are doing with EIMLE and Redes de Tutoría, check out: www.logroeducativo.wordpress.com

For more of Sara's stories from the field:

<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/sara-vogel>



Sara and Meixi, planting a tree



Sara and Meixi, with Meixi's tree

Meixi Ng:

I came to México, a few days before all schools nationwide were just starting up after the summer. PiLA gave me the opportunity to work with schools all around Mexico with Redes de Tutoría (formerly Convivencia Educativa). Sara and I are working with the Integral Strategy to Improve Academic Achievement (or EIMLE for its Spanish abbreviation) in the Secretary of Education, which is implementing a radical shift in the way lessons are conducted in the classroom: teaching in tutorial relationships, or “relación tutora.” We work with the “worst” performing 9,000 schools throughout the country, changing communities from inside the classroom, inside the school, and bringing the joy of learning back to schools. I’ve only been here for two and a half months and I’m already mesmerized by the changes that are happening here in the schools. This culture of tutorials in the general classroom is a way of walking alongside students and teachers, and also a way of teaching in the hardest to reach, most marginalized villages, changing the schools from the inside out. Every day, I understand more about educational policy and how to bring change to my part of the world – Southeast Asia.

Tutorial relationships create a network of students, teachers, parents and authorities, armed and equipped with knowledge and pedagogical techniques to learn and teach. Students are called to be part of the change, to be part of the solution for their “failing” communities and schools. They learn so that they can then be tutors for others at all levels of the school and then catalyze growth in their communities.

Josefa Ortíz de Domínguez, a telesecundaria—a rural school where students learn by television with the aid of one facilitator—I got the chance to meet and interview three girls that had gone through two years of the “relación tutora” program. Interviewing the girls who were both tutored and tutors was inspiring. They spoke with such confidence and were

poised to lead in their communities. This was a rural school, so even without fancy technology or resources the school was improving and giving life to its community. It was quite a beautiful sight, a humbling experience. And the cherry on top: The school improved its national test scores in just two years with this new way of teaching.



Meixi and some students

Excited CEAC students!



Cara Buchanan, Amazon Conservation Association, Cusco/Villa Carmen, Peru

Saludos, PiLA! Espero que todos estén bien.

I write to you today from the city of Cusco, Peru where I currently work with the Asociación para la Conservación de la Cuenca Amazónica (ACCA), sister organization to the U.S. based Amazon Conservation Association (ACA).

I'm not quite sure how to properly introduce you to the ACCA/Cusco experience, so I'll start off by sharing a few things I never thought I'd live to say.

Over the past few months I have...

Coordinated the construction of a massive serpent aquarium project.

Spent entire days walking around Cusco asking herbal and medical professionals what treatments they recommend for chicken-induced tortoise wounds.

Become a proud surviving traveler of one of the "World's Deadliest Roads" (according to the experts from the History Channel's very own *Ice Road Truckers*, of course).

Asked everyone I can about local beliefs and practices of traditional medicine.

If any other fellows are having a similar PiLA experience I would love to hear about it and compare (presumably, very interesting) notes. But in the meantime, I'll tell you a little more about the past few months I have spent living between the high altitude of the Andean mountain range and the lowland Amazon rainforest of Manú National Park in the region of Cusco.

It's hard to believe that just a few months ago I was finishing up my studies at Columbia when I came across an interesting quote in one of my bio classes that read, "the earth is too wet to be a machine". At the time this had very little meaning to me. I was studying, working and living in the heart of New York City and from my perspective it so often *did* seem like there was a mechanic nature to the world...at least the world as I knew it. I could never have anticipated just how much my mind would change a short time later after transitioning to a routine of falling asleep to the lull of croaking frogs, distant howler monkeys and the call of *repundula* birds that almost sound like animated water droplets.

As the ACCA Villa Carmen Research Station Volunteer Coordinator I communicate with potential and current volunteers who come to the station to work on any number of our diverse volunteer projects: nature photography, wildlife monitoring, gardening & sustainable agriculture, landscape exploring & cartography, carpentry with local materials, work as a resident artist, veterinarian, or field station English teacher. Because Villa Carmen is a relatively new research station, there is always plenty of work to be done and independent, creative approaches to our volunteer projects are highly encouraged.

Recently my work has been split between the rainforest field station and our Cusco city office, which are separated by 8 hours of the aforementioned (now made infamous) 'road'. The opportunity to work in both contexts has granted me invaluable exposure to both the theory and practice of ACCA's mission. Bearing the 'behind the scenes' processes in the Cusco city office has lent me a robust understanding of the challenges that influence daily operations on the fieldwork side.



As someone who bounces between the rural and urban contexts I have come to embrace my role as one of the organization's *enlaces*, or links, between the mostly English-speaking volunteers and the (almost entirely) Spanish-speaking Peruvian ACCA staff. Taking on this role has taught me what it means to serve as an ambassador for both American and Peruvian cultures. It has been incredibly rewarding to facilitate communication across cultural boundaries and witness the outcome of meaningful collaboration.

One example of this collaboration is illustrated by the construction of the serpent aquarium. Originally, the idea for this project came from the casual brainstorm of an American volunteer at our field station who had spent extensive time researching turtles and snakes in South Florida. After a few conversations we began to organize and gather materials for a small-scale project. As the plan developed, ACCA field staff noted that the new aquarium could not only serve to take care of the reptiles at the station but also might become an educational resource for people in neighboring indigenous villages and towns. From its humble beginnings the project has greatly expanded. To complement the installation of the serpentarium, we have been researching and writing up ideas for community education initiatives that will make the topic of reptile conservation more accessible and interesting to visitors from surrounding areas. By maintaining a commitment to including local people in our work, ACCA continues to establish trusting relationships with *human* resources that are absolutely vital to carrying out our mission of building sustainable conservation efforts.



In case you think that building a snake aquarium or writing educational initiatives on rainforest conservation are far removed from daily life and best reserved for environmental biologists and scientific researchers, do read these two quotes from our website that have helped me to better understand what my work means within the big picture: "At first I thought I was fighting to save rubber trees; then I thought I was fighting to save the Amazon rainforest. Now I realize I am fighting for humanity"—Chico Mendes and "When one tugs at a single thing in nature, he finds it attached to the rest of the world"—John Muir

After asking me about my academic background in Human Rights, Spanish, and Public Health, my Villa Carmen Research Station supervisor Dr. Tejedor said to me, "Cara, I think you're the first person who has come to volunteer with us who is so much more passionate about people than about nature, and actually that's really important".



I am proud that ACCA embraces a holistic approach to environmental conservation work. Without a dynamic understanding of both the human and environmental factors of the equation, we will not be able to solve the problems of global warming, climate change, deforestation, epidemics of tropical disease or rapid decline in population of indigenous peoples. It's all connected. We need the help of biologists, sociologists, anthropologists, teachers, artists, doctors, lawyers and travelers in order to work through each piece of the puzzle. And so, the work goes on.

I am deeply thankful to my ACCA family who has taught me so much, and of course to PiLA for granting me this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to learn. When I travel back to the states and head to medical school I will be bringing back a whole new appreciation for what it means to connect people with their environment in order to secure better health outcomes in both the rural and urban contexts. Even if I end up back in New York City where croaking frogs and exotic birds replaced by taxicab horns and street music, this time I will be prepared to remind New York that yes indeed, the earth is too wet to be a machine – I've now seen it for myself.

Letter from the Director

Dear Friends of PiLA,

The November newsletter is packed with reports from the field and lots of great photos. This year, we have two fellows at Convivencia Educativa—Meixi Ng and Sara Vogel, both of whom come to PiLA with excellent backgrounds in the education of children from under-served areas. Their experiences, in Singapore and New York City, have served them well as they undertake the work of CEAC. Cara Buchanan traded in New York for the wilds of the Peruvian Amazon and the chance to work in a variety of capacities in the field of natural resource conservation.

It is with great excitement, and perhaps a little trepidation, that I await the incoming flood of new applicants for the 2012-13. The reason for the excitement is obvious, the fear, perhaps less so—we get so many extraordinary applicants and I just wish we had even more placements on offer so that we might address the pressing need for post-collegiate, international NGO field experience. It is possible that we may have as many as 30 placements, including new ones with: World Food Program, Azuero Earth Project, and Building Dignity. I hope, too, that we may offer one each at grassroots organizations in the Dominican Republic and Ecuador—but, those placements, and others like them, are very much dependent on the support that you, our Friends, are able to extend.

If you have not already donated, I hope you will take this opportunity to do so: <http://www.princeton.edu/~pila/support/index.htm> Our fellows bring so much to the organizations with which they work and enable our partners to accomplish more with their resources than they would otherwise be able. I hope you will agree, after reading this newsletter and our past ones, too, that our fellows are certainly making the most of the opportunities that they have won as PiLAs.

Thank you for your support and your interest in PiLA.

Best regards,



Claire Brown '94
Executive Director

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