

Internship Final Narrative Report  
Jeff Petty  
ISPAC Preparatoria, Puerto Vallarta, Mexico  
August – December, 2006

I arrived in Puerto Vallarta on Thursday the 10<sup>th</sup> of August 2006. I had virtually no idea what life would be like after emerging from the customs booth in the Airport. I didn't even know where I was to be living since the last minute cancellation of the family I had heard would host me fell through. Luckily, Juan Carlos Coellar, the supervisor that would grow to be my best friend in Mexico, was waiting for me as I ran into the humidity that I would never adjust to. He took me to my new host family's home in Colonia Los Mangos while he explained to me that the next morning, bright and early, the school was having their opening mass of the school year with a staff training day (read: lecture by Miss Cuqui) following. He explained that it would be a good first impression if I could go, even though I wasn't Catholic. At the mass I was introduced to a good cross-section of the faculty and direction of ISPAC, but at the staff lunch that followed the "training day" I started to realize who taught what and where they taught it.

Juan Carlos told me secretly that Saturday he and some other teachers were having their annual kick-off carne asada barbeque, and although we would be the only representatives from the high school, the teachers that would be present were people that I would get along with. I was invited and told that a former intern named Ted was coming into town on vacation and he would be the guest of honor. When I arrived at the barbeque I discovered that Ted was one of my friends from the UO trampoline program. It had been about a year since I had seen him, but we had basically spent 6 hours or more a week together for the first three years of my college experience. Though I had known he had lived in Mexico, I had no idea that not only had he been at ISPAC two years

before, but also I was living with the same family that he did! The barbeque was my first introduction to the group of ISPAC teachers that, during my time at ISPAC, would be my favorites: Luciano, Norberto, Luis, Minerva, Blanca Rosa, but unfortunately not Paco.

Having Ted around for the first week I was in town was an amazing advantage that I never anticipated. After realizing that I had an invaluable resource at my disposition during the most confusing part of the internship, I asked him an annoying amount of questions about everything I could think of, all of which he was more than gracious to answer.

My first day of work was the following Tuesday. I didn't go Monday because he thought that by waiting until the second day with students, I could make a bigger impression on them when the new excitements of the first day of school had waned. On my first day I mostly observed how the school functioned, making appropriate introductions to all of the English classes that I would be assisting and teaching during my time at ISPAC. After students left school that day, Juan Carlos and I sat down and talked about our goals for the internship.

My biggest reason for participating in the IE3 program at ISPAC was to help me decide whether teaching is a career I'm interested in pursuing. Both of my parents are educators so I have had exposure to the life of teachers, but I had never been in a situation where I was *the* teacher. A secondary goal was to further increase my Spanish abilities by living in a Latin American country. A completely unexpected result of this internship was that my English skills, especially grammar, are much better. I suppose exposure to grammar everyday and having to be able to explain the justification for the language's usage hones one's ability.

In terms of my Spanish ability, I can't deny that they improved immensely. Living with a family that only spoke Spanish (although Carlos my host brother frequently asked me for English translations) required me to rely on my language skills. Though I had completed a Spanish major prior to being in Puerto Vallarta, I advanced enough to make and understand some fairly complicated jokes. Both co-workers and the family repeatedly referred to me as being "pizpireto" which was explained to me to mean "someone who makes the opportune comment at the opportune", though my only definition I could find in a dictionary said "coquettish."

The family I lived with really couldn't have been any more perfect for me. Señora Marisa was like a mother to me, and I always took the opportunity to compliment her in front of her friends and family, which would cause her to blush and giggle. Carlos (or Carlos Papá as I referred to him) was almost too eager to engage me in conversation about whatever caught his fancy, though often it was my impression of education in Mexico. He had strong opinions and stronger political connections that always surprised me, especially when presented with the bluntness I grew to expect. The two host brothers were incredibly friendly, and luckily, my age. Allan was slightly younger at 20, but probably more mature than Carlos, 22. Carlos is a pirate on the Marigalante pirate ship, *the* tourist attraction on Bahía de Banderas. Both Carlos and Allan's friends quickly became my own and I spent most weekends hanging out with them or playing soccer at what I can only describe as a secret jungle field, this immaculate soccer pitch that is a half hour by car into the wilderness, across a river we crossed by footbridge.

Though I had a strong connection with my family and friends in Puerto Vallarta, I still have to say the hardest part of the experience was the feeling of isolation. Until I

could reach a level of familiarity with people to get angry at them, I felt really alone, even if there were lots of people around. By far the most difficult aspect of my time in Mexico was the disconnected feeling that kept me from understanding everything completely. I wanted to learn everything I could about the culture I was immersed in but the only way to understand the intricacies of a people are to spend time with them. I was frustrated that I was frustrated, but eventually I discovered that the only way to learn all the details of life that I take for granted in the US was to be patient. Homesickness for me was the absence of my complete integration; the predictable idiosyncrasies of the people I'm closest with. I think I have that now, but I can't imagine a way to speed the process up. I think it's one of those metamorphoses that isn't realized until it's complete.

While difficulties with daily life were frustrating, school life wasn't without its aggravations. The school's style of management left me with a bitter taste in my mouth, mostly because of the way the dealt with discipline problems that I encountered with the 3<sup>rd</sup> semester. This was the group of students that broke a former intern's nose with an errant shoe on the first day of school. In order to have issues with this group though, I had to be in a position of authority for them to act out against. My classroom management abilities (when alone with students) became what I was most interested in improving.

During the first couple weeks I mostly assisted Juan Carlos, only really interacting with students on an individual basis unless I was reading aloud (a native speaker is important to hear). After I had mostly learned the students' names, I began teaching while Juan Carlos observed me, and shortly after that, began teaching classes on my own. I most enjoyed doing listening and reading exercises, but the books we used everyday were surprisingly fun, so even the grammar lessons could hold the students'

attention. The 5<sup>th</sup> semester students immediately became my favorite due to their maturity and manners. I could get them to understand that if they focused and did the work we had to get done for the day, we could spend the end of the class talking about things in English. The other two English classes never quite understood the concept of a reward for good behavior.

After I was able to teach classes without Juan Carlos's presence, I became an even bigger asset than I already was. Unfortunately, the English department at ISPAC's high school is tragically understaffed (Juan Carlos being the only member). Once I could handle a class on my own, I freed him to work on things that, without me, would be too time consuming to attempt. Examples of this are the trip he organized to Virginia for January and special class events like "Parent Show and Tell Day." I managed to do a few special things too. One that will help the school in the future is the literature packet I assembled that includes various short stories and poems from American authors like Poe and Silverstein. For the first time in his time at the high school, we were ahead of the lesson plan for every class.

Nearly all of the success I feel I have had in Mexico is due to Juan Carlos. We connected on more than a professional level, and often hung out or took trips to places like San Sebastian del Oeste or Sayulita. His English is immaculate and he knows how to guide a class and set an amazing example for interns to follow. Early into the internship we agreed to correct each other when we made grammatical mistakes, though we would never do it in front of students. Because of this accord, my Spanish improved substantially and his English vocabulary and pronunciation is even better than it already

was. I can't give anything less than my highest recommendation to him. Getting to know and appreciate him is the first tip I want to offer prospective interns.

Another piece of advice I can offer is to pick up a map of Puerto Vallarta within the first couple days you are here. You can get "Blue Map" at either Gigante or Soriana, two of the big department store chains in Mexico. It's much better to look like a goof with a ridiculous map for the first few days than to continually get lost in the streets that will eventually become second nature. Having a map will also help you find the immigration office, where you'll have to go to renew your tourist card, a nightmarish process that I wish I had known about before having to do it myself.

Near the end of the first three months, my tourist card was about to expire. I knew I had to renew it, but I didn't know what hellish hassle that process would become. If you are going to have to renew your tourist card, you should take a photocopy of every page of your passport and your credit cards with you. You'll also need to have your original tourist card, copies of a bank receipt showing that you paid the \$30 required to renew the card, and proof of a Mexican address. You should plan two days to take care of the renewal though it might be possible to do it in one day if you get there as it opens (9:00 a.m.) and get the bank receipt taken care of as soon as you can so that you can get it all turned in by the time the office closes at 1:00 p.m. To get the bank receipt you have to take the form from the immigration office to a bank and get three copies showing that you paid the renewal fee to the bank. It sounds complicated and it is. Good luck.

The last piece of advice I want to offer is a classic: Carpe Diem. You only live once and while you're in Mexico you should take advantage of the travel opportunities. Go to Guadalajara and all the little pueblos accessible by bus. You'll meet all kinds of

fun characters that will completely personalize the experience. If you can do that, your time in Mexico will become uniquely yours, and nobody will ever be able to understand the complexity of thoughts and feelings you'll feel for the country, the people, and the culture. For me, there is nothing like sitting on the beach with some Cerveza Leon watching the sun redden behind the Marigalante on the horizon.