Honduran students build their voices with journalism

INTRODUCTION BY HOWARD SPANOGHE

For journalism advisers, every moment is a learning experience. University of Missouri graduate student TIM WALL takes JEA advisers to Honduras and gives them the opportunity to translate his visit into pedagogical upgrades. His techniques should encourage imaginative approaches — whether for your school or for other situations. Consider ideas about making choices, finding answers to questions, visualizing story parts, competing for the best story and developing visual reporting skills.

Try “translating” one of the techniques to a classroom in the United States. For example, Hall’s use of the photo flash technique might suggest a technique that would work well for all ages or levels of journalism students. Could you use this method to help your students become better observers? Or better visual reporters?

Plan ways to emphasize paying attention to details such as:

- Reserve an intro class time for photo-diash experiments — maybe on Mondays or Fridays or possibly for a designated five to 10 minutes daily during the first week of each month.
- Use from one to three photos.
- Select photos that are more complex as the activity progresses.
- Expand from still life to short videos and then to multiple videos.
- Introduce more complex videos and multiple videos for one showing.
- Require students to read lists or stories for accuracy checks.
- Build enthusiasm for accurate visual reporting.

BY TIM WALL

Tattoos needed my students into writing.

While teaching journalism to fifth graders at a downtown public school in Siguatepeque, Honduras, I noticed a group sporting mischievous grins and turning repeatedly to look at Kevin. He was using a piece of glass to cut a design into his arm. He told me he was giving himself a tattoo.

“A scar and an infection is all you’ll get doing that, not a tattoo,” I told him in Spanish. “You need a machine if you want more than a black blob. … This is what a tattoo should look like.”

I unbuttoned my black dress shirt and revealed the tattoo on my right shoulder.

As the students clambered over one another for a better look, I promised to show them the rest of my tattoos if they paid attention and completed their assignments. Body art bribery worked. Showing off my ink encouraged the students to put their own ink on paper, and that was the main goal of...
Student art and editorial cartoons visualize communication.
project En Voz Alta, which means “in a loud voice.” What I hoped to do was give my students a louder journalistic voice.

Completing the En Voz Alta project was part of my requirements for a Master of Arts degree in journalism from the University of Missouri. I taught one-hour-long journalism classes to about 230 fifth- and sixth-grade students in three schools in Honduras. My goal was to develop a means of using journalism to give students the confidence to tell stories that mattered to them and to improve their ability to tell those stories. The lessons, according to the students’ regular teachers, also helped improve students’ writing, media literacy and reading comprehension.

Each week I interviewed the students’ classroom teachers for feedback about how to improve the curriculum. They responded candidly and encouraged me.

“Thank God that you are here in a public school,” said Eda Savala, a sixth-grade teacher at the school Norma Regina de Callejas. “We’ve never had a professional journalist come here before. It’s more like the journalists just criticize us [the teachers].”

PROJECT DESIGN

To teach important communications skills, the En Voz Alta project progressed from a basic definition of journalism to practicing skills such as interviewing and lede writing. Next students were assigned writing projects and created their own newspapers.

Week 1: Journalism Basics

The first week of class focused on teaching the basics of journalism. To develop lesson plans, I used two curricula available on the American Press Institute/Newsletters in Education website. I translated the plans into Spanish and added them to the class. The most effective addition was to increase use of games and activities.

Commenting on the use of games in the classroom, sixth-grade teacher Rafael Ramos said, “This is a very strategic and fundamental form of education. It’s a form of motivation. Logically, when they are motivated, they learn better.”

The games included diverse activities, such as the following:

- **Find the Answers:** I distributed newspapers to the students, and each chose a newsletter. Then they marked the answers to the six questions: Who? What? Where? Where? Why? How? The students discussed their results. I made a poster with the six questions and another with an example of an article, both before and after marking the answers to the six questions.

- **Find the Parts:** The activity was similar to the six-questions activity. Students marked parts of a newspaper, such as headlines, bylines, ledes and publication date.

- **Unscramble the Inverted Pyramid:** Four sentences were written on strips of thick paper. Together they made up a story, but the students had to decide which sentences contained the most important information. Students taped the sentences into an inverted triangle drawn on the board in the order they thought made the most readable story.

- **Remember the Photo:** I flashed a photo clipped from a newspaper to the students. They had to write down as many details as they could and then think up two questions about the photo. The activity proved to be a favorite among the students so I expanded the plan to include writing a short article based on what they had seen.

Week 2: Journalism Practice

Progressing to the next step, I introduced four specific in-class writing assignments. Teachers suggested it was better to have the students work in class, as opposed to doing the articles for homework.

“It’s better that students work in groups here in the school because when they take the work home, they receive help from older people so the result may not be their work,” Savala said.

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What I liked best is that the students are learning much about how to write. It is important because it does not simply help with Spanish but with any writing assignment. I believe that when these students go on to high school, this ability to read and write will serve them well.

WALTER SUAZO,
FIFTH-GRADE TEACHER
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To help students create their own newspapers, I taped a poster with a blank format on the board. Instead of an actual headline, the poster simply said, “Headline.” Students used this poster as a template while they were putting their own articles into the newspaper format.

Because few students had access to cameras, we used drawings to illustrate their stories. Students who were creatively oriented were free to decorate their pages as they saw fit. In the group projects, those students were allowed to help their less artistic peers.

In the first set of classes, students worked individually, but the second set worked in teams after I received feedback from the students’ regular teachers.

“There are advantages when students work in groups. One helps another — that is the advantage of working in a group,” Suazo said.

Classroom Challenges

Keeping discipline in the classroom often consumed a quarter or more of my class time. If the teachers stayed in the classroom, students would behave. But some of the teachers disappeared as soon as I walked in the door. Students knew I had no means of punishing them so the classes turned into chaos. One class behaved so poorly the class had to be dropped from the program.

“Students are easily distracted so you need the help of us, the teachers, to control and to discipline them,” Savala said. “For them you are a stranger, but eventually you captured their attention. They come with questions: Where are you going to take them? What are they going to receive?”

“It’s the first time we’ve had the assistance of a North American at this school in this type of work. Thus, we learn from you and you learn from us,” Savala said. “Much of this depends on the support of the teacher. If they don’t finish the work you give, I say to them, ‘OK, you won’t go to recess until it is done.’ They know if they don’t do the work in the time you give them, there is a type of little punishment for them.”

PROJECT INSIGHTS

Honduran children grow up in a world they did not shape, but it is a world that molds their futures. By making use of the news media both to observe and to draw attention to what is important in their lives, students improved in media literacy and communication ability. Teaching the journalism classes allowed me to contribute to their education, and many of them enjoyed the classes.

“I’ve been watching how well the students interact with you. I’ve noted that the students are very enthusiastic because they wait for you anxiously,” Savala said.

“You know, I think some of them have the wood [ability] to become journalists. Like Javier, he said to me, ‘Oh, teacher, how beautiful.’ Others too, they like it and have the capacity,” fifth-grade teacher Zoila Barrahona said.

Journalism even became a revenue stream for Ardón’s students. A group of students produced several editions of a student newspaper and sold it for the equivalent of 25 U.S. cents.

It was enlightening to realize that journalism has the potential to improve young people’s lives. The project could be carried out in thousands of areas and reap benefits for students and teachers.

Many effects of the En Voz Alta project were subtle and difficult to quantitatively study. But some of those subtle effects could be life changing for the students.

“The beginning of a career in journalism is when a person starts to feel disquiet about all the things around them. At that moment they view their environment as something more interesting,” Alejandra Canales Chirinos, a journalist for the Honduran newspaper El Heraldo, told me.

Perhaps some of my students now feel that disquiet and have a new interest in telling stories about the world around them.
Dangers in Honduras

BY TIM WALL

Journalists criticize frequent work stoppages and strikes by public school teachers. Educators in Honduras strike because politicians, over the years, have promised teachers raises, but the promises were rarely fulfilled. Even worse, the teachers often were not paid for months. When teachers strike to demand their pay, the news media tend to take the side of the government, contended Eda Savala, a sixth-grade teacher at the Norma Regina de Callejas school.

During my stay, a work stoppage by high school teachers shut down the high schools. In support of the teachers, students took over a high school in Tegucigalpa, the country’s capital. The action resulted in violent confrontations with police, reported El Heraldo, a Honduran newspaper.

Angry teachers, however, are the least of a journalist’s worries in Honduras. Seven journalists were killed in Honduras in 2011, according to the International Press Institute. Going into the project, I was concerned that I would be exposing the students to danger. But the truth is that they are already exposed to danger. The Honduras’ murder rate of 62.1 per 100,000 inhabitants was the highest of any nation for 2011, according to the United Nations’ Global Study on Homicide.

The violence of the gangs contrasted with the gentility and the hospitality of the Honduran populace. The lucrative trade in guns, drugs and humans builds the gangs’ and cartels’ wealth, which contrasts with the low-income and economic hardships of Honduran citizens.

The En Voz Alta project did not change students’ circumstances, but it did teach valuable skills that may someday help students succeed despite the brutal realities of their world. The project sought to develop ways to use journalism teaching to improve the lives of children in struggling nations.