

# La realidad mágica de Oaxaca—Colores, olores y sabores de Oaxaca:

## An Interactive Workshop for Spanish Teachers

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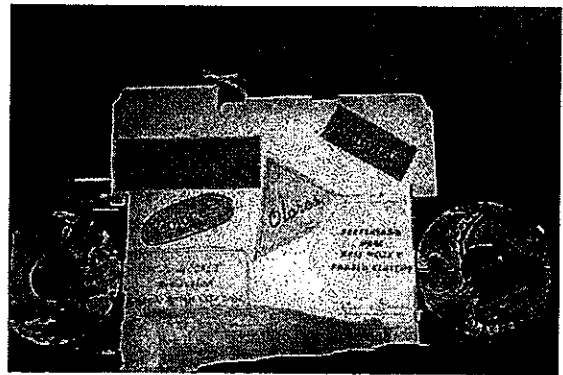
As the fortunate participants in the National Endowment for the Humanities summer institute entitled *La Realidad Mágica de Oaxaca* (led by NNELL past president, Dr. Mari Haas), we designed interactive ways to share our rich and colorful learning experience with our students and colleagues. In February 2004, we lived our Oaxacan adventures in an all-day workshop entitled, *Colores, olores y sabores de Oaxaca*, for our state organization, the Colorado Congress of Foreign Language Teachers (CCFLT). Our goal for the day was to immerse the participants in a Oaxacan cultural experience, stimulating their senses to see the images of the valleys of the ancient *zapotecas*, hear the *sones itsmeños* (ballads from the Istmo de Tehuantepec), touch the *artesanías*, taste *quesillo* (fresh cheese) and *chapulines* (fried grasshoppers), and smell *el copal* (incense used during the Day of the Dead celebration). Geography, archeology, colonial architecture, marine turtles, people of the maize, crafts, cuisine, music, song and dance were all addressed through interactive activities. Through creating a Mexican environment, we hoped the participants would leave with ideas that they, too, could share with their students.

In order to introduce participants to just a taste of the colors and images that Oaxaca has to offer, colleagues were treated with a PowerPoint presentation of nearly 300 photos we had taken during the summer. Everything from the colonial architecture, for which Oaxaca is known, to the market place, the arts and crafts, and the people we had met were included. These pictures were shared with all of the teachers so they will be able to take them to their own classrooms and speak about them with their students. It was an excellent way to whet their appetites to the people and places of this magical place we were about to explore in our fantasy adventure.

After a get-acquainted activity in which teachers shared their favorites in many categories, we began our simulated trip. We all made "seat belts" from crepe paper streamers that we threaded through cardboard buckles, "bus windows" and "curtains" of paper, and "visas" from index cards. Properly belted in our chairs and with manila folder "suitcases," we were ready to begin our imaginary journey. Having

simulated the purchase of tickets, the stowing of luggage and the attentive listening to safety instructions, we began our road trip from the capital city of the Distrito Federal along the treacherous mountains to the Oaxacan valleys of our destination. When the bus finally arrived at the Hotel Bugambilias after many curves in the road, travelers made postcards by drawing their favorite scenes on index cards to send home.

As presenters, we were challenged with how to bring to life the very special *zócalo* (town square or plaza) of Oaxaca City. Like most cities in México, it represents the heart of the city that draws to it people of all classes and walks of life. A visit to the *zócalo* is probably one of the best ways a newcomer can become familiar not only with the special relaxed pace of any Mexican city but also the wide range of people who frequent it. In an effort to bring the atmosphere and people of the *zócalo* to the classroom, participants were asked to play the roles of the characters in the play, "A day in the life of the *zócalo*." Caretakers, athletes, shoeshine stand owners, ambulant salespeople, tourists, bankers and students all have a part to play as the day progresses and the personality of the city, town, and nation begin to unfold. Whether teachers choose to make this a silent play with a narrator or a loosely structured role-playing activity will depend on the linguistic ability of the students. The colorful helium balloons, props, and name tags helped the participants feel as if they were in the heart of downtown Oaxaca, which affords locals and tourists a very entertaining session of people watching.



The file folder "maleta" and CDs on interviews and Oaxaca photos.

Understanding the importance of corn to the Mexican people is imperative to our visit to Oaxaca. A video introduced the ancient cities of Monte Albán and Mitla where cornfields still grow today. Teachers learned a Zapotec legend of the origin of corn and repeated it to their partners with flashcards before they made little books to retell it later. Next several participants demonstrated how to make tortillas, using Play-Doh® for the *masa* (dough), while the other teachers pantomimed the process. Cornhusks became little dolls with a few quick yarn ties. These toys could be main characters of stories written by students. After a visit to the Sunday *Mercado* (market) of Tlacolula, participants passed around their purchases, trying to guess the price and purpose of many items, such as a *molinillo* (chocolate beater), tortilla press, water scooper and wooden toys. This delightful activity is a very inexpensive way to introduce cultural products and practices to our students.

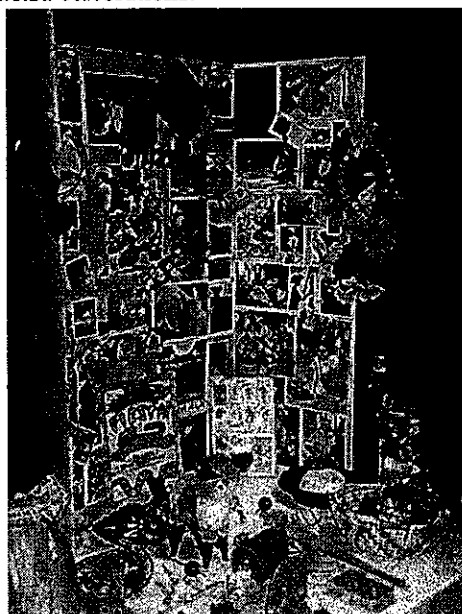
In a subsequent trip, many participants learned of the significance of the marine turtles from multiple perspectives. From the view of literature, two legends were shared, one regarding how the tortoise acquired the design on its shell, and the second one answering the question of why it lives so long. From an ecological point of view, colleagues learned through a series of drawings about the plight marine turtles have suffered in the last century prized for their meat, eggs, hide and shell. Their numbers were severely devastated. Thanks to eco-volunteers, and new laws, the marine turtle can often be seen grazing on the sea grass offshore from Puerto Escondido and the Bays of Huatulco. With partners, colleagues were able to explain the real challenges of the marine turtle in our world today.



Presenter Christine Wells acting as the "bus attendant" announcing departure times for the fantasy trip.

A workshop about the state of Oaxaca would not be complete without some appreciation of the music and dance of the area. The history of the *Bani Stui Gulal* and the *Guelaguetza* are among the most important folk dance and music festivals in the entire Republic of México. The distinctive costumes of the *tehuanas*, and the haunting music of *sones itsmeños* like *Zandunga* and *La Martiniana* gave participants yet another opportunity to actively participate. Singing was only the beginning! All of the participants moved their *esqueleto* to dance to the music. We showed video clips of the actual *Guelaguetza* and then clips of real American elementary and high school aged students performing folk dances from the area to inspire others to include Oaxaca in their next music lesson. At the end of that segment, we tossed small plastic bags of goodies to the audience as is traditional at all *Guelaguetza* celebrations.

No trip to Oaxaca would be complete without visiting several of the many villages in the area whose artisans make their living creating colorful souvenirs to sell to the tourists. There is something for everyone! The black pottery of Coyotepec, the *alebrijes* (wooden carved and painted magical animals) of Arrazola, the hand dyed weavings of Teotitlán del Valle and many more. During the last hour of the workshop, we gave participants the time and opportunity to recreate paper flowers, colonial styled houses completely out



Artesanías are on display to enhance the Oaxacan experience.

of paper with *tejas españolas* (Spanish roofs), or bookmarks and frames out of colorful craft sticks in the style of *alebrijes*. All of the participants left with a model of a craft project inspired by the artisans of Oaxaca that they could take to their classroom and easily adapt for their own students.

A celebration ended the cultural immersion, and everyone enjoyed more music with samples of *mescal*, *quesillo* and *chapulines*. The workshop was a vivid, memorable experience for the teachers because of their willingness to suspend reality for the simulation, and they left with many ideas of how they, too, could create fantasy cultural experiences in their own classrooms.

For more information about the workshop and the CD of photos and/or DVD's of interviews of people in the market, please contact Christine Wells at [jekr\\_wells@adelphia.net](mailto:jekr_wells@adelphia.net) or 719-653-1865. To access thematic units on Oaxaca go to <[www.oaxacaunits.com](http://www.oaxacaunits.com)>.