

## **Acompañar Obediendo: Learning to Help in Collaboration with Zapatista Communities**

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*Joint service-learning programs of Wake Forest University and the University of Texas-El Paso are working to develop an anthropologically-informed service model for/with the authors' Universities, our students, and our community colleagues. Building on extensive ethnographic fieldwork and experience leading experiential programs, the model results from consultation and communication with the communities we 'serve.' This paper provides a case study of the authors' experience in Chiapas, Mexico, where collaboration with community partners is producing a refined theory and practice of service. It begins with the community's own definition of assistance and service, and continues through a commitment to acompañar (accompany) the group before, during, and after the service experience, producing a program and relationship based on symmetry and sustainability.*

As faculty leaders of the Wake Forest University and the University of Texas-El Paso *El Horizonte* Service Project, it seemed to be the best service-learning program ever. By their own account, our mixed group of 11 students were getting along famously. We'd just completed a three-day stay in Tulan, a small Zapatista support community located in the rainforest of Chiapas, Mexico's southernmost state. Known for their exquisite orange blossom honey and the primary medical care they provided for their neighbors, the Tulaneros were representatives of the EZLN, the *Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional*.<sup>1</sup> In active and complex conflict against the Mexican government since 1994, the Zapatistas were a unique rebel organization, and we shared a commitment to development and service.

Though the persistent winter rains dictated that one of our group's service activities was continuously removing of mud from the cement patio in front of the compound's houses and health clinic, the climate did not dampen the enthusiasm of both our students and our host community. True to the theme, when we left there wasn't a dry eye to be found. Now, we were down river a few kilometers at a very different Zapatista community, and there was a short break in the rain. As we cleaned up from our usual breakfast of black beans, tortillas, and eggs, one of the two student assistants helping to run the program met us, her face somber.

"We need to talk," she announced.

"Sure," we answered. "What's up?"

"Not here. We all need to talk. The group is waiting for you in the school."

We were staying in the recently completed building housing the autonomous school, a product of our previous field programs. As we entered, we saw the students arranged in a circle on the wall-to-wall sleeping bags that lined the floor and on the hammocks that swung overhead. From the looks of it, there was mutiny afoot.

"We've been here four days now, and we're having a really wonderful time," began the group's spokesperson. "We enjoyed dancing and singing with the folks up in Tulan, and playing with the kids, and making tortillas, and yeah, well, we picked a few baskets of coffee. But..." She paused, and her tone grew ominous. "We aren't doing any service."

We looked at each other in stunned silence. Prior to departure and in our pre-jungle orientation, we had spent long hours discussing the nature of the service experience. This program was a result of years of preparation, a spin-off from a previous program, designed in collaboration and consultation with the Zapatista communities and their leadership. We were dancing and singing, and playing with the children, making tortillas and picking coffee. But the students still thought that they weren't doing any service. They were having a hard time giving up the model of hands-on, build-the-school

volunteering they'd always associated with service. It was time to pause and reflect on the theory, method, and practice we developed to guide anthropologically-focused service-learning in Chiapas.

In the following pages, the authors examine this model of service-learning. A brief history is provided of the Maya Program, and its offspring, the student organized *El Horizonte* Service Project, placing them into the context of the conflict in Chiapas.<sup>2</sup> The process of receiving approval from on-campus review boards is contrasted with preparing students and obtaining informed permission from host communities, as the two-way risks and responsibilities of community involvement are considered. Next, we focus on the actual experience, and what it teaches about community development, service, and anthropological research. Achieving balance in depth of encounter, definition of service and learning, the host-guest learning exchange, and the integration of ongoing research in the field experience are all part of this process. Though students enter into service placements expecting to do something concrete, the product of long-term dialog, reflection, and planning may build teachers rather than schools, and provide recreation and resources rather than labor. Finally, the authors comment on the shape of upcoming exchanges in Chiapas, as our hosts take ownership of the process, providing guidelines for future encounters.

### Seeking Horizons: The *El Horizonte* and Maya Programs

The authors developed the Maya Summer Study Program through refining 25 years of field program experience. A direct descendent of the Hartwick College-SUNY Oneonta Chiapas Project, it built on aspects of our combined experience leading programs in the southwest United States, Mexico, and Guatemala. A five-week field program in cultural anthropology, it began with classroom and in-field preparation in San Cristóbal de las Casas Chiapas and seated the contemporary Maya experience in its prehispanic roots through visits and service in archeological settings. Moving to the Lacandon jungle, students spent several days with two Maya communities, and finished the program in highland Guatemala. The goals of the program were as follows:

- Provide long-term accompaniment to communities in their process of autonomous and autochthonous development
- Understand service as a symmetrical, two-way process of learning, giving, and receiving
- Use our research skills and opportunities to

assist communities meet their self-identified needs

- Learn about coffee production and assist in marketing
- Learn about plants and herbs from midwives and healers
- Examine the dynamics of change and choice in contemporary Mesoamerica
- Learn/improve Spanish
- Explore links to the broader Latino community in the United States
- Understand our own cultural, class, and ethnic biases
- Use what we have learned thru service as a way of informing our own communities and as a basis for future fund-raising efforts

In contrast, the *El Horizonte* Program was a dual-campus, student-led initiative mentored by the authors, as faculty advisors. Two weeks long, the program had the same overall goals as the Maya Program, but its main thrust was to provide a community-authored service-learning experience in the Zapatista jungle communities of Cerro Verde and Tulan. A unique characteristic of both programs was the relationship between Wake Forest University (WFU), a private, historically white institution, and the University of Texas-El Paso (UTEP), a public university with a predominantly Mexican and Mexican American student body. As part of the program, students had the opportunity to share ideas and information with those whose life experience differed greatly from their own. For both groups, the learning process went beyond their experience in Chiapas, and forced them to confront their own unidentified biases.

*Horizonte's* two student directors were veterans of the longer Maya Program, and each spent an additional period setting up the program and doing research in Chiapas. Student directors Teresa Sotelo and Liz Story represented the polar extremes of life experience. Teresa was a working-class and outspoken Chicana; Liz a well-to-do and sometimes-apologetic member of a privileged and conservative family. Their adversarial relationship during the first program encapsulated what could be expected as the extremes of interclass, interethnic conflict. Their decision to accept the challenge to work together to develop the *Horizonte* initiative on their respective campuses was testimony to the life-changing effects of service-learning.

As program directors, Simonelli and Earle negotiated these student conflicts during the Maya Program, developing a process for mediation and

reflection as we went along. For Horizonte, the task passed to the two veteran student leaders. Liz admits that she was more than slightly apprehensive about our decision to ask the two of them to be group leaders for Horizonte. She pointed out the irony of the situation, trying her best to make light of what she thought could turn to disaster. Building on the lessons learned from their own experiences and from their interactions with the Zapatistas, Liz and Tere worked with their student groups prior to departure to prepare them to understand possible conflict. However, their meeting in the Mexico City airport was a refreshing new start. Their personal conflict, as well as the nature of the whole field experience, had made profound impressions upon their lives in the intervening year. Perhaps following these cues, members of Horizonte formed immediate and strong bonds with each other, cross cutting all class and ethnic difference. It was these same intergroup bonds that turned the students into a solid front, as they challenged our model of service and learning.

*Service, Research, and Informed Consent:  
Laying Foundations*

The decision to work in Zapatista communities was a product of both serendipity and the authors' long-term research interests in community-authored development, especially in the frontier regions of Chiapas. Earle did Ph.D. research in an indigenous community there in 1979, and Simonelli began work in the same zone with a nongovernmental organization (NGO) in 1997. In both cases, our initial interest was in how community development and NGO interventions might take place in a way that helped without hurting (Simonelli & Earle, 2001). Our involvement with the Zapatistas grew out of a desire to understand both their unique development model and the relationship between peace, conflict and development. As a place to answer anthropological questions about conflict, and to provide the opportunity for students to participate, the Zapatista communities were the least conflictive of the world's conflict zones.<sup>3</sup>

Located close to the Mexico-Guatemala border, our host communities of Tulan and Cerro Verde were integrated into the larger EZLN organization through their participation in Tierra y Libertad, an autonomous municipality. An outgrowth of the 1994 rebellion was a reorganization of municipal governments and regions, especially in the Zapatista zones. In response to this government gerrymandering of municipal territories, autonomous town councils (*consejos autónomos*) were formed in over 32 regions. In these, the residents developed parallel, but separate systems of governance, health, education, and production. Currently, there are at least 36

autonomous municipalities in Chiapas, comprised of hundreds of Zapatista support bases and other resistance communities.

Tierra y Libertad was one of the largest and best developed autonomous municipality and, with five others, was violently dismantled in spring 1998. In 1997, the leadership had approached members of five NGOs working with Guatemalans fleeing the violence in that country, to see if there might be some way that their communities could benefit from the huge sums of money flowing into the region as refugee aid. This provided the groundwork for subsequent policy that would emerge through the Zapatista reorganization begun in spring 2002, the desire for aid to be distributed equitably, so that no one was left behind, and so that envy and competition did not divide people struggling against similar economic and political barriers. In response to the appeal, one of the NGOs made efforts to seek out international contacts for communities in the *autónomo*, and the authors were it. The Maya Summer Program developed from this initiative and from relationships forged with Cerro Verde and Tulan after the 1998 'break-up.' Because this was during a seeming hiatus in regional governance, the authors assumed that the autonomous municipal council was not operative. Initial interactions were with the communities alone, as the authors developed our research interests in conjunction with community development needs and aspirations (Simonelli, 2002; Simonelli & Earle, 2003a).

In fall 2000, we began talking with the adults and youth of Cerro Verde about bringing students as part of a service-learning program during the following summer. After 2000, an important part of the Zapatista conflict with the Mexican government became what they called a 'rivalry of ideology,' especially as concerned the design and object of development programs. As the Zapatistas pointed out, informed community development in a conflict zone encouraged peaceful interactions between parties in rivalry or conflict. Documenting this model of internally-authored development at work was an important aspect of the authors' research and presented an opportunity for students to experience a unique decision-making and work model.

Service-learning was a growing initiative at Wake Forest and Texas - El Paso. In its focus, service-learning meshed well with the authors' goals as applied cultural anthropologists, following a venerable precept derived from 1950s Action Anthropology *to learn and help in equal measures*. Building on this goal, Maya Program students would be bringing bags and bundles of school supplies to help provision the community's existing

autonomous school. In addition, the authors had accumulated a small sum of money from countless cookie sales and other fund raising. The students expected to use the money to actually rebuild the school during the visit. But the Zapatista communities were used to another kind of visitor: members of international *brigadas*, who came, witnessed, and returned to their homes. Part of the authors' task was to try to explain to community members the differing philosophical and practical expectations of the two types of group. They, in turn, taught us the importance of witnessing as both service and engaged anthropology. The potential to document and tell the Zapatista story in our home communities and to our colleagues was a valued aspect of our presence in their communities. It is a means of advocating without intervening, and asks for critical reflection and reporting by all parties. It is not a naive or romantic acceptance of a revolutionary movement's assessment of itself, but one based on long-term field work and the invitation to question and comment on what we see and experience.

In addition to having a service component, the Maya Summer Program required that students enter the field with a research project in mind, interests that dovetailed with the authors' own ongoing work concerning viable community development in a conflict zone (Earle & Simonelli, forthcoming). In part, the research component broadened the term service-learning to what might be more accurately called 'service/research-as-learning.' Though the focus of this component changed based on negotiation with the communities, one reason for including explicit research questions was that initially Wake Forest University had funds available for students involved in faculty-mentored research, but not for service.<sup>4</sup>

Since the students were proposing research in addition to service, the authors had to obtain approval from our respective institutional review boards (IRBs), something that is not typically required of service projects. Prior to leaving for Chiapas, we spent days locked in contentious exchange with the IRBs, who were asking not just for informed consents, but the supposed standardized questionnaires that students would use as part of their research. We reminded them that cultural anthropology's hallmark is *ethnographic field research*, a research design using participant-observation as the primary methodology. Ethnography is the field technique used to provide a *qualitative* picture of relationships, representing a well-rounded view that blends outsider observations with insider insights. The "facts" recorded are individuals' interactions and statements, stressing people and their actions in social, spatial, temporal, and his-

toric context. Though cultural anthropologists may at times add a standardized survey to our work, it is typically a product of the initial periods of participant-observation, rather than something devised before entry into the field. It can reinforce conclusions reached through qualitative research, but alone, its standardized nature loses the important nuances surrounding a response.

Beyond pointing out once again the nature of qualitative research, the authors stressed that it was unethical and unsafe for our so-called "subjects" in Chiapas to sign individual informed consent documents. First, as members of a rebel group, signing anything was unwise. Second, decisions were made by the community as a whole, for the community as a whole, not by individuals. Finally, it was not our place to invite *them* into *our* undertaking. They would welcome us if they chose to welcome us. The impulse to consent or reject would be of their design. Even more important, it was difficult to explain to IRBs that the content of research would be based on Zapatista prioritization of need in the community, and later, the municipality and region. Our task was to match students' interests and skills to our hosts' immediate need for information, making the whole enterprise much more symmetrical than most conventional studies. As we struggled to come to an agreement with the IRBs concerning informed consent for both our work and our students' projects, and attempted to explain the college student conception of service to the communities, it became clear that a newly reconstituted regional Zapatista leadership was a step ahead of us (Simonelli & Earle, 2003b).

Zapatista governance is guided by the precept *mandar obediciendo*, literally, to lead by obeying, which is their own service-based form of governance. This means that the leadership is guided by the dictates of their constituents. Just as during our initial interactions community members were learning from us that research was a large part of any anthropological undertaking, we were learning that to be involved with "helping" autonomous communities meant that we must accompany them based on their guidelines, or *acompañar obediciendo*.

About a month before our scheduled departure for Chiapas, a cryptic message arrived by e-mail, telling us that a problem had surfaced concerning our relations with the autonomous municipio. We were stunned. Hadn't the Municipio been disbanded in 1998, its leaders held in the *Cerro Hueco* prison for over a year and a half? Though we knew that the leadership had regrouped and learned invaluable governance and human rights skills while housed together as guests of the state, neither Cerro Verde nor Tulan mentioned a reconfigured

autonomous government outside of the prison. Now, that leadership was questioning our right to be in their villages, part of their process of living autonomy.

Arriving in Chiapas a week before the scheduled start of the Maya Program, we wondered about our position vis-à-vis the municipality. Acting on its prerogative to monitor outside projects and programs in constituent Zapatista communities, the new municipal president laid out the process by which we could apply for, and be granted a visa. We were asked to present a formal proposal at the Enlace Civil in San Cristóbal, a clearinghouse for relations with the Zapatista support bases. We were learning that to do service, we would have to work closely with a shadow government that not only had an articulated foreign policy, but an embassy to handle official clearances to boot. It took two days of discussion to obtain a stamped, signed form allowing us to travel freely to Cerro Verde. But though we had been granted *Informed Permission* to visit by the “subjects” of our service-based research, the real negotiations had not yet begun.

#### *Negotiating Service-Learning as Accompaniment*

We left in the afternoon for Cerro Verde, a scenic drive that delivered us to a community strategically placed on the road to Realidad...I was not prepared for the way that they opened their hearts and home to us...we were given a presentation by the school children...riddles, poems and songs, opening with the Zapatista hymn. The children’s creativity was a remarkable reflection of the effectiveness of the community’s teaching methods. After dinner, we were treated to guitar music, and then dancing. But on a more somber note, we were later scrutinized by a member of the autonomous council...who seemed to be interested primarily in what our intentions are and what kind of a relationship we intend to have with the community. The conversation with him, Dr. E and Dr. S was like a dance, flowing and gliding back and forth-barely touching, but maintaining intense eye contact...There was a fierce protectiveness that seemed to radiate from him, but apparently we passed the litmus test enough to be allowed to stay. Still, I’m not sure he was satisfied with the results of this “little experiment.” It’s hard to fault him though, for being cautious in this land of betrayal, repression, exploitation...(Fieldnotes, Maya program participant, July 23, 2001)

It was past midnight when the festivities welcoming the Maya Program to Cerro Verde began to wind down. Among the Zapatistas, dancing is social ritual, and tired as we were, it was a critical part of our welcome. Our final dance was a rousing two-step with the aging patriarch and matriarch of

the community. We waltzed our respective partners back to the sidelines, and joined the students, near our indoor-outdoor sleeping quarters. They were exhausted but enthusiastic, anticipating tomorrow’s service activities. They had not yet realized that the dancing and singing were a big part of those activities. Now, they were about to learn first-hand what the Zapatistas meant by service. The evening was just beginning.

We moved to another section of the Cerro Verde enclave, where the space was set out a little like a rural courtroom. The representative of the nomadic Tierra y Libertad government sat in front. We were in the first row facing him, with the students arrayed behind us. In El Paso, Earle had worked with his bilingual students, coaching them in techniques of simultaneous translation. As we began introductions and discussions, two things were clear. First, a primary service of the El Paso students would be as language intermediaries, serving both the community and us during our interactions. Second, the purpose of this particular program was to define future relationships with the Zapatista communities, to refine a model of service that served their needs and pushed at the limits of our definitions. Consequently, the first late night meeting was largely a probing conversation between Martin, the Municipio’s leader and us, a series of introductions to mutual expectations. As we spoke, we could hear the low murmur of translation from behind us. When one of the students tired, the job was passed flawlessly to the next. Finally, they were asked to spend the following day reflecting on their commitment to the Zapatista communities, to be ready to define service in the context of Zapatista need.

As the meeting ended, we saw Luz and Rodrigo, our principal community hosts, hovering anxiously in the darkness. It was becoming clear that the community and the municipality were negotiating with each other and also with us. They sought to determine the limits of autonomy of a group, and what kind of obligations need arise between the community and municipality. We were seen as representatives of potential assistance for development, whether direct or from a sister city (hermanamiento) relationship, as they were proposing. What was taking place in the meetings was the fine-tuning of the daily details of autonomy, how it is “operationalized” as a concept in the face of the need for communication, compromise, and consensus. We were privy to a community development process in which the community struggled even with its most proximate political allies for the right to negotiate their lives on their own.

We joined Luz and Rodrigo, comparing our indi-

vidual perceptions of the meeting with the Consejo, agreeing that the discussions went well. Luz seemed really tired. Her youngest child was sound asleep on her back, lulled by the late night deliberations.

"It's not easy at times here," she said. "We have to make sure we are doing things right on all levels. On the level of the *pueblo*...the community; on the level of the *Consejo*...the municipality; and on the level of the *comandancia*...the Zapatista leadership. We spend a lot of time talking."

This was evident during our stay. At times, when the men and the women were having their individual discussions, the children also gathered to talk about the same issues. To discuss, to reach consensus is part of the socialization process, learned in the larger classroom of daily experience. Girls and boys are included in the process of shaping the development initiatives and external relationships they will inherit.

Their meetings, their desire to consult and dialog, were key to how they worked so well together. They were a conscious community that had arrived at tentative self-governance though this process of consultation with all adults and many of the youths. It is a balancing act between larger communal obligations still acceptable to those in resistance and past obligations to the official government that are not acceptable, particularly in the areas of education and health. As we were gradually learning, these were forms and obligations they were developing for themselves, with the help of the Zapatistas, who provide training and skills, giving them the raw materials for autonomy. Our visit was helping the municipality to probe at a model of where and how outside support should fit into these programs.

One of the chief concerns of this new representative of the autonomous municipality, as he explained it, was that NGOs and others use their contacts with communities to raise funds that don't get to the community in the end, in essence exploiting the rebels to run an organization and pay outsiders. This was not an unfounded concern, since it has been noted that at times 70-80% of international aid turns into salary, overhead, and benefits for those who generate it.

"We need to monitor resources that don't get to the people who need them, but are resources which are raised in their name. We need to know who is doing what, and where."

This sounded so familiar. Who controls community development, after all, when NGOs deploy their projects? For the municipality, it was a form of foreign policy.

"We also want to make certain that the truly remote communities are not neglected," Martin told us.

This also sounded familiar. Favoritism and division-

ism were bad for development. For the municipality, it was also a form of domestic and fiscal policy.

So here is the irony. To gain freedom and autonomy from outside control, it seems these communities of Maya rebels must cultivate being communicative and cooperative within their own group and with the municipio. To succeed, they must give up some autonomy and some actual resources in the process.

"So you see," Martin continued, "the communities are not completely free to accept money and service from you. Some of these resources must flow to the organization as a whole."

As "donors" we had no problem with this idea, and said so. "Have you thought about taking a portion, say 10%, of all donated monies to use in a municipal development discretionary fund?"

Martin laughed. "So you think that if 100 pencils arrive in a community, we should take 10 for the municipio? How would you administer such a thing? A development tax?"

"It's something to think about," we said, offhandedly. Two years later we realized that they had done just that.

In addition to attending these spontaneous and planned meetings, as we tried to agree on a template for collaboration, we also spent hours talking with the children and teachers at the tiny autonomous school. They explained their philosophy of education, in which teachers, students, and parents assisted each child as she moved at her own pace through levels of learning. Teachers are raised up from their own communities and, most important, return from training to share their skills.

These encounters with the educational system, coupled with the meetings, were part of the community's carefully crafted plan, part of a cultural translation process that guided us to ultimately see the wisdom of disencumbering the educational funds we brought, of providing the opportunity for them to exercise autonomy in using the money. The Maya Program's quick-fix service project of rebuilding the school was replaced with the long-range goal of funding education and training, including that of Cerro Verde's would-be teacher. It was another part of a continuing process of consultation and reflection in the construction and evolution of joint projects. Reluctantly, the students realized that the community could do far better building the school than we could ever do. What they needed from us was to build a model for future programs and relationships. In the end, our school funds became an investment in human infrastructure, not just for Cerro Verde, but also for the municipality as a whole. As such, this arrangement was beneficial to Cerro Verde as it sought to define

and fulfill its obligations to the larger polity.

The students remained somewhat disappointed that they would not have something tangible to photograph to illustrate their service project. During the Maya Program it was clear that the greater service was learning, for both hosts and guests. We hoped that with Tere and Liz committed to continue working over the coming year, these lessons would lay the foundations for the experience that became El Horizonte. As Liz notes below, it was not that easy.

Embarking upon this service-learning project I prepared myself to deal with potential problems: bickering between Wake and UTEP students (our group was entirely female), logistical complaints about food, sleeping, showers etc. Surprisingly, this was not the case, but I had many students, from both universities, approaching me with concerns arising from misconceptions about service. Even after our preparation, I found myself in the position of explaining what we were doing in these communities. *Why were we there?* So I thought to myself, “We are talking with them, picking coffee, playing sports, dancing, learning to make tortillas, playing the guitar, and building gardens.... what does all of this *mean?*”

But I knew that our “service” was so much more than these visible signs of our presence. Two years prior during the Maya Program I was first exposed to the idea of *hermanamiento*, which I understand as a brother/sisterhood between a community and an “outside” support such as us. By definition, it is symmetrical and long lasting. This was the paradigm on which I was basing my notions of service. And I could see that many of the group members still perceived service as a tangible structure left behind as a testament to the “good will” of the group. We were clearly not building any structures. So what was the purpose of this trip? I gave the questioning few a brief account of the process that occurs in these communities. Schools and clinics do not get built because we want to build them. Projects occur according to their needs and in their time. If we came during coffee harvest, we picked coffee. At this particular point in time, the communities needed our presence. In a material world where humans cannot live without thinking of essential necessities, it is a rare and beautiful occurrence to appreciate physical accompaniment. Our presence represented solidarity and the earnest concern for community survival. I was unsure if I had been successful in genuinely conveying this message to the group. But, as I observed the interactions between the students and the community, it was clear that they were beginning to understand.

### Achieving Balance in Experiential Learning: Anthropological Lessons *Balance in Depth of Encounter*

Though the authors’ experiences are somewhat unique in that our service program meets the needs of a fiercely autonomous rebel organization rather than an urban meal program, the lessons derived from it, coupled with general insights from anthropology can be used to construct any service program. Anthropological methods of teaching and learning in the course of field experiences provide an excellent template for structuring cross-cultural service. Our theories, methods, approaches, and academic “culture” are especially appropriate for this type of teaching. We have developed a pedagogical background through living and teaching ethnographic field programs that help us to remain alert to issues of balance. We balance observation and participation; learning and helping; teaching and being taught; immediate results and sustainable activities; practice and research.

Like other anthropologists who conduct field programs, we have seen many teaching configurations. These range from class-in-a-bus, where you drive about the area in a big tourist bus, and give lectures in the lobby of the hotel or through a microphone behind the driver, to cases where, after some training, students begin to do individual research or deliver a service one-on-one. Like our colleagues in the discipline, we know it is best to provide the most complete immersion into a cultural milieu, yet at the same time one cannot overwhelm the student with challenges. Insufficient contact and engagement does not allow for the student to receive a compelling cultural impact, and too much can create withdrawal. Finding the balance of support and challenge is not easy. One lesson from the Maya and Horizonte Programs, among others, is that a balance is necessary between some movement across space and through topics, and periods of stable, close-up encounters, sufficiently lengthy so that students can discover their own ways of interacting. As in service-learning programs at home, this corresponds to a cyclical pattern of preparation and contact, reflection and engagement, first impression and in-depth exposure.

Though Horizonte students were “introduced” to the Zapatistas before departure—through film, books, and lecture—these materials could only superficially prepare them for their stay in the jungle. But prior to leaving San Cristóbal to visit and work in Cerro Verde and Tulan, our students were given the opportunity to see and experience their hosts’ actual commitment to the movement, though from a distance. While still on the “safe” touristy and urban turf of San Cristóbal, we were “invaded”

by the people we would later go live with, as 22,000 Zapatistas marched into the city. We had an outsider's encounter with them as masked and anonymous crowds, as they took over the colonial streets and plaza. Had this been our only encounter with the rebel organization the students would have come away with the image of a well-disciplined but angry mob. Instead, in retrospect, the juxtaposed contrasts served to demarcate the difference between public social "performance" and everyday life. And no amount of talking and meetings could have conveyed to us the importance they placed on remaining integrated in the larger Zapatista organization. Luckily, we had two days in which to reflect on the march before moving to the contrasting experience of living and working in Zapatista communities.

*Balance in Service and Learning,  
Teacher and Learner*

For abroad-based experiential programs, slowly "testing the waters" of cultural experience is easy, and begins with classroom and other academic preparation, before the immersion encounter. Maya Program and Horizonte students on both campuses went through preparation providing background on everything from Maya worldview to the roots of 20th century Central American conflict. In addition, they and their families received a detailed briefing anticipating safety and logistical concerns.<sup>5</sup> After the intergroup conflicts of the Maya Program, Tere and Liz worked on their campuses to head off similar encounters, using the Zapatista model of critical reflection as a way of analyzing potential conflict scenarios.<sup>6</sup> And, we did everything in our power to alert the Horizonte group to the ephemeral Zapatista definitions of service.

At-home service programs should also strive to provide adequate preparation and introduction before the service experience, even if students are itching to get out of the classroom and into their placements. This helps separate service-learning from the typical volunteer placement, accompaniment from charity work. People are obligated to learn before they can serve. But as the Maya Program illustrated, it is not always known what it is that must be known to be knowledgeable enough to provide a service. What does the host community consider a service? Does the student understand this to be one as well? Do those leading the project? What constitutes a service is negotiable in many service-learning situations. Adequate preprogram conversation between the community and group leaders can help produce a model that meets the expectations of both groups and is informed by mutual needs.

In a place such as Chiapas, every experience has a learning dimension. At the same time, parts of the

place are a major tourist destination, and many people who come to Chiapas miss so much of the experience because they do not have the background. As anthropologists we feel it is important, even as tourists, to know as much as possible about what we are experiencing. And with service-learning, not knowing enough can actually be dangerous to those we encounter. Our students, as service-learners, need to know as much as can be provided about the life-ways of the places they are to serve because one can make the mistake of helping in ways that are culturally inappropriate. This helps to lessen the possibility of unintended offenses, or falling prey to what the Zapatistas call the *Cinderella Syndrome*—a subtle attitude of deprecating charity; providing cast-offs to the poor relations.

As participants in the Maya Program learned, what constitutes service for people in the autonomous regions of Chiapas contrasts dramatically with many students' expectations for service work. The entire focus of the program became learning how to serve in that context, and we incorporated that learning in continuing reflections during the second program. Tere and Liz continued this exercise informally, since they spent hours with the other students, interacting as peers. Regardless, students still imagined service to be manual labor, such as building houses, planting fields, and picking coffee.

In contrast, our Zapatista hosts define manual labor projects not as service but learning. In their preparation for Horizonte, the hosts worked together to construct culturally appropriate opportunities that would help us be able to help them. In Cerro Verde, they planned an excursion to the *milpa* or cornfield, so that we could have some sense of accomplishment while they taught us about their lives. After the students had thrown their backs into the exercise for about an hour, a 12-year-old approached us to ask if they understood yet what planting was like. We said we thought they did; he immediately called to the others, and we packed our machetes and returned to the enclave. The time it took for them to "handle" us exceeded the value of any tangible service we could provide for them.

For communities such as Cerro Verde and Tulan, which are trying to subsist in a globalizing world, labor and work-knowledge is abundant. Other resources, such as cash and usable supplies, are far scarcer, and our programs can help to provide this. But the Zapatistas taught us that our most important contribution was our very presence and sociability. To see an ethnically-integrated group interacting equitably with the local community and coming to understand their struggle and perspective, provides a much-needed service for them,



especially in the midst of a sea of opponents, neighbors, paramilitaries, soldiers, and a sometimes-hostile government. In turn, their service to us was to allow us to see that, in spite of the potential for conflict inherent in this situation, it is possible and desirable to compromise in the interest of peace.

Our hosts define service as the visit itself. Our service, as anthropologists, is to bring students who in turn provide the service of internalizing what they are doing, socializing within the community, playing with the children and the elderly, eating their foods with them, participating in their expressive activities, and generally giving their isolated lives the temporary feel of an international festival. In a note to the students in August 2003, the young teacher trained through 2001 Maya Program funds reminded us of this:

We wish to give you a thousand thanks for the school supplies you donated, that will help us a lot and are serving to help us move forward with autonomous education. All the children are very grateful for the help you gave us, but also they really miss your games and jokes...for us this is a gift, because the children need to enjoy themselves, because for them the work, the problems, the obstructions that their parents suffer, they feel, and they become desperate, up to becoming sick. For this, your presence is very important, and at the same time, very festive...

For the Zapatistas, every experience provides both a teachable moment and the possibility of service. The close of the Horizonte program was yet another opportunity to sing and dance, the pulsing rhythms of taped norteña music topped only by our constant laughter. The fiesta and dance was a formal statement honoring the solidarity and sharing between the people of Cerro Verde and students, as had been a dance in Tulan a few days before. As we learned during the Maya Program, dance is social ritual for the Zapatista, not mating ritual. Thus, there are social constraints on appropriate behavior. Students were well aware of the protective bounds of ritualized sociability. As the music came to a momentary pause we looked up to notice a small pack of uninvited guests, all young men, their hair slicked back and secured by rolled bandannas, Los Angeles style.

“Who are those people?” Duncan asked Ana, a 26-year-old mother of two and community health care provider, as they finished a bouncing polka.

“They come from across the river. They heard the fiesta. They are the sons of our enemies. We welcome them.”

“And it’s all right?”

“Of course,” Ana said. “We welcome anyone who wants to join us. And maybe it will make them

reflect on what they’ve done to us in the past; trying to expel us from the ejido; intimidate us with their armed patrols. Maybe they’ll think twice about cutting off our electricity again, if it cuts off the music and their opportunity to get close to the *gringas*.”

Ana’s thumbnail analysis of what a visit from PRISTA youth could mean in the big picture was second nature to her, an extension of the way she had been raised from childhood to reflect, analyze, act. She left it to us to do a lightning reflection and make the obvious connection. It was a service program after all, and this was yet another definition of service.

Duncan sidled over to our students and quietly encouraged them to ask the young men to dance. We watched as the young women strode across the coffee-drying patio-turned-dance-floor to invite the other side into the fiesta. We were confident that the acceptable social bounds would be maintained, even by the visitors, as the model of dance as solidarity was clearly visible. Moreover, our students had learned that in Cerro Verde, no opportunity was missed to turn the personal into political. Everything functioned on multiple levels. If the community learned to turn the other cheek as part of their religious reflection, their evolving political astuteness taught them to use that other cheek to make a practical statement. And teaching us how to live their activism was another part of their reciprocal service to us. The possibility that the relationship of camaraderie offered to the students might transcend the moment and maintain itself outside the frame of our own relations with our Zapatista hosts was an added attraction of our presence.

#### *Praxis: Balancing Practice, Method, and Theory*

One of the great barriers to all effective ethnographic fieldwork is a legacy of unbalanced power relations. As ethnographer and informant, student and studied, our relationships in the field have often institutionalized asymmetry, in spite of our anthropological objectivity. We recognize this legacy and the problem it encodes. And if this is a possible barrier in anthropologically-designed service-learning, it can be a monumental issue in programs derived from other disciplines. In Chiapas, as in other developing parts of the world, people are marginalized and isolated. The Zapatistas know that the cultivation of international solidarity is an essential strategy for political survival, an issue far more important than any unskilled manual labor (Earle & Simonelli, 2004). The presence of outsiders who are not directly linked to the system of political and ethnic oppression surrounding them lessens the degree of asymmetry, though not entirely.

As anthropologists with resources, power, and influence, and as bearers of this history of interac-

tion and representation, we are labeled not just as “teachers” but as titled and formally-educated “knowers.” This artifice can get in the way of free flowing communication, especially in places such as Mexico where a teacher’s authority frequently goes unquestioned. Students from the United States provide an interesting mix of statuses. They are high status because of their origins, but low regarding their current social position as students. Their status ambivalence or liminality invites members of the host community to be their temporary teachers, to address the many questions that constitute their learning endeavors. This both encourages students to inquire, and community members to respond.

Our students’ naiveté and resulting inquiry contributed to the larger anthropological project of applied research. Students’ individual academic interests, from sustainable agriculture to organization of social movements to religious transformation, among others, opened the door to a broad range of shared information, especially when matched with community information needs. A particular instance was the case of a registered nurse who was part of Horizonte. Her special skills were important in Tulan, where a small free clinic was part of the community’s service to those who lived around them. The student and the local healer spent many hours exchanging information and experience, and in doing joint medical consults. The nurse was amazed to see how the local healer integrated her information into a larger framework of low-tech, traditional healing. We were able to see much more deeply into the community’s medical activities than if we had just asked. Students discover things we did not know we did not know, because in their position as learners, they are provided information it is assumed we already know. The heuristic stance the community takes with the students, guiding them, explaining and instructing, allows us, as researchers, to stand in the background and take notes. This is a powerful incentive for anthropologists to bring service-learners into the community.

In turn, what we learn and experience and take back to our respective universities and communities is an equally powerful incentive for Zapatistas to receive service-learners. The Horizonte students agreed to work with Tulan to develop a business plan for marketing their honey in the United States. Contracting for an initial delivery of 650 pounds of jungle pollen honey, Horizonte members obtained a small grant to cover shipping. They received, bottled, and distributed the shipment, and took on the task of selling it. Both the researchers and the autonomous municipality watched this experiment

carefully. We sought to document the process of Zapatistas engaging with the market, as they tried to undertake capitalism with socialist goals; they waited to see if the experiment could be a viable model for marketing honey from the entire region.

Anthropologists work hard and long to develop field sites, establishing trust through participation and observation. For us, the Maya Program and Horizonte represented a balance between what the student comes away with and what the student provides, not only as service for the community but in terms of contributing to the anthropology of the place. While we may see short-term help as an immediate product of the encounter, we strive to make this encounter more “sustainable” as part of the long-term involvement that characterizes anthropological inquiry. For practical reasons, such long-term involvement is what the Zapatistas had in mind when they initially encouraged hermanamiento. In the end, rather than a commitment between a place and a place, as is the usual notion of a sister city relationship, we developed an ongoing relationship between an outcome and an outcome. Ultimately, our research goal is to elaborate anthropological theory concerning the viability of smallholder farming as community development. And their daily objective is to remain viable as smallholder farmers.

Providing research-informed service and doing service-informed research in Chiapas has meant working closely with community members as partners. Project design involved the use of a theoretical perspective concerning method, and a methodological perspective on theory. *Theoretically*, our work was guided by the notion of “agency,” and deriving from this, the act of giving agency to those to be ‘aided,’ as a creative response to the colonial experience, of which anthropology was a part. This perspective means that *methodologically*, we must share the inquiry and program design process. We are given informed permission to be participants and scribes of portions of their social experiments, while at the same time their relationship with us is a way of testing their theories about, and design for, equitable development.

Anthropology seeks to understand aspects of human behavior and thought that do not find their way into the mainstream, usually because of the silenced, marginal, and “minority” status of those who are the “subjects” of “study.” One major project of the discipline is providing the opportunity for those left out of the picture, due to uneven distribution of value and power, to speak. Bringing forth these voices constitutes a central anthropological enterprise. Taking students to these locations opens up vast possibilities deriving from con-

tact, and serves to mutually demystify the respective “other.” As our profession tacks between the local and global, the deeply urban and remotely rural, bringing new generations into relation with these less-known lives builds understanding and empathy, and encourages not only further anthropological learning among these communities and others like them, but a more in-depth commitment to applied work, to making a difference with what one knows. Service-learning programs are the boot camp for training applied anthropologists, some of who may go on in academia. But many will take up work with NGOs and other international aid organizations, with national migrant worker assistance groups, with local Hispanic/Latino social service work, among myriad possibilities. At the same time, service-learning serves to remind anthropology of the importance of giving back to the people that serve up information, while also allowing them to join us in the teaching of our shared students.

Service-learning as an application of anthropology is a testing ground of cultural theory, in essence the experimental branch of our discipline. Moving beyond feel-good resolutions to the inequitable distribution of wealth and privilege, anthropologically-informed service-learning shows that we can be involved in the reconfirmation or “testing” of critical theory. This outcome still remains crucial for faculty who face tenure and promotion assessments. Even in institutions promoting service-learning as a pedagogical tool, there is little value placed on such efforts when making judgments of individual standing in the profession.

At the same time, anthropological models of learning and service are a gentle critique of other programs where a subtle, but deadly, ethnocentrism still guides the provision of service. That the world of development and humanitarian aid, of which service-learning is a microcosm, has yet to get that message is evident in the Zapatista’s blunt assessment of attempts to help them.

### Zapatista Postscript: Put Your Money (And Your Service) Where Your Mouth Is

In late July, the Zapatistas announced sweeping changes in their external and fiscal policy, as part of an internal reorganization. It is not often that the recipients of development and humanitarian aid have the courage to speak out about the well-intentioned, uneven, and mission-directed assistance that arrives to “help” them. Spearheaded by the regional councils of autonomous indigenous municipalities such as Tierra y Libertad, they were striving to achieve a more equitable and effective development plan.

Since 1998 we have watched the rebel organization work as an informal NGO, providing services and training to its constituents and support bases in education, health, production, commercialization, and tourism. Our interactions with Martin, a representative of the municipality, beginning during the Maya Program and continuing to the present, made it clear that their concern with the philosophy and practice of international aid is deep-seated. For them, the changes meant another important step towards functioning autonomy. For us, it was clear evidence that the service and learning had been a true exchange. Now the real challenge was beginning.

As spokesperson for the autonomous councils, Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos offered a lengthy critique of the provision of aid. Writing in July 2003, he described a donation that arrived in 1994, a rose colored, spike-heeled shoe, imported, size 6 1/2, without its mate. Noting that the other little rose colored shoe never arrived, and that the pair remains incomplete, Marcos continued:

...and piling up in the Aguascalientes or regional centers are nonfunctioning computers, expired medicines, clothing too extravagant that not only can’t we wear it, we can’t use it in our theatrical productions, and yes, single shoes without their mates...And this kind of thing keeps coming, as if to say to us, “poor folks, in such need, surely they will take anything, and this stuff is just in my way...”

Not only this. In large part, there is a kind of handout even more concerning. This is the approach of NGOs and international organizations that consists, broadly speaking, in that they decide what the communities need, without a thought towards consulting; imposing not just predetermined projects, but also the timeframe and form that they should take. Imagine the desperation of a community that needs drinking water and they are saddled with a library, those that need a school for the children and they are given a course in herb use...

The Zapatista communities are the responsible parties in their projects (more than a few NGOs can testify to this), they make them go, make them produce and in this way make improvements for the collectivity, not just for individuals...From this moment onward the communities will not receive leftovers nor permit the imposition of projects.<sup>7</sup>

We applauded as we read the details of the proposed reorganization, and chuckled out loud at the announcement of a 10% tax on all development aid coming into the Zapatista communities, to be used as a discretionary fund. Embedded in the new policies were all of Martin’s concerns about inequitable distribution of aid. Now, donors would

no longer select the community they wished to support. One could select an area of interest, such as education, but the Zapatista *Juntas de Buen Gobierno*, or regional consulates, would determine which educational program would get the money. Not only this. No longer could we select a site for our service-learning projects. With the aid of Cerro Verde's women, who developed workshops for other Zapatista communities in how to host *gringo* students, other more neglected sites would be developed to receive future programs. And, because the Zapatista motto is "for each of us nothing, for all of us everything," even the surplus earned from the sale of the Tulan honey would technically have to flow into the *Junta* office for redistribution.

In August 2003, Martín's successor, the new President of the new and reorganized municipal government, met us in Cerro Verde and laid out the revised plan. On our next trip, we would be introduced to education and health projects in several communities. If we wanted to have our students keep working in Chiapas, we, too, would have to follow the new rules. Our immediate response was to envision the nightmare logistical and safety briefing it would take to allay the concerns of parents sending students on a service program to some unknown location in the jungle. But, in good faith, we offered to use photos from the projected community visits to produce a multilanguage brochure, describing the types of projects, to be given to potential development partners. In one of the first real tests of the new fiscal and foreign policies, a North Carolina church decided to support Zapatista education projects in general, rather than just the Cerro Verde School.

In December 2003, the authors and two students representing Wake Forest and UTEP met with the regional Junta de Buen Gobierno to renegotiate our program's relationship with the Zapatistas. We were accompanied by Martín, who had granted us our informed permission during the Maya Program, and helped guide our understanding of the process of providing symmetrical service among the Zapatistas. During the meeting, Martín often restated our questions and statements to the others, to better facilitate their understanding of what we were attempting to communicate. We explained our dilemma. We were not an NGO nor representatives of a large institution; our work was our own and that of those who followed, inspired by our example, mostly students, including Liz, and another, who were seated with us. We brought students so they could also talk about what it is like here to others who have not come, to their families, their community.

"*O si*," piped in Martín. "They gain an experi-

ence you cannot get in books, only by living it with the *compañeros*, and then they take it back with them, to raise the consciousness of others."

Defining the parameters of our service and research-as-learning experience was a piece of the Zapatista drive for transparency in all aspects of social interaction and governance. Transparency includes, but does not preclude, explaining. For our programs, transparency begins with our own preparations with our own students, a reflexive understanding that even the nature of service is a shared construction and not something we bring whole cloth into the service locale. It continues with the in-field process of negotiating the service, including its research components. While our methods will never earn NSF funding, and our attempt to document an optimistic, nonviolent development-oriented Zapatista movement will continue to irritate many colleagues, our goal is to produce a result that is valued equally by the unfolding partnership.

As the Zapatistas continue their remarkable evolution as a 21st century social movement, one way of talking about the transformation of service and aid initiatives in support communities is to use the term "self-development," as defined by the amount of autonomy social groupings can muster to control their lives. This is contrasted with development done by others, the standard model of "we teach, you learn." The Zapatistas are clear on this point:

The aid to the indigenous communities shouldn't be seen as help to the mentally retarded who don't even know what it is they want (and therefore must be told what they need to receive) nor children who need to be told what they ought to eat, at what time and how, what they should learn, say and think...This is the rationale of some NGOs and a good part of the international funders of community projects...<sup>8</sup>

Sadly, it is also true of many service-learning programs.

Through using a model of research-as-learning we have acquired a deeper understanding of how to define service in ways that connect with community priorities, as well as offering needed knowledge and expertise. The lessons of the organized Chiapas programs and subsequent individual commitments by students are not peculiar to this program, but can help in the design of most service-learning and 'service/research-as-learning' programs. As in all anthropological fieldwork, careful preparation, conversation, and negotiation in the field are keys to laying the groundwork for subsequent involvement on any level. Understanding how the community or neighborhood fits into the larger power environment or 'political landscape' is crucial to a

program that strives to develop a long-term, mutually-respectful relationship. At the university, those who work to prepare students must guide them into truly questioning their own definitions of service, while also dealing with their expectations and need to feel some kind of achievement. Having experienced students take over responsibility for future versions of the program, in essence having someone in training to lead subsequent programs, can help with continuity and prevent having to start from scratch each year. Carefully screening program participants can guard against those who are wedded to inappropriate philosophies of helping, but at the same time it can also exclude those who have the most to gain from the experience.

Anthropology and anthropology students can profit from some of the lessons of service-learning programs. The trauma of the 'parachute' method of traditional ethnography that many have experienced can be mediated by the slow negotiation of community relationships. Community service learning is a gentle evolutionary process of guided and incremental entrance into the field, and a good way of learning the ethics and philosophy of fieldwork. Its absence as an accepted focus of anthropology is perhaps related to its kinship with advocacy and practice, and the still existing schism between 'objective science' and the application of anthropology. That we can participate as we observe, and document the process, seems to be lost in debates about methodology.

Anthropology continues to stand aloof as other disciplines appropriate our qualitative methods without fully understanding them. Anthropologists will not step forward to take a teaching role, afraid to be branded as consorting with social work. Anthropologically-informed community service learning may be a means by which non-anthropologists can acquire qualitative skills that incorporate the lessons learned in a century of evolving fieldwork, the same lessons about symmetry and control that have emerged from our carefully negotiated relationship with our Zapatista community partners.

A crucial piece of the fight in Chiapas is about gaining greater control over life and what happens in the shared future. Encouraging prospective donors and servers to disencumber their generosity means asking them to give up control. The Zapatistas have taken us seriously in our anthropological commitment to community-authored service and learning. Do we have the courage and humility to truly live out our theories of agency and act on our mutual learning experience, to acompañar obedeciendo? As Marcos said, obeying the call to speak for the autónomos: Those who help one or various communities are helping not just to

better the collective's material situation but a project much simpler but more encompassing: the construction of a new world, where many worlds fit in, where the handouts and pity for others are part of a science fiction novel, or of a forgettable and expendable past.<sup>9</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Ejercito Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (Zapatista Army of National Liberation).

<sup>2</sup> The authors wish to thank the people of Cerro Verde and Tulan for their infinite patience, and the students for excellent spirit. Partial support for our work comes from the Archie Fund, the Pro Humanitate Fund, and the Mellon Foundation, facilitated by Wake Forest University.

<sup>3</sup> For a larger discussion of doing anthropology in conflict zones, see the issue of *The American Anthropologist* published as a reflection on 9/11, Vol 104(3) September 2002.

<sup>4</sup> This was later remedied with the inception of Wake's Prohumanitate service-learning initiative. By that time, our community partners were interested in what our research could do to help them.

<sup>5</sup> Copies of these materials are available from the authors.

<sup>6</sup> Derived from models taught by pastoral teams of the Catholic Church, this form of reflection is a basic tenet of liberation theology and underlies all group interaction and conflict resolution.

<sup>7</sup> Summarized and translated by the authors, from the discussions of the Autonomous Councils, as reported by Subcomandante Marcos. "Autentico etnocidio," el modelo de Salinas: Marcos, La Jornada, July 25, 2000, pp.6-7

<sup>8</sup> Ibid

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

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