

# Training Teachers, Transforming Education

by NATALIE ARSENAULT

**I** FIRST RECALL STUDYING Latin America in college when, on a whim, I enrolled in a Brazilian Portuguese class because my Spanish professor told me it would be fun. Little did I know how that class would change my life: for nearly two decades, I have dedicated my academic and professional life to Latin America. However, I have often questioned why I was not learning about Latin America in high school or earlier in my education. When I began working at LLILAS in 2001, this concern propelled me to build an active public engagement program that focuses primarily on helping K–12 teachers integrate Latin American content into their classes. Learning about Latin America—and the rest of the world—should begin long before a student reaches college.

With a population today that is 40% Latino, Texas has become the country's fourth majority-minority state. The Latino population, which represents many countries from Mexico to Argentina, continues to grow exponentially. Latinos constitute the single largest ethnic group in Texas public schools and comprise 50% of the total students enrolled. Latin America is not a separate place, south of the border along the Rio Grande; Latin America surrounds us and is relevant to our daily lives. Not only do we need to understand better the distinct peoples and cultures that constitute our state (and, increasingly, our nation), but we need to collaborate with our neighbors in the Americas to address the challenges facing our hemisphere.

Texas teachers are required to teach about Latin American histories, cultures, and peoples in a variety of courses. For example, the sixth grade social studies course, focused on the study of contemporary world cultures, must include coverage of North America, Central America and the Caribbean, and South America. However, teacher certification requirements neglect region-specific background training that provides teachers with in-depth knowledge of Latin America. Lack of foundational knowledge causes teachers of these courses

to rely on limited textbook coverage or gloss over the region. Furthermore, the possibilities for inclusion of Latin America across the curriculum are wide-ranging: elementary students can apply their counting skills to Mayan math; music students can play Latin American rhythms; English classes can study theme and genre through traditional folktales. Gaps in their knowledge keep teachers from integrating diverse content into their classes.

As a leading area studies program at a state university, LLILAS is uniquely positioned to share expertise about Latin America with educators in Texas. Scholars at the university generate new ideas and thinking, and Public Engagement (formerly Outreach) serves as the conduit to deliver that information to educators. Moreover, Public Engagement extends LLILAS's core activities of education, research, and exchange to K–12 teachers, creating a series of opportunities for them to connect to Latin America.

## Education

Teachers teach what they know. Given that currently a United States history teacher can be transferred to world history without additional training or certification, teachers often struggle to cover material about which they know relatively little. LLILAS addresses the critical need for foundational training on Latin America. Teachers who have never taken a college-level course on Latin America need answers to the most basic questions: What is Latin America? What are its histories, cultures, challenges, successes? How are countries similar and/or different?

LLILAS Public Engagement conducts professional development sessions in school districts and regional service centers throughout Texas to answer these, and other, essential questions. Our sessions provide basic information and dismantle common misconceptions about the region. To ensure that teachers teach the region free of stereotypes, we address student perceptions—from “Latin America is poor” to “everyone speaks Spanish”—and provide methods to discuss the region in a way that respects its diversity and complexity.

Once they have background information, teachers need classroom-appropriate materials. Textbooks are outdated and cover only a small amount of information. To address the need for quality materials, Public Engagement has created a set of standards-aligned curriculum units that are complete and ready to use in the classroom. The units combine brief but thoughtful background materials, primary source documents that are not easily accessed by most teachers, and age-appropriate activities for students that build both skills and content knowledge. Professional development sessions include presentations of the units' overarching themes and specific content. Curriculum development allows us to bring current research to K–12 schools: we draw on university courses and texts to convey key ideas to a younger audience. Unit themes include human-environmental interactions (e.g., air pollution in Mexico City); the journeys of global commodities (chocolate and rubber); women in world history (the role of mothers in protesting dictatorships in Argentina and Chile); comparative slave systems; and human rights.

Professional development sessions, which last from two hours up to a full day, draw in teachers who are not able to attend on-campus workshops. Public Engagement launched the program in 2003 as a way to reach teachers across the state. On average,

we visit 5–10 sites and present to 200–400 teachers per year. Since 2003, we have presented to more than 1,750 educators in Texas to ensure that Latin America is covered adequately, accurately, and thoughtfully in K–12 classrooms.

### Research

Elementary and secondary teachers have little time to conduct research in areas that interest them. Many strive to bring original content into their classes, but their heavy teaching schedules do not allow them to explore new directions. Through on-campus workshops and support of teacher-generated curriculum, LLILAS provides research opportunities to educators who do not normally have access to them.

LLILAS Public Engagement partners with campus libraries and archives to organize workshops that incorporate educational components—university faculty and graduate students present information related to a central theme, and extend research possibilities by introducing our collections to a new audience. For example, LLILAS collaborated with the Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection on *Chile 1973: An International Search for Truth and Justice*. The workshop discussed Chile's coup d'état, as well as the abduction, torture, and murder of American journalist Charles Horman, whose story is documented

in the Joyce Horman and Edmund Horman Papers held by the Benson. This workshop provided directed access to the vast resources of the country's best collection of Latin American materials. Workshop attendees were encouraged to conduct their own research within the Horman Papers to find documents that best served their teaching needs.

Through Hemispheres (the international outreach consortium at UT), LLILAS worked with the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library and Museum to organize *Cold War Cultures*, a week-long educator workshop designed to address the global impact of the Cold War. One goal of the workshop was to introduce attendees to the archival collections of the LBJ Library, which include government documents and recorded presidential phone conversations about the 1964 Guantanamo water crisis and the 1965 revolt in the Dominican Republic, among other important events. Once again, teachers were encouraged to conduct research in the archives to gather items that would connect to key course themes.

LLILAS Public Engagement also provides guidance and consultation during the research process. Teachers have specific interests and themes they would like to address, but do not always know the best way to find reliable materials. Since 2004, Public Engagement has worked with the Fulbright-Hays Seminars Abroad program, which sends K–16



Left: Fulbright-Hays Seminars Abroad group in Austin for predeparture orientation for Mexico and Peru. Right: Natalie Arsenault.

educators to Latin America for month-long seminars, on the research and development of curriculum projects. We facilitate the process by presenting training sessions on best research practices and recommending specialized resources related to the topics of participants' projects. We draw from the expertise of the Benson Latin American Collection to assist with the process. Public Engagement supports research by educators so as to enable them to integrate new content into their courses. The research process generates the knowledge, and comfort level, that allows teachers to improve their coverage of Latin America. The results are better educated teachers, dynamic content for the classroom, and more engaged students.

### Exchange

While education and research are important aspects of our public engagement program, study abroad truly transforms the teaching of Latin America. Global classrooms start with personal international experiences. Meaningful teaching about Latin America results from a connection to the content: teachers must feel this connection in order to captivate their students. Firsthand experience in the region provides teachers with insights, knowledge, and a perspective that can be gained in no other way. LLILAS Public Engagement facilitates experiential learning opportunities that are about exchange, not

tourism: while we visit important sites and attend cultural events, the emphasis of these programs is to meet with local experts who can facilitate a deeper understanding of their country and culture.

Thus far, we have conducted three Fulbright-Hays Group Projects Abroad: *Study Seminar and Curriculum Development Project in Brazil* (2004), *Performing Arts and Culture in Mexico* (2006), and *Arts and Empowerment in Brazil* (2010). These programs have three main objectives: (1) to enhance knowledge and understanding of Latin America in a variety of courses through expert lectures, site visits, and other experiences that provide an intellectual foundation for a group of selected lead teachers; (2) to work with participants to develop interesting, accurate, standards-based curriculum units that are complete and readily usable in a variety of classes where vibrant resources can add depth and breadth to the subjects being taught; and (3) to post projects on our multimedia website for wide dissemination of the new curriculum to enrich classroom teaching of Latin America throughout the country.

Our Fulbright programs have transformed the teaching of Latin America in the classrooms of all those who participate. As one participant commented, "I had visited Brazil twice prior to the seminar. I realize now that previously I had viewed Brazil through the lens of an accidental tourist ... Having

spent the month studying Brazil's history, society, and cultural programs, as well as the Portuguese language, I now feel that I really experienced Brazil for the first, as opposed to the third, time." This type of comment, reflecting a new appreciation for a country, is typical. Teachers return excited about teaching the country and integrating their experiences into the classroom. In addition, they return with photos, videos, music, and realia that enliven their teaching. In the end, generations of students are the beneficiaries as their teachers' enthusiasm sparks their interest in learning more.

Experiential learning also allows Public Engagement to integrate teaching and research objectives. Their in-country experiences furnish participants with a wealth of knowledge, delivered through lectures, site visits, and conversations with locals. We choose the lens through which they study the country, striving to make it an appealing and compelling entry point into a country and its culture. Our strength in developing these programs lies in our ability to couple access to leaders, artists, educators, and other people not generally on the tourist circuit with solid academic lectures that provide the background information necessary to understand the central themes we are studying. Participants then return to their schools to conduct additional research and develop curriculum to be shared with their peers. Through these programs, Latin America can be presented to U.S. students in all its complexity; the programs allow us to create materials that engage and enlighten students across the nation.

Teacher education has placed LLILAS at the forefront of world studies education in Texas. The multiplier effect of educating teachers is evident in generations of students whose cultural awareness and global competence have improved as a result of our efforts. Demand for our services is high, as our audience needs, appreciates, and utilizes our resources. We are currently raising funds to bring the K-12 program to the next level and ensure its permanence: educators in every corner of the state should have access to teaching, research, and exchange opportunities that allow them to present the real, vibrant Latin America to their students. ☀

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A "living picture" exercise about water at a professional development session for teachers.