

MENTORING IN AN ENGLISH-SPEAKING  
SCHOOL IN MEXICO:  
CASE STUDIES

MASTER'S PROJECT

Submitted to the School of Education  
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of the Requirement for the Degree  
Master of Science in Teaching

by

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## Table of Contents

Chapter I	INTRODUCTION.....	1
	Background of the Project.....	1
	Purpose of the Project.....	5
	Definitions.....	5
	Limitations and Assumptions.....	6
	Significance of the Project.....	7
Chapter II	REVIEW OF LITERATURE.....	8
Chapter III	METHODOLOGY.....	13
Chapter IV	CASE STUDIES.....	16
	Mentoring in an English-speaking School in Mexico.....	16
	Cindy: Attendance and Grading.....	27
	Dan: Failing a Needy Student.....	32
	Dan: Questions After Class.....	37
	Dan: Language and Culture.....	43
	Bob: Mission Impossible.....	47
	Brian: Problems at Home.....	53
Chapter V	SUMMARY, CONCLUSION, RECOMMENDATIONS .....	60
	Summary.....	60
	Conclusion.....	61
	Recommendations.....	62
	Bibliography.....	64

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **Background of the Project**

After fourteen years of experience as an English as a second language (ESL) teacher in Mexico, eleven of which were spent at the Instituto Mexicano Norteamericano de Relaciones Culturales (The Mexican North American Institute of Cultural Relations), a binational center sponsored by both the American and Mexican governments to foster understanding between the two countries through cultural exchanges, the writer returned to the United States to become certified in Spanish and to finish a master's degree in education at the University of Dayton. A course called Teacher Leader was recommended to the writer by his advisor. He explained to the writer that this was a course for experienced teachers who wanted to progress in their profession without becoming administrators. With this interesting and unique description, the writer enrolled in the course and had what proved to be a valuable and enjoyable learning experience.

The course, taught by Dr. James Rowley, dealt with many aspects of mentoring in education with a particular emphasis on the relationship between the experienced mentor teacher and the new teacher. The small class was

conducted in an informal manner which allowed all the students to participate and share their experiences in class discussions. The concise, easy-to-understand text provided many examples of practical applications of the principles of mentoring. The course was further enhanced by a series of videos in which actual teachers and students role-played situations that might commonly arise between a new teacher and a mentor. The videos dealt with a variety of problems and amply illustrated the various approaches that a mentor may use when helping a new teacher to resolve a problem. They had an authenticity that was refreshing because they presented common problems in the teaching profession from the viewpoint of the new teacher with the added practical input of an experienced mentor. The mentors in the videos did not impose their views on the new teachers, but shared their experiences as caring professionals and helped the new teachers arrive at their own conclusions regarding the best approach to the problem. Since the writer had some experience as a mentor in Mexico, the course had a special significance. It provided additional evidence of the value of mentoring while deepening the writer's understanding of the mentoring concept. The course also brought back memories of how the writer had had to adapt to his role as an ESL teacher in Mexico without the benefit of a mentor program.

As a beginning teacher at the Mexican North American Institute, the writer was confronted with an entirely new environment. The writer's previous experience as an ESL teacher in Mexico had been with individuals or small groups

at American multinational companies or Mexican companies doing business in the United States. The writer worked as an employee of various language institutes. As he almost always went to the companies to give classes, supervision from the language institutes was minimal. As long as the company was happy with the teacher's services, the institute did not intervene in the teacher's methods or the course content. The teacher, therefore, had a lot of freedom to develop his own individual teaching style. The Mexican North American Institute, however, was quite different. Classes were taught only at the school. Class size could vary from a minimum of eighteen in an advanced course to a maximum of thirty-one students in a beginning course. Only institute text books were used; tests developed by the institute were given regularly; ordered records had to be kept by the teachers.

A new teacher was given only a mini-course of five hours taught by the academic director during the first bimester of teaching. This course dealt with the school policy regarding grading, attendance, and the required course content. There was no master or mentor teacher program. New teachers were encouraged to observe experienced teachers, but it wasn't really required. The writer relied heavily on new friends and acquaintances for advice and support. These teachers were essential to the writer's success. A more inefficient school policy for new teachers can hardly be imagined.

Nine years later a supervisor approached the writer and asked him if he would like the job of master teacher (mentor). When asked why he had been

chosen, the supervisor responded by saying that it was a relatively new job (it had been in operation for a year and the writer had never heard of it) and that no one else wanted it. Since they were friends, he hoped that the writer would help him out. Initially, the writer was hesitant to take on the responsibilities of a job that no one else wanted; nevertheless, the writer asked to see the job description which read something like the following:

A master teacher will observe and advise all new teachers with less than six months experience at the institute who have not yet received a permanent contract. The master teacher is expected to observe at least five one-hour classes of each new teacher, to provide the new teacher with useful information on how he or she can improve their classes, to answer any questions, and to give positive feedback whenever possible. A mentor should be available outside of class for a private conference if requested by the new teacher. All information is confidential and the mentor does not share anything with the administration. A master does not evaluate the teacher's performance as this will be done by the administration. In addition, the observation hour would replace one hour of teaching or the equivalent of one class at the same rate of pay.

The description sounded okay to the writer; he signed up. Mentoring new teachers turned out to be a positive experience with one notable exception. If the writer had had a course in mentoring, he would have done a better job with the new teachers. Based on this experience, the information received in Dr. Rowley's mentor teacher course, and thoughtful reflection, the following case studies

illustrate various aspects of the complex mentoring relationship necessary in an overseas English-speaking school in Mexico.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This project was designed using actual case studies to demonstrate how mentoring in an overseas English-speaking school in Mexico deals as much with the necessary cultural adjustments an American faces as it does with solving the normal problems a new teacher and a mentor face together.

### **Definitions**

**American school** - an elementary or secondary or both that follow a curriculum that would be found in the United states and although it is located in a foreign country, it is accredited by American educational associations.

**Binational centers** - schools in a foreign country sponsored by both the American and the host country's governments dedicated to the teaching of English and the diffusion of American culture based on the premise that increased cultural exchanges will lead to better relations between the two countries. Binational centers are located throughout Latin America.

**ESL** - English as a second language



**English Language Institute** - a commercial school that teaches ESL to adult students who are studying English for business and professional reasons.

**English-speaking School** - an American school or a binational center in a foreign country

**Mentor** - An experienced teacher who offers guidance , counsel, and support to a novice teacher during the first year.

**Mentoring** - the formal relationship of the mentor and the new teacher.

### **Limitations and Assumptions**

These case studies have been written from the perspective of an American ESL teacher at the Mexican North American Institute, a binational center in Mexico City, and would be applicable throughout Mexico and, with some minor adjustments, to a school with an ESL program for Hispanic students in the United States.

### **Significance of the Study**

The writer's research has revealed that very little has been written about the actual experiences of Americans teaching at a binational center or an American school in Mexico. Case studies like these would be quite useful for an

American teacher contemplating spending some time teaching in Mexico at an English-speaking school or for educators at such schools who are interested in establishing a mentor teacher program. From the writer's experience comes the knowledge that mentor programs are still in an early stage of development in Mexico. With the growth of economic and cultural ties between Mexico and the United States increasing at a very rapid rate as evidenced by the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement with Mexico, these case studies will meet a very real need and will be beneficial to new American teachers in Mexico because it will enable them to make as effective and enjoyable a transition as is possible to their new teaching environment through a mentor teacher program.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

As an experienced teacher knows, teaching can be a tough or even trying experience, but by learning to deal with difficulties in the classroom, teachers can learn how to use them to their advantage and become better professionals (Loucks-Horsley, 1987). When a teacher is attempting not only to teach, but is also presented with students from a distinct and, at times, unfathomable culture, difficulties and misunderstandings will inevitably arise (Sosa and Gonzalez, 1993). Combining the challenges in the classroom with the problems of learning how to live in a foreign country with its different language and culture, the new teacher can easily feel overwhelmed and start thinking about home and the familiar (Muckle, 1992). Unfortunately, the writer has personally witnessed many good teachers who gave up too easily and went home before they wanted to. Most often, however, a new teacher does adapt somehow after having lived through a lot of rough experiences. Fortunately, the writer had the kind advice of several American teachers who had lived a long time in Mexico, and these fellow teachers became good friends and willing participants in what could be described as an informal mentor teacher program. This way of adapting to a new teaching environment was rather haphazard and a lot of difficulties could have been avoided if the school had had a formal mentor teacher program (Mager, 1992). Naturally the new teacher will be unable to avoid some problems even with the

help of an experienced mentor. Nevertheless, the mentor can provide effective strategies for dealing with problems that are often cultural conflicts through the sharing of experiences (Sosa and Gonzales, 1993). Often just by knowing that the problem the new teacher is facing is a common one that has been successfully resolved by many experienced teachers is a great help. The new teacher, the students, the mentor and the administration all benefit from a well-adapted mentor teacher program (Loucks-Horsley, 1987).

The mentor and the new teacher must deal with situations that are often profoundly cultural in nature. The mentor's task is to explain the many different ways that Mexican culture shapes the educational process in an English-speaking school and how the new teacher should respond. The challenge in these case studies is how to adapt the information about mentoring from the United States to the cultural context of the English-speaking school in Mexico.

One of the amazing aspects of the writer's research dealing with mentoring in an English-speaking school in Mexico has been the paucity of information on the subject. Everything relating to education or teaching English as a second language is based on programs in the United States. A mentor in Mexico must be aware of the many facets of the culture in order to adapt information about mentoring from the United States to Mexico. There are many excellent books regarding Mexico available in English. An important word of caution, however is advisable here. Teachers must avail themselves of books written by both foreign,

in the case American and other nationalities, and Mexican writers so that a conception of Mexican culture includes as many different viewpoints as possible.

The best place to begin is with the Nobel Prize winning author Octavio Paz. His masterpiece, The Labyrinth of Solitude, offers the most complete work on contemporary Mexican culture ever written. Paz has lived in the United States and includes the American perspective in his book. The comparison of Mexican and North American culture is extremely valuable in understanding how vastly different these two countries are. In addition, the book is a pleasure to read for anyone with an interest in the cultural development of Mexico.

Distant Neighbors by Alan Riding is a complete description of the political and economic situation of today's Mexico. Unlike Paz, Riding deals primarily with the present and while many Mexicans believe that the book is overly critical, Riding has thoroughly researched his work. Unfortunately, the book presents all of the current problems besetting Mexico, but offers few solutions. Nevertheless, the book is a concise description of all the current issues confronting Mexico and the many problems that must be solved before Mexico can move from being a third world country to becoming a member of the first world.

Triumph and Tragedy by Ruiz, a history of Mexico, begins with the Aztecs and ends with the Mexico of 1992. The book is a balanced account and describes in detail many of the painful historic events between Mexico and the United States from a Mexican perspective. After reviewing these historical events in which Mexico was inevitably the loser, an American teacher gains an

understanding of Mexico's history which enables him to be more sensitive to his students' world-view.

An older book, Parasitism and Subversion in Latin America by Stanislaw Andreski, while dealing with all of Latin America, contains excellent chapters on Mexico. Andreski is a sociologist and presents all the problems bedeviling Latin America and Mexico using sociological studies. His analysis of the problems confronting Mexico indicates a profound synthesis of historical, religious, economic, and political factors that provide the basis of the current societies in Latin America. Unlike the other books in this chapter, Andreski elucidates the various approaches to the social problems in Latin America and their probable results. His outlook is pessimistic and his predictions have unfortunately proven to be all too accurate.

Exploring the Latin American Mind by Leibman, who lived in Mexico for six years, while dealing with Latin America as a whole, concentrates heavily on Mexico. The author describes the intellectual atmosphere of contemporary Latin America. The book contains an excellent chapter on education and the author even comments on the presence and influence of American schools throughout Latin America. The book's style is simple, easy to understand, and is an excellent introduction to the many current political philosophies followed by Latin American governments.

The five books presented here offer the opportunity of learning about Mexico from all the possible perspectives. A mentor in Mexico must have a

thorough knowledge of the culture since so many of the situations that the mentor and the new teacher must deal with are of a cultural nature. Even after fourteen years in Mexico, the writer is still learning about Mexican culture and how this culture is expressed both in and outside the classroom. Teaching and learning about Mexican culture form an interesting part of the mentoring relationship in an English-speaking school in Mexico.

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODOLOGY

With my experience as an ESL teacher and as a master / mentor teacher at the Instituto Mexicano Norteamericano de Relaciones Culturales in Mexico City, the writer returned to the United States in order to become certified as a Spanish teacher and to complete a master's degree in teaching. In the first meeting with the Graduate School of Education advisor, Dr. Biddle, the course, Teacher Leader, was recommended to the writer. Dr. Biddle described the course as having been designed for experienced teachers who had a desire to advance themselves professionally without becoming administrators. The idea and purpose of the course immediately appealed to the writer. The course, taught by Dr. Rowley, explained the role of the mentor teacher and how the mentor helped the new teacher to resolve the common problems that confront all new teachers. This course provided an opportunity for the writer to learn about the value of mentoring and how to apply the concept of mentoring when helping a new teacher. Fortunately, the writer could compare the experiences as a mentor in Mexico with the newly acquired knowledge from the class. Naturally comparisons with the writer's previous experience demonstrated the inadequacies of the Mexican school's program. The problems could be eliminated and the entire mentor program could be improved. The idea of the handbook began at this point.



One of the assignments in this course was writing a case study with an unsolvable moral dilemma. The writer used an actual experience that had happened at the Instituto Mexicano Norteamericano in Mexico City to construct the case study. The writer enjoyed writing the case study and realized the effectiveness of such an approach to demonstrate how the mentoring process worked. (An expanded and adapted version of this case study has been included in the project.) Videos showing how mentors and new teachers dealt with problems gave further credence to the case study method. The use of case studies in another education course the following year provided additional evidence of the efficacy of the case study method. The writer, therefore, decided that the case study method offered the best opportunity to present actual examples of the effective application of mentoring as described in the project. The case studies were based on the writer's experiences as both an official mentor and a teacher who often gave and received the help and advice of fellow teachers in an informal mentor program. The case studies contained in the project went beyond the theory of the positive aspects of a mentor teacher program because the process of mentoring were described from beginning to end which enabled a comprehensive view to emerge. The inclusion of the case studies was the best way to portray how the cultural differences between Mexicans and North Americans influenced the classroom atmosphere. The case studies not only illustrated the mentoring process, but provided an opportunity of presenting many of the potential cultural misunderstandings confronting a new

American teacher in Mexico. Once the new American teacher accepted the reality of cultural differences and how these conflicts were successfully resolved, the learning process continued not only uninterrupted but enriched.

A second assignment from Dr. Rowley's course resulted in the writing of a paper entitled "Mentoring in an English-speaking School in a Foreign Country" was adapted specifically to Mexico. The paper was expanded, provided with references, and rewritten with additional information regarding Mexican culture. The revised paper together with the case studies became the project.

The writer's perspective throughout the development of the project remained a firm belief that teaching in Mexico was an invaluable experience and that an effective mentoring program made it a real possibility for any American teacher who was interested in a foreign adventure.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

#### Introduction

The project begins by demonstrating the need for mentoring at an English-speaking school in Mexico. The qualification for a mentor and the essential elements of a mentor teacher program are explained. Following is an explanation of the role of a teacher at an American school and a binational center. Next is a description of Mexican students and some of the cultural differences an American teacher will face. The following case studies demonstrate how a mentor teacher can help the American teacher new to Mexico deal with the cultural differences at an English-speaking school in Mexico.

#### **The Need for Mentoring in an English-speaking School in Mexico**

In many schools new teachers are often bewildered by Mexico and have difficulties adjusting to their new roles as teachers. Trying to adapt to life in Mexico and to a new job simultaneously can often prove to be just too much for some new teachers and they're on the first plane home as soon as school is over. Some of them complain that they felt abandoned by the administration and were not helped enough by their fellow teachers who have often forgotten just how difficult it is to be a new teacher and new in Mexico. Obviously a mentoring program will not be able to solve every problem that a new teacher in Mexico must encounter, but psychological support will certainly make the new teacher

feel more at home and provide the means for coping with many of the most common problems (Gold, 1992).

### **Mentor Teacher - Who Is Qualified?**

A mentor teacher in an overseas English-speaking school in Mexico should have a minimum of three to five years experience and a thorough knowledge of the language and culture of Mexico (Odell, 1990). Hopefully, the mentor will have taught a variety of courses at all levels. Since many of these schools have a small staff and often rotate teachers in various courses, this recommendation is not difficult to follow. If it is possible, more experience at a variety of overseas schools is desirable.

Mentors at the beginning "are expected to be loyal and committed in their assistance to others" (Bird, 1992, p.112). Both the teachers and administration should get together in the selection process so the best candidates can be chosen (Enz, 1992). Mentoring requires a helping and open-minded teacher, and in the close proximity between the teachers and administrators at most English-speaking schools in Mexico, the teachers who would make good mentors are easily known. "The mentor needs to be an accepting individual who knows how to communicate genuine feelings of acceptance to the beginning teacher" (Gold, 1992, p. 30).

A new American teacher at an English-speaking school in Mexico should be assigned an American mentor. Before anyone misinterprets the above statement, an explanation is necessary. Remember that a new teacher in Mexico

will probably have some questions and possible problems that relate to the culture of the country that he is in. Based on the writer's experience and that of other fellow Americans, the writer has learned that most of us don't feel comfortable asking questions that we fear may be misinterpreted by a Mexican. The questions and problems regarding the culture of the host country are best dealt with by another American who has undergone, survived, and learned to enjoy teaching and living in the culture of Mexico. "Interestingly enough, a mentor also serves as an anthropologist. In this capacity, the mentor helps the beginning teacher decipher the complex culture of the educational setting in which they both work. The context in which mentoring occurs is a crucial element that has a major impact upon the success of mentoring within educational settings" (Little, 1990; Reiman & Edelfelt, 1990, p.11 ).

Accessibility and time are important. "Mentoring a beginning teacher takes a great deal of time: before, during, and after school hours" (Enz, 1992, p.70). A new teacher might need a brief respite from the school atmosphere and prefer to talk to the mentor over coffee in a nearby restaurant. In Mexico, teachers often get together after school hours to socialize so that these kinds of meetings are often casual and just friendly encounters. However, many new teachers are often far from home and living for the first time in a foreign country, so a mentor should be a friend that the new teacher can approach with a variety of questions and problems. The writer has yet to meet an American who has lived and taught in Mexico for a few years who was not willing to help a new teacher regardless of

whether or not a formal mentoring relationship existed. In fact, since the whole concept of formal mentoring is still relatively unknown in Mexico, new teachers often have to rely on what they can learn from more experienced American teachers in the few minutes before and between classes. "This form of assistance, however, while valuable for beginning teachers is not considered the equivalent of mentoring" (Neal, 1992, p.39). Since no formal mentoring program existed when the writer began teaching at the Instituto Mexicano Norteamericano, the writer overcame problems with the help of friendly teachers who took time out to lend the writer a helping hand. The writer will never forget how much is owed to them. Many of these people are still the writer's friends and will remain so.

Mutual agreement is the last step in beginning the mentoring relationship. Because the mentor and the new teacher will be spending a lot of time together, it's absolutely necessary to place people together who like each other and have something in common. Let's let the men from the big city mentor the new teachers from the big city. Let's not place the young man who just graduated from Bible college in the midwest with an antiwar protester from the sixties because it might be a good experience for both of them. Instead, let's place people together who can best relate to each other. Trust and confidentiality are essential elements of a successful mentoring relationship (Odell, 1990). "Only the assistance function is consonant with a significant mentoring relationship. States quite simply, 'mentors' who engage in evaluations for future employment

decisions are not mentoring" ( Odell, 1990, in Neal p.45). In a final note of caution, it's best that men mentor men and that women mentor women because of the very different societal roles of men and women in Mexico and Latin America. A lot of potential problems will be avoided (Andreski, 1966).

### **What's the Role of a Teacher in an English-speaking School in Mexico?**

A good thing to remember is that an English-speaking school in Mexico is not an American school that was picked up and dropped wholly and completely into a foreign country. Let's just forget that the school manual seriously states that an American curriculum is followed scrupulously and that an American atmosphere prevails and is encouraged. Don't believe it. An American school is an American school in Mexico and the "Mexican" presence is both inside and outside the gates.

During research for a graduate education class at the University of the Americas at the American School in Mexico City, the writer discovered that Americans made up only 30% of the student body and that the school employed American and Mexican teachers. Most of the administration staff, however, were Americans. An American or more aptly an English-speaking or bilingual school in a foreign country is different. Most of the students will be from wealthy families from the States or the host country (Leibman, 1976). This is reflected in the freedom of dress at American schools; at both public and private Mexican schools uniforms are required. The parents are interested in their children's education. Remember, that a family or international company is paying a lot of



money for an education at an American school. Tuition is far beyond the means of the average citizen of the country. Both administrators and teachers are expected to be available to the parents whenever the occasion may arise. Social relations within the school are formal and teachers are required to be team players with the administration as the unquestioned captain.

A binational center, on the other hand, like the Instituto Mexicano Norteamericano is supported by both the Mexican and American governments, and its mission is the furtherance of understanding between the two countries through cultural exchanges. These binational centers, which are found in most foreign countries, are dedicated to teaching English to the citizens of the host country and in the case of the institute in Mexico, Spanish to foreigners. The institute also sponsors a variety of cultural activities that teachers are encouraged, but not obligated to participate in. Tuition is kept to a minimum and most students will be from middle-class or working-class backgrounds.

These two descriptions of English-speaking schools in Mexico are provided here simply to demonstrate the very different types of mentoring situations that would be applicable to each.

### **Mexican Students - Are They Different?**

As has been mentioned previously, many students at an English-speaking school come from wealthy families that attach real importance to education. In Mexico there is a huge class difference between the minority who have a



university degree and the overwhelming majority with an average of four years of primary education.

All but a few students in rural schools dropped out before completing the third grade. On a national average, 54 percent of the children entering primary school never finished. A tiny percentage went on to secondary schools. At the higher echelons, most of the students at the National University were from families with good incomes (Ruiz, 1992 p.470).

A good education is an absolute essential for advancement in a society where the majority are poor, uneducated, and barely able to eke out a living. English is the world's new lingua franca and a person who speaks English well is not laughed at because of his or her accent in Mexico, he or she is greatly admired and will find doors open to them precisely because of their ability to speak, read and write English. All of this means that the students in an English-speaking school are there because their parents are aware of the advantages of knowing English and are willing to pay for it. Most students are already motivated and need little encouragement.

Mentoring in such an environment however, does involve some real challenges because new teachers are often totally unaware of how to deal with students in Mexico. The mentor can explain some of the differences between Mexican students and American students. For example Mexican students are accustomed to a traditional style of teacher-directed class. The students are

called on and they answer. There is more emphasis on memorization than creative thinking (Leibman, 1976). Students are not comfortable asking questions during class and prefer to ask the teacher after class. Attendance is paramount. Whatever the grade average, a student who misses more than the permitted number of absences fails. There is a grade orientation among students that would warm the heart of many American teachers. Diplomas are proudly displayed and wallet-sized miniatures are provided so that a student can always carry a copy of his or her coveted diploma wherever he or she goes. More about the cultural differences between Mexican and American students will be provided in the case studies. A good mentor can help the teacher become aware of just how different his or her new students are and how he or she should deal with them. Obviously, a mentor can provide the new teacher with the necessary cultural awareness and a lot of problems will be avoided.

### **Cultural Awareness**

No matter how much most Americans believe that everyone in the world is just like them, teaching in a foreign country will soon disabuse anyone of that common cultural cliché. People in other countries have a different culture and new teachers usually pass through several stages of culture shock. First, they are really surprised by everything in the new culture. When the surprise wears off, they begin to compare the cultures. If some aspect of the host country culture is in agreement with American culture, it's good and if not, it's bad. Some new teachers never get out of this phase and after having made everyone

miserable with their complaints, they go back to the promised land. Once the comparison and contrast stage has been overcome, there comes a nonjudgemental awareness that there are other cultures in the world and that they are as valid as the American culture. The final stage is the acceptance of the host country's culture and the realization that everyone has the right to do things in their own manner. At the final stage, an appreciation for the host country's culture occurs and the foreigner can accept and reject aspects of the culture based on his or her own personal values. A dedicated mentor teacher who has learned to appreciate the host country's culture can share his or her experience with the new teacher so that they can begin to understand and admire the great cultural diversity in the world that belongs to all human beings. Before embarking on this however, there are certain common problems that all teachers face that mentors can help them with.

Language is a common problem. After minoring or majoring in a foreign language, the new teacher finds that he or she isn't able to communicate well. The mentor can inform the new teacher how different written and colloquial language can be. Above all, the mentor should explain that language the teacher isn't sure about should never be used in the classroom.

An interesting example of this kind of misunderstanding and its unfortunate consequences comes from history:

When General Victoriano Huerta took over the presidency of Mexico in 1913 after the assassination of President Francisco

Madero, President Woodrow Wilson insisted that Mexico hold popular elections. Huerta advised Wilson that elections would be held "proximo." The Spanish word "proximo" is not a cognate of the English "proximate." Proximo does not mean "immediately", "very soon", or "next month" which are the definitions in English dictionaries. In Spanish "proximo" means "soon" or "sometime in the future." When several months passed without a scheduling of public elections, Wilson determined to enforce his interpretation of what he thought Huerta had promised him. He sent the United States Navy into the port of Veracruz. This incident is one which is still resented by some Mexican and other Latin American politicians. (Leibman, 1976, p. x).

Mistakes in Spanish will inevitably happen , however, and the new teacher will have to learn to laugh at them and then avoid them in the future. Every new teacher will soon develop a tolerance for the students' mistakes in English through the awareness of just how difficult mastering a foreign language can be. A mentor can share his or her own experiences and explain that language problems happen to everyone. Personally, the writer believes that a sense of humor is a great help in overcoming language difficulties.

Customs in Mexico are obviously different from American customs. The mentor can help the new teacher understand the students' behavior by explaining some of the customs common to Mexican students. Remember, there is as

much misunderstanding on the Mexican side as on the American side and customs should be explained carefully. If there is one thing that the mentor should communicate to the new teacher, it is that value judgments should never be made regarding different cultures. When inevitably a student asks which culture is better, the teacher must state that there are no good and bad cultures. Cultures, like languages, are just different. Be sure to always dwell on the positive aspects and not the negative when talking about the United States and Mexico. Correcting common misconceptions about America and American culture is an integral part of a teacher's duties at a binational center and through the teaching process, the teacher will learn a lot about the host country's culture and a lot of his or her own confusion will be overcome. Living and teaching in Mexico as in any foreign country can be a wonderful opportunity and the mentor should help the new teacher explore all the cultural richness of the host country.

### **Cindy: Attendance and Grading**

**Storyline:** Cindy feels that it is unfair to fail students who have passed academically because they have exceeded the permitted number of absences

**Major Issue:** School attendance policy

**Other Topics:** Teacher Flexibility  
Teacher Judgment

**Teaching Tips:** Develop an attendance policy  
Explain the attendance policy to the students  
Be ready to defend the policy

**Cultural Insights:** Mexicans are chronically late. The Mexican concept of time is vastly different from that of the United States. Punctuality has a low priority. The inefficiency of the public transportation system is often blamed.

#### **Discussion Questions:**

1. Why does the Institute have such a strict attendance policy?
2. Can such a policy be successful?
3. Do you agree with Cindy? Why or why not?
4. Is Martha's explanation a good one?
5. What would you have done?

## Cindy

Cindy is an ESL teacher at the Mexican North American Institute in Mexico City. She graduated last year from a university in the Midwest with a major in ESL and has come to teach at the institute in order to get some foreign teaching experience which she believes will enhance her resume and be a real plus for admission to graduate school. Her plans are to teach English as a second language at the institute for two years and then return to the U.S. and enter graduate school. She has adapted quite well to Mexico and her job as a teacher. Every now and then she gets homesick; she calls her parents weekly. She has made new friends and is having a good time. Students enjoy her classes and her mentor teacher is favorably impressed with her. After a rather uneventful first semester, it's time to send in her final grades, and she has become quite perplexed regarding the grading system. According to the institute policy, students who have more than seven absences during the grading period should receive an incomplete. The institute bases this policy on the belief that class participation is an essential part of the student's grade because learning a language requires oral practice. Several of her best students have more than the permitted number of absences because they have many tardies. According to the institute policy, three tardies are the equivalent of an absence, and it is this rule which has caused some of her students to exceed the limit of absences.

Cindy doesn't feel the rule is fair and doesn't want to fail students whom she feels are competent to go on to the next course. The deadline for turning in her final grades is fast approaching, so she turns to her mentor for help.

Her mentor, Martha, has worked at the institute for five years as an ESL teacher. Like Cindy she is from the Midwest, and the two have gotten along well. Like everyone else, she has been very impressed with how well Cindy has done as a beginning teacher. Since she has lived in Mexico for five years, she has a good understanding of Mexican culture and how the institute actually operates. Martha has her own policy regarding tardies and their effect on grades. Like Cindy she also struggled with what she considered to be an unfair policy concerning grading. She has arrived at her own conclusion in reference to this grading dilemma which she feels is fair, and she now shares it with Cindy.

First of all, Martha explains to her that she would be justified in enforcing the institute's policy regarding tardies. However, she explains that she does not strictly adhere to it nor does the administration insist on its strict application. In fact, only a few of the institute teachers follow it. Martha says that she found herself in exactly the same quandary at the end of her first semester. During the process of turning in final grades, Martha expressed her misgivings regarding the whole policy of absences and tardies to the teacher who was checking her final grade list. The teacher, who had more than twenty years at the institute, explained her method of dealing with this policy. She felt that a strict adherence to the guidelines was detrimental to everyone involved. She saw no reason why



students who had a passing grade average and had at least average oral work should fail because they had exceeded the number of absences. In fact, he felt it would be an injustice to the student. If the student had actually passed the course, he sent them on to the next course without any qualms. If the administration had complained about the discrepancy, he would have defended his decision by stating that as the teacher he felt justified in passing the student. So far, the administration had never once asked him about his decisions regarding this policy. Several of the other teachers who had been present during the conversation concurred. Everyone agreed that the great majority of students with a lot of absences failed anyway so it wasn't necessary to apply what they all considered to be a very arbitrary policy. Martha agreed with them and considered that a student's academic performance should determine his or her final grade. She has never been called upon to defend her policy before any administrator, but she would gladly do so if asked to. She further confides that she has discussed her grading policy in confidence with an academic director and was told that it was fine to be flexible. The director felt that the teacher should have the final decision. He explained that the policy was never intended to be strictly enforced. The real intention of the policy was to discourage students from missing class or constantly coming late which is a common problem in Mexico City. Martha shares all of this with Cindy who is visibly relieved. She agrees with Martha's grading policy and will follow it. She thanks Martha for helping her out of a real dilemma.

Martha now shares something with Cindy that she feels is very important. Most of the students depend on public transportation that is notoriously bad in Mexico City. Traffic jams are common, and a trip that might normally take ten minutes can sometimes take a half hour. Mexico City's traffic is terrible as anyone who has visited there can attest. The subway system stalls frequently. Most of the time it isn't really the student's fault if he or she arrives late. Teachers experience the same problem of getting to school on time. Being on time is not a great priority for the majority of people in Mexico.

Martha now reveals her personal feelings about her students. She tells her that most Mexicans are poor to an extent that is unknown in the U.S. and that life can be quite hard for them at times. Many families have to make great sacrifices in order for their children to get any kind of education. She wants her students to know that for at least an hour a day in her class that there is someone in a position of authority who is on their side willing to help them as much as possible.

### Dan: Failing a Needy Student

**Storyline:** Dan doesn't want to fail a student because she will lose her scholarship. The student is poor and Dan feels that failing her would be unjust.

**Major Issue:** Failing a student

**Other Topics:** A teacher's personal feelings for a student

A teacher's sense of fairness

The possible effects of a failing grade

**Teaching Tips:** Know the reasons for failing a student

Understand the consequences of passing a student who has not really learned the course material

**Cultural Insights:** Many people in Mexico are desperately poor. Education offers them the possibility of escaping poverty, and people are willing to make great sacrifices in order to attain it.

**Discussion Questions:**

1. Why doesn't Dan want to fail the student?
2. Why does Dan feel this way?
3. Do you agree with Paul's reasoning? Why or why not?
4. Will failing help the student?
5. What would you have done?

### **Dan: Failing a Needy Student**

Dan has just completed his first semester of teaching at the Instituto Mexicano Norteamericano in Mexico City. He had previously taught ESL for two years in Kenya as a Peace Corps volunteer. Africa was a wonderful experience for him. He learned Swahili and is a serious student of native African art. When his two years were up, he went back to the United States, but after a few months in his native California, he decided he decided that he wanted to explore Latin America and thought that the best place to start would be Mexico. He plans to stay at least two years. Dan has a sharing personality, and he deeply cares for the welfare of his students. He never likes to fail anyone, but he has always followed the school's policy regarding grade averages. Now he is troubled by a particular student's final grade average because the girl is the daughter of a woman who works in the print shop at school, and he knows the family is rather poor. If he fails the student, she will lose her full scholarship for one semester and will only get it back if she passes the same course which she will have to pay for next semester. Dan is quite worried about her, so he turns to his mentor for help.

Paul, Dan's mentor has enjoyed working with him from the beginning. Like Dan, Paul has overseas teaching experience. He worked in Guatemala and learned a lot about Mayan culture. He has worked at the institute for over four years. Paul has been fascinated by Dan's stories about Africa and Dan has felt the same interest in Paul's life in Guatemala. Paul admires Dan's dedication to

his profession, but he has cautioned him not to take the job too seriously . Dan listens to his mentor, but so far he has been working as zealously as ever and shows no signs of giving himself a rest. Paul almost never sees Dan in the teachers' room because Dan always stays after class to help any student who needs it. While admiring his commitment to his students, Paul realizes that Dan is pushing himself too hard. He jokes with Dan that he won't be able to get out of bed some morning because he'll just be too exhausted to move. Dan listens to his mentor, but believes it's his duty to do the best job possible even if it means never going to the teachers' room, missing lunch, observing other classes when he has time, and staying in the library after school to help students. Paul isn't surprised that Dan is upset with the idea of failing a student who will lose her scholarship as a result. Of course, Paul sees that Dan is truly agonizing over this and desperately needs some advice. He feels he can help if Dan will let him.

Feeling obligated to explain the school's grading policy to Dan, he tells him again what the rules are, and he gets the response that he had expected from Dan. Dan insists that grading should be flexible. No teacher should be bound by rules that don't take into account the student's needs and the deleterious effects that a failing grade could have on a student. He has seen the poverty in Mexico and wants to help alleviate it. Dan finally winds down after about five minutes and asks for his mentor's opinion.

Paul replies that he agrees with everything that Dan has said. There are definitely times to bend the rules, but that this is not one of them. Knowing

beforehand what Dan's answer will be, he still asks him if he has carefully checked the student's final exam with the idea of finding a few more points. Answering as expected, Dan says that he has checked it several times and that the student is four points away from passing. Since the school requires a minimum of eighty percent for English courses, Dan feels that four points aren't all that much. Paul asks to see the exam and points out that the student has made several serious grammatical errors. It isn't just a question of four points. The student has obviously not learned the grammar that she needs to know in order to be ready to go on to the next course. Dan sadly agrees and says reluctantly that if he has to fail her, he will. He hates, however, to think about the hardship he'll cause.

Now Paul carefully explains why he would hurt the student more if he passed her. He has seen many times what happens when a teacher, out of misplaced kindness, passes someone who really failed. She would go on to the next course and fail because what she really needed was in the previous course. She might fail several times and lose all possibility of another scholarship. In fact, she would probably be reexamined after several successive failures and placed back in the same course that she's just failed. All of this would cost her more time and money needlessly. If she fails now, she'll have an excellent chance of getting a thorough knowledge of what she presently lacks by repeating the course. With all probability, she'll be one of the best students in the class and will probably acquire all the skills necessary for success in the next course. Paul

assures Dan that what appears at present to be a favor would really be an injustice to the student.

After thinking it over, Dan accepts Paul's reasoning. He explains to Paul that he wants to help his students as much as possible. He realizes that in this case he would actually be hurting the student by sending her to a course that she wasn't ready for.

### Dan: Questions After Class

- Storyline:** Nobody wants to ask Dan questions during class. His students prefer to ask him after class, and Dan is so busy answering questions that he has no time to do anything else.
- Major Issue:** Students won't ask questions during class
- Other Topics:** Different countries have different styles of teaching  
Students approach learning differently  
The role of the teacher in the classroom
- Teaching Tips:** Inform students about the class structure beforehand  
Explain the American style of classroom teaching to students  
Encourage students to participate in class
- Cultural Insights:** Mexican students prefer to ask the teacher questions after and not during class because Mexican teachers normally devote class time to lecturing. The relationships between the teacher and the student is very formal.
- Discussion Questions:**
1. What is your opinion of the formal style Mexican teaching?
  2. How would you describe the American classroom?
  3. What are the strengths and weaknesses of each system?
  4. Should a teacher impose his own culture in the classroom?
  5. What should Dan do?



### **Dan: Questions After Class**

Paul is getting ready to go home when Dan walks into the teachers' room. He asks Paul if he could ask him a few questions. Paul, as a good mentor, lets Dan know he's always ready to talk. Dan starts to excuse himself for bothering Paul when he's obviously on his way home, but Paul confides that he's in no great hurry and would like to know what's on Dan's mind. They decide to go to a quiet restaurant nearby for a cup of coffee.

Dan says he's a little disappointed with his students. He isn't having any discipline problems at all; in fact, the silence is deafening. After every explanation, he never fails to ask if his students have any questions, and all he gets are pleasant smiles in a quiet classroom. Since no one has any questions, he then will ask if anyone has a doubt about the material he has just gone over. He admits that there are inevitably a few students who always sit in the front rows that will ask a few simple questions that they already know the answers to. Appreciating their desire to learn English, he gladly answers their questions and inquires again whether or not anyone would like him to clarify any aspect of the lesson. Only rarely does anybody venture a question. Being a great believer in oral language exercises, he selects a few students at random and asks them the language structure of the lesson by using examples that are not in the book. After a few seconds of embarrassed silence, the students often admit that they don't exactly understand how to use the language structure correctly. Would he mind going over the examples in the lesson again? After more examples

accompanied by explanations, the students are able to perform the language exercise. What really bothers him is that no one will ask him any questions during class. Without calling on them directly before the language exercise, he never knows for sure if the students have actually understood the material, and they have no intention of letting him know unless he asks them a direct question. He can't understand why nobody will just ask him to explain whatever it was that they didn't understand. The real surprise comes when class is over, and Dan needs to go to his locker in the teachers' room to get another book or just sit down for a few minutes. As soon as the bell rings, excited students surround his desk holding open books and asking questions at the same time. Since Dan is the kind of teacher who believes that a student should never leave a class with an unanswered question, he dutifully clears up any doubts his students might have. Sometimes he loses his whole class break answering questions and giving explanations. His colleagues have often observed him running out of his class with an expression of wide-eyed terror because the bell for his next class has rung, and he can't stand the thought of arriving to a class a minute late. Lately, however, even he is getting tired of missing his breaks and wants to enjoy a well-deserved rest between classes. He hasn't seen any of the other teachers staying after class, and he is curious to know why everyone else seems to be able to teach a class and get out on time. He wants to know why he can't accomplish what other teachers do in the same amount of time. He even admits that he's

getting tired of everyone asking questions after class instead of during class. He's frustrated and wants to know what he can do to solve his problem.

Paul smiles and tells Dan that he understands the problem perfectly. Every foreign language teacher has had the same experience in Mexico. He explains that it is the custom in Mexico for students to ask the teacher questions after class. He isn't sure why students won't ask questions during class, but he assures him that most Mexican students are reluctant to do so. Mexican educators have told him that classes in the traditional style of Mexican education are teacher-centered, and students are not supposed to interrupt the teacher's lecture. If a student wishes to ask a question, he or she should be polite and respectful by waiting to ask the teacher at the end of the lecture when class is over. The students are behaving correctly according to their culture.

Paul now explains his language teaching philosophy. He believes that if he teaches a language without teaching his students something about the culture that is intrinsically tied to that language it would not be effective as the students will not know how and when to use the language correctly. Paul reminds Dan that they are teaching English at the Mexican North American Institute of Cultural Relations. The express purpose of the school is the improvement of relations between the United States and Mexico through the teaching of English to Mexicans and Spanish to Americans as well as other cultural exchanges. Since they're teaching English at a binational center, it is imperative that they explain the culture that is part of the language. Explaining American culture is an integral

part of their job, and not doing so would be unfair to the students. In fact, most students are quite eager to learn about American culture, and Paul says that this brings them back to the subject at hand.

Paul tells Dan that he should carefully explain to his students that he will be conducting his class in the exact same manner as he would in the United States. Since he wants his students to have a chance to experience an American-style classroom with an American teacher, Dan should tell his students that he will teach English and some things about American culture too. He reminds them that a language and the way it is used can reveal a lot about the culture of the country where it is spoken. He now gets to the point and explains to them that the class is for their benefit and that it is his job to answer their questions. In fact, he will never refuse to answer any questions about English. If he doesn't have the answer during class, he will look up the information and tell them at the beginning of the next class. However, in American classrooms students are expected to ask questions during class not after it. He tells them that from now on he'll be leaving immediately after class and that the time for questions is in class. He assures his students that as an American teacher he likes having an informal class where everyone feels free to participate. He tells them that he is their teacher and that he is there to help them. It is their class, not his. He is willing to explain anything he can and to clear up any doubts that they might have. However, he expects them to do that during the class. Conducting the class in

this manner will enable all the other students to benefit from his explanations because he is sure that many of them will have the same questions and doubts.

Dan tells Paul that he had no idea that his students were simply following the proper procedure for asking questions in a Mexican classroom. He likes the idea of explaining American customs and culture in class together with the lessons. He hopes that his students will reciprocate by teaching him more about Spanish and Mexico. He is relieved to know that Paul and other teachers had the same problem and that solving it was not difficult.

Before Dan leaves, however, Paul adds some words of caution. When discussing the cultural differences between the United States and Mexico, students will inevitably ask the teacher which country is better. The teacher must always answer that neither culture is better than the other. They are just different. Paul assures Dan that by this approach to cultural differences he will avoid hurting anyone's feelings or getting into unnecessary arguments.

## Dan: Language and Culture

- Storyline:** Dan admires Indian cultures in Mexico. He feels that his students should share his enthusiasm and doesn't understand why they don't.
- Major Issue:** The racial and cultural complexity of Mexico
- Other Topics:** The place of the Indians in Mexico  
How Mexicans think of themselves  
The different cultures in Mexico
- Teaching Tips:** Find out about the sensitive topics and avoid them  
Accept the culture of the country  
Learn everything possible about the students' culture
- Cultural Insights:** Being an Indian in Mexico is not a matter of blood as in the United States but a matter of culture. The dominant mestizo society in Mexico considers Indian culture to be inferior. The word Indian is often used disparagingly in Mexico to describe someone or something inferior.
- Discussion Questions:**
1. How do Mexican mestizos regard the Indians?
  2. How does this attitude differ from the American one?
  3. How can a new teacher learn more about Mexican culture?
  4. Why should sensitive cultural issues be avoided?
  5. What do you think of the Mexican concept of the Indian?

### **Dan: Language and Culture**

A few days after the beginning of the next semester, Dan rushes into the teachers' room to see Paul. He is visibly upset and asks to talk to Paul as soon as possible. Dan says that he unwittingly offended his grammar class, but isn't quite sure what happened. Paul agrees to meet him over a cup of coffee in the teachers' room after school is over. Dan tells Paul that he must have done something terrible without meaning to. Paul asks him to wait and wonders what Dan could be so perturbed about.

A few minutes into the conversation, the nature of the problem is revealed. Dan finished class a few minutes early, and his students were eager to learn more about him, so they asked him a few questions about his personal interests. Dan is a fervent believer in being open with his students and sees himself as a kind of one-man cultural ambassador and gladly shares his new found enthusiasm for Mexican culture, especially Mexico's indigenous past. He becomes quite eloquent in his praise for the great accomplishments of the Aztecs. Following his impassioned speech, he tells his students that he knows they must be proud of their Indian past. One of the students asks him why they should be proud of a people that practiced human sacrifice. Dan replies that all past societies had customs that aren't acceptable today. The student agrees and says that the Aztec civilization may have had its glorious moments, but that is ceased to exist long ago. Dan wonders how he can so easily place the Aztecs in the past. After all, he tells his students that they all have Indian blood and must be proud of it. A



heavy silence now hangs over the classroom. No one speaks, and Dan looks out over a classroom of sullen and glaring faces. When the bell rings in a few seconds, the students march out without the customary good-bye. Dan admits that he has no idea of what he has done wrong.

Paul begins by stating that Dan has touched upon one of the most sensitive areas of the Mexican psyche. Being called an Indian in Mexico is considered to be a grave insult. The majority of the people who make up modern Mexican society undoubtedly have features that reveal at least some trace of Indian ancestry. Most Mexicans are mestizos which mean they have both European and Indian ancestry. However, the fact of their Indian ancestry is not to be mentioned. The word Indian has a negative connotation in Mexico. When Dan referred to his students' Indian blood, he was unknowingly offending them. Paul explains that unlike the United States where being an Indian is a question of having Indian ancestry, being an Indian in Mexico is a cultural matter. Any Mexican, no matter what his degree of Indian blood, is not an Indian if he lives in accordance with the dominant culture of Mexican society. Being an Indian in Mexico means identifying completely with the Indian culture. In modern Mexican society, a person decides what cultural category he or she belongs to. The whole matter has nothing to do with ancestry or blood, but everything to do with culture. Since the Mexicans who identify as Indians are at the very bottom of Mexican society, few Mexicans are willing to call themselves Indians. Paul tells Dan that race is a very sensitive issue in Mexico and that he should just avoid the



topic in the future. Mexicans want to be referred to as Mexicans and not by any other terms. He recommends that Dan read The Labyrinth of Solitude by Octavio Paz to gain an understanding of how Mexicans themselves feel about their mixed ancestry. Paul explains to Dan that race is a very complicated subject in Mexico, and it takes a long time before any foreigner can obtain much of an understanding of how Mexicans feel about themselves regarding their ancestry.

Dan, of course, is rather confused about the whole thing. Paul explains that Dan just hasn't had enough time to understand all of the important elements of Mexican society. He asks Dan to imagine what it must be like to be a foreigner in the United States trying to understand American society in just a few months. Paul assures Dan that he is in the same situation in Mexico. In ignorance foreigners sometimes make mistakes and unintentionally offend the people of the host country. He promises Dan that, like everyone else, he'll learn how to live successfully and have a good time in Mexico.

Dan still wants to know what he should say to his students. Paul says that it would be best not to say anything because by the next class his students will have forgotten all about it.

### **Bob: Mission Impossible**

**Storyline:** Bob consistently rejects any relationship with his mentor by simply ignoring him. He doesn't show up for meetings and offers no excuses. Bob is headed for trouble, and the mentor is unable to reach him.

**Major Issue:** Rejecting an obligatory mentoring relationship

**Other Topics:** The consequences of ignoring the mentor

The negative attitude of a new teacher

A teacher who feels that no help is necessary

**Teaching Tips:** Be aware that some teachers reject mentoring

Find ways to deal with reluctant teachers

Know when to go to the administration for help

**Cultural Insights:** Some incompetent American teachers believe they can find a refuge in Mexico, but Mexicans are also adept at recognizing incompetence, so they don't last long. Displaying cultural arrogance is a sure way of getting into trouble.

#### **Discussion Questions:**

1. What was Bob's attitude towards his mentor?
2. How can a teacher like Bob effect the school?
3. Could Paul have done anything to change Bob's attitude?
4. Should Paul have gone to the administration?
5. What would you have done?

### **Bob: Mission Impossible**

The writer's belief is that a good mentor can help almost any new teacher make the necessary adjustments that lead to a successful teaching career. The mentor must always be there to help, and new teachers usually want all the help they can get. However, at times a new teacher may feel that he or she must make a difficult decision alone. In this case a mentor's job is to simply listen and point out some of the alternative solutions and their consequences that the new teacher may not have thought of. Nevertheless, the mentor makes it clear to the new teacher that it is not the role of the mentor to decide what is best for a particularly complicated situation. A good mentor does not want to impose a solution on any conflict that a new teacher is struggling with. The mentor can only share his experience, if any, with the specific problem at hand. If even this might be considered meddlesome, the mentor just offers support for whatever solution the new teacher finally decides on while indicating a sincere willingness to get together and talk if the new teacher should want to. Frequently a new teacher may not even be looking for a solution. In fact, the problem may already have been resolved, and the new teacher just needs a friend who will listen without commenting or passing judgment. Most teachers like to talk and sometimes the hardest part of being a mentor is keeping quiet and listening. The above situations are rather common ones that the mentor must handle using good judgment and common sense.

However, there are some situations that even the best mentor can have a difficult time dealing with. Every now and then a new teacher will appear who thinks he doesn't need anyone's help and who views a mentor as someone who might be necessary for the less fortunate beginning teachers, but certainly not in his case. This new teacher resents any attempt on the part of the mentor to offer advice or even support. There are exceptional cases of new teachers who actually need very little help from a mentor. Surprisingly, these new teachers are exactly the ones who most eagerly seek the guidance and help of their mentors. The new teacher who already knows everything and is not at all shy about sharing this belief is the most troublesome for a mentor.

A case of this type that occurred several years ago at the Instituto Mexicano Norteamericano in Mexico City shows that a mentor, no matter how good, is not always successful. Paul, who was introduced in a previous case as Dan's mentor, was assigned to be Bob's mentor. Having been informed that Bob was an experienced teacher at a public university in Mexico City, Paul was looking forward to meeting him. Their initial meeting went well and Paul thought that Bob would be a welcome addition to the teaching staff. Bob was relaxed and wasn't at all concerned about starting a new job. Paul thought that Bob's confidence would be helpful both in and out of the classroom.

During his first observation of one of Bob's classes, Paul noticed that Bob was just as relaxed in class as he had been during their first conversation. Actually, Bob went through the entire class without ever showing any indication of

interest or enthusiasm in either the subject matter or the class with the notable exception of pointing out two very attractive women in the classroom to Paul and asking him whether or not Paul thought they were as pretty as he did. Paul gently told him that he'd rather know about how Bob liked teaching the whole class. Bob shrugged his shoulders and turned away. Paul's reaction had obviously been a big disappointment to Bob.

Knowing that any teacher can have a bad day, Paul hoped that had been exactly what had happened to Bob. Paul had observed Bob's last class of the day and decided that he had been tired and maybe just a little nervous with his mentor being in the classroom.

After having observed several of Bob's other classes in which his behavior had been more or less the same as the first observation, Paul suggested getting together, and they agreed to meet the next day for a talk. Wanting to be diplomatic, Paul ruminated over how he could let Bob know that teachers were expected to be enthusiastic about teaching and to be an active participant in the class. The students needed to interact with the teacher, and Bob had dominated the class by lecturing and writing on the blackboard the entire class.

Paul needn't have worried about offending anyone because Bob never showed up for the meeting. In fact, after having agreed subsequently to two other meetings with Paul that he didn't bother to attend or even offer to make excuses for not having attended, Paul reluctantly went to see the academic director for advice about Bob. Having been a teacher for many years before

becoming an administrator, Paul thought that she would be sympathetic to his plight. She was very understanding because she had already received several complaints from students about Bob's grading of the mid-term exams. Bob hadn't followed the proper grading procedure, and she wanted Paul to meet with him to go over the exams. Paul sheepishly confessed that he hadn't been able to get Bob to show up for three separate meetings he had scheduled. She told him laughingly that he hadn't come to the meeting she had requested with him to talk about the exams either, and she had hoped that Paul had had better luck. She said that Paul shouldn't worry and that she would schedule another meeting with Bob just out of curiosity see whether or not he would even bother to show up. Meanwhile, Paul should continue to observe Bob's classes just to see if he could find out what was wrong.

After three more observations in which Bob showed that neither his attitude nor teaching had improved, Paul could only wonder what was going on with Bob. During the last observation, Bob had asked Paul if he thought his students would be interested in seeing a movie video. It seems that Bob sometimes worked as an extra in American films made in Mexico, and he had painstakingly compiled all of his brief appearances onto one video cassette that he thought his students might enjoy. Showing the first flicker of enthusiasm in the classroom, he told Paul that he had once appeared for a few seconds in a Rambo film. He wondered if Paul thought he could get permission from the administration to show the cassette in the last class instead of reviewing for the

final exam. After overcoming his initial amazement, Paul told him that the students needed a final review and that the administration would take a very dim view of even the suggestion of a request to show a video that had nothing to do with the subject matter of the class. Bob was disappointed, but did agree that a review for the exam would be a good idea. Paul came to the last class before the final exam and actually intervened and taught part of the class just to make sure the students got their review.

Needless to say, Bob was not asked to come back to the institute after his first semester. A year or so later news came to the institute that Bob had been deported to the United States. It seems that Bob had returned to the state university where he had taught before coming to the institute. In order to create a real American atmosphere in the classroom, Bob had his Mexican students recite the Pledge of Allegiance to the American flag. Students complained, and Bob was immediately deported. No one at the institute was surprised or saddened by the news. In fact, Paul and everyone else at the institute could only laugh in astonishment at Bob's predictable fate.

Admittedly, Bob's case is unusual to say the least. However, it is included in this study to demonstrate that a mentor, no matter how good and dedicated, may not be able to help or even reach every new teacher no matter how hard he tries.

## Brian: Problems at Home

- Storyline:** Brian feels that his teaching will suffer because of his problems at home. He feels that his wife, Maria, is excluding him from the family.
- Major Issue:** How cultural conflict outside of school can be deleterious to a teacher's performance
- Other Topics:** The potential problems of cross-cultural marriages  
Adjusting to a new culture  
Escaping personal problems through work
- Teaching Tips:** Be aware of problems a teacher new to Mexico might have  
Be ready to listen  
Share your experiences with the new teacher
- Cultural Insights:** Marriages between Mexicans and Americans require a willingness to understand and accept both cultures.
- Discussion Questions:**
1. Why is Brian unhappy?
  2. How is Brian's work being effected?
  3. What could happen to Brian and Maria's marriage?
  4. What are the challenges of a marriage between a Mexican and an American?
  5. What do you think of Keith's approach to the problem?



### **Brian: Problems at Home**

Brian is a new teacher at the Instituto Mexicano Norteamericano in Mexico City, Mexico. The institute, which is jointly sponsored by the Mexican and American governments, is dedicated to the improvement of relations between both countries through the teaching of English and Spanish. Brian, whose wife is Mexican, has always wanted to live and work in Mexico to find out more about his wife's culture and hopefully to improve their marriage. Since their marriage five years ago when both had just graduated from school with bachelor's degrees, Brian's wife, Maria, has always expressed an interest in returning to Mexico.

Because Brian met Maria when they were both attending the same school in New York and since Maria's English was excellent, Brian had always thought of her as an American and had tended to ignore her culture since they had always lived together in the United States. Brian has a minor in Spanish and can get along well enough to be understood, but he prefers to converse in English since Maria's English is so much better than his Spanish. At first this didn't make any difference to Maria because she had always maintained a close circle of Spanish-speaking friends. When their first child, a daughter, was born, Maria thought that she should speak to her in Spanish so that she would be bilingual and capable of speaking to Maria's family in Mexico. Brian speaks to his daughter in English and everyone seems to be happy.

Even though Maria has her degree in elementary education, she decided to stay home with their daughter, Carmen, until she was old enough to go to school. This decision was mutually agreed to and everyone is getting along fine. Brian, however, who has been teaching high school English since he graduated, has become increasingly unhappy at work. He complains about doing paperwork instead of teaching. His initial enthusiasm has waned, and his students have been getting on his nerves too. He doesn't feel he's accomplishing very much. Since he's complaining about his job all of the time, Maria suggests that he look for a job in Mexico. Maria tells him that the atmosphere would be better for teachers and that everyone could use a change. Maria calls her family and lets them know what she and Brian are thinking about. Her family is enthusiastic, and, within a few weeks, they've found Brian a job at the Mexican North American Institute. If the personal interview goes well, Brian has got a job teaching English as a second language. Brian flies down for the interview and is hired for the next semester. He gladly resigns and soon he and his family are in Mexico City. Within a month Brian is teaching, and everybody seems happy.

Keith has been assigned to be Brian's mentor teacher at the institute. Like Brian, Keith has a Mexican wife and a nine-year-old son. He has been a teacher at the institute for eleven years and is still enthusiastic about his job. He and Brian get along well at school, and soon they are getting together socially. Brian likes his new job. The students are disciplined and eager to learn. He doesn't have much paperwork to do. Mexico seems to agree with Brian. Soon, however,

during their weekly meetings to discuss Brian's progress after the first six months, Keith notices a change in him. Brian seems to be spending an inordinate amount of time at school and is reluctant to go home. Brian's classes are still excellent, his students like him, and he's popular with the other teachers. Keith senses the change, and he decides to find out what's bothering Brian. Keith knows something is wrong.

Brian at first denies that there is anything wrong. He asks if his classes are okay. He then wants to know if there have been any student complaints. Finally, he asks if there is a problem with any of his fellow teachers. Keith patiently tells him that there haven't been any problems in any of these areas. Keith wants to know if he's satisfied with him as his mentor. Brian is surprised at the question. He says that Keith's advice has been excellent, and he appreciates his friendship. Keith decides to push further and asks what's really upsetting Brian. At this point, Brian breaks down and says that he is unhappy and admits that he's having problems at home. Maria has become a "real" Mexican since they got here. She's been at her parents' house almost everyday. If she's not at their home, she and Carmen are talking to her mother for what seems like hours on the phone. Even Maria says she doesn't have much to do. Brian admits that her family has helped them a lot and that he still likes his in-laws, but he's feeling more and more like an outsider. He says that Maria isn't even aware of how he feels. He'd like to explain his feelings to his wife, but he's afraid she might misinterpret what he'd have to say as criticism of her and her family. He has

been sublimating all of his anger and energy into his classes and feels that by becoming an excellent teacher he can somehow find the social acceptance at school that he believes he's being denied at home. He confesses that his very good performance at school has begun to become an ordeal and that he's rapidly reaching the point of both mental and physical exhaustion. He believes that if he doesn't get things straightened out at home with Maria very soon, his marriage could be in serious trouble. He wants to keep his job performance and his life at home separate, but he doesn't know how much longer he can. Since his working papers are a result of his marriage, he feels that he is trapped. He wants to resolve his problems at home before his teaching suffers. He likes teaching in Mexico a lot and doesn't want to leave. He asks Keith, his mentor, what he should do.

Keith is quite familiar with the problems that Brian is dealing with. In fact, he has heard the same complaint from other teachers married to Mexican women and assures Brian that what he's going through is quite common. He has even had a similar experience. Mexican women are especially close to their families. Independence is not a virtue in Mexican culture. Maria's attachment to her family does not mean that she is excluding Brian. He explains to Brian that Maria is acting like a "real" Mexican because that is what she is. Undoubtedly Maria had to adapt to American culture while living in the United States, and now Brian is the foreigner who will have to accept Mexican culture. Since Brian says he likes his in-laws, Keith encourages him to get to know them better. The last

thing Brian should feel like is an outsider. Most of all, Brian should tell Maria that he wants to learn more about her culture and customs. Like most Americans, Mexicans are also enthusiastic when it comes to talking about their country. By living in the country and being a member of a Mexican family, Brian has a great opportunity to learn things about Mexico that most people would never have the chance to do. Since Brian likes living in Mexico, he should find out more about the country and its people. Mexico has a rich and varied culture that has fascinated many foreigners just like Brian.

Now Keith talks about Brian's excellent teaching performance, but advises him to go home after class. He needs to relax and spend time with his family. Because Maria is completely bilingual and says she doesn't have much to do, she might welcome the chance to help him with his paperwork and be able to give him some good ideas to use in class. After all, she's a teacher too. In fact, Maria can be a real help to Brian and all he has to do is ask her. Not only does his job performance not have to suffer, it can be enhanced with Maria's help. Above all, he must share his feelings with her in a positive way. He can find out from her what it was like adjusting to American culture.

In conclusion, Keith tells Brian that what he's going through is culture shock and with willingness and openness, he can turn what appears to be a problem into a positive learning experience. Sooner or later, every foreign teacher has to go through a rough period known as culture shock. Keith assures Brian of his support and his readiness to help him by explaining how he learned to

teach and live successfully in a new country and culture and why he believes that it was worth the effort. Keith has the confidence that comes from experience.

## Chapter V

### Summary, Conclusion, and Recommendations

Teaching at an English-speaking school in Mexico offers a new American teacher a once-in-a-lifetime adventure in education and learning. These case studies provide actual examples of the many and varied situations that an American teacher in Mexico must deal with and how an experienced mentor can help the new American teacher to overcome any difficulties which might arise. The problems presented in the case studies are common and are often repeated during each school year. By being aware of the areas of potential conflict, the new American teacher can avoid unnecessary problems. Not every kind of conflict, however, can be avoided and when problems that result from cultural misunderstanding do arise, the mentor can offer support and explain why the students are behaving in a particular manner, and how these problems can be understood and resolved. Through the case studies the writer has illustrated how challenging and rewarding the role of a mentor teacher in Mexico can be. A mentor not only helps a new American teacher to share his or her own knowledge and culture with the students, and points out how the students can also teach their teacher many of the fascinating aspects of their language, lives, and culture. Mentoring in an English-speaking school in Mexico is a great learning experience for everyone involved and a lot of fun too.

## Conclusion

Mentoring American teachers new to Mexico offers a lot of challenges. The new teacher has often come to the host country just to get some experience that will provide the prerequisite to teaching in an English as a second language program in the United States. Surprisingly some have little interest in learning about the host country. Fortunately, these teachers are in the minority since most Americans who want to teach in a foreign country already have an interest in other cultures. However, adjusting to a new country's culture and language is a difficult challenge for anyone. If the new teacher doesn't have any teaching experience in the U.S., the mentor is facing the challenging tasks of helping the new teacher improve teaching skills along with the difficulties of adjusting to a new country. Dealing with the problems of culture shock often consumes as much time as talking about teaching. The fact that culture shock can enter the classroom complicates matters, and at times the problems of both can become so intertwined that they become indistinguishable.

An experienced mentor will enable the new teacher to understand the problems that seem overwhelming can not only be overcome but that having experienced them will increase teaching skills and provide new teaching opportunities for professional development. Most English-speaking schools in foreign countries have a "camp mentality" and the teachers form friendships and



a lot of their social life will center around the school and their fellow teachers. These teachers are always ready and happily willing to extend friendship to the new teacher and include new teachers in their social activities. A lot of social interaction among American teachers in Mexico goes on and the new teacher will have an official mentor and many other unofficial mentors that are always there to help.

### **Recommendations**

Of course, a mentor teacher can encounter some special problems in an English-speaking school in Mexico. Many teachers and administrators have little or no idea what a mentor teacher does. This difficulty can be overcome through positive information about mentoring. A good solution to this kind of problem would be to offer an inservice training period dedicated to explaining how a mentor teacher program could benefit the teachers, administration, and most of all the students. Most of the obstacles that confront the implementation of a mentor program will be overcome through information that explains how and why such a program would be beneficial to everyone.

Remember that an English-speaking school in Mexico can provide teachers with new opportunities for growth. Most schools are eager to implement programs that have been found to produce positive results and that come from the United States. Despite all the problems that the American educational

system is undergoing, American education is still widely admired around the world. When teachers and administrators in Mexico learn that mentoring has been accepted and widely adopted in the American school system, its reception will be positive. English-speaking schools in Mexico want to maintain the best system possible and are eager to embrace new ideas like mentoring. The mentor should encourage the new teacher to try out many of the new ideas that are popular in the American classroom. Teachers participating in the design and implementation of the mentor teacher program must have the freedom to develop the program best suited to the needs of Mexico and its teachers. If all the above steps are followed, the entire school will enjoy the benefits of an effective mentor teacher program.

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