

## Tortillas and Salt: Lessons across North America

By: [Cathryne L. Schmitz](#)

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### **Abstract:**

This is my story about educating social work students (and faculty) about poverty and privilege in the first and third worlds. The story is one of shared learning. Through this story, an intertwining of many stories, I share the experiences of students and faculty as we traveled to Mexico to learn about poverty, interconnection, and interdependence across the Americas. The story is also about the value of intense immersion experiences in maximizing student growth. The lessons provide a frame for expanding our ability to educate social work professionals on the impact of growing poverty, structural inequalities, and growing global interdependence.

### **Article:**

In August 1995, I arrived in Mexico at the Cuernavaca Center for Intercultural Dialog on Development (CCIDD) with a class of graduate social work students from a mid-sized private university. Unsure what to expect, I was anxious and excited about the opportunity to experience the poverty of Mexico and view the impact United States (U.S.) economic policies have on the lives of the most vulnerable of Mexico. I was hopeful that I could help create a learning environment where the students could grasp the complexities of the issues. What I experienced surpassed all my expectations. Together with the students, I witnessed many faces of poverty, its causes, and its consequences.

The Center, located 50 miles south of Mexico City, offered an ideal setting for a two-week immersion course combining experiential and academic learning. We were joined in that experience by students and faculty from Montreal, Quebec. Together, we were women and men of many races (black, white, Asian, Hispanic), ages (18 years to 50 years), and classes (middle and working). We were part of a truly North American experience with teachers and learners from Latin America, Canada, and the U.S. as well as Africa, Europe, and Asia.

The curriculum (Schmitz, 1997) was tightly structured. Participation, daily reflective journaling, and discussion were required. Social work faculty and the CCIDD program staff developed a schedule flowing between experience, lecture, and discussion. Before the experience, I purposely provided little context so the students were immediately immersed in their own responses and feelings. Readings were carefully chosen to provide a grounding in culture, history, U.S.-Mexican relations, and economics. Short stories familiarized the participants with the culture on a more feeling level. The class met once before the trip to discuss the readings and again after the trip to reflect on issues of re-entry.

This story is an inter-weaving of my experience with family stories and student learning. Much of the experience was a shared one. Just as the learning shifted between the collective and the individual, the heart and the mind, the present and the past, so does the story. Students and faculty participated in experiential learning supported by discussion and lecture on liberation theology, the role of the Church, economics, history, human rights, and empowerment. The timing of the experiences, educational sessions, and discussion-reflection provided students with a new awareness of issues. The intensity of the experiences opened students to the importance of the knowledge. Without the intensity, it is difficult to shift to such a dramatically new level of

understanding.

The students provided their own context. Many were young and middle class with limited life and professional experience. Referred by prior students, they came expecting a life changing process. While most were excited, some were also fearful, anxious, and unsure. Most were raised in the Midwest, a few in the East. One brought the depth of international citizenship. Although some had experienced life traumas, only Kenya, born and raised outside the U.S., had experienced the naked poverty viewed through our CCIDD experience.

In two weeks, students learned what could have taken years. Most had little experience of the economic, social, and political conditions of Mexico. I sat with the students on dirt floors as individuals and families told of life amongst poverty, disease, death, and oppression. I watched as students struggled with guilt trying to absorb all that was seen, heard, felt, and thought. I struggled with them against being overwhelmed. Daily time for quiet reflection and journaling, guided group reflection, and discussion helped translate their experiences into learning.

As Kenesha states, "Before going to Mexico . . . I held some of the stereotypes that are common in the U.S. I did not have too much exposure to Mexico. . . [although] our text helped." Rhonda adds, "This was not only an educational excursion for me, but a life changing one." "In the past I thought of Mexico as a far away country and I had no part in their community. By taking this class, I wanted to see first hand how this other community lived. What I really learned was that community among the poor in Mexico very much involves me as an individual."

### **Immersion**

The orientation to the city, the country, and the educational process on day one is transitional but cannot prepare us for the tender, touching, and powerful experiences we begin just two days into the class. People with little to share open their homes and their lives to us. As we enter homes to listen to families, I am aware of the mutuality of the learning. My role as participant and educator leaves me in the position of participant observer. The duality of being outside the process and immersed in the process at the same time come together at the intersection between the personal and the political. I watch and listen to the students, CCIDD staff, and families noting not only student learning but also families watching, processing, and sharing. I constantly monitor student response as a basis for facilitating discussion and reflection. I also watch and feel the families, imagining the lessons they are taking away. My personal reflective journey—passionate, personal, warm-hearted, and intense—can be expressed only through my poetry, art, and stories.

Eyes wide. You watch.  
Eyes wide. You watch.  
You share.  
Mother and child. Open.  
Alive.  
Surrounded by death.  
Surrounded by life.  
Surrounded by hope???

We visit a squatters' settlement and a remote indigenous village suffering from extreme poverty and isolation. We participate in a Christian-based community meeting and visit with local change agents, academics, labor leaders, social workers, and health professionals. Each experience provides a context for discussion and learning. Our first experience is a very moving, rich, passionate visit to La Estación.

### **Experiencing La Estacion**

As we walk through the squatters' settlement known as La Estacion, we see a poverty we expect but a hope we do not. Families live in small one— or two-room huts made of metal, wood, or sometimes brick, many with dirt floors. Wires run off city meter boxes providing illegal access to electricity. Families now have access to

running water not far from their homes and while there are no bathrooms, a minimal sewage system exists. We stop to talk with families who graciously welcome us into their homes, sharing the story of their lives with us. An older, widowed, childless woman tells about life for the elderly poor in a country without social security and Medicare. A young woman of 25, the mother of four, tells us of her husband's murder and her struggle to raise her children through her domestic work and her needlework. Another tells us that she recently threw out the father of her children. She can no longer take the drinking and the abuse.

We see women struggling to survive. Children and families with vision. Children working. We hear of the men, machismo, drinking, violence, and murder. They help us understand what it means to be without an adequate education and health care. . . with no hope of making a living. The women and children continue the struggle to earn money for food, some education, survival. They continue as a family. There is life within the poverty. A softness and respect exists between mother and children, brothers and sisters, that surprises us. Families have dogs for protection and companionship. Many cultivate beautiful gardens in their small spaces.

Little girl, I don't know your name  
but I see your life.  
The poverty  
The hope  
The illiteracy  
The love.

**Reflection, Discussion, and History.** Overwhelmed and exhausted, we return to rest, reflect, and journal. I retreat to my room to quietly contemplate and integrate what I see and feel. I consider, as well, student faces and postures, pondering on the meaning of their quiet response as preparation for the group discussion I will help facilitate later that day with CCIDD staff. Students responses are raw and painful after this first immersion. In spite of the desperation and the despair, the softness within the children does not go unnoticed. The group reflections help students sort and process.

As Derek reflects, "The group process helped me find out how others felt and thought about what I saw." Olivia expands, "Today I felt many emotions. . . . We discussed in our groups the emotions everyone felt. The processing made me pull together the meaning in my experience. I compared the lives of these people to the lives of poor inner city Americans. There are great differences, yet similarities. The children here have hope in their eyes unlike some of the young children I work with."

During the evening, a scholar from the University of Mexico provides a lecture on the history of Mexico and U.S.-Mexican relations resulting in the current conditions. Because of the intense immersion experience, student interest is heightened. The lecture then increases their understanding of the context of what they have seen and are about to see and hear.

Day four begins with a visit to the home of a woman who spent many years in La Estación and is now an indigenous organizer. As she tells us her story, she weaves in the process of her growth and emerging sense of empowerment, growth sparked by a soft-spoken priest we later meet.

### **Ofelia, the Priest, and Community Empowerment**

From a small, remote, isolated village to Mexico City at the age of 12, a domestic servant with positive and negative experiences. She married while still an adolescent, moving to the squatters' settlement with her husband's family. Five children. Years of isolation and abuse. Shame. Ofelia struggles to raise her children without running water, a sewage system, or adequate health care. She and other women experience growth when a priest comes to the settlement—La Estación. He asks, "What are your problems?" The women answer, "We have none. . . ." So he educates, and they learn.

Through his work, the priest works with the women first in recognizing the needs of the community, then in

learning how to impact change. The women learn to work with and pressure public officials and politicians. They are successful in getting running water and a minimal sewer system into La Estacion. Ofelia is able to start a small store. The women start offering day care and work on health care. Ofelia keeps her children in school and eventually leaves her husband after years of drinking and abuse, when he abuses one of her children.

Through her organizing, lobbying, and advocating, not only does the community grow but so does she. Illiterate well into adulthood, she learned to read and write with the help of her children. Math becomes a necessity in order to make the store run. And as she grows, she finds she must leave La Estacion. She first lives in an apartment, supporting her children as a domestic worker with the added pressure caused by the need for transportation to support her work and the children's education. She is lucky and is given enough money by a European woman to buy a small piece of land. In her struggle to build a home, she again organizes a community of people. Together they build the cooperative responsible for building the home we now sit in as well as nine others. They are quality homes on a hillside far from the settlement. Habitat for Humanity has now joined their effort.

Today her children—four in all—are successfully grown. Many are college educated. All are working. Four beautiful grandchildren quietly and respectfully play in the home as Ofelia educates us in her very eloquent fashion. Today is Saturday and she must baby-sit so her daughter can earn extra money. Ofelia's organizing goes on. Now she is an organizer of domestic workers. She has learned to speak publicly. She talks of growing more assertive. She talks of participating in international conferences. She talks of educating other domestic workers. She talks of educating the young people about family planning and life planning.

Ofelia is also an educator of Americans and Canadians. I am mesmerized by the telling of her story. Her presence is calming, dignified, and powerful. As the story of her life unfolds, I am drawn into the strength and growth. Through the telling of her story, my depth of understanding about the interplay between community empowerment and personal growth expands: A young, very bright, resilient girl struck out on her own. She lacked the knowledge and skills to build her life in the directions she wanted. A priest devoted to liberation used a small community group to educate and empower. The women then worked together to facilitate change for the community and themselves. In Ofelia's case that growth has continued for both the community and the individual, though they have gone in different directions.

**Transitions.** Rhonda frames the response of many with her observation, "Her strength struck me first." Kenesha's comments reflect her amazement, "She left her husband because of abuse and took her children. She also helped organize domestic workers, ran a store, started a home building co-op, and much more without a formal education. She has provided education for her children, however." Olivia feels this experience is pivotal: "Ofelia has done the kind of organization and advocacy that I have gone to school to learn. I think I probably learned more from her experience and sharing." "She has great leadership abilities and used these to organize whatever community she was in to improve their poor conditions," noted Christopher.

The lessons from this day are reinforced and deepened by visits with other communities and community leaders—indigenous and professional. We later meet with the priest, adding depth to our understanding of the respect and quiet patience necessary in educating and supporting the community as the women gradually came to understand their oppression and their rights. Eventually he helped them to take the steps to action which precipitated significant community change.

Over the next several days a sociologist from the University of Mexico provides an academic lecture, a labor leader tells us of personal and professional growth, and a youth leader attending the University shares his growth. I ask the students to question what they see on multiple levels and what it means to the families and to themselves as individuals and as social work professionals. We discuss and experience the intersection between the personal and the political, their roles as social workers in personal and community change, and the role of social work in health care, economic and community development, program development, and empowerment.

## **The Blanket Man: The Firing of the Messenger**

Are you a fugitive from justice?  
As a man child you worked hard.  
You learned to read and write.  
You learned your rights.  
You became a teacher of others.  
They came to fear you. You were outcast. You are a fugitive for justice.  
Are you alone?  
You left your town to start again. Work. You must work hard.  
The injustice continues. You work hard.  
The young. The Old.  
Hard work. Abuse. Discard. You work hard.  
But the young . . . .  
It is not right.  
You must stand. Twenty join.  
You must educate.  
The flyers. The talks.  
The knowledge grows and the owners watch.  
More flyers. Where do they come from?  
Quien sabe?  
Spies. Traps.  
They try to trick you.  
You are too smart. You are too many.  
Habemos muchos.  
There are a lot of us.

They call him the "Blanket Man." He is a storyteller, a teacher. He teaches the power of education and moral conviction. He understands the importance of taking a stand and fighting for justice and fairness, whatever the cost. For him, the struggle started early. He started working in a factory when only 12. He taught himself to read, then started reading the labor laws. After organizing and striking, he was fired. The others withdrew in fear of hunger. How can you fight when in fear of hunger? Off to the city for another start. A good worker. Many years of commitment and labor. A family to support, so he works. There comes a day, however, when he recognizes the abuse of the children in the factories and he must once again take a stand. He organizes while dodging the bosses. Others help. He outsmarts them. Eventually they fire him and he fights, but the laws don't help.

Labor lessons impact the family and the community. Because he keeps his struggles to himself, the distance grows between the Blanket Man and his wife and children. But when he shares, they join and find a way to move forward together. With openness, it is hard to divide and conquer. Now he works with others in an artisans' collective making a living with respect.

***The intersection between the personal and the political.*** I am overwhelmed by his presence, my response, and my inability to communicate through words without translation. His natural leadership and quiet story telling ability still leave me processing my emotions and knowledge. I am frustrated by the language barrier yet may have learned more because of it. I am forced to listen without verbal response. I listen with all my senses and respond through my presence. Monitoring my response, watching students, and reading their journals, I am able to develop a guide for the student discussion. Students are encouraged to talk about what they see and feel and eventually to discuss the implication of those experiences for social work professionals trying to understand the impact of poverty on individuals, families, and communities in Mexico and the U.S. We talk about the growing consciousness of this labor leader, his work community, and his family.

As Christopher reflects, "He fought hard for others' rights and even risked his own life. . . He also had

doubts. He even quit fighting at one point and thought only of himself. . . Now I will always think of [Blanket Man] when I have doubts of my own. . . He emphasized the importance of his family and even admitted his mistakes."

The students begin to connect the issues of labor, social work, and economics, as well as the role of the social work profession in economic development and change, at multiple levels. Follow-up experiences on days six and seven with a youth leader and then a potter who has become an indigenous change agent reinforce the lessons, moving us into a discussion of gender relations.

### **The Potter and the Youth Leader: The Destruction of Machismo**

This settlement exists along a creek. It was once tucked away quietly. A settlement of potters with no services or land ownership. There was always the threat that the government would take their land. As population increased, the land became more valuable and accessible, the water in the creek less drinkable. So Tomas led the community in struggling, resisting, and fighting. They now own the land and have roads, water, and sewers. Along the way Tomas learned to read, write, and educate. His symbol, the dolphin, signifies peace, gentleness, and intelligence. Ellen reflects the learning of many with her comments: "He brought out how important it is to have plants and animals around you. . . 'It is not human to live without them'."

Jaime is only 20 years old and has already been a community leader for four years. He comes from a family that knows, values, and supports education and independence. At a young age he learned of liberation theology and became involved in empowerment through small Christian groups. This is where he learned about poverty, privilege, and interdependence—the need to organize and educate. He fights for liberation.

While they model for us the many men who are committed to their family and community, they tell us of the problems with gender relations and the machismo. "He [Tomas] talked to us about the machismo in his country and why so many women are left alone to raise their children" (Olivia). Tomas drew for us the connection between machismo, lack of a viable future, alcohol, and family planning. "He talked about machismo and the problems of men" (Christopher). Jaime confirms and expands. These men and others tell us about the struggles and the work of the women; the need to educate the men.

*Change Agents.* These visits prompt a discussion on the process of change. The "social work group reflection helped me [Kenisha] to hear what other people thought and got out of our experiences. I also think it helped everybody release tensions that had been building up." We reflect on the difficulty of facilitating attitudinal and behavioral change, particularly on issues of gender relationships and oppression. I meet with students to reflect on their experiences and integrate those experiences with social work knowledge and practice. We talk about the interplay between the rights and responsibilities of individuals, families, and communities.

Students are asked to reflect on similarities to and differences between poverty in the U.S. and poverty in Mexico, and on the potential role of social work in remediating the issues of poverty on the micro, mezzo, and macro levels of practice. The knowledge and awareness growing out of our experiential and didactic lessons provide a basis for our upcoming visits with service providers. As Susan stated, "I found this [group reflection] really helpful to hear what other people felt and thought. It helped me to pull together and focus all my jumbled thoughts." With week two we move into visits to local clinics, services, and programs involving discussions with human service professionals. The students have enough knowledge to ask insightful questions about the role of professionals with disempowered individuals and communities.

### **Social Work and Health Care in Bleak Surroundings**

Over the next several days we meet with professionals and paraprofessionals, visit an orphanage, hear views on the care of the elderly and disabled. Shifting discussion—the need for practice to flow across levels of intervention. The intensity of my own struggle increases. The personal and the political. . . pain. . . few resources. . . huge needs. Social workers and health care professionals talk of women, social transformation, and service delivery with compassion despite desperate surroundings. They talk of the need for services with social

transformation. Women and children are dying from poverty and poor nutrition. Children live in the streets, forming gangs that become families. The AIDS crisis is growing. Good services for the disabled if there is money, none for the poor. High rates of breast cancer and domestic violence impact the lives of women. Death from botched abortions.

Mujeres Pobres. . .

Tell me how you survive.

I see your faces everywhere.

You work so hard.

Tell me how you survive.

The men, they drink, they beat the children,  
they beat "their" women, they have lost their way, their hope.

Tell me how you survive.

I see you on the street.

I see you at the bus.

You surround me at the market.

There is not enough to feed the children.

There is no place to live.

Tell me how you survive.

Where do you go?

What is your story.

Tell me how you survive.

Carmen is a social worker who tells of men drinking, women beaten, and social workers confused. She talks of asking women, "Why do you stay with a man who beats you?" And a woman answers, "With him I have one man to beat me. If he is not here, the other men will hear and come into my house and rape my daughters and me." So social workers learn to work with the women and the men to change the home.

The daily construction of a new program of life is needed for change. Carmen talks of needing a lot of consciousness and awareness to be a social worker without hurting yourself and society. Families need education, awareness, and information. Economics, machismo, nutrition, sexuality, and relationships are intertwining problems with interwoven solutions. The solutions come from the strength, richness, and hope of the people. Social workers work with the current human crisis but to work with that crisis without working on changing social conditions leaves social workers as a part of the social control.

The needs are so great and the cost so high. For many, alternative health care fills the gap with soft music, massage, the drink of life. The Espacio de Salud (Alternative Healthcare Workshop) rose out of the neighborhood as an integrated part of a center developed by community residents to meet their needs—child care, classes, training, and health care. Local residents are trained, empowered, and employed to empower and serve. The need for holistic health care is impressed upon us. The parts of a person cannot be segregated. The physical, emotional, and spiritual are intertwined.

We hear about and see the conditions of families in poverty with no programs to provide cash, health, or housing benefits. Events like these add depth to our discussions of social policy, methods of service delivery, and the role of social work on multiple levels.

Kenesha, Ellen, and Christopher comment on the knowledge and growth: "Macro/micro—we need to understand both, how policy changes people. . . No one is self-sufficient. . . Involvement with family and community, hope versus resignation. . . 70% poverty. . . Child abuse and neglect, abortion and family planning. . . Homelessness/ housing. . . Empowerment/ education. . . Community building."

These are the dilemmas which stuck with the students to surface during group reflection.

We are now ready for our last immersion experience, perhaps more intense than the first. It was the most difficult for me because of the hopelessness. The level of isolation and poverty are outside student experience, providing a context for evaluating the impact of poverty with no perceived avenues for exit. "They were so poor and such a contrast to my life that it seemed unreal" (Olivia).

### **Death and Desperation in the Village: No Way to Make a Living**

Poverty comes in many forms. In a very remote village we experience a poverty of desperation and hopelessness. Chased into the hills 500 years ago by the Spanish, the indigenous still struggle for survival in small villages. They live on land with little water. Rugged countryside, difficult to cultivate.

*Children begging.* Families telling tales of violence, death, and despair. The isolation is mental, economic, and physical. Hunger is daily. Families make a living primarily by making and selling baskets. We visit Isidro. He's a proud man. He, his wife, and their six children welcome us. They are gracious in finding rice bags and logs to put on the dirt floor of their home so we can sit while they talk. They have few blankets and no furniture as we know it. I wonder how they keep warm in a hut made of corn husks. It must be cold at night with the wind blowing through. Begging, watching, lack of hope, baskets.

*Tortillas and Salt.* Where Are the Beans? Isidro tells us that most days his family shares one meal of tortillas and salt. But some days there are no tortillas. "Sometimes we have beans." But not often. Meat? No. Education can be supported for only one child—the oldest son. There is no money. The baby, Ruth, is sick, dehydrated from diarrhea. A simple disease to cure but deadly for a poor mountain family with no money. But this is one of the lucky families. Their connection to CCIDD provides a market for their baskets and help with medical bills. A safety net few families here have.

*Life and Death in the Village.* Life and death in the village blend together in ways difficult for us to understand. Our next family shares their story of life amongst death. The mother-grandmother talks of death and murder in the village. Her daughter-in-law sits with us, nursing one baby, talking about losing her last baby to disease. Men killed with machetes. The father-grandfather killed. Three of her sisters are widows. We recognize the desperation and the connection between the drinking and the lack of jobs and hope, and a murder rate as high as we see in our own city. Students easily make the connection to home and see the complexity with a new understanding.

I understand only too clearly that hardship and desperation do not erase the humanity, the connection, the commonality among us. I marvel that amidst such desperation, there exists some hope.

The love between mother and child is apparent as she sits, sharing with us. In Isidro's home, family bonds are apparent through the expression of mutual love and sacrifice. One of the students reflects on the connection, the hope.

While hiking to the top of a mountain to visit people of a remote village, I discovered that quietly and gently my hand had been taken captive by a small six-year-old boy. Quickly, my mind and my heart also became hostage--hostage not to a small boy but rather to a series of incongruities about children who live in poverty. After all, having no electricity, only a community well for the entire village, corn stalk houses, dirt floors, lack of immunizations, less than a tortilla each day to eat, and the chance to die from simple diarrhea, the children should be sad, lethargic, sick, and depressed.

But the figure at the end of my hand spoke a different story. Yes, he was skinny, underweight and dirty, BUT he was also energetic, smart, inquisitive, and gentle. His eyes were not dull as I envisioned but sparkled radiance and mischief. For a short time I was in love. (Suzanne)

### **The People and the Environment**

Families and professionals teach us the connection between the environment, poverty, and a quality life for all.

"To be human is to live with animals and plants and to have the chance to learn" (resident, La Estación). Toilet paper becomes symbolic. Mexico is a country with some of the best toilet paper in the world. It is at the same time a country where 70% of the people cannot afford toilet paper and the sewage system cannot handle it. It is also a country with poor access to safe water. Water is vital for survival but for many it is difficult to access and brings disease.

Water . . . . Agua . . . . many words in many languages. Valuable . . . . vital . . . . life giving . . . . life taking . . . . squandered . . . . polluted . . . . wasted . . . . squandered by the wealthy. . . . Misused by nations. . . . The poor . . . . The isolated die from lack . . . . Die from pollution. Lessons Learned

### **Oppression, Poverty, and Social Work.**

Without the artifacts, the language, and the symbols of our own culture, and the guilt, anger, and pain of our own history, it was easier to see the impact, the trappings, and the pitfalls of poverty. Through their graciousness and openness amongst extreme poverty, families taught us of hospitality and hope, of desperation and hardship. Students were able to view the difference between poverty with hope and poverty without hope. They learned of hunger, pollution, illness and health care, education, and housing. They also learned that we didn't have to leave home to see the degradation of poverty without hope.

"I [Ellen] have learned that poverty in Mexico, as well as other third world countries, affects us all in one way or another. I've learned that regardless of these people's impoverished conditions, they still had laughter." "I [Rhonda] was able to see how people suffered from oppression every day and lived. . . The struggle to survive was a reality for these families." "I [Derek] became acutely aware that there are human needs not being met in this country [U.S.] as well."

Students arrived, frequently unaware of Mexico, global relationships, economic interdependence, and the multiple roles for social work intervention. Interspersing experiential learning with lecture, reflection, and discussion provided a context for understanding neoliberal economics, NAFTA, multinational corporations, the need to understand and participate in economics, and the power of individual and community action. Academics taught us history. Church and indigenous leaders taught of the struggle for liberation. While the experience was based in Mexico, the knowledge was translated back into practical implications in the U.S.

As Kenya, the student from South Africa, reminds us, "It's all about transforming the world we live in for the whole of society." Others reflect, "I realized that more needs to be done than charity work. Mexico needs some serious structural changes." "I need to be involved in some aspect of social change."

Ofelia's life experiences were full of lessons on the role of education, empowerment, and action in precipitating individual and community growth and change. Ofelia, the youth leader, the social worker, and the Blanket Man all provided lessons on the importance of support and family. And many, including the social worker, Ofelia, the youth leader, and the potter, spoke of the impact of unequal gender relationships. Students who might have been defensive and confused about discussing the impact of gender inequality at home could see the impact clearly outside their own culture and use that learning to reflect on the issues at home.

As framed by Olivia, "Women carry the burden and endure the most hardship all over the world. Not a new fact but deepened in my heart by the pain and the constancy of women's struggle."

Students learned the value of policy practice. They learned that the connection between the poor and the privileged is interdependence rather than dependence.

"I [Christopher] have learned that our policies are affecting the Mexican people for the worse." Kenesha added, "I learned that I need to stay educated on factors relating to public policy."

Experiencing a nation with a poverty rate of 70% left students understanding the disastrous effects increasing

poverty and abusive welfare reform will have on the U.S. The value of a safety net for low-income individuals and families was apparent.

"I [Ellen] cannot reconcile the waste of human potential I saw while in Mexico. . . This [poverty] may not be violence in its stereotypical form . . . nonetheless it is violence, violence of another nature."

As reflected in their discussions, journals, and evaluations, students came away understanding more about the ongoing oppression of the indigenous people across North America.

Ellen summed up the feelings of many: "Being in Cuernavaca, Morales has left a very vivid image of oppression with me that I will never forget."

They learned about the struggle for liberation in Chiapas—about the connection between violence and the written word. Written reflection on the experience gives indication of the impact.

Christopher commented, "I learned more about the extent of poverty and the connectedness of all of it and us." Kenesha stated "People in poverty have similarities regardless of the country." Still another, Olivia, reported "I learned that I need to become more aware of the poverty of other countries and how they impact the U.S. and vice versa." "People live in poverty not because of choice but structure of the country" [Ellen]. White students learned that they must not think they can be "the solvers of the world" [Susan]. They must instead enter the struggle with persons of color and develop ways to stop the oppression.

Understanding about the need to expand historical knowledge and access to accurate information on current global events grew. Students saw an expanded role for social work in the change process. They're learning to ask "Who benefits?" They understand now that those who labor frequently do not benefit from that labor. Students reflected on the need to find accurate media portrayal of current and historical relationships.

"I [Rhonda] have learned that watching the news and reading the paper aren't enough. I need to find reliable sources of information."

"I [Susan] have to become more involved and stay aware of what is happening in the U.S. and other countries and how my own actions contribute to the poverty and injustices of the U.S. and other countries."

"I [Christopher] have to make sure I get all the information from now on."

"I [Derek] knew nothing about Mexico before reading the book for this class and coming down here. I was ignorant about what was/is happening. I need to keep myself educated."

"Since I [Kenesha] have returned from Mexico, I have changed my thought processes which in turn have begun to change my behavior."

The following comments by Kenesha, Ellen, Christopher, and Olivia reflect the learning. "This was not only an educational excursion for me but a life changing one." "I find myself better educated, more insightful, and more understanding of the issues in Mexico."

"The two-week Mexican experience afforded an introductory glimpse into a worldwide economic system which perpetuates the growth of poverty. But it was just a beginning. In the long run, it will not be the facts and figures that we remember, but instead the faces and the words of the people."

"My feelings were ones of joy, sadness, peace, pain, and anger. Even though in many ways Mexico is

vastly different than the United States, there are quite a few similarities."

### **Integration**

The program ended with a group exercise. We, the participants from the U.S. and Canada, worked in small groups to design and sculpt a shift from current conditions to a new world without privilege built on oppression. The sculptures symbolized small community groups coming together for education, empowerment, and community building. A growing interconnectedness between individuals, families, and groups led to a shift in the power, politics, and economics for the benefit of all. We left Mexico with a sadness and a hope. We vowed to work toward change locally and globally.

Students vowed to continue learning as reflected by the comments of Rhonda, "I need to keep learning and searching for the truth."

Student learning continued through the trauma of reentry. Through journals, reflection papers, and discussion, students deepened their understanding of global interconnection and interdependence. Experiences as recorded in their journals provided a basis for writing a reflection paper integrating what they saw and experienced with social work practice, knowledge, and theory. They were required to reflect on the issues of poverty in the U.S. as well as in Mexico.

"I [Derek] still have a great deal of information to process and work through." Ellen adds, "This is the story of a woman who no longer believes in unquestioningly following those that made the rules. . . She knows that power corrupts and that often the people who are making the rules have too much power or are too concerned with keeping their power. This causes them to no longer care if the rules are good and just or if they benefit the people they were intended to help and protect."

### **Faculty Growth**

As a social work faculty member in a country with growing poverty and a world which is both shrinking and enlarging, I struggle with educating students from isolated backgrounds. Our students frequently come to us knowing only a revisionist history of the U.S. Many have little knowledge of the world outside U.S. boundaries and an inadequate understanding of the structural issues of poverty and oppression within the U.S. and across the Americas.

Over the years I have become more successful in educating students about the overlapping historical, political, and economic components of race, gender, and economic oppression. I have seen students awaken to a joy in learning about diversity and an anger at the lack of depth in their understanding of history, interconnection, and oppression. Until I participated in this immersion experience, I had not, however, seen students fully recognize and emotionally embrace the issues of poverty and the need for fundamental change. Here the lessons on the individual and structural issues of poverty and oppression became a part of their experience, raising in them an understanding of the need to make basic changes in their personal and professional lives.

As I was transformed personally and professionally, I became more aware of myself as a teacher, a learner, and a woman. I continue to struggle with integrating the lessons the families taught me. I work to improve my language skills. And I continue to refine my teaching based on the lessons of the trip. I learned the value of guided reflection interspersed with intense immersion experiences and academic lectures about theory and practice knowledge. My involvement in the process provided me with an understanding of student pain and vulnerability. As the students experienced the humanity of those in need, they became open to learning community-based practice, examining the interconnection between the environment and the quality of life for all, and understanding the role of social work in shaping local and global economics and social change. Empathy and compassion provide the basis for moral policy development and enlightened practice.

### **REFERENCE**

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