

**Grand Valley State University**

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## South of the Border: A Librarian's Service Experience in Nicaragua (poster)

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Available at: [https://works.bepress.com/debbie\\_morrow/9/](https://works.bepress.com/debbie_morrow/9/)

## Introduction

I spent eleven days in May 2012 in Estelí, Nicaragua, as a volunteer member of a presenter team offering a workshop to engage Nicaraguan college students and faculty in learning concepts of sustainable and relevant innovation and development.

The program, the Applied Global Innovation Initiative (AGII) at Grand Valley State University, has been evolving since 2004 in an ongoing relationship with La UNAN, the Nicaraguan national university system. Nicaragua, at the base of the socioeconomic pyramid, is the poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere. AGII's vision statement reads, "Empowering people to change their world with their resources." Their mission states, "Through product innovation that is interdisciplinary, intercultural, and innovative in approach The Applied Global Innovation Initiative empowers individuals (communities, faculty, staff, and students) to address challenging environmental, economic, and social issues facing the world's poorest populations.



The AGII program co-directors, professors of Marketing and Engineering, required no special expertise or language skills for volunteers, but were excited this year to have an information professional among the volunteer group.

**Goal:** My poster will highlight insights from my cross-cultural service and learning experience.

## Objectives:

- Describe teaching strategies used in an intensive multi-disciplinary workshop, from the perspective of a participant-observer



- Describe the role of an information professional as a member of the multi-disciplinary workshop presenter team



- Highlight the challenges of presenting this workshop in a cross-cultural environment



## Teaching Strategies: Observations

### Some demographics:

- ~130 participants; 100+ college students, 20-23 yrs, & ~25 faculty, 30-60 yrs
- Predominantly native Nicaraguans
- Native language – Spanish; some with minimal English proficiency
- University (tertiary) education cost at public institutions: free
- University matriculation as a proportion of all Nicaraguans 0-5 years older than secondary-school age: ~1.5%
- Distribution of income: the top 20% of Nicaraguans by income hold 45-50% of the country's wealth (<http://www.indexmundi.com/facts/nicaragua/income-distribution>). Six years of primary education is free and compulsory, but many families cannot afford to have their children continue on to secondary school or college instead of going to work.

### Cross-cultural considerations:

Engaging this group of workshop participants 8am-5pm for six days running required considerable planning on the part of the program co-directors. They structured the program for the week with sensitivity to cultural norms, language challenges, issues of age and status differences among the participants, socio-economic realities in Nicaragua, and the rigors of offering a great deal of content in a short time.

The first event after registration was a get-acquainted mixer, the "Human Knot." Each "knot" had 10-12 people, many of them brand new acquaintances.



### Teaching approaches:

#### Active learning

Every morning and afternoon included a bit of formal presentation, but great emphasis was put on actively and tangibly developing ideas: brainstorming in groups, sketching ideas, voting using criteria, getting input from potential consumers, making 3-D models, pitching to an audience.



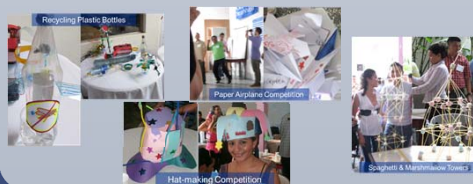
### Relevant and culturally appropriate



Very few elevators in Nicaragua, but plenty of taxis, often shared. So the concept for making a 60-90 second idea pitch was taught as the "Taxi Pitch," complete with props!

### Fun!

Every day included fun, friendly group activities, with minimal overtly individual competition. Small awards were handed out generously for Best Group, Best Team Effort, and so on. In the Plastic Bottle competition, individuals were encouraged to turn plastic bottles into something related to one of the projects proposed by their 5-person team.



## Providing Information Support

As a 'Bibliotecaria' on the May 2012 team, I was able to contribute in a number of ways in supporting the participants and the presenters. In every case, the Internet Wi-Fi set up for the week by another team member, and the aging Toshiba Portégé laptop I lugged along with me, were invaluable!



Participants were introduced to concepts in market research and business plan development. With the help of translators, I took questions from teams, and researched them online. Using La UNAN's Moodle courseware environment I delivered responses including URLs for web sites and documents relevant to the query. Most queries were related to materials costs and socioeconomic and demographic statistics in Nicaragua.

### Tips & Tools

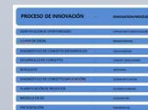
- Translators
- Moodle, enabling asynchronous query/response interactions
- Google – find freely available information
- Google Nicaragua – reset browser location to local domain; include **site:.ni** to find sites within the country
- Google Translate – not great, but adequate for rough translation to/from Spanish; includes a "Listen" option to hear the translation (<http://translate.google.com/>)
- A ready smile and lots of patience!

## Challenges & Solutions

Obvious challenges include language differences, unfamiliar cultural norms, and complex organizational/administrative tasks to be managed to coordinate the event. My observations here are limited to teaching successfully when there isn't a common language between teacher and student.

### The Language divide

The co-directors underwent some intensive Spanish-language tutoring in their first few years presenting in Nicaragua. However, to teach adequately, they presented in English, relied on one expert and several up-and-coming young translators, kept presentation content brief, and provided all printed materials in Spanish and parallel English. Several short video demonstrations used during week were narrated in Spanish.



Posters like this one outlining the week's topics, associated worksheet handouts, and projected slides were in both Spanish and English.



Dr. Lane (right) and Dr. Farris were both become quite skillful at delivering their verbal content in short phrases with many pauses, so that translators (left, with microphone) could keep the flow going.

Where idiom might be a barrier to understanding attempts have been made to find the right local idiom to make a point. For example, "brainstorming" for Nicaraguans is *una lluvia de ideas* – "a raining of ideas" – to begin Day One of the Innovation Workshop!

## Reflections

Each noon the US team left the workshop site to retreat for lunch as a group. The meal was a time in the day to regroup and plan ahead, in our own language.



Following dinner and discussion sessions with the Nica faculty in the evenings, several of us made a routine of sharing a quiet late evening snack.



My experience with the AGII May Innovation Program workshop in Nicaragua was enriching at every level – personal, professional, academic, civic, and social.

Professionally I had the opportunity to observe two skillful and dedicated teachers with very different temperaments combine forces to deliver a thoughtfully constructed program to a large group as effectively as they could. Day after day I saw them draw on teaching skills they've each honed over a career to communicate content across the divides of language and culture. At some level, this was no different from what they do in every class they meet.

Personally I had the privilege of meeting and working with the AGII Co-Directors, the rest of the US team, La UNAN and FERAM Estelí administrators, Nica student and faculty workshop participants, and all of the Nicaraguans who hosted us in hotels and restaurants. I had a brief glimpse of a country and environment very different from my own for long enough to appreciate the will of Nicaraguans to learn ways of sustainably climbing some way up a very steep socioeconomic pyramid.



## References & Photo Credits

Alexrk2. (2010). "File:Nicaragua relief location map.jpg." Wikimedia Commons. ([http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Nicaragua\\_relief\\_location\\_map.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Nicaragua_relief_location_map.jpg)); edited by D. Morrow.  
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## Contact Information

### Program

Applied Global Innovation Initiative (AGII) at GVSU - *Iniciativa Global de Innovación Aplicada (IGIA)*  
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