

Culture and Community Health in Oaxaca, Mexico

ISL 959:375

Summer 2014

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Tentative Dates: May 27-June 29

Course Description

Rutgers University is positioned at one end of a transnational migration corridor that extends from Oaxaca, a state in southern Mexico, to New Brunswick, NJ, a city with a diverse population including a rapidly growing number of migrants from southern Mexico. Rutgers faculty have been working to transform the corridor into a multi-sited space of transnational research, education, and inter-institutional exchange that includes Rutgers University and LAZOS America Unida in New Brunswick and the State University System (SUNEO) and SURCO, our partner in Oaxaca.

This course on “Culture and Community Health in Oaxaca, Mexico” represents one part of this larger, multidisciplinary effort to develop and expand relationships with the Mexican community both in New Jersey and Mexico. The course involves three main educational components:

- Course on the anthropology of health in Mexico
- Course in Spanish, with an emphasis on medical vocabulary and dialogues
- Service learning activities in community and public health programs in Oaxaca

The program goes for four and a half weeks during May and June. Each week begins with a Seminar on Culture and Health in Mexico. During the middle of the week, students volunteer in a community health service project that is on-going. Projects include work in urban and rural health clinics and organizations that promote public health. SURCO makes the connections to these types of programs and has considerable experience placing students in them. Students have language classes three afternoons a week, with an emphasis on medical Spanish. Each week ends with a Reflection Seminar during which students discuss their experiences working in community health programs. Weekends include excursions to cultural and ecological sites, time with homestay families, and opportunities to explore Oaxaca.

Course Objectives and Expectations

This course is designed as part of Rutgers Study Abroad/International Service Learning programs. Students will learn about the realities of Mexican society: through direct participation and interaction with people; through providing community service to various health projects; and through classroom discussions and readings. Students will not only learn about community health in Mexico, but they will develop a deeper understanding of what it is like to live in another society, where much of their taken-for-granted assumptions about social life are challenged on a fundamental level. As in any course whose basis is the discipline of anthropology, I want students to appreciate the lack of clear-cut answers to daily and deeply structural social problems. More specifically, my objectives and expectations for the course are that students:

- Learn about the Mexican health care system, understanding the realities and consequences of medicine in a context of globalization;
- Come to understand the realities of life in Oaxaca, Mexico, with a special emphasis on the issues of access to health care for local families and communities;
- Learn about health issues in Oaxaca to better understand health in a developing country context, and to inform students' understandings of health issues among Mexican immigrants in New Brunswick, NJ;
- Develop a multinational perspective on health care systems as they operate in Mexico in comparison to the United States, with special attention to health care reform in both countries;
- Improve their Spanish language skills through class work and immersion in Oaxaca;
- Participate wholeheartedly in service projects dedicated to helping local communities;
- Reflect on the service learning experiences in the form of diaries so that students record and integrate their service learning experiences with classroom learning;
- Face the challenges of life in a foreign culture with humor and graciousness, showing a respect for local customs and a maturity to deal with the inevitable hardships that will arise;
- Act as ambassadors for Rutgers University and their country, remembering at all times that they are guests in another land.

Requirements and Grading

Students receive grades in Community Health in Oaxaca (3 credits) and Medical Spanish (3 credits) through the Rutgers Study Abroad Program. One of my roles as Faculty Director is to assist you in transferring those credits and grades to fit with particular curricular requirements. Course outcomes are assessed using the following methods:

- Faculty review of students' reaction papers to assigned readings
- Student progress in Spanish proficiency – assessed by Amigos del Sol Language School
- Faculty review of student journals on their learning experiences
- Quality of student participation in the various seminars and program activities
- Student post-program evaluations of the experience (quantitative and qualitative)
- Student post-program essay that assesses what their learning on multiple dimensions

Attendance: The medical anthropology course meets once per week on Monday mornings for three hours to discuss course readings. We also meet as a group on Friday mornings for reflection on and discussion of our field and service experiences. Students spend three mornings each week in community health placements in and around the city of Oaxaca. There also is a medical Spanish class in the late afternoon on three days a week. In addition, several events outside of class are scheduled each week. Attendance at every class meeting, group outing and event is mandatory, unless excused by illness.

Reading and participation: Students are expected to do all the assigned readings for each class meeting. Please bear in mind that this is a six-credit program, and the workload reflects this. Students write brief (2 page) reaction papers to each week's readings and keep a journal of their community service experiences. Being prepared for class is necessary for full comprehension of the lectures and engaged participation in class discussions. Participation involves being alert and taking notes during lectures; asking questions to clarify points of misunderstanding; engaging actively in small-group activities; and contributing to discussions.

The following books are required for the course:

- Kaja Finkler. 2001. *Physicians at Work, Patients in Pain*. Carolina Academic Press.
- Matthew Gutmann. 2007. *Fixing Men*. University of California Press.
- Arthur Rubel, et al. 1991. *Susto: A Folk Illness*. University of California Press.
- James Young & Linda Garro. 1993. *Medical Choice in a Mexican Village*. Waveland Press.

Assignments and Evaluation: Assignments should be typed, double-spaced, and submitted on the dates indicated. The grades are determined as follows:

- **Participation** (10 %) – Students are expected to attend and participate in all meetings and class events, including research and service activities.
- **Journals** (10 %) – Students keep daily journals/diaries in which they reflect on their experiences doing fieldwork and service. In addition, students share their observations and reflections verbally in weekly group discussions.
- **Weekly Assignments** (40%) – Students write brief reaction papers to the assigned readings.
- **Final Paper** (40 %) –After the program, students write a final paper that reflects on the learning and growth that occurred as a result of all the activities in the program.

Language: All readings, writing, and classroom discussion for this course are in English. Most of our field trips, events and activities are in Spanish. Students have weekly Spanish classes, with a focus on medical Spanish. The language school does a pre-assessment to place students at their appropriate level and a post assessment, which should show measurable improvement and upon which the grade in the language class is based.

Disciplinary policy: There is a zero tolerance policy for student misbehavior while on this trip. Mexico is a more socially conservative society than the U.S., and you should conduct yourselves accordingly. I do not regularly supervise participants' behavior outside of class activities; any reports of students getting into trouble with host families or local authorities may result in disciplinary action, possibly including the student returning home immediately and

receiving a failing grade in the class. Students should know and abide by the Rutgers University academic honesty policy in preparing course work. Students are required to sign a Behavior Policy form.

SURCO – University Services and Networks of Understanding in Oaxaca

SURCO is our partner in coordinating this study abroad program. SURCO is a non-profit grassroots organization combining consulting, academic programs and local activism. SURCO believes that knowledge is not only used to interpret the world, but to change it. Integrating formal education and activism allows SURCO to provide dynamic and diverse opportunities for our program participants, while facilitating connections to the international context and to collaboration with our local projects. As an active partner in a wide range of local networks that tackle social and environmental justice issues, SURCO focuses on food and water sovereignty, urban conviviality, defense of indigenous territories, and community-based radio and video.

Prior to the Course

Please read a brief history of Mexico that situates our program in Oaxaca in context. My top recommendation at this point is Roderic Ai Camp. 2011. *Mexico: What Everyone Needs to Know*. I would also recommend either Richard Grabman. 2009. *Gods, Gachupines, and Gringos: A People's History of Mexico* or Brian Hamnett. 2006. *A Concise History of Mexico* (Cambridge Concise Histories).

Course Schedule: For each week of the program, the syllabus lists the course schedule, community service activities, and other activities of the program week. Readings should be completed by, and written assignments are due at the time of our Monday morning class.

Week 1

- 5/27 **Arrival Day;** Meet and stay with host families
- 5/28 Orientation International Service Learning Program, Oaxaca & Mexico, SURCO
- 5/29 Tour of the “Other” Oaxaca and the Centro Historico
- 5/30 Orientation to community placements
- 5/31 Free day to explore and enjoy with homestay families
- 6/1 Trip to Teotitlan del Valle: learn about Vida Nueva , a Zapotec women’s weaving cooperative, traditional Zapotec healing with a group ‘limpia’

Week 2

6/2

10 am – 1 pm Seminar: ***Medical Choice in a Mexican Village***

This anthropological study examines how local people choose one type of health care over another, using the cultural concept of the health care system to frame the analysis. Young & Garro examine preferences for healing in creative ways and find that local people have developed a comprehensive set of "rules" for making decisions about treatment. This book gives us insights into the kinds of issues people face in the communities where we work and some of their concerns in deciding how to get help.

Reading: James Young & Linda Garro. 1993. *Medical Choice in a Mexican Village*.

2:30 – 4:30 Lunch with homestay families

5:30 pm – 8:10 pm Medical Spanish Class

6/3-5

8 am – 1 pm Field placements in community health projects

2:30 – 4:30 Lunch with homestay families

6/4-5

5:30 pm – 8:10 pm Medical Spanish Classes

6/6-7

Community Service with the Ecoalebrije Project in Arrazola

6/8

Trip to Monte Alban, a dramatic archaeological site

Week 3

6/9

10 am – 1 pm Seminar: ***Susto: A Folk Illness***

Much of my own research has been carried out on the cultural syndrome of *ataques de nervios* among Latinos. The work of Arthur Rubel was very influential on my own research. *Susto* is a folk illness that is widespread throughout Latin America and associated with a broad array of symptoms. Among susceptible populations, the sickness is understood to be caused by a fright that sometimes leads to the separation of soul and body. This study takes an interdisciplinary approach to understanding *susto*. Since I worked on the *DSM-IV* and *DSM-5*, I will share my experiences working on the section on cultural syndromes.

Readings: Arthur Rubel, Carl O'Neil & Rolando Collado-Ardon. 1991. *Susto: A Folk Illness*. / Guarnaccia, P.J., R. Lewis-Fernandez and M. Rivera Marano. 2003. Toward a Puerto Rican Popular Nosology: *Nervios* and *Ataques de Nervios*. *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry* 27:339-366.

2:30 – 4:30 Lunch with homestay families

5:30 pm – 8:10 pm Medical Spanish Class

6/10-12

8 am – 1 pm Field placements in community health projects

2:30 – 4:30 Lunch with homestay families

6/11-12

5:30 pm – 8:10 pm Medical Spanish Classes

6/13

10 am – 1 pm Reflection Seminar

2:30 – 4:30 Lunch with homestay families

6/14-15

Free weekend

Week 4

- 6/16 10 am – 1 pm Seminar: ***Physicians at Work, Patients in Pain***
Finkler's work brings an anthropological focus to the work of physicians. Her book addresses the interplay between traditional healing and biomedical treatment and examines the strengths and weaknesses of these different healing approaches. Finkler studies the problems that physicians face in reconciling their training in biomedicine with the cultural dimensions of medical practice in Mexico. This book gives us insight into the other side of health care as we work in different community health settings.
Reading: Kaja Finkler. 2001. *Physicians at Work, Patients in Pain*.
- 2:30 – 4:30 Lunch with homestay families
5:30 pm – 8:10 pm Medical Spanish Class
- 6/17-19 8 am – 1 pm Field placements in community health projects
2:30 – 4:30 Lunch with homestay families
- 6/18-19 5:30 pm – 8:10 pm Medical Spanish Classes
- 6/20 10 am – 1 pm Reflection Seminar
2:30 – 4:30 Lunch with homestay families
- 6/21-22 Trip to Capulálpam de Mendez in the Sierra Juarez – visit traditional medicine clinic and ecotourism experience

Week 5

- 6/23 9 am – 12 pm Seminar: ***Fixing Men: Sex, Birth Control and AIDS in Mexico***
Prior to going to graduate school in medical anthropology, I worked as a family planning health educator for four years. While most studies on reproductive health make women their focus, Gutmann examines how men in Oaxaca, and the women in their lives, make decisions about birth control and cope with HIV infection and AIDS. As in our first book, this study looks at how men, and women, balance the healing techniques biomedical and indigenous medical practitioners employ for infertility, impotence, and HIV/AIDS. By this time you will have interacted with men in Oaxaca and can assess for yourselves how Gutmann portrays these issues.
Reading: Matthew Gutmann. 2007. *Fixing Men*.
- 2:30 – 4:30 Lunch with homestay families
5:30 pm – 8:10 pm Medical Spanish Class
- 6/24-26 8 am – 1 pm Field placements in community health projects
2:30 – 4:30 Lunch with homestay families
- 6/25-26 5:30 pm – 8:10 pm Medical Spanish Classes
- 6/27 10 am – 1 pm Final Reflection Session
2 pm – 4 pm Closing Comida
- 6/28 Free Day to say goodbye to families and purchase of last minute gifts
- 6/29 **Departure Day**

Assignment Descriptions

Reaction papers to assigned readings

For each class, students write a 2 page (double-spaced) reaction paper to the assigned readings. This paper helps students prepare for the class discussions and gives me a sense of what participants are getting out of the course. The papers should be posted on the Sakai site before each class. I expect you to use full sentences and paragraphs and to present a coherent discussion of the readings. At the same time, these do not have to be polished projects; they are thought pieces. The paper should briefly address some of the following issues:

- What are the key points the author is trying to make?
- What did you learn from this particular reading assignment?
- What new ideas did you derive from this reading?
- What ideas are you critical of and why?
- What insights, personal and/or scholarly, did you get into issues of health and illness from reading this assignment?

Journals of Your Reflections

Beginning with your arrival in Oaxaca, you should start keeping a journal. This diary is the place where you record your observations and experiences of your time in Mexico, as well as your personal reactions to what you are observing and experiencing in your daily lives and in your community service activities. Use the journal to reflect on your experiences and relate them to what you are reading about and discussing in the course. During your first week, be sure to consider the following questions: What are your reactions to your new reality in Oaxaca, Mexico? What things strike you as unfamiliar and unexpected? What things seem familiar? How are you adjusting to your homestay situation, working with a new group of students, and navigating a new city? How does what you've seen so far match or conflict with your prior expectations? Write at least five pages each week in your journal, and be prepared to present insights from your journal writing process in Friday morning Reflection Seminars.

Final Paper

At the end of the program students write a 5 page paper (double-spaced). Students should assess their learning along a number of dimensions: What did you learn about health in Mexico? What did you learn from living in Mexican culture for a month? What did you learn about yourself in terms of your skills, cross-cultural strengths and weaknesses, and interests in possible future directions? You had a wide range of experiences living, studying and working in Oaxaca for 5 weeks. When I ask you what you learned, I am thinking of all these different experiences. Students can choose to review each dimension of the program as a learning experience or to focus on themes that cut across program activities. Feel free to be creative in how you do this.

Possible Service Activities

A critical component of this program is the service-learning dimension. The philosophy of service-learning is that through engagement with people in the world, students can gain a much deeper understanding of social reality than through book learning alone. Students can also make meaningful contributions to improving the world around them. Students spend three mornings each week in service activities in health-related programs around Oaxaca coordinated by SURCO. Some of the possible placement sites from past summers include:

Secretaria de Salubridad y Asistencia (Seguro Popular Clinics): This is the public healthcare system for citizens who are generally the poorest in Oaxaca. There is a main hospital located in the city of Oaxaca and numerous clinics scattered through the state providing various clinical and health education services. Participants will work in the smaller clinics alongside nurses and doctors. Students will assist in checking-in patients, participating in campaigns- like vaccinations or clean patios- and helping with a health census. We have worked in several Seguro Popular clinics in and around Oaxaca City.

CORAL (Centro Oaxaqueño de Rehabilitación de Audición y Lenguaje): CORAL offers hearing-impaired children and adults the gift of a brighter future by providing a full range of low-cost hearing rehabilitative services and programs for those Oaxaqueños that generally cannot afford them. Volunteers will work with the director and teachers at CORAL to facilitate education, help with fundraising, and work with the children and their parents.

Horse Therapy Project [Equinoterapia]: The goal of this project is to provide high quality equine therapy to children of all ages with a range of mental, emotional and physical disabilities. Through the medium of equine therapy, the organization is able to teach and provide rehabilitation services to many children in the community and surrounding areas. The center provides a place for children to learn, develop, be accepted and stretch their muscles by receiving therapy on horseback. The students will be working with the psychologist as well.

Puente a la Salud Comunitaria: Puente a la Salud Comunitaria contributes to food sovereignty and advances the health and well-being of rural communities in Mexico by promoting the cultivation, consumption and commercialization of amaranth. Puente works towards a world where families and communities live with dignity and exercise their food sovereignty through the sustainable cultivation, consumption, exchange and commercialization of local healthy food sources.