

Making a Difference in Guatemala

by Piotr Jusik

Berne famously said that we should aim to make every hour of our lives seem like a work of art. Last Thursday was filled, for me, with the artistry and richness that comes with the diversity of the counseling field—the sort of day that makes one feel alive, authentic, thrilled, hopeful, and proud. I started with a counseling session in English with an Indian client, followed by a session in Polish, and then a workshop in Spanish for a company that asked me for some group coaching. So many contexts and roles that share the common denominator of transactional analysis! I love the colors, cultures, and diversity!

That's why I'm teaching a counseling skills course for teachers at the Universidad del Valle in Sololá in the western highlands of Guatemala. I'm also running an online practice with clients from around the world while contributing to the life of the local community of the pueblo of Panajachel, on the shores of Lake Atitlan. This is the right spot for writing my CTA and figuring out my identity as a transactional analyst.

For the last 10 years, teaching was my main professional activity, which



Guatemalans love recognition through diplomas (from left standing): Jose, Irma, Miriam, Cristina, Piotr, and Abigail; (in front); Carlos

stimulated me to focus on the application of TA counseling in education. Everything started with a teaching job in an international school in my home country of Poland. Having moved to London, I taught children excluded from mainstream schools due to emotional and behavioral difficulties. That was when TA came to me and sparked my interest in learning more about human nature.

Personally, I find it useful in the education environment to distinguish formal counseling sessions from

informal chats that still can give a boost to a learner in need. There is so much that can be done talking to kids in corridors, on schools trips, or just before a lesson. It is useful to equip teachers with some TA tools and strengthen their Adult. The course I teach is called “Informal Counseling Skills for Teachers,” and it is aimed at third-year psychopedagogy students. I sometimes hear them say that they are grateful for my teaching, and I cross this thankful Child/generous Parent transac-



Piotr (far right) and his students in Guatemala

tion by bluntly saying “I am simply doing a job!”

I ponder the context of colonization and how it shapes the dynamics of our intercultural encounter. Whether I like it or not, I represent the system of white colonizers that came here to impose their versions of reality a few centuries ago. I consciously decide to approach the whole experience from a cocreative stance. I seek to negotiate meaning in an Adult-Adult space, to be curious about the way I perceive others and they perceive me.

For instance, I have been pulling my hair out because my students come to class at least 30 minutes late. My Parent gets angry, and my Child freaks out as the students calmly enter the classroom shuffling their feet as if they were in a dream-like state. I tried a number of things: exploring, questioning, specifying perspectives, and so on. I asked, “What is your reality? Is it OK for you to miss class when you’re paying for it?” It’s like a client who is constantly 25 minutes late to a 50-minute session. The stu-

dents seemed unmoved by my inquiry. My supervisor suggested that there may be a cultural Don’t Think. I suppose that makes sense given the history of Guatemalan civil war that tore the indigenous communities apart here from 1960–1996. I remind myself that trauma deprives people

of their sense of agency. Perhaps part of my role is to sit in an empty room and feel unimportant, just like the Guatemalan people did through the persecutory rule of their government.

Nonetheless, I persevere and keep asking about the students’ perspective. They say that university often changes plans with no consideration. OK, they’re feeling done to and jaded. They also say that they are tired; it’s their last year of university, and they work full time to make ends meet. They occupy a variety of roles, including as primary school teachers and special education consultants running training projects through the ministry of education to enhance adult literacy. They support a wide range of learners, from as young as 5 to as old as 83. So, they have a lot on their plates.

However, in the last class I decided to look at our process from a systemic perspective. I asked the students to name their feelings and write them on the board. No names, no personal confrontation so as to depersonalize the process.

We then took a bird’s-eye view and looked at the cocreated dynamics as an interaction between the Mayan and white cultures. As we exchanged thoughts, I named the fact that we can unconsciously enact the dynamic of colonization and oppression. My truths and versions of reality might seem more legitimate to them. The students perked up and started speaking their truths. They named their exhaustion and hopelessness. Some of them had lost parents in the civil war or experienced domestic violence. As women, they felt inadequate and treated as less able and less intelligent in a machista society. It was interesting that even though we represented different cultures, we all felt frustrated, hopeless, and lost. I suppose intercultural work comes with a price.

We went on to discuss the machista patterns that Gloria Noriega described in her work on codependence. A quick sketch of a symbiotic relationship and they understood the pervasive patterns that persist in Latin countries. Suddenly, some universal themes emerged, such as freedom, human nature, intimacy, and courage. It didn’t matter that they didn’t come on time anymore. What mattered was our contact, the cocreated and shared reality. I commented on how in the West our time is dictated by work and schedules.

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For Guatemalans, relationships are more important than tasks. In some way, they are free, they don't have to readily succumb to the demands of their duties. They'd rather have a chat first, make sure everyone is stroked, and then get on with the job.

Nevertheless, a prime example of symbiosis played out among us. When I kept asking about their lateness, they concluded that they were not taking their commitment seriously, and they could not change it. They reacted passively, unwilling to examine their own motivations further. Finally, it emerged that they would come late to class because there was no extra diploma for the course. They needed a Parental stamp of approval in order to see their learning as valid. My question "who are you learning for?" was met with silence and confusion. In spite of that, in the coming weeks, most of them were late on average less than 30 minutes. Thus, their Adult expanded, even though it seems to me that our notions of time will simply be different.

It could be argued that TA is a system that itself might also have a tendency to colonize. And yet, when I asked the students, "What is this like in your Mayan cosmovision?" They came alive and talked about their connection to Mother Earth and the need for balance and interdependence. I chuckle inside thinking that sounds a bit like the integrating Adult as described by Keith Tudor. And I chose to be quiet, knowing that our implicit understanding is more worthy than the theoretical digressions that could take away the depth of our encounter. 📍

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Students giving their final presentations

Award Nominations Sought

Eric Berne Memorial Award

Deadline: 1 December 2019

Send EBMA nominations to committee chair
Lis Heath at lis.heath@gmail.com.

Hedges Capers Humanitarian Award

Muriel James Living Principles Award

ITAA Service Award

Goulding Social Justice Award

Deadline: 1 January 2020

Send nominations for the Capers, James, Goulding, and Service Awards to
ITAA Secretary Sumithra Sharatkumar at sumithrask@gmail.com

ITAA Research Award

Deadline: 1 January 2020

Send nominations for the ITAA Research Award to committee chair
Susan George at susangeorge4@yahoo.com

See the ITAA Web site at www.itaaworld.org/itaa-awards or contact the ITAA
at info@itaaworld.org for details on making nominations for these awards.