

## Collaborating Across Diversity: Rewards and Challenges

*María Teresa Fátima Encinas  
Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla*

*María Thomas-Ruzic  
Universidad de Colorado en Denver,  
Estados Unidos de Norteamérica*

### **Abstract**

Globalization and internationalization have promoted a significant number of policies and projects related to student and faculty mobility, and progressively more to collaborations among universities. Although the effects of globalization vary significantly among nations, universities tend to look for projects to expand their resources through collaboration with other institutions.

The ELT profession in Mexico has been characterized by a high level of experience with internationalization projects focused mostly on student and faculty mobility (Ramos, 2000) and on faculty professional development through distance or semi-distance programs. However, in the last decade, due mainly to faculty participation in graduate and post-graduate programs abroad and an interest in forging North-South conversations, more joint projects based on faculty participation have begun to emerge.

While promising, these collaborative ventures bring with them a number of challenges such as the need to be sensitive to the dynamics of north-south (Pennycook, 1994; Smith, 2005), communicate needs and concerns (John-Steiner, 2000) and define shared goals, and negotiate complex and dynamic processes of all the institutions involved. Thus, as universities build collaborative projects, there is a growing need for research in these areas.

We first describe a number of current efforts between the MA English Teaching programs from the University of Colorado at Denver and the Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla in the areas of teacher education, intercultural learning, literacy and technology. We then present the voices of different participants. We draw from sociocultural perspectives to conclude with implications for collaborations among diverse participants across geopolitical boundaries.

Globalization and internationalization, two central movements in higher education, have promoted a significant number of policies, projects and efforts related generally to student and faculty mobility, and progressively more to collaboration among higher education institutions. Although the implications and effects of globalization vary significantly among nations, universities worldwide tend to look for

projects to expand their resources through collaboration with other educational institutions and community partners.

The English Language Teaching profession in Mexico has been characterized by a relatively high level of experience with internationalization projects. Until recently most of these projects have been promoted by agencies linked to the governments of the UK, US, or Australia—that is, of the native English-speaking world—with Mexican universities tending to host or administer these transnational programs rather than participate academically in their design and implementation (Didou 2006). These programs have generally focused on student and faculty exchange and mobility (Ramos, 2000) and on faculty professional development through distance or semi-distance programs. However, in the last decade, due mainly to faculty participation in graduate and post-graduate programs abroad and an interest in forging transnational, North-South, conversations, more joint projects based on faculty participation among higher education institutions have begun to emerge. [Didou 2006]

While promising, these collaborative ventures with diverse participants bring with them a significant number of challenges. Among these are the need to translate institutional regulations and norms and professional languages (Nocon, Nilsen & Cole, 2002, 2006), communicate forthrightly about needs and concerns (John-Steiner, 2000) and define shared goals, and negotiate complex and dynamic processes among different participants at multiple levels of all the institutions involved. All these negotiation processes among the diverse participants among the administrations, professors and students of both universities are permeated in some way or another by the north-south dynamics and “colonialism” (Pennycook, 1994; Smith, 2006). The political relationship between the United States and Mexico seems to be underlyingly and sometimes openly present in all these negotiations. Thus, as we embark and build on collaborative projects and negotiate the complexities of diversity, there is correspondingly a growing need for bringing critical perspectives and research in these areas.

We first describe the background for a number of current efforts between the MA English Teaching program at the Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla (BUAP) and the School of Education and Human Development at the University of

Colorado at Denver and Health Sciences Center (UCDHSC). Efforts thus far have been in the areas of teacher education and intercultural learning, literacy and technology. We then present the voices and perspectives of different participants in a recent collaborations, and some of the challenges that these efforts have generated. We draw from sociocultural perspectives to conclude with implications for collaborations among diverse participants across geopolitical boundaries.

## 1. Background

Participants in the collaboration described here included students, faculty, and administrators from programs in two different institutions: the *Maestria* in English Language Teaching at the BUAP, and MA programs in Education at the University of Colorado—at both the Denver and Boulder campuses. The 22 BUAP students were also practicing English teachers in higher education institutions, *preparatorias*, or private companies in Puebla. The 26 participants from Colorado were MA students either in Educational Equity and Cultural Diversity (at CU-Boulder) or in Curriculum and Instruction: Emphasis in Bilingual Education and English as a Second Language (at UCDHSC). Most were elementary school teachers.

The MA English Teaching at the BUAP was launched in September 2005 as the fourth master's level program in English Teaching in Mexico. The two Education programs at the University of Colorado have been established, though under somewhat different names, since the 1970s.

This ongoing joint venture began with the six-month stay of a Fulbright visiting professor from the University of Colorado at Denver and Health Sciences Center (UCDHSD) at the *Facultad de Lenguas*, BUAP in 2004, a time during which the curriculum for the MA in English Teaching program was being developed. Dr. Thomas-Ruzic started participating in, and later coordinating, the process. Her main contributions were the use of the Teacher Education TESOL Standards not only in the curricular framework but also for the analysis and evaluation of the new program. These initiatives resulted in the integration of two new areas: culture and practicum. Thomas-Ruzic and Marlene Brenes-Carajal reported on the new program at the TESOL 2005 Convention,

The collaboration experience with Thomas-Ruzic--framed by the BUAP's commitment to internationalization as well as the search for options which would allow us to expand our programs' resources--led us to pursue the efforts which we report on in this presentation. The evaluation of these efforts and new projects for the near future will soon be built into a formal institutional agreement between the two universities.

Subsequent to the initial collaboration experiences above, two MA courses were programmed for the Summer 2006 at the BUAP: Sociolinguistics, and Testing and Evaluation. Two professors from the University of Colorado, one being Thomas-Ruzic, taught the courses using a hybrid model. This model involved a distance component preceding an intensive two-week, on-site course session and a second distance component following the on-site sessions. A student from another BUAP program, the *Maestría en Ciencias del Lenguaje*, and one from the from the University of Colorado at Denver took these courses along with the cohort of 22 MA students from the *Facultad de Lenguas* at the BUAP.

One of the activities during the intensive on-site sessions included a group of MA students from the University of Colorado and their professors who were in Puebla for a regular summer program linked to two local elementary schools. All together, 26 MA Colorado students and their professors were able to attend the afternoon 'gathering', joining the group of 24 *Maestria* students and seven faculty and administrators from the BUAP for the chance to meet, talk, and exchange experiences.

In order to construct a clearer picture of how the different participants viewed the 2006 summer course experience and the Colorado MA students and faculty visit, we carried out focus group interviews with the BUAP MA students in September 2006, six weeks following the course meetings. In September and October we also interviewed the Director of the *Facultad de Lenguas* at the BUAP as well as several professors from the University of Colorado. We report on these interviews below.

## **2. Voices and perspectives of the different participants on the summer courses**

### **2.1 The BUAP MA students' perspectives on the courses**

When asked about their expectations or apprehensions before starting the course on site, most of the MA students admitted to feeling quite apprehensive before the course. They said they thought that the professors from the University of Colorado would be demanding, threatening and critical of them and their English. They were, therefore, concerned about participating in class and online. A few reported feeling excited and that they had looked forward to new experiences and challenges. This latter group tended to be students who had had more contact with native English speakers or had lived in an English speaking country. One student said she was interested in comparing the Colorado professors with their Mexican counterparts.

... it was exciting to work with native teachers. They are from Colorado, they are working there, they are from a different society than ours. And also to compare them with Mexican teachers ...

Overall the students interviewed considered the on-site course challenging and demanding. They appreciated the ways in which both professors promoted participation on line and in the classroom. Most appeared to concur with the comment that "the topics were so involving and so interesting that we didn't really pay much attention to the format, but rather to the meaning..."

When asked about the on-line component, the students did not mention having problems with their abilities. However, a number of students reported feeling stressed because of limited internet access:

.. like in my case I didn't have access at home. . . You have to work to do some other things and also plan your time and schedule your time to have them--at least 20 or 30 minutes to read what your classmates have been posting, and also give your opinion.

Most of the students considered the two intensive weeks to be very demanding:

I don't know if it happened to all of my classmates, but we were going through two intensive weeks but we didn't know how hard that would be. Once we got there we were like Oh my god! This is way too much, how can I handle it? Sometimes we had to quit some classes we had in the afternoon, stop working so we could attend class and even when all the material that we got was really interesting, and all that, yeah sometimes we needed to breathe a little, a break to breathe.

The BUAP students had different opinions about one of the professors' cautiousness regarding language education policies. One student reported she would have liked the professor to give her opinion; instead "she kept herself very neutral and she didn't want to take sides....." Capturing another sentiment of some of the students, another student stated, "What I like most about her is her respect." Direct contact and shared experiences seem to be pathways for participants to begin to re-examine their assumptions and apprehensions and start communicating. This process may be especially true given the complexity of the North–South relationships, which may play out in what Mexicans and North Americans feel and think about one another.

## **2.2 Colorado visiting summer course instructors' reflections on their experiences with the students and the courses, specifically with regard to academic literacy and on-line components**

Overall the two instructors agreed that they were favorably impressed with the abilities, informedness, and commitment of the *Maestría* students in the courses they taught: Assessment and Evaluation (Miller) and Sociolinguistics (Thomas-Ruzic). Of the students Miller noted:

I had never met a group of people so appreciative of the opportunity to ... learn in a graduate course setting. . . The students were extremely passionate about their work as English teachers, and challenged themselves to question the *status quo*. They were extremely appreciative of my time and my perspective and patient with me as I learned more about the Mexican system and how it related to our course. The students always stayed in English when having discussions in class.

When asked about the students' writing abilities, Miller wrote:

The [quality of the] written work submitted varied, just as it does with our students here [at the University of Colorado at Denver]. I adjusted my writing rubric to include a stronger component of grammar/mechanics, more as a tool to give feedback to students on their written English. Some students needed additional work on organization, and showed tremendous improvement between the first and final paper in this area.

In general, the instructors found the students' academic literacy backgrounds in English to be developed more than sufficiently well to complete the written assignments successfully and on time. The students made effective and substantive use of the instructors' feedback on their ideas and their writing, incorporating feedback in their revisions and redrafts of written assignments. Adjustments that the instructors reported making for this group appeared to have more to do with the short, intensive, time frame than to students' abilities. For example, where Miller's assessment class normally included six assignments, she cut it back to four, replacing two of the assignments with points for online discussion.

Because of the short duration and intensity of the course, the two instructors felt that there was not enough time to give some of the readings that attention they needed. This sentiment was echoed by a number of the students as well. The instructors also made some adjustments. These included moving some of the discussions of readings to on-line; making some of the assigned readings optional, and using a "jigsaw" strategy so that different groups of students read and reported out to the others on what they had read and analyzed. Miller noted that she cut back on the number of readings to one text and additional articles (she usually includes two texts and about twice the number of articles). She noted that this reduction in reading was similar to what she would do for a class in the U.S. meeting during a short summer session.

On-line and electronic tools were felt by the instructors to enhance the learning experiences of the courses. Four tools, and how they were used, are discussed briefly below.

1) Readings. Through the Auraria Library's electronic course reserves, students were able to access a web-based reading packet of assigned and optional articles and chapters that one of the instructor's had arranged to have scanned and accessible in PDF.

2) Discussions. An environment for communicating in the two different courses on line through discussion areas, web links, and email was created through NiceNet. Both instructors engaged the students in the use of this tool for several weeks prior to the onset of the face-to-face course meetings. For Thomas-Ruzic's course, short readings and vignettes were made available and students were asked to post reading reactions and make connections to their own practice and thinking. Miller had students post a short piece describing their teaching contexts. During the three weeks of face-to-face class meetings, . Thomas-Ruzic made limited, supplemental use of the discussion areas; both instructors used the discussion areas for follow-up readings and reflections in their two on-line weeks that followed the on-site meetings.

3) Posting of assignments and other attachments. A *Yahoo Group* area was made available to the summer instructors and students for purposes of posting (assignments, photos, course lecture notes, PowerPoint presentations, relevant links and research). The Yahoo Group was used both during the face-to-face course meetings and in the two final on-line weeks.

Both instructors agreed that the students appeared to make excellent uses of the tools, especially, the discussion areas in NiceNet in which the instructors had structured small groups, typically of 3 to 5 students. Miller noted that because it was her first time using an online component, she probably was not as responsive to students' comments as she would have liked. She also noted that it was challenging for her to come back to Colorado and retain some of the same intensity that she had experienced in Mexico.

4. “Smart” classroom. In addition to the on-line tools above, both instructors were pleased to put the Facultad’s “smart room” technology in their classrooms to good use, and to be able to draw on the expertise and availability of the technical staff. In the more traditional, “paper” dimension, Miller notes she had underestimated the time and labor involved for support staff to prepare photocopies for classes each day. Thus in the future she plans to create a course packet ahead of time and have it available to students from the onset, possibly electronically, and limit copies to a few supplements as needed.

When asked about other challenges associated with her experience at the BUAP, Miller reflected on the challenge she experienced in trying to plan a course that would allow students to make meaningful connections with the materials and projects, given the limited knowledge she had about the students’ academic and professional backgrounds, contexts and interests. Once on site, however, Encinas and others were available and valuable as resources for additional information not only about the students but the *Facultad de lenguas*, the BUAP, and also the Mexican educational system. Thomas-Ruzic was able to build upon her 2004 experiences as a visiting professor in the *Licenciatura* program, when she had taught a sociolinguistics course at the undergraduate level. She had also had the opportunity to meet the *Maestria* students earlier in the academic year, when she had joined the group to give a guest talk. Both instructors found that the few course readings they had been able to include relevant to the Mexican context were highly appreciated by the students; the instructors planned to make greater efforts to represent Mexican researchers and methodologists in their course readings in the future.

One issue that posed somewhat of a conundrum for the instructors was students’ arriving late to class, something which seemed to become more prevalent over the two weeks. On the other hand, Miller pointed out that from her experience, the BUAP students tended to be more prompt than her students in Colorado in getting their writing assignments in.

### **2.3 Facultad de Lenguas Director's perspective on the courses**

Overall, the *Director de la Facultad de Lenguas* expressed his very positive impression of the collaboration efforts between the University of Colorado and the BUAP. The only two issues that he brought up in an interview were the complexity of the political relationship between the two countries and the online components. There seems to be certain reluctance, or at least a caution, about implementing distance education and mixed modality courses.

### **3. Encounter between the BUAP and CU students**

The encounter between the MA students and their professors from the University of Colorado and their BUAP counterparts took place on one of the afternoons of the intensive session. The encounter was framed in terms of a claim by Smith (2005, drawing from the work of Stromquist, 2002) that teachers in both U.S. and Mexico working in issues of language and schooling “should consider themselves ‘comparative educators.’” Given the power differential underlying educational and other matters between the two countries, Smith argues that a comparative educational approach is needed to help mitigate this imbalance of power by ensuring that educators become familiar with educational reforms and processes going on in both the North and South. Although Smith was using the notion *comparative educator* to discuss two-way immersion programs based on data collected in public schools in the U.S. Southwest, we found the notion a useful one in which to engage the Mexican and Colorado as they considered their own practices, contexts and responsibilities as educators. Following some introductory remarks about the respective programs by Kathy Escamilla and Fatima Encinas, the students were asked to get into mixed groups of four to talk to and ask one another about their professional work, interests, and challenges. Faculty and administration also took the opportunity to get acquainted and exchange ideas, or to join the student groups.

In the focus group interviews three months later, MA students at the BUAP expressed different opinions about the encounter. One group of students noted that the exchanges were pleasant but not particularly important, with one student stating “...it was simply “a plain, informal conversation about why they [the Colorado

students] were here, what they were doing here.” Another group of BUAP students found the conversations very substantive. One student said: “The person I talked to was interested for example in our identity, in our history, in our traditions.” We feel the sentiments expressed varied due in part to the dynamics of the particular small groups, and also, to how much or how little previous contact with North Americans the BUAP students had had, with those who had had less previous experience ascribing more importance to the conversations.

The University of Colorado students wrote journals as part of the requirements for the class in their Puebla experience that incorporated their cultural visits. The students were asked to write a narrative and include five of their most memorable moments. Kathy Escamilla reported (2006, personal communication) that many if not the majority of the students listed the BUAP encounter among their most memorable moments of their Puebla stay. One student noted in her journal that her group had discussed immigration issues, and that the exchange of emotions had created a strong connection among the group. This student wrote that it would be an honor to be part of an exchange effort involving the Mexican teachers in Colorado. Students’ journals also expressed the wish to have connected with the BUAP students for more time and for more than one afternoon.

#### **4. Where are we now? –And where are we going?**

At the time of this writing, our respective universities’ international offices and legal counsels are still negotiating the language of the *convenio*, or memorandum of agreement—some nine months after the first draft was sent from the BUAP. This *convenio*, once signed, will establish a formal institutional relationship intended to facilitate exchanges and joint projects. In the meantime, the authors have not been losing any time. Some recent and upcoming activities on their “drawing board” include:

- October 2006. A participant from the University of Colorado's Puebla 2006 summer program hosted a BUAP student ("Laura") and her Colombian colleague ("Marta") in her home. Laura and Marta spent several days in the teacher's classroom--observing, participating, engaging with students and assisting the teacher. They also made all-day visits to two different Denver-area high schools and joined two different university classes.
- April 2007. Colorado graduate students and teachers will host many of the cohort of 22 BUAP Master's students. Students will stay in homestays in the Denver area for one week, spending time in their host teacher's classroom and school, and also visiting university classes. This exchange effort comes in response to the interest the BUAP group expressed to spend time working, collaborating and/or researching with teachers in and Colorado, and in having the opportunity to learn in Colorado what the Colorado students learned in Puebla.
- Summer 2007. Jointly taught summer courses by the authors will involve students from both institutions. The authors are also planning a research project looking at issues of literacy and learner identity in several successful, highly ranked *secundarias* in Puebla.

As we forge transnational, North-South conversations, our joint projects continue to emerge from faculty co-participation. With the aim of engaging our students and teachers in dynamic, shared learning opportunities, we believe that we can overcome some of the barriers that get in the way of serving *all* our students and communities--south and north. We are committed to negotiating, renegotiating and researching the complex processes on multiple institutional levels involved in collaborations that cross borders.

With regard to the exchange opportunities being projected, one BUAP student expressed the sentiments of the group: "It looks like a very promising future." Indeed, collaborating across diversity, no matter the obstacles and adversity, holds hope and promise, along with challenges, for us all.

## References

- Didou, S. (2006, March 16 ). Internacionalización de la educación superior y provisión de servicios educativos en América Latina: del voluntarismo a las elecciones estratégicas. Paper presented at the Seminario internacional IESALC – UNESCO Conferencia de Rectores, Panama . Retrieved on August 1, 2006 from [www.iesalc.unesco.org.ve/internalización%20es.%20didou%20no%20presentación.pdf](http://www.iesalc.unesco.org.ve/internalización%20es.%20didou%20no%20presentación.pdf)
- John-Steiner, V. (2000). *Creative collaboration*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Nocon, H., Nilsson, M., & Cole, M. (2004). Spiders, firesouls, and little fingers: Necessary magic in university-community collaboration. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 35(3). 368-385.
- Pennycook, A. (1994). *The cultural politics of English as an international language*. New York: Longman.
- Ramos, G. (2000, January 15). Internacionalización de la educación superior. Paper presented at Primer Encuentro Docente. Educación Superior: Retos y Perspectivas, Universidad del Valle de México, México DF, México. Retrieved on August 1, 2006 from [www.unal.edu.co/ori/red-orion/docs/internal-Mexico.pdf](http://www.unal.edu.co/ori/red-orion/docs/internal-Mexico.pdf)
- Smith, P. H. (2005). Socio-cultural processes in two-way immersion education. *Lenguas en contexto* (2), Autumn. (p. 15-21).
- Stromquist. N.P. (2002). Globalization, the I, and the Other. *Current Issues in Comparative Education* 4 (2). <http://www.tc.columbia.edu/cice/articles/nps142.htm>  
Consulted by Smith, P.H. (see above.).

**María Teresa Fátima Encinas** coordinates the MA in English Language Teaching at the Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla, México. Her teaching and research interests include teacher collaboration, teacher development, writing and multiliteracies.

fatimaencinas@puebla.megared.net.mx

**Maria Thomas-Ruzic** (Ph.D. Linguistics, University of Colorado, Boulder) works in language teacher education, supervision and mentoring. Her teaching and research interests include culturally responsive pedagogies, and teacher learning, teacher inquiry and exchange. As a Fulbright scholar in 2004, she began collaborating with the Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla.

Maria.Thomas-ruzic@cudenver.edu