

UC MEXUS-CONACYT COLLABORATIVE GRANT

Maya study fosters binational ties

BY FRANCES FERNANDES

In 2005, a Mexican educator and a UC San Diego communications psychologist launched a binational collaboration to study primary education among Mayan-speaking children.

The UC MEXUS-CONACYT Collaborative Grant project, *Elementary education, culture and cognitive processes of the Mayan children of Yucatan, Mexico*, was designed to investigate culture-sensitive educational conditions in Yucatán and to develop specific pedagogical interventions. Mexican partner Juan Carlos Mijangos Noh, a researcher from Escuela Normal Rodolfo Menéndez de la Peña, Mérida, Yucatán, was already studying the education of the indigenous population. For this project, Noh and his graduate student team were to work closely with a research team led by Michael Cole, a UCSD professor of communications and psychology, in designing and implementing the study, and creating culturally sensitive educational material to help improve school performance in the target community of Chacsinkin.¹

But early in the project, it became apparent that Maya families in that community no longer were using the indigenous language and culture that Cole and Noh sought to evaluate. Instead, parents and teachers were focusing on mainstream Spanish. When Cole's graduate student Robert Lecusay went to Chacsinkin to observe classes, he found teachers unwilling to cooperate with him. The teachers "parachuted in" from more affluent communities, Cole said. Their discomfort with the local community and lack of respect for its culture was communicated to the children in a variety of subtle ways. They saw local people as culturally inferior and the children were made to feel culturally inferior also. The researchers



Photo by Robert Lecusay

A research collaboration between Escuela Normal Rodolfo Menéndez de la Peña and UC San Diego focused on Maya children in Chacsinkin. A house in the village is pictured above.

saw this as evidence that teachers were disconnected and disinterested in the town.

The Chacsinkin project had seemingly run aground. However, the project was conceived with additional goals, enabling the researchers to continue their work in unanticipated directions. The investigators invited experienced researchers John Lucy, Suzanne Gaskins and Luis Moll to take part as "advisors."² Both principal investigators also sought to ensure that the work would continue beyond the scope of the initial project by using it to prepare young scholars in "the study of development, learning and the pedagogical science."

From the outset, the researchers planned to use new audio-visual technology to enhance the collaborative experience on both sides of the border. A sophisticated version of a webcam, a Polycom, was to be used for plan-

¹ Chacsinkin is a village 104 kilometers southwest of Mérida.

ning and discussions between the widely dispersed research groups. In addition to Lucy and Gaskins, who were working in a community close to Chacsinkin, graduate students working with Moll and other Universidad Autónoma de Yucatán (UADY) researchers were brought into the discussions.

This expanded network required the coordination of several institutions, facilities, technical personnel, researchers and students across three time zones, two nations and two languages. Cole research associate Virginia Gordon saw multiple opportunities for discoordination, some potentially catastrophic. UADY needed special permission from the Mexican government to bypass a firewall³ to connect with the U.S. universities through an Internet-mediated videoconference. Added to these stumbling blocks were power failures, audio problems, poor acoustics, a scarcity of bilingual technicians and the timidity of graduate students. Yet Cole saw these apparent limitations as benefits in disguise. "It's a little bit awkward . . . the whole turn-taking mechanism is slowed down. But that's great because everyone thinks before they speak, and they have to work a little harder at understanding one another."

The videoconferencing allowed participants to build a new body of knowledge that spawned additional collaborations and established new ties among researchers and students with overlapping interests. The project took on a life of its own as researchers found ways in which they could broaden its scope. Gordon saw that group understanding of the issue was greatly enhanced by comparing the situation of Mayan speakers in Mexico with that of Spanish speakers in the U.S. International/intercultural dialogs of this kind could contribute to "higher order learning."⁴ Cross-national comparisons also helped

researchers better understand the complexities of minority ethnic group life within a dominant majority culture.

The situation in the Maya village had a direct parallel in San Diego County. In part, the project had been designed to compare to Cole's extensive work with San Diego elementary school children, which demonstrated how cultural contexts condition cognitive processes. Gordon had experienced dynamics similar to those occurring in Chacsinkin in her own work in San Diego. Gordon and then-fellow graduate student Honorine Nacon observed Latino parents at one San Diego school voting to eliminate a bilingual Spanish program because they wanted their children to learn only English and be more integrated with the English-speaking community. There also, Gordon observed that most of the teachers commuted from more affluent areas and seemed eager to leave as soon as their classroom duties were completed. In Arizona, where Moll observed similar dynamics, he addressed the issue of culturally disconnected middle-class teachers by showing them how to incorporate "local funds of knowledge" into the education experience. Teachers were exposed to the local community where they spent time learning about the specific skills and experience that local people could contribute to education.

Eventually, the audio-visual meetings enabled researchers and students who were operating in the same intellectual arena to become acquainted and set up face-to-face meetings, and some of the discussions evolved into new projects. In the town where the Chicago researchers Lucy and Gaskins were working, parents strongly advocated the practice of Mayan language and culture—unlike in Chacsinkin. The researchers set up a meeting with Mijangos Noh and his students, and remained in contact even after the Cole-Mijangos Noh collaboration came to a close.

In addition, Moll's graduate students and junior researchers became energized by the discussion, and one student decided to devote her doctoral dissertation to comparing home literacy in Arizona and Yucatán.

Mijangos Noh and Universidad de Yucatán student Fabiola Romero Gamboa wrote a book, *Mundos encontrados, análisis de la educación primaria indígena en las comunidades en el Sur de Yucatán*, about the experience (Ediciones Pomares, 2006). An English-language version is in the works.

² John Lucy, University of Chicago William Benton Professor, Department of Comparative Human Development and Psychology, <http://home.uchicago.edu/~johnlucy> and Susanne Gaskins of Northeastern University are experts on Mayan language education and development. Professor of Education Luis Moll, Department of Language, Reading and Culture, University of Arizona, and associate dean for academic affairs for the College of Education, is an expert in language, reading and culture.

³ Gordon, Virginia, Robert Lecusay, Michael Cole, Laboratory of Comparative Human Cognition University of California, San Diego "Multisite Videoconferencing between Developed and Developing Countries to Build and Sustain Educational Research Collaborations," a paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago, IL, April, 2007.

⁴ Ibid.