

## **Participating in the U.S.-Brazil Fulbright Teacher Exchange**

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On December 28, 1999, I was informed that I had been selected as a member of the U.S.-Brazil Fulbright Teacher Exchange in 2000. In this program, teachers from Brazil and the United States participate in a direct but non-simultaneous exchange of teaching assignments for the purpose of increasing mutual understanding and cooperation. My personal goals were to improve my teaching methodology, gain an understanding of Brazilian culture, and enhance my intercultural skills, including awareness, understanding, and competence. This exchange experience was immensely valuable because it transformed my perceptions and practices and enriched my appreciation of another culture.

The first phase of the program began with the arrival in the United States of twelve Brazilian EFL teachers on March 18, 2000. These teachers, from the elementary, secondary, and university levels, spent seven weeks in the United States during March, April, and May. Working with their partners, they engaged in educational activities that included observing and teaching classes and discussing curriculum design. In addition, a variety of social and cultural activities were planned to introduce the Brazilians to the American lifestyle and culture.

My partner, Mariza Riva de Almeida, is a professor of EFL at the Federal University of Parana in Curitiba. Mariza and I became friends almost immediately, which enhanced our close working relationship. Mariza had an advantage in terms of the exchange program: she is fluent in both Portuguese and English, but I do not speak Portuguese. For seven weeks Mariza attended my classes at American University, as an observer and team teacher, and took part in the TESOL program as a teacher trainer.

In phase two, the U.S. teachers spent five weeks in Brazil in July and August. In our first week, we attended the BRAZ-TESOL national convention in Sao Paulo from July 17 to 20, 2000. The conference, which was held at McKenzie University, provided a variety of excellent

presentations. The topics ranged from using computer technology and the Internet to raising cultural awareness in our global universe. There were 1060 participants from Brazil and around the world. The breadth and depth of experience represented in that conference were great. I met old friends and made new ones, learned much from listening to my colleagues, and gave two presentations. From Sao Paulo we all traveled to our assignments in the states of Parana, Ceara, Goias, and Bahia.

I arrived in Curitiba during winter break. In this week before university classes began, I became acquainted with the Parana Secretary of Education, Alcyone Saliba, and her deputy Ines Carneletto, who arranged for me to visit public elementary and middle schools. I saw eight schools, ranging from some with good facilities to others that were in bad repair. This journey through the public school system was one of the most fascinating and informative aspects of my exchange. I was able to interview principals, teachers, and even a few students. The overall impression was one of a public school system in need of a major restructuring--needing new buildings, textbooks, curricula, and computers. In particular, the lack of English teachers who are fluent in English was obvious. I met many dedicated and hardworking teachers and principals, including Edivina de Lima, the principal of a school that served students from a favela (slum). Edivina works from early morning to late at night because she is determined to help her students survive the poverty, crime, and drugs that surround them. I feel great admiration for her ability to improve the world of her students.

When classes at the Federal University started on August 1, the administrative staff of the university was on strike, making it necessary for the professors to assume administrative tasks, such as registering the students. But the teachers carried on with business as usual. This gave me an insight into the attitude of most Brazilians, which is one of patience and stoic acceptance of problems. Because in the past forty years Brazilians have experienced the hardships of a military dictatorship as well as extreme inflation and a collapse of their economy, they tend not to complain about what must seem minor problems. In other words, they have a different perspective on life than we do, or as the Brazilians say, "a different reality."

Having been an ESL teacher at American University in Washington, D.C. since 1976, I was eager to observe university classes in Brazil and listen to Brazilian English professors share their expertise. Thus, I spent many hours in the Federal University's department of English as a Foreign Language, which has two sections: language and literature. One afternoon I invited seven EFL professors from both the public and the private universities to meet with me to discuss theories, techniques, and experiences in teaching. They spoke openly, as Brazilians do, about their professional lives. We covered topics such as motivation of students, expectations of teachers, methods for teaching writing, literature in the EFL classroom, and curriculum design. I learned a great deal from these creative professors and have already adopted some new teaching ideas, based on our discussions and my observation of EFL classes. One small example of this is that Federal University professors are addressed by students as "Professor first name." I was called Professor Myra in Curitiba and am now the same in Washington, D.C.

Throughout my weeks in Curitiba, I formed close friendships with the professors at the Federal University, who welcomed me into their classrooms, their homes, and their hearts. Besides teaching my partner's classes in advanced writing and reading, I taught classes in North American Literature and British Literature, which turned out to be the highlights of my teaching experience. In general, I found the Federal University students serious, intellectual, and highly responsive. Perhaps this results from the fact that these students are aware that they are an elite group: only four percent of all high school graduates in Brazil go on to higher education (as compared to sixty percent in the States). Those that can pass the difficult entrance exams are accepted into the Federal University system, which is considered the best and is free except for the cost of the books. Private universities are less competitive to enter.

Along with teaching, I gave several presentations to large audiences of students, teachers, and administrators: one presentation at the Federal University on active listening; two at the private Interamericano School on case studies and literature in the ESL/EFL classroom; and one at the State University at Ponta Grossa on poetry. The audience members seemed to enjoy my ideas and were

enthusiastic about sharing their experiences with me. They asked many questions, especially, "How can I come to study in the States?" and "How can I get a Fulbright?"

Three months after returning from Brazil, I have only now begun to integrate the variety of experiences that I encountered during my exchange. It was an intense time of challenge, adjustment, and adventure. It certainly is true that you have to go away from home to broaden your horizons, and living within the Brazilian culture for five weeks opened my eyes. As a native Iowan who has been in Washington, D.C., since 1973, I have learned and grown as a result of my time in Brazil, not only in terms of teaching but more importantly in my understanding of a different world and a different culture. In Brazil I saw widespread poverty, the constant fear of violent crime, strong belief in spiritualism, an emphasis on spontaneity and ingenuity rather than advance planning, and a society that is concerned with class differences. I also saw students who are eager to learn in spite of the scarcity of materials, teachers who work long hours in two or three schools to make a living wage, and administrators who dream of improving the educational standards in Brazil. Overall is the lasting impression of people who are thoughtful, kind, and generous to visitors from the United States.

This Fulbright exchange has affected me in both tangible and intangible ways. The tangible effects can be seen in my teaching methodology. First, I found a meaningful suggestion in the opening plenary session at BRAZ-TESOL. Dr. Maria Antonieta Celani (PUC--Sao Paulo) identified the reflective teacher as the driving force in ELT in "An Arena of Struggle and Contradiction": Where's the Driving Force in ELT? According to Professor Celani, ongoing and dynamic teacher education is one of the central factors in achieving excellence in our profession. This emphasis on the need for teachers' continuous learning and changing involves complex processes, conflict, and struggle. Experienced teachers will recognize the wisdom in Professor Celani's advice to seek new and different ways to motivate and educate our students rather than being satisfied with the commonplace and established systems. As professionals in ESOL (English to Speakers of Other Languages), we can and should continue to learn and improve ourselves

through research, writing, publishing, graduate study, and reflective teaching. Through reflective practice, we can "identify contradictions in order to change our practices."

A second meaningful suggestion came in the closing plenary session given by Dr. Francisco Gomes de Matos (UFPB, ABE--Recife), who spoke on "A Humanizing Agenda for the 21st Century." Professor Gomes de Matos, who has worked to support the rights of language learners, discussed the benefits for both teachers and students of using a humanistic approach to the teaching of English. I agree with Dr. Gomes de Matos and want to implement his suggestions in my classroom. Finally, through my observation of classes at the UFPR, I noticed that the teaching style of many professors at the UFPR was warm and personal, and it differed in subtle ways from my own teaching style. Since I returned from Brazil, I have tried to interact in a Brazilian way with my students, and so far the results have been successful.

As for the intangible effects of my Fulbright, I know that I have been changed by my experiences with Brazilian students and teachers. To be specific, I have a broader perspective and a deeper understanding of my students' experiences. I teach students who come from developing countries like Brazil and who have been educated in educational systems with problems such as those in Brazil. Perhaps I can do more as a teacher now that I have seen another way of life.

I have developed several projects as a result of my exchange. First, my partner and I wrote an article for the BRAZ-TESOL Newsletter titled "A Paradigm for Progress in English Language Teacher Training in Brazil." This article reflects the need for excellent teacher training programs in Brazil. In addition, we did a survey on students' and professors' attitudes toward studying and teaching American and British literature as a means of learning English. Finally, I recently set up an online collaborative project with UFPR Professor Luci Collin through the Learning Technologies Network at the Academy for Educational Development. Students in her class at the UFPR and my AU students are communicating through e-mail. This project supports the Fulbright program's major goal "to improve mutual understanding between people in the United States and people in other countries" and is an exciting continuation of my Fulbright exchange.

Living in Brazil has increased my intercultural awareness, understanding, and competence, and I intend to incorporate this new knowledge into my teaching in a practical way. I hope to take advantage of my sharpened intercultural communication skills to improve my relationships with my international students in the university. Perhaps to some extent I have accomplished the goal of a better understanding of Brazilians, their culture, and their educational system. However, five weeks in a country as complex as Brazil is not enough time to truly understand its richly diverse and mysterious culture. I look forward to having another opportunity to work in Brazil and to having more Brazilian teachers in the United States. My Brazilian colleagues and I have ideas to share and plans to implement, and we have formed lifelong bonds. Although the contrasts between our countries and lifestyles are great, the similarities proved to be even greater.