



Quito, Ecuador

Manna Project International

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Cultural Anthropology
Co-op Fall 2020

Overview

Manna Project International is a US based nonprofit organization, which strives to foster communities of young leaders to become the next generation of social change. The volunteers are the bloodline of the organization and they work collaboratively with each other and the community members to create a better organization.



My role as a Program Director

- + Due to COVID-19 I worked remotely as a Program Director (PD) to implement a variety of community development programs focused on improving health, education and livelihoods.
- + Worked collaboratively in a group of 2 site directors and one other PD as well as trained and collaborated with a group of 12 interns.
- + This position is unpaid - Each PD pays a monthly fee
- + I applied and received the Presidential Global Scholarship to compensate and cover basic necessities such as rent and food.



My role as a Program Director (continued)

- + My co-op was not self-designed since the Program Director position has been an essential component to the company for many years now
- + Wrote grants and headed fundraising and outreach
- + Managed the social media accounts, connected with doners and Alumni



Day in the life

I spent the majority of my time in programs or preparing for them. As a PD you are tasked to teach at least one English as a second language (ESL) course to the community as well as volunteer with at least one of our partner organization. I was fortunate enough to teach three ESL courses alongside two interns. Typically, on site, we would partner with 5 or more organizations but due to COVID-19 and lack of internet access for the majority of our members and partners, we only worked with two partner organizations this fall. I worked directly with the organizations to run four classes a week surrounding different topics such as nutrition, education and mental health. I took care to ensure the curricula was relevant to the community and avoid as much as possible any ethnocentric perspectives.



Day in the life

I taught over Zoom four days a week, to people between 8 and 50 years old. To accomplish this I had to adjust a standard class curriculum to ensure we had an engaging and effective online classroom community. I was responsible for all aspects of the class from prep and curriculum development administration of tests and exams. The curricula were tailored according to age, proficiency and topic.



Hopes for this experience

When entering the co-op, I hoped to gain field experience teaching English and working hands-on in a community. I hoped my experience would teach me about a new language and the practices of a different culture. I hoped to have successfully run two programs.

Due to COVID-19 many of my original hopes were not achieved; however, I was able to learn through a new light. I was able to still make connections, my students taught me about their traditions and cultures, and we were able to compare and share our lives even being so far apart. While COVID has kept us physically apart, I learned how to adapt and ensure there were meaningful connections and mutual value through the additional efforts to maintain programs.



Challenges - Second Languages

Learning a second language is very difficult and requires a lot of practice, focus and, patience; as I liked to tell my students. My co-op provided me with Spanish classes three times a week for the first two months, and I decided to continue for the next four at my own expense. I began my co-op not knowing a word of Spanish with the hope that by the end of my time I would be able to communicate effectively to my students and peers in Spanish and English. In my time, I was able to successfully complete the beginner level Spanish class and move onto the second part.

I was able to complete many of my tasks in this coop without a second thought, but I quickly realized learning a second language was not going to be easy. It was challenging to communicate with my students because the language barrier was too tough to overcome. The majority of our members were beginner or intermediate English speakers, and my Spanish wasn't advanced enough to communicate fluently. I would need to ask a co-worker if they could translate or help me translate to comprehend and work together. It was frustrating that every day I was faced with the barrier. I felt exhausted after a day of learning and speaking in a different language because it requires so much focus to accurately make sentences.

Challenges - Second Languages *(continued)*

One way that I was able to overcome and work through this barrier on my own was utilizing the chat function in Zoom for my students to send me messages and I could use a translator to understand and write back. Being online made this a lot easier because in person I would not have this ability. Another way I was able to work through this challenge was two months in, I advocated for an Ecuadorian Volunteer to work directly with me in classes to translate and be an extra support for the students and I to feel comfortable communicating.

In my own time, I learned and practiced many of the verbs I would teach. I began to learn in Spanish to better communicate and the concepts I was teaching. I learned that making mistakes is perfectly ok when learning a new language; I learned that practice makes mostly perfect. It is rewarding to know that I was able to work through this challenge in many different ways and while on a daily basis it hindered my ability to smoothly communicate, it did not impede on my ability to effectively communicate and do my job.

New Experiences



Despite a virtual environment, we were able to continue the language exchange partner program! Allowing members of our team to interact with and learn from our friends in Ecuador, this quickly became one of our favorite opportunities here at Manna Project!

We discussed some of our favorite hobbies like hiking and cooking. She shared her favorite traditional Ecuadorian foods, the four regions of Ecuador, and some of the best places to visit while in Ecuador. Though having just recently met, we were very excited to learn more about each other and look forward to continuing that connection in the future!



Ethical dilemmas

I did encounter some ethical issues related to the organization's lack of policies regarding eligibility for community member participation. My organization targets people at or below the poverty line. The organization tries its best to cater to this community. However, in the last few years there has been many changes in management and there is no direct rubric set up to judge the impoverished community. In a meeting once the executive director even said, "program directors in the past were tasked by judging upon observation" Such observational judgement can lead to racist or ethnocentric decisions that are antithetical to everything the organization strives to be. Therefore, I had to have a conversation with my supervisor and executive director to work through this issue and to brainstorm ways that a direct rubric and more concrete way of judging the economic status of our community members could be implemented. While in my time I did not get to complete the project as it requires extensive research and professional development, my hope is in the future there will be a continued effort to improve the policies and practices related to the eligibility for community member participation with the organization.

Reflecting on what to do next

This experience absolutely helped me solidify my interests and what I would like to continue doing for the next 5 years at least. I knew I had a passion for working in community engagement and with a variety of ages. I went into this job excited and had an expectation I would like the experience; this experience exceeded my expectations. I adored getting to know my students and tailored my class to use vocabulary and conversation activities to better get to know my students. I was able to make connections with community members in all of my programs. I equally spent my time working collaboratively with the Manna staff and interns as I did with the community even if it was all through a computer. I have made lifelong connections to the Ecuadorian community and Manna family. I hope in my future co-ops and career I will be fortunate again to have a passionate, productive and welcoming experience.



English with Children! - Partner organization Gotitas



Considering inequality

The overlay of COVID through my co-op brought a more universal social inequity to the forefront for me which is the compound effects of reliable internet service. In Ecuador reliable internet access is a privilege and very expensive in the Chios Valley where my organization is based. After moving our programs online, we found many of our members are at a disadvantage in their studies because internet wasn't available during the class time, therefore we switched to asynchronous format to supplement so they could access the material when their intent allowed it. While keeping the synchronous classes for those who could participate during class time and practice their speaking skills in real time. Simultaneously here in the US similar inequities and negative impacts on students have been reported extensively, demonstrating this is a much more universal concern than many of us might have realize in our privilege.

In addition, social and environmental inequality which stuck out to me during my time, was I was sitting in on a program ran by an intern and they were discussing the Flint Michigan Water crisis. The community members pointed out they have the same issues, they do not have drinkable water from the tap, they have to buy all their water. It's imperative that we all stay mindful of ethnocentric assumptions and how relative our standards are to us in America.

