

Time Out for Literacy in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico

By Matthew Gollub © 2006

(Editor's note: San Miguel de Allende is a 400 year-old colonial town in the central Mexican state of Guanajuato. Although the city is small, its Biblioteca (library) is the second largest in all of Mexico, thanks in part to the involvement of the local foreign community. In addition to volunteering this summer, Matthew donated a set of his books.)

During a three-week stay in San Miguel this summer, I volunteered to read with local kids at the library. The staff at the *Biblioteca* thanked me profusely for my time. But I honestly feel that I'm the one who benefited most from the exchange.

My first benefit was the peaceful refuge from the heat and crowded downtown streets. Each afternoon, I would plop myself down by a shaded table in the *Biblioteca's* courtyard and invite my "pupils" to bring me any books they wished.

A second bonus was to partake in their joy as I had children read aloud from their books in Spanish. The *Biblioteca* has a surprising number of high quality picture books. Though most appear to be "well loved," they still open doors; their artwork and words still amuse and refresh.

A third advantage to volunteering was the opportunity to improve my Spanish. I started studying Spanish when I was in 7th grade. Now, in my mid-40's, I feel comfortable speaking, but unfamiliar words inevitably crop up. I'll ask anyone, even children, to clarify new words. My pupils' improvised definitions of bathroom idioms left me in stitches. I also gained insight to their lives and culture while discussing how the stories related to them.

A fourth benefit—and this is a big one—was finding a meaningful way for my 10-year old to interact with local kids. My son Jacob understands little Spanish. He does, however, know the phonetic rules to decoding, i.e. *reading*, Spanish. Jesús (age 12), Luisa (around 11) and Guadalupe (around 8) found this remarkable because in Mexico it's so common for kids to *understand* Spanish but

to have trouble sounding out written words!

Our afternoon reading sessions lasted from around 4:00 to 5:00. Our selections varied from very easy to very hard, from word books and story books such as “Clifford the Big Red Dog” (in Spanish), to non-fiction texts about the colonies of bees. Jacob and Jesús often took turns reading one book while the girls and I took turns reading another. Soon I not only learned each child’s nickname (“Lulu” for Luisa, “Chucho” for Jesús, etc.) but which words were likely to give them trouble.

Getting to know these kids even briefly added dimension to my stay in San Miguel. It seems that kids who hang out in the library tend to do well in school. They’re smart, patient, and grateful for the opportunity to read and interact with a kindly grown-up. If the students are old enough to read out loud, being a volunteer “reader” is really about listening. Smiling, keeping a sense of humor, and giving lots of encouragement is the key. If you can “model” reading in Spanish with lots of expression, all the better. Sometimes, we would draw pictures based on the stories. Other times, Jacob and I would teach our new friends English phrases.

I believe this sort of individualized nurturing is the literary equivalent to providing mother’s milk. In school, kids generally receive instruction with at least 20-30 others. In private, their reading skills and confidence may develop but otherwise wither in the harried atmosphere of a class.

A final benefit to volunteering touches me on an even more personal level. My wife and I are blessed to have one wondrous child. But when I offer my attention as a reading tutor, to laugh at illustrations, to explain a lyrical rhyme or phrase, I feel that for a moment, in some small way, I am helping to help raise more than one kid.

Tips for Volunteering as a Literacy Tutors

Whether you live in San Miguel or are just visiting for a spell, the *Biblioteca* can use your help!

If you wish to volunteer as a literacy tutor, please contact Director

Miguel Kagel. Here are some suggestions for reading with kids.

--Let your student(s) choose what to read. If a child reads haltingly and needs to sound out many words, try switching to something less challenging. If the child can read effortlessly at the speed of conversation, encourage him or her to try something more sophisticated.

--If possible, take turns reading aloud while demonstrating how to read with lots of expression.

--Do what works, abandon what doesn't. If your student appears bored or distracted with one book, switch to another book or activity.

--Vary the activities to take the "pressure" off reading. For fun, try introducing basic English words, or simply ask about family members, favorite foods, sports, music, etc.

--Most important, have fun! Reading is an infinitely useful skill but also one that should be enjoyed.

Matthew Gollub is an award-winning children's author and publisher based in northern California. As a speaker he has performed at 800 elementary schools. His latest book is titled Give the Gift! 10 Fulfilling Ways to Raise a Lifetime Reader. For more information, please visit www.matthewgollub.com.