

Stephen F. Austin State University

Texas Tides provides gateway to educational resources

Emily Taravella - March 9, 2007



Fourth grade teacher Teresa Garcia and student Richard Galan explore the colonial town of Taxco, Guerrero, Mexico.



This Ofrenda (or alter) is decorated for the Mexican Dia De los Muertos (The Day of the Dead) celebration. This Ofrenda was placed outside a store front in Taxco, Mexico.



This Ofrenda inside a hotel in Taxco, Mexico shows some blending of the U.S. celebration of Halloween and the traditional Mexican celebration of the Day of the Dead.

Since it isn't always possible to take students out to explore the world, many teachers strive to bring the world into their classrooms. Public school teachers participating in the Texas Tides program at Stephen F. Austin State University have visited places such as Yucatan in Mexico to absorb the culture and to study the ecosystems. When they return from their travels, the videos, photographs and personal experiences they share breathe life into their lessons.

The Texas Tides program was created through a grant the Ralph W. Steen Library was awarded in

September 2005 by the Institute of Museum and Library Services.

Teacher travel is just one component of the program, according to Rachel Galan, program director. With the grant funds, SFA library faculty members are developing the "Texas Tides Digital Learning Consortium," Galan said. Using resources from libraries, museums, archives, historical societies, private collections, state parks and wildlife preserves in Texas and Mexico, the librarians are creating curriculum materials that are freely available online to teachers, students and researchers worldwide.

"The materials are provided in both English and Spanish in a digital format that covers the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills," Susan Clarke, digital projects librarian said. Texas Tides offers opportunities for teachers to attend workshops, receive curriculum materials, partner with schools in both Texas and Mexico and travel.

Teresa Garcia and Donna Bass, teachers at Thomas J. Rusk Elementary School in Nacogdoches, were among the first to take advantage of the travel opportunities.

Garcia, a fourth-grade language arts teacher, traveled to Mexico City and Cuernavaca for the Day of the Dead celebration. She was able to visit three Mexican schools and to talk with students and teachers at those schools. Garcia described the experience as "amazing." "This wasn't the experience that tourists have," she said. "We actually celebrated the Day of the Dead with families. People were willing to share with us, and we brought back videos and photographs that we will incorporate into a Web site for others to see and experience."

The Day of the Dead is a time of celebration of the lives of deceased family members and friends, Garcia said. Characterized by illustrations of "happy skeletons," orange carnations, candles, fireworks, food and visitations, the Day of the Dead is actually a more popular holiday in Mexico than Cinco de Mayo, Garcia said.

What also made the trip memorable is that Galan and Galan's fourth-grade son, Richard, accompanied Garcia. "Having Rachel and Richard along was wonderful," Garcia said. "Before we even left the airport, Richard was journaling." Garcia said her students had been writing letters to students at a school in Mexico, and they were anxiously awaiting her and Richard's return.

"When we got back and told them our stories, they were mesmerized," Garcia said. "We're still working on projects tied to this trip, so who knows where it could go?" Garcia said other photographs and interactive materials available on the Texas Tides Web site have captivated her students. As a treat for the most deserving, Garcia said she allows students to visit the Texas Tides Web site.

"It's a privilege for them, and people who get to use it are 'in the know,'" she said. "They really appreciate it. What better way to leave an imprint (on the mind of a child), than to let them see what they've been learning?"

Richard Galan said the trip was fun for him, and his journal allowed him to keep a memory of what he did. "Writing is fun - if there's something good to write about," he said. Richard said he enjoyed telling the other students what he saw and experienced. "This wasn't just something in a book," he said. "We actually saw it - 3D - and we touched it."

Richard Galan said he believes students enjoy seeing historical photographs on the Texas Tides Web site, because it's more exciting than reading a description in a textbook.

Garcia said one thing that inspired her most about the trip was seeing how some of her Hispanic students from Mexico were motivated to share stories of their culture, upon her return. "These were students who, for whatever reason, had stifled stories about their culture and heritage," she said. "Once they realized that their culture is something they could teach us, they were willing to share."

Garcia said Texas Tides offers resources that teachers are unlikely to find anywhere else.

Clarke said the interactive resources offered through Texas Tides allow indexed images to be saved and exported into computer slide presentations or saved as Web pages. "Each database record has a unique citation URL, allowing users to easily share or link back to specific images," she said.

Galan said photographs and videos from the teachers' travels are also posted on sites such as Facebook, MySpace and YouTube. Images are available at the highest possible resolution, allowing close-up examination of fine details, Galan said. "In the near future, Texas Tides also will offer virtual field trips and videos, Spanish/English translations, 20th Century collections, science, math, art, and cultural information," Galan said.

Teachers across Texas will be selected to serve on the 2007-2008 curriculum development team, and those who are interested may contact Galan at (936)468-1590.

For information, visit <http://tides.sfasu.edu>.