

7-1-2019

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### Recommended Citation

Maldonado, Korinta and Shosted, Ryan (2019) "The Maya Classroom in Diaspora: Blending Community-Based Research and Advocacy in Champaign County, Illinois," *Maya America: Journal of Essays, Commentary, and Analysis*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 1 , Article 10.

DOI: 10.32727/26.2021.9

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/mayaamerica/vol1/iss1/10>

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# The Maya Classroom in Diaspora: Blending Community-based Research and Advocacy in Champaign County, Illinois

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**Abstract:** Over the past ten years, professors and students from the University of Illinois have collaborated with the rapidly growing population of Maya residents in Champaign County, Illinois to develop opportunities to use, preserve, and pass on their linguistic and cultural skills. Our general goals are to support educators and school to better understand the linguistic and cultural heritage of the Maya students and to open up spaces and build support networks for the students to continue to use their language in diaspora.

A population of Q'anjob'al Maya—conservatively estimated around 800—currently resides in Champaign County, Illinois. Many report Santa Eulalia, Huehuetenango, Guatemala, as their hometown. The population in Champaign County has been of considerable size for at least a decade. Over the past ten years, professors and students from the University of Illinois have collaborated with this community to develop opportunities to use, preserve, and pass on their Q'anjob'al linguistic and cultural skills. While our short-term objectives have changed, our three over-arching goals have remained the same:

- (1) To support local Maya as they create resources for continued Mayan language use in diaspora.
- (2) To help young people in particular value their Mayan language skills and cultural resources, and to recognize the viability of using Mayan languages in print and electronic domains;
- (3) To provide support to educators who wish to better understand the linguistic and cultural heritage of their Maya students.

Through a course in linguistic field methods offered at the University of Illinois in 2009, Ryan Shosted and his graduate students at Illinois first became familiar with the Q'anjob'al language and a handful of its speakers. A graduate student at the time, Jill Hallett, now a professor at Northeastern Illinois University, began working with the Q'anjob'al community to develop an alphabet poster and a book. She has documented her experiences in Hallett (2012). These initial efforts at producing a basic lexicon

and accompanying print materials were largely carried out through Hallett's personal collaboration with community leaders Juan Andrés, Luis Esteban, and Mateo Diego. The results were posters and illustrated alphabet books distributed to members of the Q'anjob'al community. At the time, our primary interaction with the Q'anjob'al Maya took place at the Church of St. Mary in Champaign. For some time previous to our engagement with the community, Father Tom Royer had been gathering his Q'anjob'al-speaking parishioners for a bilingual homily every other week; on occasion a visiting priest offered the mass in Q'anjob'al. A community lunch after the service afforded opportunities for Shosted and Hallett to meet and set up other appointments with members of the community throughout the next two weeks. During Sunday School, Hallett worked with the children to illustrate a Q'anjob'al version of Aesop's fable, "The Boy who Cried Wolf": "Naq Unin Ilom Kalnel". She worked with adult members of the community, including Luis Esteban, to produce a bilingual text in Q'anjob'al and English. The result was posted to a Q'anjob'al language documentation website currently <http://go.illinois.edu/qanjobal>, along with the alphabet book and poster previously mentioned, among other materials.

The Q'anjob'al documentation website began drawing some attention soon after it was launched. Over the years, we have fielded inquiries from health care, legal, and social service agencies across the United States. Professionals at these agencies are eager to learn anything they can about the Q'anjob'al Maya, their language, and their culture. Unfortunately, it has not been possible for us to provide them with comprehensive resources until more recently, when we began working more intensively with educators and Maya students in our local school district. We are currently developing an online course in Q'anjob'al language and culture to be offered free of charge through the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at the University of Illinois.

After a few in-service meetings with teachers, we became aware of the great need for education about Q'anjob'al (and Mayan languages more generally) in the classrooms of Champaign County. For example, before we started our work, teachers were largely unaware of the differences between Mayan languages and Spanish. Some had reacted with puzzlement at the prospect of Latin American students who could not speak Spanish. There were even some attempts to place Maya students in special education classes, since the presumption was that their lack of Spanish fluency suggested a developmental challenge. It is important to note that several thoughtful and informed educators and school staff worked quickly to shift this way of thinking; our advocacy in the public schools, delivered in the form of in-service talks, may have played some role in reinforcing this welcome achievement.

When Korinta Maldonado joined the University of Illinois in 2014, her interaction

with local indigenous-immigrant communities sparked renewed interest in reaching out to the Q'anjob'al Maya. The initial goal was to collaborate with educators and local organizations working with Indigenous migrants to better understand their experiences as Q'anjob'al diaspora members in a predominantly white, Midwestern university town. A continued flow to Champaign County of members of the Q'anjob'al and Chuj nations during the early-mid decade of 2010 caught many institutions and communities off guard. It was urgent to locally underscore the specific experiences and needs of the Mayan community, to initiate a process of "*acompañamiento*" (especially in the legal realm), and to open spaces that could foster cultural exchange/visibility among distinct local communities.

It is within this context that we inaugurated the Mayan/Indigenous Working Group at the University of Illinois in 2016 in an effort to coordinate community-engaged scholars with a trajectory and interest in working alongside the Maya diasporic communities. Many of us already working with the local Mayan communities convened. From this initial meeting Veronica Paredes and Korinta Maldonado initiated conversation with ESL teachers in local school districts who showed interest in working collaboratively. In the fall of 2017, the Digital Storytelling workshop took off. Mrs. Katie Hutchinson, the ESOL teacher at Urbana High School, picked ten students that would be working on this assignment once a week during their English class time. Of the ten, eight students spoke Q'anjob'al and two were Spanish speakers. The objective of the workshop was to tell a story that was important for them.

We initiated the workshop by viewing a few short digital stories. We talked about the message in the digital stories: the structure, graphics, sounds, and the languages spoken since many were spoken in Indigenous languages but had subtitles in Spanish. Thereafter there were a series of assignments related to brainstorming topics, storyboarding them and writing down their story of choice. The students were excited at the prospect of creating something on their own; nonetheless, we faced many challenges as we set up the tasks and assignments. One challenge was that many of the students missed school often because of health-related issues, or not having the proper vaccinations to attend school. Because the workshop was only once a week for six weeks, if they missed a few sessions, catching up became really hard. Related to this was the fact that students came with distinct years/levels of schooling. Catching up felt like an enormous task especially because the workshop was writing-intensive even though we were writing in Spanish, which all participants in this group spoke fluently. We restructured the workshop to accommodate these schooling differences but the instructor still made the difficult decision to pull out the students that had fallen behind. The process was not easy. Some students initiated telling very painful personal stories and halfway through the sessions decided that they did not want to work

on that same story.

The end results were digital stories<sup>1</sup> told by the students about meaningful events and or spaces. One of the stories elaborated by a student from Barillas, Huehuetenango spoke of his journey to the United States. The student narrated not only the painful and hard trek up North but also how he envisioned a better future for him and his family in the US. Having access to a free education was a determinant pillar of his optimism. Although this student is a fluent speaker of Q'anjob'al he refused to tell his story in Q'anjob'al. A second story spoke of traditional sweets/candies from the specific Mexican town the student is from. She spoke of the smells, tastes that she yearned and that made her proud of her distinctive and rich culture. She spoke of how back at home she worked hard selling these candies and was able to help her parents with some of the house bills. Her story shows how students also participate in their family economies and how it is a source of pride to do so. This exercise aimed at opening spaces that would allow students to safely speak about their experiences, histories and cultures.<sup>2</sup>

In spring 2018, we began working closely with two ESOL instructors at Urbana High School, Katie Hutchison and Joy Davila. Ms. Davila's class, called "English for newcomers", was composed of around a dozen students who spoke Mayan languages--primarily Q'anjob'al, but also Chuj and K'iche'. After several rounds of consultation with the Maya students and their teachers, we chose a project: to produce a phrasebook in Mayan (Q'anjob'al, Chuj, and K'iche') that could be used by their teachers and friends who wanted to learn more about their languages.<sup>3</sup> We wanted to make it a practical guide, including phrases that they might hear in school or use to interact with others: greetings, the names of objects in the classroom, and expressions of personal, affective state ("I'm happy", "I don't feel well", etc.).

One immediate challenge was the Mayan language diversity in the classroom: we anticipated working with just one Mayan language, but we worked with three instead. We have since engaged with even more linguistic diversity. The second challenge was that some students were Spanish-only with no indigenous language background<sup>4</sup>. To integrate everyone into the project, we decided that there would be three tasks: (1) translation into each of the three indigenous languages; (2) word-processing; and (3) illustration.

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1 There are distinct ways to define digital storytelling. Yet, all of these definitions contain the same elements: the use of digital media to tell a short story. Fletcher and Cambre define it as the blending of digitalized still photographs and narrative in order to create short powerful multimedia pieces reflecting social change (Fletcher and Cambre, 2009)

2 To hear these stories, visit: <https://soundcloud.com/user-323754884>

3 The phrasebook, which we entitled Tzet yok a b'i? [What's your name] in Q'anjob'al, is available at <http://faculty.las.illinois.edu/rshosted/docs/8-book.pdf>.

4 The students that only spoke Spanish were from central Mexico not from Guatemala. They nonetheless, engaged with the project in very productive ways. They learned to say a few words and engaged with the classifying, typing, and drawing sections.

We made worksheets of expressions in English that needed to be translated and began sitting down with speakers of the three Maya languages to help produce transcripts of the translations. As the translations became ready, these were passed on to the typists and illustrators. Because literacy skills in the Maya languages differed considerably between students, we checked out reference dictionaries and grammars from the University of Illinois Library (which has an excellent collection of Mayan language materials) and tried to standardize the spellings as much as we could.

Despite social pressures that have historically limited or even banned instruction in Mayan languages, Q'anjob'al has been used as a means of oral instruction in Santa Eulalia schools for nearly forty years (Holbrock 2016, p. 160). Q'anjob'al literacy skills are now taught in kindergarten and fourth through sixth grade, as well as in middle school (ibid., p. 30). Many of the youth we have worked with arrived from Guatemala in the past decade and therefore could have potentially acquired literacy skills in Q'anjob'al. However, since access to formal education in Santa Eulalia is itself dependent on a number of socioeconomic and geographic factors, not all students in our classroom were proficient at writing in Q'anjob'al. Some composed short narratives entirely in Q'anjob'al, others translated sentences from Spanish and/or English, while others translated individual words. We know less about the opportunities our Chuj and K'iche' students may have had to obtain literacy in their languages.

In cases where a student was reluctant to write, an amanuensis wrote down the student's speech and then standardized the spelling by consulting a dictionary. Opportunities were taken to share the transcript with the student and double-check their approval of the expression. Shosted's previous field work on Q'anjob'al was helpful in this regard, but it did not help much for standardizing the materials in Chuj and K'iche'. As a result, we felt less confident about the accuracy of the expressions in these languages. Constraints on our time were such that we wished to give the students a final, printed product to take home and remember, before the end of the semester. Choosing not to let the perfect be the enemy of the good, we wrote a preface to the booklet acknowledging the potential for inaccuracies, but moved forward, hoping that exposure to print materials in Mayan would benefit the students. We came up with the title *Tzet yok a b'i?* 'What's your name?' in Q'anjob'al. The day we distributed the booklets to the Maya students, their teachers, and the school librarian, the students had a party. The students passed the booklets around, collecting signatures from one another, from us, and from their teachers. We felt pleased that we had supported the students' creation of an artefact in their first languages---something that they can hold on to and distribute to friends and family, something that suggests pride in their mother tongue. Further, during Maldonado's visit

to Jolom Konob' (Santa Eulalia) some samples were given to the Council of Ancestral Plurinational Authorities (Consejo de Autoridades Ancestrales Plurinacional).

We envision participating in the ongoing collaborative construction of linguistic and cultural resources with and for the local Mayan community. Our most recent project involves the collection, printing, and distribution of folk tales written by the Maya students. These include the story of Santa Eulalia, the patron saint of the city many of the Q'anjob'al students call home and the story of the Quetzal narrated by K'iche', Ixil and Poqomchi' students. As in the earlier narrative project, we provided the students with an example of a digital story narrating a traditional origin story in the Tepehua language from the 68 voices project out of Mexico. We encouraged the students to speak with family members to decide which story from their hometown they would like to write down, illustrate, and audio-record. The project is not complete at the time of this writing, but our objectives have been consistent with previous efforts. We hope the resulting publications will be a source of pride for the Maya students and another exemplar of their rich cultural heritage that can be shared with friends and teachers.

We will continue this deeply satisfying community engagement work with the Maya community of Champaign-Urbana. After a number of attempts, described here, to reach out to the community and learn what resources we might bring to help them further their own cultural and linguistic goals in diaspora, we think we have found some success along with a variety of challenges. We are hopeful that our joint activities with the Maya will foster greater understanding between Maya students and their teachers, in particular, but also between the non-Maya and Maya populations of Champaign-Urbana more generally.

## Supplemental Multimedia

<https://soundcloud.com/user-323754884>

<http://bit.ly/UHSFOLKTALES>

<http://go.illinois.edu/qanjobal>

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