Fulbright Reflection: Alan Blackstock | Global Engagement

Alan Blackstock

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Teachers from the Instituto Universitario de Lenguas at the University of Cuenca’s 150th anniversary parade. Blackstock is holding the sign.

Alan Blackstock is a professor of English based at USU - Uintah Basin. He has won multiple awards, including USU-Uintah Basin Instructor of the Year in 2012. Blackstock completed a Fulbright program in Fall of 2017 in Ecuador. Last fall, at this time, I was halfway through a Fulbright grant at the University of Cuenca, one of the largest public universities in Ecuador. Cuenca is a city of around 400,000 inhabitants, located in south-central Ecuador at an elevation of 8,000 feet, surrounded by mountains and threaded with rivers. My Fulbright project involved assisting the university in its efforts to comply with a government mandate to bring all students up to a level of B2 on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) in a foreign language by 2020. According to the CEFR guidelines, a B2-level language learner can “understand the main ideas of complex text,” “interact with a degree of fluency...with native speakers,” and “produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects.” This is a tall order, considering that few of the language teachers in Ecuadorean public schools are themselves at a B2 level, and so university language teachers (most of whom teach English, since that is the foreign language in greatest demand) are faced with the daunting task of bringing students from minimal familiarity to fluency in a few semesters. As a small part of this endeavor, I was asked to conduct teacher-training workshops and to work with individual teachers and small groups in the Institute of Languages in the areas of curriculum development, professional development, and research advising.

The workshops offered for faculty in the Institute of Languages focused on strategies for teaching English as a foreign language, peer evaluation, and professional writing and publication. One area of particular concern was peer evaluation, which was not being done in any formal way at the University of Cuenca. As Institute director Ximena Orellana explained to me, “Peer observation is just not a part of the culture of higher education in Ecuador.” And though there was initial resistance to the idea on the part of some faculty, by the time my assignment was completed, Institute faculty had worked out a schedule for observing one another’s classes, and the practice had been adopted as an important part of the faculty evaluation process.

I was also invited to give weekend and evening lectures to groups of university faculty and students from various departments and colleges on subjects ranging from professional writing and publication to developing skills in the use of English in tourism, which is an important sector of the economy in Cuenca and throughout Ecuador.

Another recent mandate Ecuadorean university faculty are struggling to meet is the expectation of publication for promotion. Many faculty members have little or no experience with an academic publication, and so my Fulbright role also included assisting Institute faculty in selecting research topics and advising them on methodology, organization, and expression. And since mine was a teaching/research assignment, and I have previously published on distance-education pedagogy, part of my time was spent investigating to what extent and in what ways Ecuadorean universities offer distance courses, particularly in English as a Foreign Language. To explore this question, I conducted interviews with students, faculty, and administrators at the University of Cuenca and other local institutions, and through these contacts was able to arrange a research trip to the University of Loja, recognized throughout Ecuador as the pioneer in distance education.

Since returning from Ecuador, I have participated in two USU workshops on the Fulbright program organized by the Office of Global Engagement. I have also had a proposal accepted for a conference presentation on my Fulbright grant activities and am currently working on an article with USU colleague Dr. Maria Spicer-Escalante, who recently completed a Fulbright assignment working with EFL teachers at a university in Mexico. I continue to advise faculty from the University of Cuenca on research projects and look forward to collaborative publication opportunities with some of them as well.
From my Fulbright appointment I gained not only valuable experience, research data, and international contacts that will prove useful in my continuing professional development, but also indelible memories of the land of Ecuador and its people, as well as a chance to reflect on why and how I teach and to return to the classroom with a renewed sense of purpose and enthusiasm. I encourage all USU faculty to explore Fulbright opportunities in their disciplines.