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The conclusion of my time with the Arajuno Road Project was rewarding and flew by much too quickly. Upon further reflection, I'm proud to share some of my favorite accomplishments and lessons learned from the experience.

Highlights

- The Skype exchanges that we arranged to complement the K-12 Global Art Exchange (detailed in the Midterm Report) were a hit! With one school, I arranged transportation to have them come to our volunteer house for the Skype conversation one afternoon. Some students wore traditional clothing, and others brought fresh fruits to show off. Some students sang a song in Quechua, a language spoken by one of Ecuador's indigenous nationalities. The school director even ran to his car to bring in an Andean flute and play a song for everyone. The class in the U.S. also played music for us. We were excited to learn that some of the students in Massachusetts spoke Spanish at home, and were able to converse with us in both languages!
- In Esfuerzo, we created something of a bilingual cafeteria. In three grades, we had units of food vocabulary this quimestre. I asked the students to help me make signs with the Spanish and English words for common food items and tape them to the wall. We added a few easy verbs and adjectives so that students could create their own sentences. It was great to see the students engaged with this interactive activity and saying things like "I like hot soup!" to each other over lunch.
- I really enjoyed building relationships with our school directors. It took some time to earn their trust and friendship at first, but once those connections were formed, it made my work so much easier. I asked them questions constantly- about their schools, teaching methods, and Ecuadorian culture in general. I felt so lucky to have their patience and guidance. They were fantastic resources, and I hope to maintain friendships with them, even now that I have returned home.
- I like to think that I became a better manager during my time in Ecuador. Working with the volunteer staff was difficult at times, but I learned a lot about adapting my management style to different personalities. With some volunteers, I found that addressing an issue directly was the best route, while others needed to be approached more sensitively.

Lessons Learned

- There is a movement in the international education field toward more short-term opportunities abroad. Students and volunteers often prefer to spend 1-2 weeks abroad instead of several months because it is more affordable and easier to fit into busy schedules. In the eyes of many of my colleagues, this short time spent doing international work is better than nothing, but I don't entirely agree. Whether they stayed for 1 week or 2 months, most volunteers expressed some variation of the same expectations and goals: improve language skills and make a difference. But these are not the kinds of things that can feasibly be accomplished in one week. Some of these volunteers left frustrated by the experience. It was so clear to me how much more rewarding the experience was for those volunteers that stayed for a month or longer and were able to build meaningful relationships with our communities. I still think that it is possible for short term international experiences to be positive, but I think they have to be structured and conducted so differently depending on the length.
- The importance of a sense of humor can't be overstated in intercultural interactions! I was frequently the only white person in a variety of scenarios in Ecuador. I stood out in a crowd. Being able to make fun of myself and the situation to make others laugh was a wonderful way to connect with them, and break down some of the barriers that otherwise might have existed. I think that volunteers and aid workers have to be careful in how they present themselves to different communities abroad, given the complicated power dynamics. By embracing some of my more awkward moments and sharing them, I hoped that my self-deprecating jokes conveyed the message that "I have a lot of knowledge and skills to offer you, but there is still so much that I am learning. Let us help each other achieve something great!"