

Instructor's Guide to Anthropology Explored: A Sample Excerpt

Below is an example from the *Instructor's Guide to Anthropology Explored*, written by Anna I. Peterson and Ruth O. Selig. This sample focuses on Chapter 31, "Linguistic Survival Among the Maya," by Robert S. Laughlin. Each section in the *Anthropology Explored Instructor's Guide* has the same format: chapter summary, questions, glossary.

Summary

The author of this chapter began his study of today's indigenous Maya culture in 1959 as a member of the Harvard Chiapas project. During this time he collaborated with several Maya and began a collection of folktales and dreams to supplement the vocabulary in the only rudimentary dictionary available at that time. By 1973 Laughlin had published *The Great Tzotzil Dictionary of San Lorenzo Zinacantan*. Since that time, Laughlin has also published collections of folktales and dreams, as well as two bilingual booklets on history, oral history, and customs. He also helped establish a puppet theater, a live theater, and a weekly Tzotzil-Tzeltal radio program.

Laughlin with the help of Maya friends began a literacy program for the Mayas. The program is in great demand. In the beginning of the program, there was debate whether to allow women into the classes, as some believed it was improper for men and women to be together at night when classes were taught.

In the years since its founding, the program has awarded over five hundred diplomas. Several of the creative writing pieces have been published. The author lists several reasons that people join the program: they want to improve their Spanish through translation exercises; they want to learn; they see the class as making them smarter; and they want to appreciate their own traditions. The program has received much recognition, and the Maya society has benefitted as a consequence.

In the 2004 update the author lists the accomplishments of the program since the 1998 edition of the book. There have been several publications of Maya writings, as well as Maya plays produced. By 2004 over 5,500 people have received diplomas from the literacy project. Laughlin's story of anthropology in action is an inspiring example of what one anthropologist has been able to give back to the people he chose to spend his life

studying and with whom he has collaborated on many productive projects.

Discussion Questions

- 1) Why was it important to compile a dictionary of the Maya language?
- 2) How did studying folktales and dreams help create the dictionary?
- 3) Discuss the difficulties of reconstructing a language.
- 4) Why do you think theater has played such a role in teaching the Maya language? Why was starting a puppet theater such a clever way to begin?
- 5) Discuss the hesitations of allowing women to participate in the class.
- 6) In his update the author lists many accomplishments of the program. Which ones do you feel are the most significant, and why?

Essay Questions

- 1) Why is preserving language a key to preserving a culture? How has Laughlin's work contributed to cultural preservation among the Maya today?
- 2) Why it is helpful to the Maya students to record their personal and family history, as well as to produce creative writing samples.

Short Answer Questions

- 1) What topics does the literacy program primarily focus on?
- 2) The author lists some of the incentives for participating in the program. What are they, and how does participating in the program achieve them?
- 3) How has the program brought Mayan society recognition?
- 4) How has the economic crisis of Mexico been a problem for the program?

Glossary

Folktale: A story or legend forming part of an oral tradition.

Linguistics: The study of the nature, structure, and variation of language, including phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, sociolinguistics, and pragmatics.

Literacy: The ability to read and write.

The Maya: Mesoamerican Indian people inhabiting southeast Mexico, Guatemala, and Belize, whose civilization reached its height around A.D. 300-900, and their present day descendants.

Oral History: Information obtained in interviews with persons having firsthand knowledge, or history passed down from generation to generation.

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