



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

Published by the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD) • College of Education • The University of Texas at Austin

A PILE OF ROCKS

"It is long overdue. This is the way it should be, and the rainfall is way ahead of schedule," remarks Lawrence Löf, Director of Rancho del Cielo*. These words set the tone for the next five days for a group of upper-division art students and a visiting artist from The University of Texas at Brownsville/Texas Southmost College. One could not have asked for anything more. The forest was overgrown, the clouds were moving in and out, and there was plenty of rainfall. This was the fourth such trip, and the goal is always to give students a first-hand opportunity to study and be inspired by nature in creating their individual pieces of art.

Students produce representational to non-objective art pieces that are indicative of the abundant colors, shapes, and even sounds of the cloud forest. Their media is as varied as the art itself (with one exception: time and transportation do not allow the use of oil-based paint—a small limitation when compared with the wide variety of ways to make art while studying at the biosphere).

On one particular trip, the visiting artists suggested embarking on some cooperative effort. All of the students would participate and incorporate whatever materials the ranch had to offer to create art. The three of us agreed on a segmented circular formation, constructed from the abundant supply of limestone rocks and boulders, shaped into a plumed serpent. Using limestone rocks assured the piece both permanence and longevity. Five three-sided pyramid structures were to be incorporated into the design. In addition, broken tree limbs and living ferns would serve as plumes. The serpent measured more than 35 feet long, 36 inches high at the head, and 38 inches at the belly. It was built over a pre-Columbian mound where a Huasteco building may have stood.

Aside from the important physical aspects of the project, we intended for it to serve as an educational tool, with an emphasis on public art. It made sense; Rancho del Cielo is a very special place that needs to have its unique purpose and integrity maintained. As with any public art proposal, we followed the guidelines we were

given. The most important was that it had to blend in with the area and/or to appear to have been there always. That was no problem; all of us were familiar with and/or had taught classes in pre-Columbian art—important selling points in the proposal stage.

The next step was to organize the group with the tasks, including digging up the limestone rocks and boulders, sorting them by size, laying out the shape of the serpent, and stacking the rocks. The theme for the rock sculpture was based on the pre-Columbian cycle of time—"El Quinto Sol." The structural design represented a compass; two-foot breaks pointed toward the four poles; and a fifth break pointed to the Southwest and to the mythical land of *Nuevo Aztlan*. The five pyramid-like structures were placed on the exterior sides of the five breaks and served as pointed appendages. At the last moment, one item was added to the structure—a half-domed stone carved into the five orientations, to be placed in the center to serve as an axis.

At 9:00 a.m. the next morning, the group began work. We had anticipated one-and-a-half days to complete the project. To our surprise, we finished by 5:00 p.m. that same day. Never underestimate the power of 14 people, especially 14 eager artists! Amazingly, some of the boulders weighed 100 pounds or more. Much of the time was spent locating small keystone-like rocks that were placed carefully to ensure that the larger and odd-shaped stones would stay in place. After a while the group acquired an appreciation for the "art" of erecting stone fences without mortar.

The whole process went fairly smoothly, except for when we had to redesign the head. It was difficult finding boulders that formed the jaws of the serpent. Luckily, one student discovered two large, oblong boulders; they were perfect. The next step was to balance them and insert smaller rocks to lock the jaws in place. It worked. The head was finished. The result was a splendid, great effort! Looking at the finished piece made many of the aches and pains go away—using our hands as primary tools produced some scrapes, cuts, and bruises; and we had tired and fatigued bodies. We could envision groups of Huasteca tribe members working collaboratively to build their religious structures.



The evening's critique by the visiting artists centered on this cooperative effort. Dialog centered on the roles students played and their feelings. To our surprise, half the students said that they felt "used." One senior complained: "It seemed that my only part was to gather and bring rocks to the site. I felt as though it wasn't my work; I was just the labor. I wasn't allowed to build!" As more students joined in the emotional *charlada* (causal talk), it was obvious that we, the force behind the idea, had failed to think things through. We forgot about involving the students in the early brainstorm session and so did not know that everyone wanted to be a part of the design and the building process. By morning, I noticed that a little chill filled the moist mountain air—not from the morning rain, but from the night's critique.

As breakfast was served and people gathered in the keep (the dining hall), the chill slowly warmed as the first cup of coffee was served. I could see students eyeing the structure. Some walked over and touched it as though they had never seen it before. Others studied it and said nothing. That afternoon, a cloudy mist invaded the compound, and a huge lighting bolt struck the area about 100 feet just behind the structure. We all wondered if we had offended the gods—a reflection of the local tribes' superstitions. There was an obvious feeling of accomplishment.

This trip was especially educational. What did I learn? First, I learned to appreciate how powerful students' feelings could be. Second, I learned not to underestimate physical capabilities. The serpent was built in eight hours! We had planned for more than 18! As I think back on the hundreds of rocks that were dug out of the earth, carried, layered, and meticulously secured in place by a group of students who knew nothing about stacking stone, I have to wonder how we did it—the

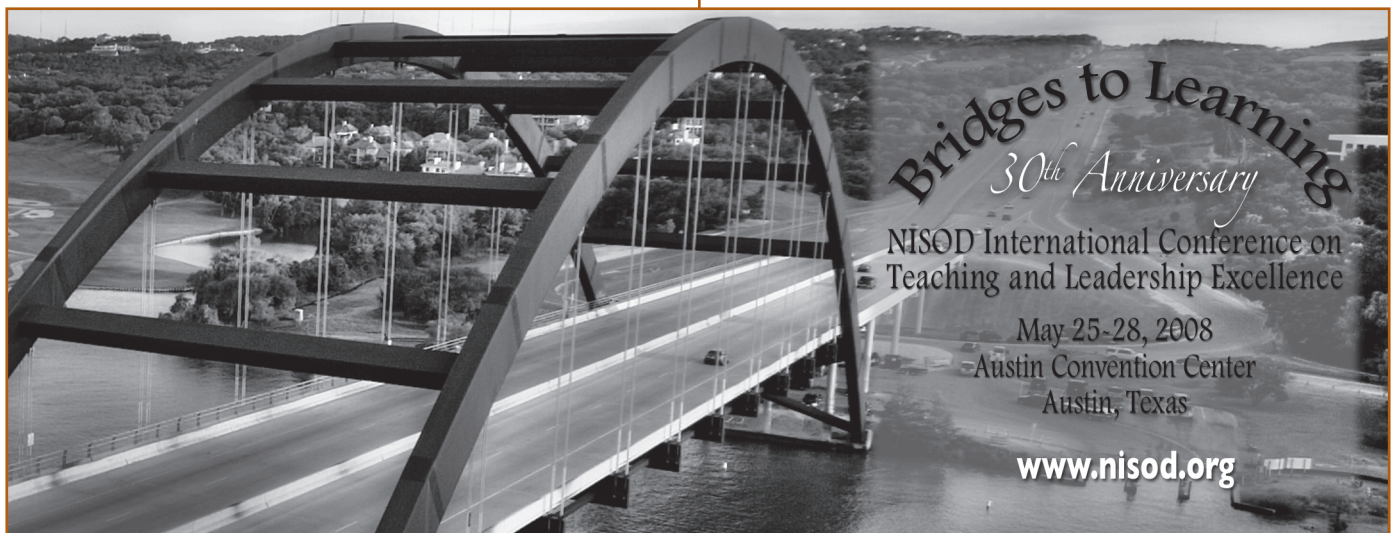
words *character* and *fortitude* may apply here. The most profound statement was made by a student who said: "I don't feel attached to it. It was the togetherness and the dialog of the group as we hunted for rocks that made this fun. Other than that, to me it is just a pile of rocks."

The student was right—the serpent was nothing more than a pile of rocks. The feelings of being "used," as expressed by other students, were legitimate, as well. Will they feel different in a few years? Will that pile of rocks turn into art? Will this student eventually feel that he left a landmark for future generations to see and enjoy regardless of the role he played? Will all of their artistic imaginations crave to see what has happened to it over time, or will a carefully constructed stone sculpture always just be a pile of rocks? I wonder what the gods think about all of this.

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**Rancho del Cielo is a rare tropical lowland cloud forest located in the remote eastern escarpment of Mexico's Sierra Madre Oriental and is managed by the Gorgas Science Foundation in partnership with Texas Southmost College and the University of Texas at Brownsville. The program is a cooperative effort between Rancho del Cielo and our Fine Arts Visiting Artist program. Students include the most advanced to graduate-level status students/artists. The activities included in these special classes focus on the study and appreciation of nature through art.*



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September 7, 2007, Vol. XXIX, No. 17

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Innovation Abstracts (ISSN 0199-106X) is published weekly following the fall and spring terms of the academic calendar, except Thanksgiving week, by the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD), Department of Educational Administration, College of Education, University Station, D5600, Austin, Texas 78712-0378, (512) 471-7545, Email: abstracts@nisod.org