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Karola Laguna waltzes with Ricardo Orduno Rivera for an enactment of a quinceanera, the traditional coming-of-age party for Mexican girls, during a class for 40 English teachers from Mexico at the Dartmouth Center for the Advancement of Learning on Tuesday. The teachers were in Hanover for a seminar to help improve instruction in their home classrooms.  
(Valley News — James M. Patterson)

## The Universal Language of Fun

### Mexican English Teachers Take Dartmouth Creativity Class

By Erin Hanrahan

Valley News Staff Writer

**Hanover** -- At the seaside Mexican primary school where Paloma Zepedu Rocha teaches English, educators are always looking for resources; more books, more computers, better technology.

But at the top of Dartmouth College's Hopkins Center Tuesday night, the young teacher was singing the praises of a simple piece of chalk.

"All we need is our creativity, our board and some chalk, and we can have an excellent class," she said.

Rocha, from the state of Sinaloa on the Gulf of California, has come a long way to make that statement, physically and pedagogically. She is one of 40 Mexican teachers and school administrators who are spending two weeks at an experimental intensive seminar at Dartmouth, aimed at improving English instruction.

The program's organizers, including language professor John Rassias, have high hopes that it can revolutionize education in Mexico, shifting the focus of state-run curriculums from rote learning to critical thinking and creative expression. And while Rocha's brief proclamation could be construed as little more than make-do optimism, she said Tuesday that her stint at the new Inter-American Partnership for Education has changed her approach to teaching for good.

That's the idea, said Rassias, who signed onto the new partnership program last spring, after being approached by Dartmouth alumna Luanne Zurlo, executive director of the New York-based nonprofit Worldfund.

“If you can transform the way a teacher teaches, you can transform hundreds and hundreds of students,” Zurlo said last night, at a reception for the program's participants. That transformation has become critical to financial success in Mexico, she said, as the tourism industry and other growing markets there have begun to demand a higher level of English proficiency than schools have provided.

Last year, Worldfund partnered with Dartmouth's Rassias Foundation and the Dartmouth Center for the Advancement of Learning to run a small pilot project in Mexico City, working with teachers to make language classes more intensive and interactive, based on the Rassias' trademarked method, which was adopted by the Peace Corps to teach foreign languages to volunteers.

This summer, the small program grew to 40 teachers, who were selected from a pool of more than 100 applicants from primary schools, secondary schools and universities throughout Mexico. Some are new teachers, while others have more than 20 years experience. “What they all have in common is a real commitment to their profession,” said Jim Citron, director of the Inter-American Partnership program. Next year, Citron said, the plan is to involve 100 teachers, whose trips are paid for through a mix of government and corporate funding.

In a small room off Dartmouth's main library on Tuesday, the 40 members of this year's program listened enthusiastically to English professor and DCAL director Thomas Luxon recite a Shakespearean sonnet. “I understand your students want to learn English for lots and lots of reasons besides reading a book,” he said, but Luxon encouraged the teachers to introduce literature into their language classes, as a creative alternative to grammar lessons.

For Guadalupe Barbosa, who teaches college-level English in Ciudad Juarez, near the borders of Texas and New Mexico, that advice came as a huge relief. Barbosa said she had waged “a fight against all odds” at her school to include

reading comprehension alongside standard grammar tests. She eventually won her fight, but said there is still room for more freedom and creativity in the curriculum. “Over here, everything is so fast, enthusiastic, energetic. It's great,” she said.

The energy is integral, according to Rassias, who talks about language instruction -- and education in general -- as a dramatic, passionate process, involving the triumph of the mind over layers of accumulated cultural experience. Rassias has a name for those layers, “The crust,” and “Our mission here,” he said outside the Hopkins Center, “is to blow those crusts to Kingdom Come.”

Barbosa described the program as “a once in a lifetime experience.”

“It's exciting stuff,” said Rassias. “I've told them repeatedly, this is a revolution.”

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