

**Environmental Studies 390:**  
**Telling True Stories of Community Development in Nicaragua**  
**January 2012**

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**Required Texts:**

--A pocket-size, Spanish-English dictionary or phrasebook (Oxford, Larousse, and Langenscheidt are all good choices).

--Book excerpts & essays on e-reserve (see syllabus).

--*Nicaragua: A Guide to the People, Politics, and Culture* by Hazel Plunkett.  
Interlink, 2007.

--*Telling True Stories: A Nonfiction Writers' Guide from the Nieman Foundation at Harvard University*. Eds. Mark Kramer & Wendy Call. Plume, 2007.

**Course Description:**

This study abroad course immerses students in community development projects in Nicaragua and prepares students to share these projects' stories by writing narrative nonfiction accounts of their visits. The course includes visits to project sites in rural and urban Nicaragua supported by the non-profit organization *Compas de Nicaragua*. This organization sponsors *Women in Action* and the *Brothers and Sisters in Reconciliation Farmers' Cooperative*, two community groups working on reforestation, organic agriculture, education, health, and food security, among other issues. Site visits will introduce students to these groups' work, involve them in service-learning projects with local people, familiarize them with different approaches to and challenges of community development in Nicaragua, and give them experiences of daily life with host families.

To help students craft narrative nonfiction accounts of their experiences in Nicaragua, this course also involves the practice and theory of writing narrative nonfiction based on immersion in another culture. Before and throughout our time in Nicaragua, we will cultivate informed ways of processing and sharing our cross-cultural experiences. We will do this by reading and discussing writing models and craft texts about writing true stories. We will also frequently share our own writing with each other and with our Nicaraguan hosts, when possible, keeping in mind that cross-cultural learning is inherently collaborative. Above all, we will strive to recognize not only what is different

about Nicaraguan life and culture but also to more fully-understand ourselves and North American culture by examining ourselves through the eyes of Nicaraguans.

Before departure, on-campus class sessions will include background on Nicaraguan culture and history; basic Spanish; a survey of travel narratives about Central America (on e-reserve); readings and discussion about community development and cross-cultural perception (on e-reserve); brainstorming of writing projects; journaling exercises; and health, safety, and packing information.

During our two weeks in Nicaragua, the class will participate in community development projects, possibly including constructing bio-gas stoves in La Paz de Carazo and installing gray water drainage systems in Managua. We will also be involved in community meetings and activities and visit significant natural and cultural sites in Nicaragua. In addition, the class will regularly meet in Nicaragua to discuss student experiences, journals, assigned readings, and writing projects.

Upon returning to Oshkosh, our class will meet for debriefing, and drafting and discussion of written work. We will also plan ways to share our experiences with UWO and Fox Valley communities.

### **Learning Objectives:**

Through completion of this course, students will strive to:

- Create a clear, descriptive, and detailed written narrative rooted in personal experience and knowledge of the techniques and particular problems of writing about other cultures;
- Gain understanding of the complexities of community development, poverty, and sustainability in Nicaragua;
- Enact a self-reflective, participatory research process that includes experiential learning and collaboration with human sources;
- Demonstrate cultural self-awareness and a more nuanced understanding of multiple worldviews, communication styles, and ways of living.

### **Coursework & Evaluation:**

- 3,500 words of original, polished narrative nonfiction that tell carefully constructed stories of your experiences in Nicaragua and demonstrate independent research (including interviews and/or scholarly research) into a specific issue or aspect of your immersion. This may include one extended piece or two shorter pieces that total 3,500 words. Your writing will be evaluated based on its clarity, its use of sensory detail and in-depth researched information, and establishment of a well-organized narrative balanced between scene and summary that portrays a clearly-characterized persona sensitively engaged with Nicaraguan realities. Your essay(s) will account for **40% of your course grade.**

- Active, constructive participation in class discussions, decision-making, service activities, and group blog postings (from your travel journal). Your commitment to participation as a group member is an essential part of the course and will account for **30% of your course grade**.
- A bound travel journal of at least 2,500 words which includes in-class writing exercises and daily entries during your immersion experience in Nicaragua. This journal should also include responses to at least five specific prompts from the list below and regular responses to assigned course readings. Your journal will be evaluated on its completion of all exercises, prompts, and entries, and its level of detail. This journal will account for **20% of your course grade**.
- A written self-evaluation of at least 500 words at the end of the course will account for **10% of your course grade**. This self-evaluation will be evaluated based on its engagement with the course learning objectives and its level of detail.

### **Journal Prompts:**

- Describe/narrate a conversation/interaction you had with a Nicaraguan from their point of view.
- Describe what gave you the most “culture shock” and/or surprise in Nicaragua (e.g. differences in lifestyle, values, material possessions) to an audience of Nicaraguans you know.
- Describe something extraordinary for you that is ordinary for Nicaraguans you met.
- Describe something ordinary for you that might be extraordinary for Nicaraguans you met.
- Describe several moments in detail when you felt confused or overwhelmed by what was happening to you in Nicaragua.
- Write an ethical reflection which describes a moral dilemma you encountered in Nicaragua and how you went about addressing it. Explain why you responded this way.
- Write a character sketch of someone you got to know in Nicaragua. Include physical description and quotes from them to make them a vivid character. Also explain why they made an impact on you.
- Write a dialogue between you and a friend or family member at home that tries to explain a barrier to community development you have witnessed and tried to understand in Nicaragua.
- Describe a specific improvement in someone’s life that Women in Action of Brothers and Sisters in Reconciliation has accomplished according to a person you met there. Explain how this improvement was created.
- Describe what material change would make the biggest improvement in the daily life of a Nicaraguan you met, according to this person. Explain how this would impact this person’s life.

## **Attendance and Late Work:**

Since this is a fast-paced, interim study abroad course, attendance at all class meetings and group activities is essential for student success and group cohesion. Missing any class meeting or group activity will negatively affect your class participation grade.

## **Academic Honesty Policy:**

The ethical use of source material—including scholarly and non-scholarly written sources, as well as interviews—is required for all forms of student writing in this course. Students will use in-text citations and a works cited page in MLA format for all written sources. If human sources are quoted or referenced, the writer must have permission to use their names or changes their names and note this. Plagiarism, whether intentional or unintentional, will result in a failing grade for student writing.

## **Tentative Course Syllabus**

### **Monday, January 2<sup>rd</sup>:**

9 a.m.-3 p.m. class meeting, location TBA

Have read:

- *Nicaragua in Focus*
- The following excerpts from *Telling True Stories*: “Participatory Reporting,” (35-39) “Being There,” (39-45) “Reporting Across Cultures,” (46-48) “Travel Writing: Inner and Outer Journeys,” (74-78)
- Excerpts from *The Tourism Encounter* by Florence Babb (on e-reserve)
- Excerpts from *Tell It Slant: Writing and Shaping Creative Nonfiction* (e-reserve)

### **Tuesday, January 3<sup>rd</sup>:**

9 a.m.-3 p.m. class meeting, location TBA

Have read:

- “Securing Consent” & “Truth and Consequences” (176-177) in *Telling True Stories*
- Excerpt from *Fieldworking* on taking field notes (e-reserve)
- Excerpt from James L. Stephens’s *Incidents of Travel in Central America* (e-reserve)
- Paul Berman, “In Search of Ben Linder’s Killers” (e-reserve)
- Excerpts from Salman Rushdie’s *The Jaguar Smile* (e-reserve)

### **Wednesday, January 4<sup>th</sup>:**

Depart for O’Hare airport

Arrive Managua.

Orientation meeting at Compas de Nicaragua Visitor Center

Tour of Managua (Revolutionary Plaza, National Palace, Sandino Statue)

### **Thursday, January 5<sup>th</sup>:**

Breakfast at Visitor Center  
Visit CIPRES model farm and meet w/Paul Baker (activist and musician)  
Depart for La Paz, Carazo  
Tour of La Paz (church, park, homemade bread)  
Meeting with farmer's cooperative  
Welcome gathering with host families

**Friday, January 6<sup>th</sup>:**

Work on building bio-gas stoves  
Meals and recreation with host families

**Saturday, January 7<sup>th</sup>:**

Work on bio-gas stoves  
Meals and recreation with host families  
Class meeting

**Sunday, January 8<sup>th</sup>:**

Work on bio-gas stoves  
Visit to Jinotepe (capital of Carazo region)  
Meals and recreation with host families

**Monday, January 9<sup>th</sup>:**

Work on bio-gas stoves  
Nature walk in search of howler monkeys  
Meals and recreation with host families  
Going away gathering with host families

**Tuesday, January 10<sup>th</sup>:**

Work on bio-gas stoves  
Visit to Mombacho volcano and cloud forest reserve  
Hiking at Mombacho cloud forest reserve  
Night tour of Mombacho (search for salamanders and red-eyed frogs)

**Wednesday, January 11<sup>th</sup>:**

Visit Granada and Masaya Market  
Arrive in Managua and go to host families  
Welcome gathering with host families

**Thursday, January 12<sup>th</sup>:**

Welcome gathering with Women in Action  
Gray water systems installation in La Primavera settlement  
Meals and recreation with host families

**Friday, January 13<sup>th</sup>:**

A typical day with a Women in Action member:

preparing food, washing clothes, working at traffic lights, etc.  
Class meeting

**Saturday, January 14<sup>th</sup>:**

Gray water systems installation in La Primavera settlement  
Meals and recreation with host families  
Evening out with host families

**Sunday, January 15<sup>th</sup>:**

Trip to the Pacific Ocean with host families

**Monday, January 16<sup>th</sup>:**

Gray water systems installation in La Primavera settlement  
Gourd art workshop, soy preparation, activities with children at Women in Action  
Meals and recreation with host families

**Tuesday, January 17<sup>th</sup>:**

Visit to Tiscapa historical site, city overlook, and zipline  
Going away gathering with Women in Action  
Going away gathering with host families

**Wednesday, January 18<sup>th</sup>:**

Return travel to Oshkosh.

**Thursday, January 19<sup>th</sup>:**

Class meeting in Radford Computer Lab, 9 AM-3 PM

- Have read: *Telling True Stories* 100-103 (“To Begin the Beginning”) & 109-121
- Bring journal to class

**Friday, January 20<sup>th</sup>:**

Class meeting in Radford Computer Lab, 9 AM-3 PM

- Have read: “Revising – Over and Over Again” (205-208) in *Telling True Stories*
- Journal due.
- In class self-evaluation

**Thursday, January 26<sup>th</sup>:** Final draft of narrative nonfiction piece due in Radford 204 by 4 pm.