

# “Go to ‘be’, not to ‘do’” by Ryan Richards

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*Ryan Richards is a guest speaker from the Miguel Angel Asturias Academy in Guatemala. Seekers supports the Academy with our international giving.*

I am grateful and humbled to be here before a community so deeply committed to servant leadership. Nine year's ago Jackie and Dave McMakin shared with you about their experience with an innovative nonprofit school in Guatemala. The Asturias Academy has grown and flourished in the subsequent years, thanks in large to the support of Seekers Church.

## Being and doing

I arrived at the Academy in the fall of 2006 and over the last two years have served, learned, been challenged, and grown. Perhaps the most important thing that I learned was an answer to an old question of mine: "how can I help?" My experience in Guatemala has taught me to arrive ready "to be" instead of "to do." Only by first joining the community, earning trust, and listening can we hope to make a positive contribution.

As is often the case, lessons are gleaned from mistakes, and unfortunately, I did not arrive in Guatemala to "be." I arrived at the Academy "to do." My head was full of ideas of how I could "add value" to the project. By focusing exclusively on "doing," I was engineering solutions for a local context I did not understand and was generating opportunities for a project whose real needs I did not know. Perhaps most embarrassing was the time when I created email accounts for the project's teachers, believing that the shared work calendar would prove a useful productivity tool. The teachers smiled and thanked me, but a week later not a single one had activated his or her account. I had foolishly assumed that they had access to the internet and knew how to use computers, which they did not. My actions also overlooked the effective, locally appropriate channels for sharing information that the school already had in place.

My folly was to spend the majority of my time cloistered in my office during my first few months in the country instead of building relationships with staff and other members of the school community. I am not saying that I was anti-social—I chatted with the teachers before school and played with the students at recess—but these activities composed only a fraction of my day. Most of the time I was in front of a

computer, trying as best as I knew how to generate value for the school.

I became noticeably more useful to the Academy when I started prioritizing relationships. Coworkers began to open up to me, and soon I was getting glimpses of the nuanced cultural terrain that my work solutions would have to navigate. I also discovered the unique assets and priorities of the community, where before I was merely a speculating outsider. My experience taught me that local knowledge is a prerequisite to effective community development work, and that its acquisition requires time; time in country, but also time face-to-face in relationship with locals.

Local knowledge is indispensable to successful change-making, and acquiring local knowledge requires time in country, but also face-to-face in relationship with locals. I became noticeably more useful to the Academy when I started prioritizing relationships in my work. Coworkers began to open up to me, and soon I was getting glimpses of the nuanced cultural terrain that my work solutions would have to navigate. I also discovered the unique assets and priorities of the community, where before I was merely a speculating outsider.

## **About the Asturias Academy**

Guatemala's educational needs are complex. Fewer than three in ten Guatemalan children finish the sixth grade, and Guatemala is only ranked above Nicaragua and Haiti in terms of literacy rates in Latin America (USAID, UNDP). The country's public schools are overcrowded, under-funded, and using archaic teaching methods. Private schools, the supposed alternative,

are too expensive for Guatemala's poor majority.

The country's educational deficit is rooted in a highly stratified social structure, which itself is a legacy of Spanish Conquest and Colonialism. Class interests are so divergent in Guatemala that elites prefer to privately procure goods such as education and security than to invest in public goods. The result is extremely low government social spending. In fact, Guatemala ranks first in the entire world in the "Freedom from Government" category of the Heritage Foundation's Index of Economic Freedom.

The Academy for which I work offers a model for reforming Guatemala's educational system. Scholarships and a low general tuition rates make the Academy accessible to even the poorest families. The curriculum combines strong academic fundamentals with training in leadership and human rights issues. The Academy's Popular Education pedagogy illicitly the pupils' curiosity and gestates within them an awareness of the reality in which they live. A recent alliance with a vocational school has also opened the door to job training for the Academy's older students.

As the Academy's Development and Volunteer Coordinator, my job has been to develop a reliable and growing stream of resources for the project, thus bringing the Academy closer to its goal of replicating into other communities in Guatemala. To this end, I have built the Academy's fundraising infrastructure and raised sufficient funds to cover the 2008 school year and purchase a full computer lab. I have also built a sustainable volunteer program and managed 23 volunteers. Volunteers have taught courses such as Theatre, Art, and English, and worked with me on administrative projects such as the construction of

a website ([www.asturiasacademy.org](http://www.asturiasacademy.org)).

I see the Academy as a subtle, profound, nonviolent revolution. Instead of sexism, I witness male and female students learning together in math and cooking classes. Instead of racism, I see indigenous and non-indigenous children playing together. The line between the very poor students and those better off is made indistinguishable by their shared experience and common uniform. Justice and peace are proclaimed throughout the curriculum, and students are trained to live those values as they engage the many social problems facing their communities.

## **How you can help**

You can support our work in Guatemala by donating, organizing a group or individual visit to the project, or committing to a month or more of service. Please feel free to contact me at [info\(at\) asturiasacademy.org](mailto:info@asturiasacademy.org) if you have any further questions.