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When clouds bring on the smiles.

BY SHARMILLA GANESAN

Six Malaysian students headed to Mexico recently to attend the Ninth International TOCFE Educational Conference and found that they had picked up more than just a thinking too.



Hanisah (far left, sitting), Annie Zulekha (far left, standing), Nadzlin (sitting in front, brown jacket), Kah Meng (far right, standing) and Alya Hanis (second from right, next to Kah Meng) posing with some of the school students in Mexico.

IREALLY want to go to a party this weekend but mother doesn't want me to. What should I do?"

"There's a boy in class who keeps teasing me. How do I deal with him?" "I really want to lose weight but I love fast food! How do I achieve this?"

These are just some of the problems students grapple with daily.

But thanks to "The 100 Clouds Project", some students in the Klang Valley now have a new problemsolving tool at their disposal to deal with dilemmas.

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The community service project was carried out in three schools in the Klang Valley recently. Under this project, students were taught to use, for 100 days, a process called “The Cloud” to solve problems.

The method is based on the Theory of Constraints (TOC) thinking processes developed by Theory of Constraints for Education (TOCFE) Inc based in the United States.

After taking part in the project, 14-year-olds Annie Zulekha Muhammad Baharuddin, Alya Hanis Abdul Rahman, Tan Wei Lian, Hanisah Mohamad Sharil, Nadzlin Mohd Yunos and Moo Kah Meng of SMK Subang Utama were selected to represent the country in the Ninth International TOCFE Educational Conference in Leon, Mexico.

Needless to say, the prospect of visiting the land of sombreros and mariachi musicians, and to interact with students all over the world thrilled the participants as much as the opportunity to teach others about the new thinking tool.

“The Cloud” involves making a diagram of their problem, as well as the needs and assumptions accompanying the situation. This helps them see the outcome of any action taken to solve the problem, and subsequently choose the best solution.



Guanajuato was captivating, with old, picturesque buildings.

The student who wanted to go to party, for example, realised through her “Cloud” that her mother was against the idea because she was concerned about her safety.

Therefore, she decided to compromise by attending the party but leaving early so that her mother would not be worried.

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“I didn’t take the method seriously at first, but it did help me sort out my problems. Now I try to apply it to any issue I face,” says Nadzlin.

Wei Lian says the method helped her see her options more clearly, and weigh the pros and cons of taking a particular step. TOCFE director (Asia) Khaw Choon Ean says the students were selected by looking at their 100 Clouds to see how well they understood the concepts and applied it to real life.

“I could see that as they got the hang of it, these students were actually applying the method to their own problems, which is excellent.

They also learnt that problems are not the end of a situation, and that solving them is not as difficult as they thought,” says Khaw.

In Leon, the six “ambassadors” attended the Opportunities as Leaders programme, where they interacted with children from other countries to learn leadership skills that can be applied to their own communities. They were also trained to look at global problems on a United Nations model.

Workshops, which were part of the conference, armed the participants with other TOC tools that can be used in decision-making and conflict resolution.

Subsequently, they had to present their vision on how they planned to use the TOC tools to benefit their community.

The students also had the opportunity to visit several Mexican schools where they acted as peer mediators and taught basic TOC tools.

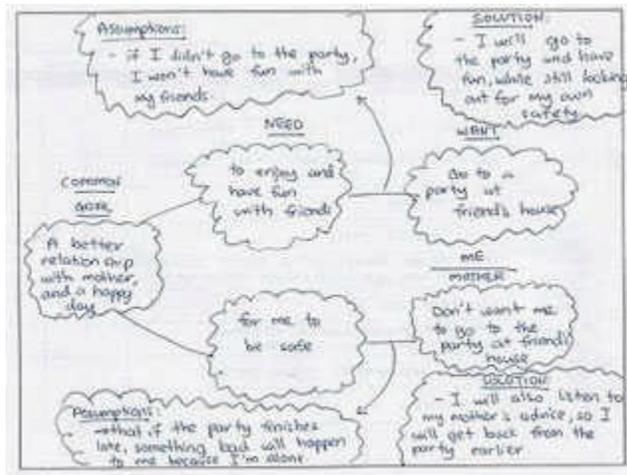
Their attendance and stay in Mexico was sponsored by TOCFE.

The six students share their experiences with StarEducation.

No problem’s too difficult...

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THE conference workshops were really useful as we learnt more about the Theory of Constraints (TOC) thinking tools. In Malaysia, we had just done the “100 Clouds” project; in Mexico, we learnt how to use the TOC tools from programme leader Francis Mejia of Venezuela and youth leader Ana Maria Conde of Colombia.

Basically there are three tools - the cloud, the branch and the target tree. We were taught how to use the cloud to analyse our problems.

The branch helped us see the possible consequences of our actions.

After that, we were given four problematic situations and asked to solve one with a “cloud”.

By the time we finished, we learnt that the cloud method not only helped us identify possible solutions but also facilitated the decision-making process.

Then, we were given cards and told a story entitled “Kingdom of Needs”. We had to decide what we needed in our lives, select a card each from the pile of “things needed” and “things not needed”, and choose a leader to explain our choice. The exercise gave us an insight into what we really need and do not need in life.

Our presentations, which took a whole day to complete, was done in PowerPoint. We also did an artwork showing the meaning of TOC tools.

We hope to teach other Malaysian students the cloud method to solve problems. I hope the TOC tools will catch on in the world! — BY ALYA HANIS ABDUL RAHMAN

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Teach us...



MY fondest memories of Mexico are of the schools I visited. The first, called Colegio Greenwich, was fun because the students were in the sixth grade and not very different from us. They were avidly interested in our culture. We got to taste quesadillas and horchata, which were delicious!

The next school we visited was Reina Maria Kindergarten, where we were assigned to separate groups.

While they started off really shy, the toddlers got used to us and were very active towards the end. We taught them the basic thinking tool, the cloud.

Next, we taught kids between the ages of eight and 10 at the Antonio Sanchez Herrera school. Though they did not initially understand the concept of “the cloud”, they did not give up, and soon became quite good at it.

Then we visited the Humane School, where students were graded on their behaviour, projects and quizzes rather than on exams. I was impressed! The students were taught to speak up, and classes were held with music playing in the background.

If there is one thing I picked up from this experience, it is that learning is a never-ending journey, and is not always about being right. The children in Mexico go to school to learn something new, not to get the

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highest marks, or be top in class, or because their parents forced them to. They go because they want to learn. – BY NADZLIN MOHD YUNOS

Friendly Mexico



BEING in Mexico was great! I just loved the whole experience of being somewhere new and experiencing something totally different. The trip also made me think of what I want to do in life. Best of all, we met tons of superfriendly people. There were representatives from countries all over the world.

Our youth student leader Ana Maria Conde, 16, and her mom Francis Meija Conde, who are from Columbia, have been involved in many TOCFE events. I really admire them because they have the ability to teach and to inspire people.

We also met this chap from Britain Alan McTavish and his wife Fiona. With his rosy cheeks, big stomach, and round happy face, I have to say Alan reminded me of Santa Claus! What's more, he loves to crack jokes and tell stories.

Luis and Honario were our pals from day one. We had a really good time with the 12-year-old Mexicans and their friends. Luis was initially shy, but talked non-stop once he got to know us, while Honario loved playing video games! We even played football together on Honario's farm.

Finally, there's TOCFE chairman Kathy Suerken, a determined woman who truly wants to make the world a better place. Not to mention TOCFE founder Dr Eliyahu Goldratt, who inspired us with his words of wisdom on the issues and problems we face daily.

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If there is one thing I've learnt, it is that we aren't very different from one another, despite coming from different parts of the world. – BY ANNIE ZULEKHA MUHAMMAD BAHARUDDIN

Muchas gracias

I LEARNT to be independent at the conference. As an only child, I have always been pampered by my parents who did everything for me when we travelled, including packing and filling in forms. In Mexico, for the first time, I had to do things for myself.

I also learnt new things about leadership and problem solving. As the assistant head prefect in school, I thought I knew all there was to know, but I realised in Mexico that I still had a long way to go. The cloud method helped me differentiate between needs and wants. I also saw the need to plan my actions based on the repercussions, be they negative or positive.

One memory that stays with me is visiting the Antonio Sanchez Herrera Primary School, where the students kept following me. It turned out that they wanted to play catch.

Teaching is something I had never done before, and it felt great to teach the students the thinking tool, even with the language barrier.

I was really glad that we arrived in Mexico two days before the conference as we got to tour Leon and Guanajuato, where the scenery was absolutely magnificent. I enjoyed every single second of it!

I even managed to pick up some Spanish... Muchas gracias (thank you very much)! – BY MOO KAH MENG

Building bridges . . .

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COMMUNICATION is an important part of life. Before I went to Mexico, I did wonder what it would be like, communicating with the people there. Well, they were really great – friendly, warm and caring. They were also polite, open-minded and understanding.

While visiting the pre-school, elementary and secondary schools in Guanajuato, it was difficult for us to interact with the students as we did not speak Spanish and they were not proficient in English.

However, through translators, we managed to teach the students the TOC tools to solve problems.

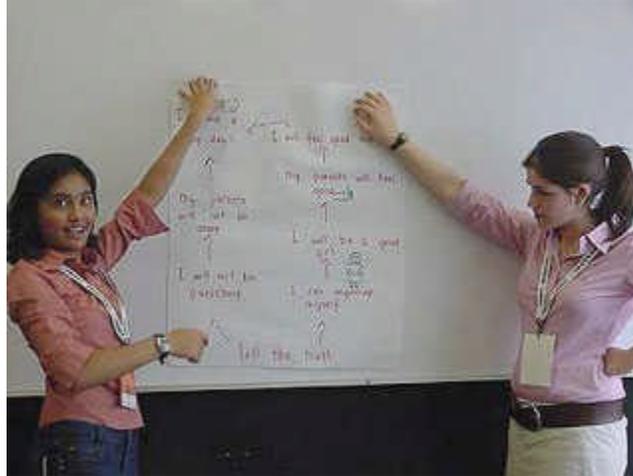
Our workshop started on the first day of the conference when we got to know the participants, most of whom were Mexicans. We were put into teams to discuss our presentations. I found everyone really supportive. We shared ideas and opinions, and even participants who were not in our group offered advice.

The presentation was a great success, due to the hard work we put in. I was really sad to leave as everyone had almost become like family. TOCFE International president Kathy Suerken actually cried when she gave us our certificates of participation. It was wonderful to discover that wherever one goes, people are essentially the same. – BY HANISAH MOHMAD SHARIL

Frog mountain?

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MEXICO's enchanting. The thing that captivated me were the beautiful buildings everywhere.

On our first night in Leon, we visited this place called Downtown, which was packed with old churches and theatres. The most famous church was the Our Lady Of Light Cathedral. Although the theatres were no longer operational, they were still used to stage plays. The roads were narrow and busy.

There was a cheerful square with jugglers, mariachi guitar players and Mexican dancers.

It was really exotic!

The restaurant at our hotel had a cosy wooden theme with lovely antique-looking furniture. That was where we had our breakfast, often considered the main meal in Mexico.

In Leon, the sophisticated Mayor Mall stood out, with its three floors of shops. The best part was the ice-cream vendors, who serve five scoops for only 22 pesos (about RM9)!

The town of Guanajuato was breathtaking, with well-preserved old buildings. There were square, colourful buildings, each with its own unique colour.

We were told that guano means frog and juato means mountain, because the frog was the first animal found there. Gold and silver mining was carried out here in the past. – BY TAN WEI LIAN