

34th IBBY International Congress in Mexico

Sophie Hallam

What stood out for me

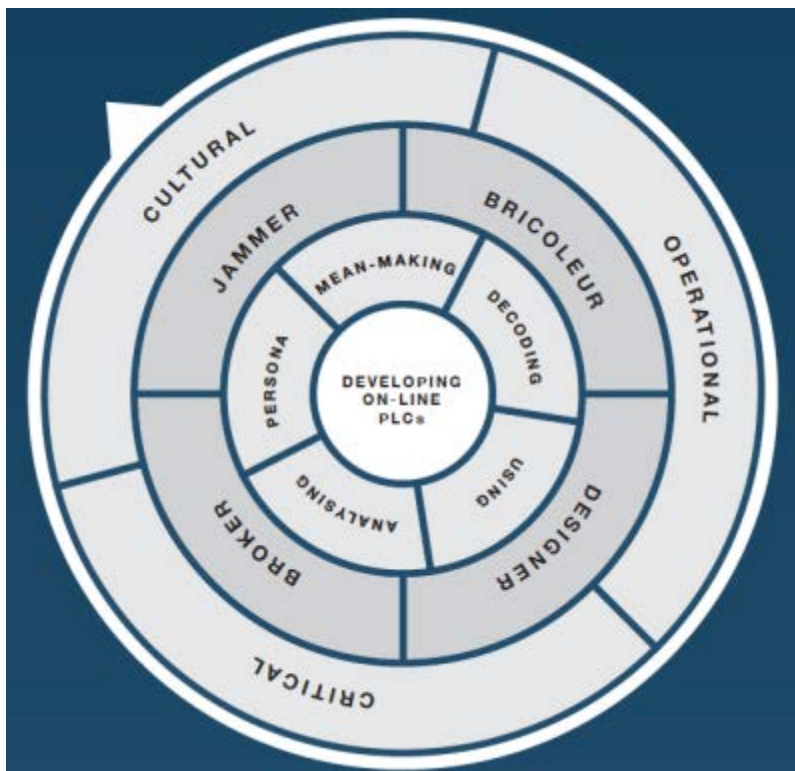
It was an absolutely amazing few weeks! It was wonderful to have the opportunity to meet with Mexican publishers, to see the quality of illustrations and the high-concept picture books that they produce, and to understand a little more about the difficulties with getting work translated.

The congress itself was very intense! But fascinating to listen to the speakers – to understand the multifaceted nature of inclusion, both inside and off the page.

It was great to attend the plenary sessions and I felt really privileged to be part of a session with Ernie Bond from Salisbury University in the USA who discussed environmental picture books, and Bozena Kolman who talked about library programmes in Slovenia. I spoke about my research dissertation, which I completed here at Roehampton in 2012, which looked at Pop Up Projects CIC and how the project's Schools Programme created a third space of literary engagement.

[My dissertation – 'Pop Up: Creating a Third Space of Literary Engagement'](#)

I also held a poster session entitled 'Participatory Literacy Communities and New Technology', which looked at the production of spoken-word poetry performed on YouTube and shared through platforms such as Tumblr, Twitter and Facebook as participatory literacy communities that underpin the idea of belonging and inclusive literacy practices.



If you are registered with Tumblr [you can see my poster and read more about these participatory literacy communities.](#)

One of the main highlights during the congress was being introduced to Dr Socorro Fernandez from the Alfredo Harp Helú Foundation in Oaxaca. Oaxaca is located in South Western Mexico and is one of the poorest and most diverse states with a large population of indigenous peoples and cultures. Illiteracy rates are more than double the rest of the country. Teacher strikes are a common occurrence – last year children in

the state were in school approximately 50% of the time. I was invited to visit after the congress and to go to some of the literacy projects there. The overarching programme Segimnos Leyendo (We Read) works with over 220 volunteers, reaching approximately 4,000 children per month. I visited Ciudad de los Niños, a home for orphaned and abandoned boys. On my arrival, there were a number of reading groups taking place in the courtyard and it was wonderful to see volunteers reading to children in the sun before their afternoon lessons. It made me think of David Almond's session where he talked about the ancient spirit of storytelling as something that holds us together.

The second project I visited was in a community centre 20 minutes from Oaxaca City where children, parents and grandparents sat outside to listen to volunteers reading. Volunteers are trained by the Foundation and had really mastered the art of reading aloud. Both adult and child alike were enthused by the high-quality texts and at the end of each reading there was loud clapping and cries of 'Otra, Otra!' ('Another, another!').

I was also able to deliver 100 books that were donated by the independent publisher Child's Play, which was really appreciated so a big thank you to Child's Play!

We learnt so much during the congress and were lucky to hear of projects around the world, but it was a real pleasure to go and visit some of these literacy projects in situ and to see the hard work and determination of the people who work there. There are many lessons to take from Mexico, but seeing volunteers and children revel in the joy of stories and reading aloud was truly inspirational.

[My blog 'Reading aloud – literacy projects in Oaxaca'](#)

Most memorable moments

The most memorable moment for me was listening to Mardonio Carbollo who writes in his native Nahuatl as well as Spanish. He reminded us that there is still so much injustice and racism within publishing and the messages we send out to the world. All his books in his indigenous language get placed either in the children's section or the anthropological section in bookshops, even though they are unmistakably adult poetry. It was a sharp reminder of the immense work that needs to be done to fight racism and prejudice.

Another moment was listening to Javier Silverio from Oaxaca who talked about language and indigenous peoples – the 'mother tongue' is being forgotten, people are told to forget. Within language is the idea of 'cosmo-vision'. To understand other people's cosmo-vision is key to fighting exclusion. As Javier said, 'Our cosmo-vision is very different from other peoples, which is currently the dominant cosmo-vision – it's key for us that society understand our cosmo-vision.'

Finally, visiting the wonderful libraries in Mexico City were a true inspiration, and attending the concert at the Palacio de Bellas Artes was incredibly special. And, of course, seeing IBBY UK member Julia Eccleshare playing Supermarket Sweep at the Papalote Museum of Childhood!

Follow up

The whole experience of applying for the bursary has been incredibly influential. The congress was a wonderful melting pot of ideas and has influenced both my personal and professional life.

After receiving the bursary, I also joined the IBBY UK committee, which has opened so many doors, not only in attending the congress in Mexico, but now being part of an organisation in the UK that celebrates and promotes international children's literature.