

UNC World View
Connecting Conversations: A World View Podcast

Episode 6 – Odili Calvo and Karla Rodríguez Sánchez – Costa Rica

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Interview by Charlé LaMonica, Director of UNC World View

Charlé LaMonica: Welcome to *Connecting Conversations*. I'm Charlé LaMonica, director of UNC World View, and we're really glad you joined us. Today, Friday, August 7, 2020, I'm in Chapel Hill and joined on zoom by two longtime friends of UNC World View—Odie Calvo of Costa Rica Immersion Abroad and Karla Vanessa Rodríguez Sánchez, a Costa Rican teacher—both talking with me from their homes in Costa Rica. Welcome, Odie and Karla.

Odili Calvo: Hello, Charlé. Thank you.

CL: First, a little bit of background. For more than 10 years UNC World View staff has led K-12 and Community College educators on study visits to Costa Rica. These rigorous study visits were designed to offer cross cultural experiences to learn about the beautiful country of Costa Rica and the educational landscape. Schools were visited and teachers shared their best practice. In all, over 250 North Carolina educators have participated in this experiential professional development. I'd first like to introduce our listeners to Odie Calvo from Costa Rica Immersion Abroad who has partnered with us to design these programs. Odie, I know you've met many North Carolinian teachers over the years and you have a special place in their hearts. Please share with our listeners a little bit about your work and how you're doing.

OC: Well, thank you, Charlé. It's a real honor to be with you in this broadcast and yes, thank you also for your kind words about us and our relationship. Indeed, it has been a real honor for Immersion Abroad Costa Rica to be able to develop more than 11 different programs in order to enhance personal/professional fields of such a wonderful group of teachers. And believe me, after this many years, I can still see their faces when they arrive and the wonderful take away when they leave. I'm totally convinced that the best way to understand, to engage, to improve this broad personal and cultural spectrum is by immersing yourself in the new culture, in the new system. And that's what we really love about our job. And I am so proud that all these teachers from North Carolina have been with us during these years. Thank you, World View for this wonderful opportunity. And of course, regardless of the circumstances, which are very difficult for all of us, we hope to have you back again here to give us a big hug in the coming years!

CL: I think that sounds like a great plan, Odie, and I know that you have many, many friends in North Carolina schools. And we want to continue those relationships. And one of the most involved teachers in UNC World Views Costa Rica study visits, Karla Vanessa Rodríguez Sánchez, has 18 years of experience in the classroom. So Karla is an English teacher in Costa Rica that teaches English from preschool age to sixth grade. And Karla, over the years as World View teachers have traveled to your beautiful country, you've

shared your best teaching practice with many North Carolina teachers over the years and it gives me great pleasure to welcome you also to our podcast today. I was fortunate to meet you in 2015 during a World View visit and it's great to see you on Zoom today as we reconnect virtually

Karla Rodríguez Sánchez: Thank you, Charlé. It's nice to be here.

CL: Well, we're really particularly interested in exploring the experiences teachers are having around the world as they create different kinds of classrooms during COVID-19. And we really want to hear about your teaching practice. But first would you share with our listeners a little bit about yourself and why you became a teacher?

KRS: Well, thank you very much for this opportunity, this invitation, and let me tell you a little bit about my town, my country. The country of the *pura vida* as we used to say here. Well, I am an English teacher in the primary school system in Costa Rica. I work for the Ministry of Education and I have been working in in primary school for about 18 years, as you said before. And also, well, I have to mention that I became a teacher because I got an inspiration from one of my high school teachers. And she was really kind and she made the difference in the classroom, because she went beyond teaching English. She also helps students to get in love with the language and get love with learning. So I am fascinated with teaching, and in this case, teaching English to the young kids, and also to help students in different situations that they face in their lives. So I decided to become a teacher because I think this is a great profession to help [mankind] a little bit. And also, well, I really like it too—working with other teachers; I love the teamwork. So I have been working in different team building projects in my community, my town and also to innovate. I think that I am a person that likes to adapt to the new changes. And during this situation, I think that that has helped me a lot.

CL: Well, I tell you what, I know from just your short response how fortunate your students are to have you in the classroom. And a teacher inspired you and I'm sure you're inspiring people every day in your in your classroom. Can you tell us a little bit, Karla, about your school? Can you describe it to us and the makeup of the students you teach?

KRS: I work in a rural area and the name of my town is Mercedes. It is located in Atenas. We are 45 minutes from the airport, from the International Airport in Costa Rica. It is a small school with about 180 students from preschoolers to sixth graders, and it is a really nice place. All the teachers from North Carolina who have visited us, I think that they have loved the place because we have big yards, where the students can play during the breaks and we can have their different activities with their parents and the community also. And well, most of the students are really happy children. So that is something. I think that in Costa Rica, they have the opportunity to enjoy—especially in Atenas—nature and to just have a little bit more contact with their parents and their relatives. Most of the students are still innocent. They have a lot of time playing outside and not only in the internet or in the video games. And also, there is a percentage of students that need a little bit of motivation for study, but the school gives them the opportunity of participating in the English Fest; there

is time for art festivals. And we have also had a school band that has been participating in the [national operations] that we have for independence day every year in the town. And I think that those are different projects that the school has that motivate the students to keep engaging to education. In general, I think that there is a feeling of fellowship in the school among teachers and students also.

CL: Sounds like you work in an amazing environment because community is what it's all about. And even though people are remote these days, that community is what holds everybody together in these kinds of times. So I'm really so glad you shared that with us so we can have that picture. What has been your experience getting to know the World View global study visit teachers during your past several years? Because I know when I was down in Costa Rica in 2015, you were engaged with us at a round table with different teachers and I know that over the years you've experienced a lot of exchanges. Can you tell us some of the some of the things that were your takeaway from that experience.

KRS: Of course. And, well, I am thankful [for] World View and Odie, because you have chosen my school for this opportunity of interchange[ing] ideas with other teachers. So I think that it has been my life-enriching experience and where we can have the opportunity of listening to different voices and how are they teaching. We can also have the opportunity to let them know a little bit about our methodology in Costa Rica. So I think that interchanging culture has been very important too.

CL: Well, it certainly went both ways, because as Odie said, people didn't want to leave when they were visiting Costa Rica. It was such an amazing, engaging experience with the teachers and the beautiful country.

KRS: I hope that we could continue having these kind of experiences, but it is very valuable for all the teachers that work here in Costa Rica also to listen to teachers from other places of the world. Thank you very much for that.

CL: Absolutely. And what I keep thinking of is all of the commonalities that we have heard over the years too because what's most important is that student and how every individual teacher can reach that individual student. But here we are in a pandemic and I'm wondering would you please share with our listeners what your experience has been when your school closed down, remote, when and if you're going back? If you could share a little bit about what's happening in your school and with your life as a teacher right now?

KRS: Yeah well in nobody was ready for this, because, especially in Costa Rica, we weren't used to teaching online and we do not have the infrastructure, or we do not have the system to work with Microsoft Teams, or any other tool. So the shut down was on March 17 for the schools. And all the kids went home that day. And since that time we have been working with something that the Ministry of Public education has called "long distance education." It's kind of remote education and the ministry is divided the students in four scenarios, according to what they have. If they have technology at home or if they have internet connection, so those are students that have the access to internet, they are having

classes by Microsoft Teams where the teachers meet them at least once a week and explain the topics or the contents for the curriculum. And then there are the other kids that don't have access to the internet. So they get photocopies of materials at least once a month to work by themselves at home.

CL: How are those materials given to the students?

KRS: Well that's interesting question. At the beginning when we went home, on March 17, it was a big deal for us because we didn't have contact with the parents. So the main means of communication was with WhatsApp. So by the phone and WhatsApp messages, the teachers contact their parents and we began by sending them little task or homework within a message. And after that, the government decided that they were going to give a package of food to the families of the students that were in the public system, because in the public system they give a meal a day, at least, to the students, every day. And so now they are not getting that food, that meal so, they decided that there were a lot of people that needed that food and they were not going to school. So every month they give a package with some food items. And so the teachers print all the material and they send this kind of booklets with the food that they get.

CL: That way they can assure that the students are getting good nutrition. What are the opportunities that you're finding with all this in terms of teaching and learning? I know there's so many drawbacks—I mean, we're in a pandemic. But are there any things that you're finding as opportunities of teaching and learning with your students that you never would have imagined before?

KRS: Well, perhaps it is a horrible time with this pandemic and the social issues that it has created, but I think that we need to think in positive ways. So I always try to find something good in every change or everything that I have to face. With the students and school, I think that the pandemic and this quarantine have created opportunities. For example, in the case of the updating, teachers updating and also the students training in technology in the use of technology. They have had to develop new skills, because they were used to using their cell phones, the ones that have that it, only for video games, or maybe a using for social media, but now they are learning how to use this Microsoft Teams to have the classes online, also to look at the internet for information and also it's an opportunity to develop more social skills in a different way. Now, [they have] person to person [skills], but now they have this challenge also. And in in the case of the teachers also we have the opportunity to innovate. Because we have had to learn to give different kinds of classes through the internet. Through seeing it screen-to-screen to the students. But also for those students that are getting only the photocopies: we have had to be really creative in that way. Actually, in the future, I see my students interacting with our students from different places around the world in order to improve their English and knowledge of other cultures, because now they have this access to technology.

CL: That's a very exciting part. I mean, as long as people have the internet access, great, amazing learning and teaching can get done. I'm wondering with all of that, when you see

these opportunities within actually meeting your students in your home. It's very interesting that you teach these very young children from preschool through sixth grade. What are you finding different from preschool to sixth grade? That's a big span.

KRS: Well, yes, actually, now I am teaching not just the students but also the parents at home because in the case of the little ones, the ones that are in kindergarten or first and second grades, they are beginning to read. So they cannot do their work by themselves, they need their parents, they must be there for helping the kids. And so it is kind of fun because sometimes the parents just send audio asking how to pronounce something because the way that I work with them is that I print the material, but I also record some audio with the pronunciation of every little thing that I put in the in the printed material. And in the photocopies they have the Spanish explanation of the activity and then the English in written words or phrases and next to this, the online class, they have this audio. So it has been a challenge, but also I have seen so many parents committed with the process of learning and learning by themselves, and with the teachers help in order to help their kids. And then they other students that are in the second cycle that is from fourth grade to sixth grade and they are a little bit more autonomous. And so they work on their own, but they still need the parents support.

CL: I think you must be an amazing teacher to be an expert in teaching the preschool, all the way to the sixth grade. You sound amazing, Karla, and I can only imagine how exciting it must be for the students to see their teachers pivoting like this as well, modeling that teaching and learning can change and really be enhanced in different ways. And also that, I think, in talking to other teachers, some teachers, unlike you, are not as familiar with technology and students were kind of ahead of the game in some cases. I know that you're just really committed to teaching the world to your classroom. And I'm wondering if you could share out a couple things that you do that connect Costa Rica to the world with your teaching?

KRS: Well, that is really important for me because I always try students to see the world through the English language because I am an English teacher, so I always tell them "learning a language is important because you can visit different countries, you can speak with people around the world." So I have a implemented in my classes a project, since I began working at the school in 2004. They have had volunteers in different periods of the year. I have contact different programs around the world from Europe from the United States. And so if they have at school, at least one or two volunteers like native English speakers. It could be just for a couple of weeks or for a month. And they have helped students in their classes like a teacher's aide working with me and also helping in the English festivals. And so in that way, the kids could learn the English from a native speaker and see the difference in the pronunciation. Also, the culture, because they tell about their place, the places where they are from. So that is one of the things I have done. And also in the past three or four years, I got the idea to take some of the groups, some of the groups at the older [grades] that they write a little bit more in English. So they are writing mail to students in schools in North Carolina or other places in the States. So that was an amazing

project for them because they really enjoy writing their letter in English and being able to communicate in a different language, and then they receive a letter from the other students that are same age or similar age with them and get them mailed at the beginning of the program I created. They got the mail in the envelope and the traditional mail and they love to see the stamps. But it was a little bit expensive and we did it that way because we did not have the technology to send emails.

Last year we had the opportunity to work with a North Carolina teacher and one group sent some emails to the students in North Carolina, and that was also amazing because, well, the teacher was really committed and they could have this communication and the parents were like, just relaxed because the teachers were checking the information that they were sending. So it was nice. So those are kind of the little things that I tried to include and innovate in the classroom. It is like out of the curriculum, but I support them because it lets the students participate in real life situations and learn about the world also.

CL: Thank you for sharing that. The small things which—a letter is really a huge learning opportunity and I can just imagine—I bet those students are holding on to those letters as well and will continue those relationships. Who knows what will come from that. As you think about kind of a broad, broad brushstroke over global education for your students, what do you find as really the most valuable thing for your students? You had mentioned that you wanted them to hear from English speaking teachers, the written word was important, the value of the relationships that they're building. From your perspective, what value is a global education for your students?

KRS: I consider the value of global education is huge in our days because I think it helps students to be more compassionate. It helps people to develop their soft skills that I think are really needed for a better world. And now we are having a change in our daily life. So, also global education helps them to be more tolerant about the difference and be aware, also about their similarities with people around the planet.

CL: Thank you so much. Karla. Thank you so much for your time today. As we learned about your teaching profession and the way you can care for your students and help develop them as they grow into young adults. And even in the middle of this pandemic, COVID-19, you're creating such great opportunities for your students to learn.

KRS: Thank you to you and to World View for caring about and giving us a time for giving an overview from our country, our town, during this pandemic. And past this COVID-19 I hope that we could continue sharing experiences for the good of our students and our teachers. Thank you very much.

CL: Thank you, and Odie we stay committed to teaching and learning about our world, especially through these challenging times. We've worked with you for many, many years. Thank you for what you brought to UNC World View educators these many years.

OC: Thank you, Charlé. I'm here listening to Karla and being amazed and excited about how many little things we have been contributing. I mean "we" I'm saying World View and

Immersion Abroad Costa Rica. Every time I go to her school and we talk about little things: How can we help? How can we contribute? She's a piece of gold in this school. She always has an idea. We work together. We have been working together as friends for so many years and I'm so glad to hear the outcome that she just let us know about. And I'm sure, Charlé, several of our World View teachers will hear this podcast and I would like to send them a big hug and tell all of them that the new world will get back after this pandemic. It's going to be much better than what we had. Just take the—as Karla was saying and you were saying it also—the little things, the special moments that difficulties could bring us and learn out of them and hopefully we'll see all of you very soon. A big hugs and kisses for all of them.

CL: Thank you, Odie. Thank you. Karla. It's a beautiful way to end our podcast and do take care in Costa Rica. We will stay connected and thank you all for listening. Until next time, this is Charlé LaMonica for UNC World View *Connecting Conversations*. Goodbye.