

Teaching as a Service Learning Experience: Reflections on Redlands students' service at Peking University

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In May 2004, I brought a group of 14 University of Redlands students to China for a four-week travel course. During these 4 weeks, besides academic activities and cultural tours, our students also taught English at Peking University, Shandong University, and Xi'an Taotong University. Incorporating teaching into a travel course is not a new idea from me. I am indebted for this to my colleague, Professor Bill Huntley, who has brought students to Japan to teach English for many years. There are many differences between the Japan and China travel courses—e.g., the former was hosted by individual Japanese families, while the latter was hosted by Chinese universities; and the former made teaching English the most important part of its program, while the latter incorporated it as component of its program equal to classroom studies and cultural tours. Nevertheless, a teaching element is what these two programs have shared in common.

In this presentation I will just focus my discussion on my students' teaching at Peking University, where I studied and taught before I left China. Our group stayed in Beijing for two weeks. During those two weeks, besides taking a short course taught by professors at Peking University and touring Beijing and nearby areas, students, as volunteers, taught English on the campus during the evenings (about three class sessions per week and various tutorial sessions). Each pair of students was in charge of a class section made of about 10-16 Chinese students, and there were a



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total of seven class sections. Before we left the U.S. for China, each pair of students had written a conversation on a topic that they would like to teach. I let students exchange their written conversations with each other. Thus, students had seven different dialogues written as lecture notes when they arrived in Beijing. Each pair of students was totally responsible to teach their class and freely taught whatever they thought best for their students, with seven

written lecture notes for their reference. Several students adjusted their teaching content based on students' needs. For example, two students helped their Chinese students to prepare interviews for American visa applications, since many of their Chinese students were going to apply for a visa to the U.S. soon.

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This teaching experience not only helped Redlands students to develop their abilities for leadership and organization and to understand the meaning of teaching, but also taught them a great deal about Chinese people and culture. It taught them something about China that they could never learn from a class or a tour. This experience provided students with an opportunity to connect with real Chinese students and

understand their lives and their ideas. Many of our students have made friends with Chinese students and have kept in contact after they returned to the U.S. One of my students told me that he sent a John Kerry presidential campaign flyer to his new friends in China who were his students, since they were eager to know what was going on in the U.S. at that time.

This teaching experience plus other experiences in China had a great impact on most of the students in the group. For example, several students enrolled in a Chinese language course after their return to the U.S. from China; several students applied for short-term teaching positions and planned to teach English in China during the summer. Moreover, one of my students, although he is no longer at Redlands now, has decided to go back to Peking University on an exchange program for a long period this coming fall and his application has been accepted. Another student said that his teaching experience in China was so enjoyable so that he decided to accept a job offer to teach English full-time in Korea a few months after our travel course. Teaching in Korea will make his return to China much more likely than if he stays in the U.S., of course.

In general, I believe that Redlands students' teaching experience at Peking University is also a good learning experience for them. Such experience has taught them to be more responsible, more capable, and more open-minded human beings. As far as cultural understanding is concerned, teaching English in China may be one of the most efficient ways to understand China.