

## Lessons from Teaching as a Fulbright Scholar in China<sup>1</sup>

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In fall, 2007, I was fortunate to teach as a Fulbright Scholar at Renmin University of China in Beijing. In this paper I organize my experiences using lessons that my teaching assistant, Dr. Li Wenzhao, shared with his colleagues at the conclusion of the semester.

After going through the Fulbright application process and waiting, what seemed like forever, I was matched with Renmin University of China, home to a leading Public Administration program. The full-time curriculum looks much like those in the U.S. However, students take a heavier course load; seven core courses were standard, plus electives. However, classes were shorter (1 ½ hours per week), and workload expectations seemed light.

Fulbright lecturers typically teach one or two courses per semester. I taught Program Evaluation for MPA students and an elective on Health Policy to graduate students from across the campus. Class sizes and physical space and amenities were similar to my home university. After a student started the system to get past the all-Chinese screens, I was able to function much as at home.

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While Chinese graduate students are expected to be able to understand lectures in English, I was assigned a teaching assistant who translated when needed. At the conclusion of my semester, the dean of the School of Public Administration asked Li Wenzhao to share what he learned with the rest of the faculty. His *Eight Lessons on American Teaching Style* serve as a structure for sharing how teaching in the China is different from the U.S.

**Lesson 1 - The whole teaching process and course design are planned in advance.**

While we take it as a given that readings, assignments, and grading criteria are laid out from the beginning of the course, this structure surprised students in China. Their typical courses seemed to unfold through the semester, with tests and assignments emerging at unpredictable times.

**Lesson 2 - The reading materials and essays are very rich and provide much information for students.**

Typical Chinese classes are textbook-based, focusing on memorization. I selected a basic textbook so I could supplement it with cases on the Internet. Given the time needed to describe each program, I cut back to one case study per class.

**Lesson 3 –Students are encouraged to use the tools and methods learned for the solution of actual problems.**

I included at least one interactive exercise per class. These were conducted in small groups, a structure that the students appeared comfortable with. The 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, at that point less than a year away, was the basis for in-class

activities throughout the semester. Students operationalized the objectives and designed evaluation strategies to examine whether those objectives had been met.

**Lesson 4 - ... the students are stimulated to criticize the case themselves.**

An article from the *China Daily* included a graph of satisfaction with preparation of Olympia venues by athletes, judges, and other target groups but without providing data collection methods. The students seemed shocked that I would criticize this report, and stunned that they were expected to challenge authority as well. Over time, learning specific and tools, such as sampling methods, gave them confidence to approach this task.

**Lesson 5 - Academic honesty is required ... and plagiarizing is forbidden completely.**

From elementary school on, American students learn to cite their sources. This is not the case in China where reiterating the exact words of scholars is considered a high form of flattery. As a result, Chinese students do not understand the concept of plagiarism as used in the West. Despite clearly describing my expectations, over half of the papers included substantial content directly taken from the Internet, without citation. I think it was difficult for students to use their sometimes-limited English to convey what someone else had already said better. By the end of the semester it became clear that American standards of citations are culture-based, not universal values.

**Lesson 6 - Be generous with encouragement, inspiration, and praise of students.**

According to Li Wenzhao, I stimulated the students more than typical Chinese faculty members. Students in Western classrooms raise their hands and ask questions when they do not understand something. If you ask Chinese students if they have any questions you will generally receive only blank stares. They said this was because when they ask a question, Chinese professors take it as criticism of their teaching. Speaking up in class was a challenge even for the more advanced graduate students.

**Lesson 7 - Be confident in the process of teaching and enjoy the experience of contact with students.**

Chinese students had clear expectations about out-of-classroom contact with faculty. Some of the most rewarding aspects of teaching came after class. I took small groups of students out to lunch to find out a little more about them and their aspirations and answer more of their questions about life in ‘the States.’

**Lesson 8 - American professors earn high salaries and enjoy good welfare.**

I think with this lesson Li Wenzhao was telling his colleagues that they were not expected to teach this way. By good “welfare” he was suggesting that since they get paid less, they don’t need to meet Western standards.

We do have good welfare. We enjoy opportunities to pursue our intellectual interests and to explore the world through programs such as the Fulbright Scholars Program. This is an exciting time to be living and teaching in China. There are great opportunities for increasing academic cooperation. Not only do I think my experience improved my teaching at home; it also led to a series of publications about

the Fulbright Program. China recognizes that it has much to learn from the rest of the world. We should appreciate that we have a lot to learn from other cultures as well.