

Creating Constructive Communication-the Socratic Seminar in China

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There is no doubt that China's peace has a significant influence on global peace. However, China is experiencing a difficult transition period, and social hazards are increasingly emerging. Internationally, China has conflicts with neighboring countries, like Vietnam, the Philippines, and Japan. Domestically, the hazards are the unequal distribution of various resources and the imbalance between the development of the economy and protection of the environment.

These hazards are made worse by the poor communication of the people dealing with various conflicts. When China had a conflict over Diaoyu Island with Japan, some voices appeared on the Internet to propose beginning a war with Japan to solve that conflict. Also, Chinese people in several cities went to the streets to demonstrate against Japan. Japanese-brand cars and Japanese-style restaurants suffered some damage, and a number of Japanese citizens in China were attacked. In 2012, in Shifang, Qidong and Nignbo, thousands of local people went to the streets to protest against the establishing of factories which have high pollution possibilities for local areas. In two of these protests, physical conflicts between the police and local community were provoked because the local government and common people did not communicate with each other effectively.

China had a long history in which speaking something different from the established opinions was dangerous. Now, with the development of the Internet, people have more opportunities to express their opinions. In *Weibo*, the Chinese version of Twitter, more and more people voice their ideas about various issues. However, the tone is confrontational. Some people use abusive words to attack each other, rather than discussing rationally, when they have different views. Moreover, the disagreement stretches from the Internet to the real world, and some people have even used duels to solve disagreements. From over-obedience to over-challenging, some Chinese people seem to go from one extreme to another in communication. Fewer and fewer people really listen to each other. People simply argue a lot and try to get other people's agreement.

We believe the lack of training in expressing and listening to opinions in China's education system is the main cause of people not knowing how to communicate in conflicts. Moreover, we believe that Socratic seminars, which are used at St. John's College (SJC), can really help people learn how to think, how to speak up, how to listen, how to ask questions, and how to cooperate in communication.

The lecture dominates Chinese classes, with teachers in the role of authority, imparting knowledge to students. However, a Socratic style of learning, which would be radically new in China, promotes equal opportunity for expression for all students and teachers. At SJC, there are two tutors (professors) in the Socratic seminars. The tutors are not authoritative and claim no knowledge of the truth, but help participants prevent the discussion from digressing. Expressing personal opinions, helping other people to develop their opinions, and considering other people's opinions are key elements in the Socratic seminars. In order to achieve this, people need to listen carefully and respond sincerely. Moreover, the Socratic seminar values the pursuit of deep questions. There are always a series of "whys" following each new question, which cultivates in the participants the habit of critical thinking. Finally, the Socratic seminar does not aim at reaching consensus, but at examining or pursuing truth together. People rarely get angry, even when they have different ideas or cannot find answers.

We plan to promote and teach the Socratic style seminar in Beijing, China, as a way of modeling a form of constructive communication. High school students are our target participants because they are open to new ideas and are responsible for the future of the country. We will invite 10 students from one of the best high schools in Beijing, The Affiliated High School of Peking University, to participate in our seminars, because they have a high possibility of being influential in China. The dean of the international department of this school has sent written confirmation of his support. The selection of participants will be conducted by a SJC tutor, Mr. Grant Franks, who is currently teaching in this high school. The criteria of selections are: the students are interested in seminars and their English is good enough to read and communicate.

The reading material of the seminar will be simple with respect to language but complex with respect to thought, like Plato's dialogues. Each seminar will be two hours long, with one of our student team members taking the role of a tutor to lead the seminar along with a SJC tutor, Ms. Patricia Locke, and another student team member acting as a participant to support them. Teachers and school leaders will be invited to visit the seminar at the end of this project. If we invite them at the beginning of the project, or to the whole project, their presence could constrain students' active participation. At the end of the project, we will give every student a report about their seminar performance.

Concrete Plan:

Preparation: (Present—May 25th 2014) Every weekend, team members will meet to prepare for the project. First, we will choose the reading materials, in coordination with Mr. Franks and Ms. Locke, and hold seminars about texts with other classmates. Second, we will do the admission work for the project. Third, we will make a detailed schedule.

Execution: (July 7th 2014—August 10th 2014) We will fly to China on July 7th and the participating high school starts summer break on July 12th. After using one week to adapt to local time and do preparatory work, like meeting our participants, we will begin the first seminar on July 14th. One seminar will be held every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, with 12 seminars total, at The Affiliated High School of Peking University. After every Friday's seminar, we will provide food and conduct a short discussion to learn participants' feelings. A questionnaire will also be distributed at the end of the project to receive formal feedback. The content of the discussions and the statistics from the questionnaire will help to produce the final Projects for Peace report. Every weekend, the team members will hold a meeting to summarize the performance of that week's seminar and discuss how to improve future sessions.

Summarization and Return: (August 10th 2014—August 13th 2014) Team members will hold meetings to analyze the whole project, deal with the questionnaire's statistics, and write the final report. On August 13th 2014, we will return to America. When the 2014 fall semester begins, a final report will be submitted to the Davis Foundation, and a meeting will be held to report this project to the whole St. John's College community.

Feasibility:

Team member Thomas Zachary has been learning Chinese for 7 months, and his Chinese is good enough to live independently in China. Team member Indira Cabrera visited China for one month in 2012, and she will have a basic Chinese course from SJC Chinese students before she goes to China. Also, a graduate from the local high school, Lingxiao Zhang, who is currently taking a gap year and can speak both English and Chinese, is going to be the local coordinator for the project.

Local Connection: Zizheng Wang has lived in Beijing for 19 years. He has many friends and classmates there. The high school where we plan to conduct the project is his high school, and he has a very good relationship with the high school. Mr. Grant Franks, a SJC tutor has taught at that high school for two years, and will be involved with selecting participants.

Seminar Skill: Each member of the team has experience with seminars from their time at St. John's College as well as a deep interest in sharing the seminar with others. One SJC tutor, Ms. Patricia Locke, is committed to going to China with us to co-lead the seminars with student team members

Participation: Our partner high school is very open to new ideas. It is an excellent opportunity for the local students to practice English, experience liberal arts education, and learn about American college life.

Expectations and Sustainability: For the student participants, first we expect them to learn how to think critically, how to listen, how to ask questions, how to speak up, and how to cooperate, by practicing the Socratic seminar. Second, by reading and discussing a great book, they are expected to think extensively about peace and the challenges to peace that China is facing. The book(s) used in the project will be given to them as a gift, and they will be asked to organize and lead a seminar by themselves in the fall after the project. For the school teachers and leaders who visit the seminar at the end of the project, we want to show them another teaching method, and hopefully they will allow students more opportunities to speak in class.