

Title of Project: Creating Constructive Communication- The Socratic Seminar in China

Country where the project took place: China

College: St. John's College, Santa Fe

Students Involved Directly: Indira Alejandra Cabrera, USA, St. John's College, Santa Fe

Zachary David Charles Thomas, USA, St. John's College, Santa Fe

Dongyu Cui, China, St. John's College, Santa Fe

Zizheng Wang, China, St. John's College, Santa Fe

Project Website: www.medium.com/@socraticseminar/latest

Our primary goal was to teach and nurture Socratic-style seminars to Chinese high school students as a way of modeling constructive communication. Through familiarity with the Socratic method, we hoped to provide a new generation with the tools to have effective and constructive communication in all aspects of life.

We arrived in Beijing, China, dedicated to working with students and recent graduates of the High School Affiliated with Peking University and its international division, Dalton Academy. Through posters, a school-wide presentation, and word of mouth, students learned about our program and were especially interested in the texts and the dialogue aspect of the program. Used to lectures, students seemed pleased to have a space where they could voice their own opinions and effectively be their own teachers. Our students spoke and wrote English proficiently. They were among the highest achieving students in Beijing and were deeply committed to broadening their scope. Many students expressed a desire to be more exposed to the liberal arts because they were unable to a younger age. After a short application essay and an interview, we were ready to begin conducting seminars with the students. Dr. Patricia Locke and Yue Gong, a St. John's tutor and Graduate student respectively, joined Indira Cabrera, Zachary Thomas in China. LingXiao Zhang, a former student of the High School, served as our project coordinator. They co-taught and provided valuable insight into the minds of students and into the academic landscape of China today. Our team met every morning to discuss our goals for the day. Tutors, or conversation guides, took turns asking an opening question, intended to foster conversation and inspire students on a deeper intellectual level. Our students were then given space and encouraged to speak and listen and respond respectfully to their classmates. We divided the program into two sessions, with the intention of giving more students the opportunity of participating in a Socratic Seminar intensive. Session 1 ran from July 12 to August 3rd. Session 2 ran from August 7th to the 24th. The program met on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays from 3-5pm. A Q&A session, intended to help with English Language and text-based questions occurred every Monday, Wednesday and Friday from 2-2:45 pm. Lodging was provided by The Affiliated High School of Peking University due to a strong desire for seminar and conversation-based education.

After a couple of classes, every student expressed that the length of the class needed to be shortened and that they were unsure how to ask permission to use the bathroom. Students were not used to such long class hours and we felt that asking to leave or leaving the conversation would distract and interrupt the active listening and question incubation necessary for a group dialogue. To accommodate, we held a 5-10 minute break in a natural conversation lull or 4 pm, depending on the conversation. This break helped create an opportunity to revisit the initial question much more deeply after the break and to allow quieter people a chance to speak as their comfort with the conversation increased.

We found out that although our first seminar dealt with the question of how to have conversation in a way that increases good-will and truly fosters an atmosphere of intellectual curiosity and growth, our students initially felt uneasy. Even the students with experiences in having a small classroom size were initially uncomfortable with no teacher or authority figure leading the class. At first, it was hard for each student to open up and silence was rampant. However, with time and having gotten to know their peers, students began to understand why their participation and unique thoughts were important and were excited at being the authority figures that led the class. Students in both sessions were initially concerned with giving a "right" answer. This often led to frustrated feelings from really talented students, in their attempt to do well. With time spent together and reminders of the overall class project, students quickly lost that sense of frustration and were able to bond with their peers over trying to understand a complicated text.

In total, 20 Chinese students benefitted from the program. The students of the Affiliated High School of Peking University are among the most academically talented in all of China. After testing well in rigorous middle school examinations, our students were offered a place in the Affiliated High School of Peking University. Most students were juniors or seniors in high school. Three students are matriculating to U.S universities in the fall. We were pleased to offer a place in our program to a homeschooled student. Homeschooling in China was previously illegal and we were pleased to offer this opportunity. The students who participated in our program are poised to affect change in their local communities and in the whole of China and are now truly equipped to do so.

As a rapidly growing superpower, China requires a new generation with the ability to understand, respect and listen to each other. As China engages other countries in political dialogue, this ability will only be more useful. The Cultural Revolution has left a gap that only continued awareness and education can fill. Though liberal arts education of the Western and Eastern tradition, you can create an empowered human being. The seminar style discussion is the most accessible method. When students realize that any group of people can come together with an open mind and with a desire for truth, they will be on the path to peace. True dialogue is necessary for creating a tangible peace, a peace that can exist in the world. The incredible thing about the project is that once you show that true dialogue is possible even for a little while, you will continue to work to ensure that it continues perpetually. Our project will continue at The Affiliated High School of Peking University. By setting aside money, we have created a fund that gives an incentive to teachers who engage their students through Socratic dialogue and will cover the cost of books for the class. Ideally, we hope to expand the project to several high schools around China and continue to discuss texts in a way that allows for honest and productive dialogue among people.

Peace is the absence of conflict and the existence of healthy relationships between people and between governments. Mutual understanding, respect and the ability to compromise is an essential part of peace in our modern world. Our project teaches students the tools to settle conflict through communication. As they learn how to deal with the inevitable conflicts that arise between peers, they learn that any conflict can be understood and solved by communicating effectively and with empathy for one another. Our project aids the cause of friendship among people and peace among governments. In the short term, students learn that a student who understands the world differently than they do is not to be feared but rather understood. We remain committed to the idea that effective communication is the way through which peace will be achieved in our world. Completing the project made us realize that even with technology; we still struggle with communicating effectively. There is a renewed sense of vigor in every participant that we hope motivates others in the search for peace.

When we acknowledge that every human being longs for peace and struggles with the same fundamental questions, we can begin to understand the issues preventing our peaceful co-existence. Our project showed me how peace can be achieved in our lifetime. -Indira Cabrera

When conducting seminar, we make an effort to truly understand each other; we converse with respect. These two factors are necessary for creating a peaceful environment for society. -Zizheng Wang

Through dialogue, we come to not only understand the material we study, but we also come to an understanding of ourselves. This introspection breeds the deep empathy from which peace grows. -Zachary Thomas

Socratic seminars are one way to make people better listeners, thinkers and speakers. As they build constructive communication together, they solve conflicts and bring others peace at various levels. -Dongyu Cui.

