

Projects for Peace Summer 2007

ACCESSIBLE INFORMATION:

Working Towards Peace by Designing and Advancing Peer Based Sex-Education to Promote Healthy Choices and Better Understanding for Gao Zhong (High School) Students in China

Victoria Yuan, USA
Colby College
Class of 2007

Melyn Heckelman, USA
Colby College
Class of 2008

We travelled to China to discuss the demoralizing effects of sexual assault, the potentially destabilizing results of pandemic sexually transmitted infections and the milieu of other socially controversial and intensely personal issues that American college students haphazardly discuss on a regular basis. We ended up teaching about tampons, the location of the vagina, and which side of a condom is “up.” When writing our proposal, our focus was to relay to Chinese high school and college students in-depth, informative sex education. Our project aimed to develop peace in three ways: personal peace, peer sex-education as a tool of peace, and the prevention of disease. Our project aimed to provide individuals with ways to protect themselves from unwanted pregnancy, disease and abuse, all of which are preventable sources of suffering. Greater understanding of and respect for one’s own body empowers the individual and encourages compassion both for oneself and for others. Second, the focus on *peer* sex education was to develop broader communication skills that foster open, honest discussions. Most importantly, it was meant to empower youths, the future of society, to take control of their own health and well-being while giving them a chance to become leaders who can continue educating and forming the foundations of peace. Third, disease is a destabilizing element in any society as seen with the Chinese government's failure to deal quickly and openly with the 2003 SARS epidemic. The result was public instability, international humiliation and public distrust in their government. By helping to raise awareness of this problem in China and combating the cultural and social causes of the spread of STIs, we believed we could help to form a stronger society in which peace is a more attainable goal. Though we feel our project began to accomplish many of these objectives, we found that the issues we faced, the information that was so desperately needed and wanted and the students we taught, all required much more time than we were able to give. The students’ desire to learn meant we often strayed from our lesson plans to answer impromptu questions regarding everything from the health effects of “too much sex” to what sex is like on American campuses and, in so doing, reached more students than we had originally proposed on a level neither of us could have ever expected. Though our policy of “we stay until you have no more unanswered questions” often meant two-hour classes turned into five-hour, tell-all sessions, we found that regardless of how well we executed our lesson plan, the most important lessons were the ones we didn’t plan for. We were role models for students and teachers, simultaneously representing what it means to come from a society that allows women to be erotic without being eroticized, and proving that talking openly and honestly about sex can be highly effective.

We arrived in Beijing on June 18th. Each day we spent the first 3 or 4 hours in protracted meetings with our contacts from Family Planning and Beijing University in order to organize our teaching schedule and cover issues of lesson plans and content. The second half of the day was reserved for research and preparation. We also took several excursions into and around the city to ascertain what forms of protection were readily available, their cost, and the availability of testing centres and the treatment we could advise students to expect while using these services. Our helpful friends at Family Planning Beijing organized for us a meeting with a group of sex educators from a local university. We used our time with them to ask questions about classroom culture, the type of questions and problems to expect, and techniques to facilitate discussion and participation.

During our second week in China, our teaching began. Our first week in Wuhan, we taught in one college and one high school. We taught two, three-hour sessions in the college, and two, two-hour sessions for the high school. Prior to beginning classes, we had to first meet with all of the educators to walk them through our curriculum to insure they were comfortable with the materials we would be covering. Because our audience changed so drastically in age, experience, and information level from the university to the high school, we found it necessary to completely rewrite several of our lesson plans. Our classes in the university focused on healthy relationships, gender identity, body image and sexuality including sexual assault. We divided students into groups and had them cut out eroticized images of women and men in magazines, had them discuss the gendered meanings of their names, and the roles men and women are understood to play in society. We asked them to question the relationship between gender and sex, think of sexual preference as a sliding scale, and

think of ways they could teach other students about sexual assault. Our high school class was much more basic; we spent the first two hours answering questions about reproductive anatomy, diagramming genitalia, and answering questions about birth control. Though we had worried that high school students would be rowdy, and prone to discomfort-related snickering, we found that the students were engaged, well behaved and eager to ask the questions that no one had ever let them ask. Though we were worried about the potential for schools exercising control over our curriculum and implementing gag rules, we found that we were given total freedom to teach our material, and that openness and trust allowed us to demonstrate for both teachers and students that when it comes to sex, the best way to discuss it is with an unabashed honesty.

The end of our second week meant relocation to Chengdu, our second teaching site. Again, we were scheduled to teach in one university and one high school. In Chengdu we taught single sex classes, and the women probed for answers regarding orgasms, birth control methods that wouldn't cause weight gain, issues of women's rights and the social stigma that makes testing for teens so difficult. Our two-hour class became a five-hour session, leaving both of us exhausted but exhilarated. We left having helped them discuss ways to mobilize students in changing the perception of testing, and feeling as though we had made a real connection. Our coed classes, though less emotionally intimate than the previous day, this upbeat class also lasted 5 hours, and produced a priceless photograph of two students, one male and one female, collaborating to determine which side of a condom was "up."¹ There were many such moments that reminded us how important our presence was and how much work was still needed.

Because a huge part of our program was continuation and sustainability through an ongoing internship program with Beijing University, American University and Family Planning Beijing, we wanted to insure that future educators would have the skills, tools and information they needed to be capable at a level that we were comfortable with. We spent the following week designing a comprehensive handbook for future teachers. The handbook includes important vocabulary, lesson plans, activity descriptions and helpful classroom tips. We found that as important as our presence was as educators and role models for students, we were also educators and role models for the teachers. Sex education is relatively new in China; our demeanour and willing frankness provided a model for Chinese teachers to copy as they designed their own sex education classes. We provided many of the educators with our lesson plans, ideas for demonstrations, and ways to begin their own peer sex education programs.

Our final week was spent designing and facilitating our internship with Beijing University and Family Planning, Beijing. Interns with what will be called BODYedu, will spend several days a week with Family Planning, helping with translations and learning about their mission. Over the course of the semester they will receive training alongside other Chinese students in order to become peer educators. When the semester draws to a close, BODYedu interns will go to schools that have contacted family planning with requests for educators, and teach for one week, the curriculum we designed during our project. We are currently working with several individuals to ascertain funding from socially conscious, Chinese corporations in order help fund Chinese interns as partners with American students in order to promote not just the spread of information, but also to encourage international cooperation.

By targeting youths as both students and potential teachers, we are creating accessible and sustainable education. People should not live with the threat of preventable pandemics, such as HIV/AIDS, that not only threaten their health, but the very social and political infrastructure they inhabit. Empowering people with information that gives them tools to protect themselves from coercion, infection and unwanted pregnancy, creates access to a greater standard of living, health, well-being; all of which are key components of long-lasting personal and social peace. Though it is easy to be overwhelmed with all that remains to do, Kathryn Wasserman Davis's Projects for Peace and the Davis United World College Scholars Program have allowed us the opportunity to begin a project and a passion that we will continue to work toward for the rest of our lives. In the summer of 2008, we will be returning to China as the codirectors of a new two-year initiative. BODYedu will work in association with Family Planning, Beijing, and will provide technical assistance to schools considering starting their own peer education programs, oversee the internship program with Beijing University and American University, and work to make STI testing and gynaecological services more available and less threatening for young adults. The Davis Program has not only funded 100 Projects for Peace, they have created over 100, life-long peace-makers, and for that the world should be truly thankful.



Victoria instructs the class on the differences between “Viral” and “Bacterial” infections. She circles the infections that may be transmitted by skin to skin contact.



Melyn inflates a condom to demonstrate how oil-based lubricants degrade latex.



ⁱ Two students practice using condoms on a condom demonstrator.