

## Co-Teaching Across Cultures

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Although not an example drawn from law teaching, my experience co-teaching at the Hopkins-Nanjing Center in Nanjing, China might provide insight into the possibilities of co-teaching as a way to teach across cultures. The Hopkins-Nanjing Center is a graduate program in international studies run jointly by Johns Hopkins University and Nanjing University to provide language training and a broad course of interdisciplinary study in international relations based on the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) model of training.<sup>1</sup>

The premise of the Hopkins-Nanjing program is to construct a faculty and student body of Chinese and English speakers with a goal of improving language skills and applied knowledge about China and the U.S. Graduates of the program have gone on to government and corporate positions in the U.S. and China. I was privileged to teach in the program in the momentous academic year 1988-1989 that ended with the student movements that led to Tiananmen Square in June 1989. Students were assigned Chinese or non-Chinese roommates so that each student would have a roommate from the other community. The faculty was also a mixed Chinese and non-Chinese group who worked together and met as a group to discuss academic policy and practice. The Center was directed by a U.S. and a Chinese director. The operation was further supported by an administrative office based at SAIS in Washington, D.C.

One of the four courses I was assigned to teach was U.S. Foreign Policy. As a U.S. faculty member, my students were Chinese, but the language of instruction was English. My Chinese colleague, who was assigned to teach the same subject to U.S. students did so in Chinese. Each instructor was allowed to select his/her teaching materials and construct a syllabus. The course was offered in the spring semester.

Based on the experience of the fall semester, we had already learned that because of language, the pace of the course had to be slowed down considerably and the content simplified. The challenge of teaching was not only language, but also of background. As we proceeded through the first semester, it became clear that many of the students were language or literature majors who had acquired the requisite language skills for the program, but did not have the academic background for a subject like U.S. Foreign Policy. There was, at that time, little basic knowledge of geography or history including of Chinese history and politics among the Chinese students. My Chinese colleagues reported similar experiences with the U.S. students.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information about the Hopkins-Nanjing Center and its programs, see *The JHU Gazette*, June 11, 2007 available at [www.jhu.edu](http://www.jhu.edu).

Growing out of the need to reorganize the teaching schedule to allow students the opportunity to take part in activities generated by the student movement in May 1989, the Chinese and non-Chinese faculty met to discuss coverage and teaching during this period. It occurred to my Chinese colleague and me that it might not only be efficient, but also beneficial to combine our classes. We also knew that the Chinese and American students compared notes about classes touching on similar subjects so combining the classes seemed a natural thing to do. Since we were both able to converse in Chinese and in English, we proposed to maintain the English/Chinese approach by lecturing in our principal teaching languages – English for me and Chinese for my colleague. The class would also meet for an extended period that would include discussion. Again, following the method of instruction, we alternated discussions in English and Chinese for the combined Chinese and non-Chinese students. We took turns leading the class discussions alternating between English and Chinese for the combined class.

The class dynamic this created was very interesting particularly in the discussion sessions where the students would help each other to fill in necessary background and who would then discover that events like the Open Door Policy that were very much part of a Chinese student's general background were barely heard of by the U.S. students. There were a number of areas where neither student group was very well equipped to understand the issue, but since the group was a combined one, it became clear that this was not a peculiarity of being Chinese or non-Chinese, but a general gap in educational background.

This made the instructors' job much easier as it put the instructor in the role of facilitator rather than being the focus of trying to explain a single event to Chinese students such as the 1950 Korean War where U.S. troops faced off Chinese troops or vice versa. The dynamic was then less one of trying to understand an instructor's particular interests (or idiosyncracies including points of view) and more one of a group where some may see something as important and others did not. This created a situation where the students enlightened and taught each other as they learned to fill in each other's information or language gaps.

In essence, this approach took focus away from the instructor to the issues under consideration. It also de-emphasized language because at alternate meetings, English or Chinese would be the primary language so each group had a chance to express themselves more fully. Indeed after the first several meetings, there was much less focus on what language was used and the students helped each other to express themselves more fully in each other's languages.

Overcoming the skills barrier of language competence and background made time for a broader discussion of Chinese and U.S. history. It allowed for discussion, for example, of what in the two countries' histories made one group of students keenly aware of some issues under discussion and the other group less so. China's struggle to regain its independence and sovereignty in the early twentieth century was still a current issue for students even in the late 1980s and so the Open Door Policy was important. For U.S.

students, there was much less awareness of the significance of the foreign policy developments of the 1920s.

Here again, a happy convergence of research interests between my Chinese colleague and me in U.S. and China relations in the 1920s was helpful. The 1920s was an important foreign policy decade both for China and the U.S. The U.S. was increasingly becoming a world power and China was beginning to emerge from the turmoil that accompanied its early years as a republic. Helping students understand the effects of this history on their countries in the 1980s was important and done in a much richer and deeper way as the outcome of the combined class than would have been possible in the separate classes. The success of this method required instructors interested in working collaboratively. To accomplish this, my Chinese colleague and I met prior to each class to determine in advance what key points we wanted to emerge from the discussions. These key points also formed the basis for the examinations that the students then took at the end of the semester.

The lesson learned from this experience with relevance to the work of the IALS readership is that crossing boundaries can be facilitated and improved by finding ways to encourage the highest level of interactivity among the largest number of participants in a blended setting. This allows individuals to realize that their difficulties and different outlooks are not the result of something idiosyncratic or peculiar, but something much larger and systemic that requires understanding and management. Learning to manage these kinds of differences was perhaps the most valuable lesson taken away by the students as they worked together.

For the instructors, the approach resulted in immediate hands-on help from the students themselves in filling language and background gaps so that a steady pace of discussion could be maintained. Even without using different languages, co-teaching in a comparative way could produce similar results and would be worth considering where faculty interests converge in law schools. The New York University Global Law Professor program, for example, provides opportunities for this kind of collaboration by drawing on foreign faculty to spend a semester at NYU. The University of Illinois College of Law has also encouraged such co-teaching particularly among research partners.

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