



U. S. – China Teachers Exchange Program Mid-Year Conference for Chinese Teachers

January 13-16, 2012
New York City

During the Martin Luther King, Jr., holiday weekend, the ten 2011-2012 Chinese teacher participants in the U.S. – China Teachers Exchange Program traveled to New York City from Oklahoma, Wisconsin, Florida, New Hampshire and Massachusetts for their mid-year conference. It was the first time for many of them to see each other since the July 2011 pre-departure orientation in Shanghai; it was also a first for most to visit New York City. The highlights of the weekend were the lively conversations as teachers exchanged teaching ideas and cultural insights, and shared professional and personal growth experiences.



Dr. Wu speaks about motivating students

Dr. Wu Wei-ling, a Chinese teacher from West Windsor-Plainsboro High School, New Jersey, whom the teachers knew from the pre-departure orientation, led the first session, “Motivating Students.” Before the conference, Dr. Wu asked the teachers to submit a description of a challenging situation they had faced in American schools and at least one “how should I...” question [e.g. “How should I teach Chinese culture within the teaching of the language?”]. A central issue was motivating students. Dr. Wu approached the topic by addressing teaching goals,

content, expectations, classroom structure, ownership and power, management, and the teacher’s role.

Her session was animated and inspiring. Part of the discussion was about the differences between the educational systems in the United States and China as well as between parents’ expectations in two countries. The teachers noted the importance of flexibility and their own adaptation to different teaching environments.

The second half of the day featured demonstration classes by two alumni of the Teachers Exchange Program with very different teaching styles. Maura Gouck (a former high school English teacher who is now a master teacher in the Department of Teaching and Learning, NYU Steinhardt School of Culture; Beijing, 1998-99) opened the session by asking teachers to select a button from a large collection she spread out on the conference table. Starting from the buttons, and then pictures, and finally a poem, Maura guided the teachers step by step to write stories and

poems in English. The teachers were fascinated, some exclaiming, “I’ve never written a poem in English!”

This technique, “enabling constraints” or “librating constraints,” can be used to teach students to achieve what might seem impossible through reasonable and modest steps.

Returned American teacher Richard Sanford (retired, Grover Cleveland High School, New York; Dalian, 1997-98) taught the second demonstration class, “What Can We Learn from an Unexpected Experience?”

Richard started by sharing an unexpected experience he had in China and then asked everyone to share their own in the United States, working in small groups. Not only did the teachers add another interactive and engaging teaching activity that could be used with their students to their repertoire, but through the discussion they learned more about American customs, culture and people.



Qin Wei and Tao Xuemei create a story around their purple button

On Sunday morning, the teachers visited Ellis Island. They enjoyed learning about American immigration history and how the country has become “a melting pot.” In the afternoon, the group attended the Broadway production of “Porgy and Bess.”

The conference resumed on Monday morning with a session on program evaluation led by Dr. Beverly Parsons and Dr. Pat Jessup from InSites. InSites is an educational evaluation company that has evaluated the Teachers Exchange Program since its inception. The teachers suggested ways to improve the program in the future. Topics included living and teaching in the United States, purposes of the program, connections teachers have made with past American and Chinese program participants, use of technology in the classroom and beyond, and the impact of the program on the teachers’ schools in China.

It was hard to part after the brief reunion, but the teachers were eager to start the second half of the school year, feeling energized, equipped with new creative teaching ideas, and changed perspectives on handling challenges, looking forward to more opportunities to gain deeper insights into American culture.



Wu Wei-ling (first left) with the exchange teachers