

Jason K. Brogden
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Dear Friends Of Ad Fontes,

I hope this short letter finds you well. I thought I would take some time to try and explain my experience within the Beida (Peking University) Summer Program of 2009 in order to give the freshest insights and thoughtful feedback regarding what took place over the past 4 weeks. I am obviously back and with Kelly, and we are both headed to Alaska for our anniversary. Ergo, I will endeavor to give you some details and encounters from within the classroom.

“There is hardly anything that can make one happier than to feel that one counts for something with other people. What matters here is not numbers, but intensity. In the long run, human relationships are the most important thing in life; the modern ‘efficient’ man can do nothing to change this, nor can the demigods and lunatics who know nothing about human relationships. God himself uses us in his dealings with others.” - Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Peking University

Overall, the university is quite gorgeous and a welcome respite to the rest of life inside Beijing. The university liaisons were of the highest quality in their concern and service of our needs. I have absolutely no complaints about their ability as hosts for the university and our teaching team. Robert Moore, our team leader, even commented on how outstanding they were in comparison to his long experience in China schools.

More specifically, the building staff and student assistants were extremely helpful in the beginning stages in which the teachers were ascertaining whether or not their technology would be compatible. But also, each and every week, the rooms were unlocked on time, A/C turned on and equipment prepared for us. There were a few common glitches with some tech which is expected of all such devices, and even a couple instances where the A/C may have been acting up. But nothing was due to human error or insensitivity. Nothing but praise for the staff from my perspective who were most supportive of our teaching efforts.

Teaching Experiment

For me personally, I chose to focus on a specific text with just a handful of goals for the students. Aesop’s Fables was our primary text and the students absolutely loved it! It’s ancient quality, online access, and varied topics ranging from religion to economics provided multiple forums for the students to engage in group discussions, impromptu

speeches, solo opportunities to teach the class when called upon and a final presentation incorporating writing, speaking, and the use of PowerPoint. They also all kept "learning journals" in which they would document what they were learning either in vocabulary or in their personal philosophical reactions to class.

The students' ability to discuss controversial topics (for them) while also remaining pleasant and open was the hallmark of the class. There were certain topics they wanted to discuss but lacked either the opportunity or skill as to how to have a forum for such talks. These specific topics included questions regarding nationalism, Westernization, modern society, spirituality, money challenges, personal decisions and responsibility, and science/religion debates. Hear me now and believe me later, **they** wanted to discuss these and would often request to have more time to converse. One student commented:

Here is my fable and a sample of my learning journal. And I would be proud to tell you that I have finished 263 Aesop's fables already and I believe I am able to finish them all by the end of our class.

We really enjoyed a good time together and I am sad that you are going to leave us. Your class is really interesting and enlightening. You successfully lead us to think deeply without feeling nervous or taking it too serious...which I appreciate very much.

Oddly enough, it seemed hard for a number of the students to accept the end of the class and one student even cried...possibly for a number of reasons...but I have never seen that! Nevertheless, I had employed the teaching strategies described in an interesting book entitled, "Creating Significant (or Meaningful) Learning Experiences" by L. Dee Fink which was incredibly helpful. If you teach at all, you may like it!

A Love Of Learning

The classroom was the main place for most activity and even my personal service while there. I did spend time with students outside of the classroom touring, shopping, eating, watching movies, jogging, going to one of the national churches and sometimes just walking around campus. But my biggest avenue of service to them as young thinkers was to be their teacher. I aimed to be a teacher who was kind and made the class profound for them, but not hard for the sake of being difficult. There was very little homework at all, but much thinking while in class. I made an effort to challenge their intellect and be a different voice than what they have heard. Physically the class was easy and their happiness reflected that. But at times I could sense the boundary and silence as they worked to deal with new thinking styles. It was exciting and exhausting at the same time. Overall, the Chinese college student still struggles with compartmentalized thinking. There were a few who were able to begin what you might

call “integrated” or “holistic” thinking...these became the students who also could help me teach the class in those moments when only a student can speak to a student. Most exciting as the below quote from one of my top learners captures:

Hello Jason,

Thank you very much for the last encouraging letter. I don't want to sound over flattering but you are the nicest American I've ever met. I feel so happy you read my journals and told me what you think of that and encouraged me to keep up the work. In China, professors have too many students and are too busy to give us even one word. What we got is only a grade.

I was really excited about you letting us ask about your faith that one day we talked about Greek mythology. Most of my family members are Christians too but I have become more serious about religion. I am so curious about things like “reason and belief” and “science and religion”. Are they incompatible? How can man believe in something so firmly? Some people don't know any history or philosophy but they believe. Isn't it strange? What drives a man to believe? ... I want to know something! I met one Christian from the States and he kept “pushing” me hard to join him by telling me God loves us everyday but was not comfortable with my questions.

Trust me; I am not a “anti-Christianity” or “anti-religion” person at all. In the twenties years of my life, I felt that someone is watching over me. When I got stuck, I had the faith to overcome it. I definitely don't think science and religion are incompatible. Science can solve problems with the law found in nature. But can it explain how the laws come about? ...

Too many thoughts in my mind. I am sorry if they don't make sense to you but I am glad if you can share more thoughts about faith with me .=)

All that said, I am quite pleased with the relationships I forged, the cohesiveness and maturity of our team, the reaction from the students and the service of all the leaders. I hope this helps in giving you a mere snapshot of the work that has gone on here. Perhaps from the letter you might get the impression that our class was overwhelming. Truth be told, I could not have been slower with the students and “hands off” to any other agenda other than giving them a quality learning experience. These particular students came with questions and curiosities for me. THEY initiated everything that came up that most would shy away from. I feel that education is a relational endeavor and that we learn the most from those we like. I took careful steps to establish great trust with the students and provide a safe place for them to take risks...they did. There was one specific time in which the students asked me if I was a Christian. I answered “yes” while also being quick to define myself as a disciple, a follower and learner of Christ. I made mention that I seek to understand the life and teaching of Christ so that I can work it into my life. Much like light that you cannot see but which illumines everything else it shines upon, so too does the life of Jesus and what he revealed to us about God the Father “illumine” all of life. I was using thoughts that John expressed in

his gospel but had to be careful not to overcomplicate it since there was no frame of reference for these students. They then asked if I was Protestant or Catholic. I explained that I was “catholic” with a little “c” since the word means “universal.” Therefore I could get along with any Christian that could get along with me and share my beliefs. However, my beliefs are actually quite Protestant. This confused them in a good way because they had trouble putting a label on me. Couple this with the fact that I was employed as a Teaching Assistant within the History of Science and you get the sense that they had to deal with me on my own terms. One student exclaimed after thinking about my responses, “It is good that you are like this as a Christian!” I wasn’t sure what to say except take it as a type of compliment since it didn’t confuse him too bad! You can also detect how hard it is to try and describe yourself in another culture with words that they would understand since they are not native English speakers. All that said, it was challenging and fun at the same time to work through such things. You have no idea how hard it was to try and articulate such a concept as “grace” in such a context. Many take it for granted and few understand it even in our own culture. In conclusion, please be encouraged by this and hopefully you feel your support of this ministry was worthwhile.

Many Thanks,

Jason K. Brogden

“Men go abroad to wonder at the heights of mountains, at the huge waves of the sea, at the long courses of the rivers, at the vast compass of the ocean, at the circular motions of the stars, and they pass by themselves without wondering.”

- St. Augustine

