

Transcultural Health & Humanities: Taiwan Immersion

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The group photo of Professor Beth Mastel-Smith, the doctoral students, and two Traditional Chinese Medicine doctors.



In May of 2015, Tzu Chi College of Technology in Hualien hosted seven doctoral students from the University of Texas at Tyler for the first three-week on campus course entitled Transcultural Health and Humanities: Taiwan Immersion. Course content featured Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) including philosophical underpinnings, diagnosis, and treatments such as acupuncture, cupping, herbal therapy, and Tai Chi massage. These classes were provided by TCM doctors at Tzu Chi Hospital in Hualien. Humanities classes, which took place primarily at Tzu Chi College of Technology, involved calligraphy, Mandarin Chinese, Buddhism, Tai Chi, tea ceremony, Tzu Chi's Silent Mentor program, Aboriginal culture, and Taiwan history and geography. Six elective credit hours were awarded, three each from the University of Texas at Tyler and Tzu Chi College of Technology. In addition to classroom learning, Tyler students – all of whom are nursing instructors in the US - provided guest lectures for Tzu Chi nursing students in medical terminology, mental health nursing, nursing in the US, and transcultural nursing; they also participated in the College's crowning ceremony. Local tours included Taroko National Park, an Aboriginal village, and a sugarcane factory and forestry center. Outings also exposed students to a multitude of cultural experiences such as the night market where students sampled local foods and enjoyed Hualien's beach area.

Students benefitted from the course in many ways than what can be summarized here. While they could relate to TCM's holistic approach to health, theoretical underpinnings were recognized as complex and difficult to comprehend. One student wrote in her weekly journal, "I actually like the fact that (TCM) views everything from a natural and holistic perspective. . . (which) also has a deep spiritual tone to it whereas the western medical thought process is focused on bio-science". Others pointed out, "It is difficult to understand that the same condition can be caused by a number of different problems related to the five elements or yin and yang" and "Traditional Chinese Medicine does not diagnose actual diseases the way (Western medicine does). Whereas, we may diagnose a sinus infection, TCM doctors may diagnose a problem with phlegm and too much cold or . . . something very different in another patient". Recognizing the brief introduction to a TCM's "labyrinth" was insufficient for complete understanding, a student said, "The next time I or one of my students that I am overseeing cares for someone of a different culture (especially one who believes in TCM) we will be able to do

Photo depicts the doctoral students from the University of Texas at Tyler are teaching nursing students at Tzu Chi University of Science and Technology the basic nursing terms in English.



so knowing that it is not just fake or crazy, but there is proof that it works and I have been blessed to be able to experience it firsthand. I may not completely understand all that they believe, but I now have insight. And if all else fails, I can just ask!" TCM doctors actively engaged students in learning. For example, students did acupuncture on each other feeling the needle's direct impact and also

tasted herbal medicines. These hands-on learning activities provided a deeper understanding and broad encounters.

Teaching opportunities offered unexpected insight. These lessons were analyzed and applied to international nursing students in the US context: “My experience in Taiwan has opened my eyes to how some of our ESL students truly feel”. Another wrote, “What seems simple to me can be very difficult for some students . . . I need to slow down, use simple terms, and build into the complex. I cannot assume that students understand concepts the way I do, and I need to clarify words that might have multiple meanings or similar sounds”. When learning was challenging, the Chinese teacher’s affirmations contributed to a sense of confidence, another lesson students will take into their own classroom, “I need to repeat, with a smile, the things I teach”.

On a personal level, being immersed in a religious culture very different from their own was a personal learning experience for some. Students felt while they were put in “unfamiliar situations” they were able to show respect and at the same time adhere to their own faith. “I feel like my God would want me to be respectful to others and their traditions . . . (He) would know and understand what I was doing and why I was doing it”. It was recognized that many Western and Buddhist beliefs were similar, only the philosophical framework was different.

Perhaps the most significant experience was meeting and developing friendships with Tzu Chi College of Technology faculty, administrators, and students. The Tyler group was assigned a “Resident Assistant”, a Tzu Chi nursing student who tirelessly helped with logistical arrangements. The entire team of Nursing and Humanities faculty was gracious and generous, selflessly sharing themselves, their time, country and culture. Administrators arranged logistics, answered a multitude of questions, and ensured a safe and comfortable living arrangement. In summary, the Transcultural Health and Humanities Course: Taiwan Immersion was a “once in a lifetime opportunity” for the University of Texas at Tyler students who learned about culture, health, healthcare, while appreciating the many things we have in common.