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'What Types of Games Do You Play With Your Students in America?'

By Denver Severt
UCF Forum columnist
Wednesday, January 30, 2013

I agreed to travel to Hainan, China, to teach an intensive two-week, 13-session hospitality course at Hainan University. Instead, it became a transformational teaching and learning experience for me.

Hainan is a tropical-island province and the largest vacation destination in China.

The mutual happiness, respect, and gratitude between the students and myself provided a charged and unmatched feeling of excitement. Students excelled at assignments, asked deep questions and showed an authentic desire to learn and study.

Aside from our intensive course schedule, the students invited me to dinner three times. One evening they first invited me to meet them in the park, where I was happily surprised to be playing games that involved chasing, running, and dancing. These games were like Duck, Duck, Goose and Ring Around the Rosies.

The activities allowed for the quick observation of the unique qualities of many students that may not have surfaced in a typical course. During dinner, a student asked: "What types of games do you play with your students in America?"

I replied, "I don't and wouldn't."

"Why is that?" asked the student. I said that I did not immediately know why and would get back to him on that.

Though obvious and true, I did not like this answer and felt that a possibility for a good experience, the opportunity for healthy, decompressed, connected exchange was lacking in my courses. Not a world traveler and an expert only to my personal experiences, I continued to search for my answer to that question.

During reflection, my mind landed on a conversation I had on my arrival flight with a 16-year old Chinese student from Beijing who attended a private high school in Boston.

I had asked him: “What surprised you most about studying in the USA?”

Without hesitation, he said: “The mindset or preoccupation related to sex of many students.”

Surprised by the answer, I asked: “And how is it different from what you are used to?”

He said: “I am quite trained to keep my mind on study and have less access to these things.” He said he had attended the top-ranked high school in Beijing and was at a high-end private Boston high school. He was hoping to differentiate himself in the application process to U.S. universities.

Before I left China, the students presented me with a notebook of appreciation filled with personal letters. Some playfully wrote in Chinese, challenging me to read it.

Later back in my UCF office, a Chinese student was looking at one of the Chinese writings and read what one young man had written. He translated it to: “Yesterday we went to the park with the American professor. Today in class, the professor came up to me and said, ‘This young man is a leader.’ Tonight I am going to bed knowing for the first time, I am a leader.”

Getting back to the question I was asked in China, the answer lingered in my mind. Maybe it would seem inappropriate to play games here with students in a park or elsewhere. Maybe American students are too busy. Maybe it was even a rare situation for students and a professor to go to the park in China, yet I had confirmed that the innocent games were typically played by university students. The games were unassuming and innocent and fun.

Do other cultures preserve the innocence of children for a longer time? How do they teach and sustain the purity in the desire to learn and study? How can we sustain purity in the desire to learn and advance?

These are questions I cannot answer aside from the obvious fact that maybe comparing different groups is not appropriate, whereas in China a university experience is a privilege and perhaps in the United States it is a necessity.

Is it the advanced nature and freedom of our society that somehow also exposes too much too soon?

I know I could not answer these questions. I reflected and wondered if perhaps my mind was too closed when trying to answer this question back in China.

But I made a determination: I can play games and maintain an openly, friendly demeanor with my American students. No matter the answer, I knew that something was vastly different in the two societies and in the games played at this age and stage of life.

I returned to my classes with a new determination, approaching my courses and others with an invigorated and open mind to playing or singing or dancing or meeting outside the course room to extend the discussions or just to get to know each other better.

As Gandhi told us, we must be the change we want to see in the world.

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