

Teaching Chinese Health Care Professionals About Community-Based Long-Term Care in China

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Abstract:

Academic exchanges between the U.S. and other countries around the world are increasing and teaching students abroad is part of this trend. China is in its initial stage of developing gerontology education and is in great need of new concepts and ideas for dealing with its rapidly aging population. This paper discusses the challenges and rewards of teaching gerontology to health care professionals in China. To achieve the desired learning outcomes in another country requires culturally appropriate course materials and teaching methods; drawing on students' knowledge and expertise by using an interactive format and gaining students' respect. Culture exchange, culturally-appropriate materials, teaching methods, elder-care in China, community-based long-term care, academic gerontology

Article:

The elder care support system in China has recently received attention because of the dramatic increase of China's older population. China is in great need of new concepts and ideas for dealing with its rapidly aging population and the profound impact this population is having on socio-economic development. Selected as a teaching fellow by the Overseas Young Chinese Forum (OYCF), I taught a short-term course on community-based long-term care (CBLTC) for elders to health care professionals at the Shanghai University Sociology Department. OYCF is a U.S.-based policy oriented nonprofit organization that is interested in funding teaching and research in China. I am a bilingual and bicultural professor at a U.S. academic institution, and conducted research on aging in China for several years in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The purpose of the course was to introduce U.S. and European models of CBLTC to Chinese health care professionals and to provide them with insights into how best to develop China's long-term care system.

BACKGROUND

China has a tradition of caring for elders at home, with responsibility for frail elders falling exclusively on family members—mainly spouses or adult children. These arrangements based on traditional expectations of filial responsibility worked well in pre-industrial China. However, demographic changes and recent economic developments have had a profound impact on the traditional family and its support system, making it increasingly more difficult for family members to meet the ideal and fulfill the cultural expectation of caring for their elders.

Impact of China's Demographic Changes

China has experienced significant change in the size and proportion of older adults over the past two decades, and this trend will continue for the next 50 years (Zeng, Vaupel, Xiao, & Liu, 2002). China's elder population, defined as adults aged 60 years and older, reached 130 million in 2000 and comprised more than 10% of the total population. The oldest-old, those aged 80 years and older, grew to approximately 11.5 million in 2000 and accounted for nearly 9% of all elders aged 60 years and older (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2002). By 2020, China's population aged 60 years and older is estimated to reach 243 million representing 17% of the total population (National Population and Family Planning Commission of China, 2003). In addition to growing in absolute numbers, the aged population in China is expected to undergo significant aging itself. It is estimated that the number of the oldest-old will reach 27.80 million in 2020 (Yue, 2001).

The rapid growth of China's aging population in absolute terms and as a percentage of the total population is largely due to the implementation of the one child policy over the last two decades coupled with a sizable increase in average life expectancy (Harbaugh & West, 1993; Yuan, Zhang, Ping, Li, & Liang, 1992). Due to smaller families with fewer children, the availability of family members to provide care and support to their older parents will most likely continue to decrease (Bartlett & Phillips, 1997).

Impact of Economic Reform

Economic factors have affected individual filial piety, values, economic status, living conditions, and living arrangements of elders and their families in several ways. First, working adult children may find it more difficult than in the past to take care of their frail parents because recent improvements in housing conditions have increased the likelihood that adult children have their own apartments and live separately from their parents. This greater independence of adult children from their elders raises concerns about care when elders become frail. The problems created by separate living arrangements are further exacerbated by the growing geographic mobility of younger adults in China. Economic developments have created attractive job opportunities for young adults, but those opportunities may not be located where their parents live.

Second, more people can afford to purchase labor outside of their home for elder care. Therefore, although most adult children still consider it their responsibility to provide care for older parents, they are increasingly looking for ways to assist them in caring for their elders as they struggle to fulfill their multiple competing responsibilities.

Development of Community-Based Long-Term Care in China

One response to the concerns and challenges of caring for current and future elders has been the growth of nursing homes. Nursing home care for the old and frail is becoming an increasingly common but expensive option in China. While nursing home care is an option for the sickest and most disabled, it may be an unrealistic option for all elders in need of care. Instead, various forms of CBLTC services and programs have begun to emerge in China, especially in more densely populated, urban centers. As used in this paper, the concept of community-based services and programs refers to a set of care services such as personal care, homemakers, and adult day care, which are delivered to frail elders in their community. The demand for community-based services and programs for elders has become a critical issue in China.

In response to this need, more jobs for *bao mu* (literally, housemaids) have been created to meet the needs of elders. *Bao mu* provide various in-home services for elders and their families, sometimes caring simultaneously for younger children and older grandparents. Many private service coordination centers have been established to serve as intermediate placement agencies for elders and *bao mu* (Wu, Carter, Goins, & Cheng, in press).

In addition, since 2000, the Shanghai Civil Affairs Bureau has required every street committee (*Jie Dao*) to establish a community service center and has invested money at each district level for the construction of such a center. The purpose of these centers is to provide services to meet their clients' daily needs, with elders being the recipients of most services. As a result of this initiative, the vast majority of street committees currently have a community service center. However, few of these centers have their own personnel or staff to provide direct services. The vast majority of the centers serve as clearinghouses for home care services, that is, community residents request services and the center matches them with registered service providers. The centers are not responsible for price negotiations or for determining what types of services should be provided.

Efforts to develop new models of CBLTC for elders in China have received growing attention. Since China is in its initial stage of development of its CBLTC system, many issues need to be addressed regarding training of the workforce, implementation of quality management systems, and increasing investment in the field (see Wu et al., in press), for a detailed description of policy implications for improving the current CBLTC in China. The U.S. and Europe started developing CBLTC systems several decades ago. Although these systems may not be perfect and could probably be improved in many ways, China can learn from the experiences of Western countries, especially as they relate to the initial stage of the development of such systems.

Gerontological Education in China

Gerontology education in China did not begin until the 1980s. The primary emphasis of China's gerontology programs has been research, not education. Thus the growth of gerontology education has historically lagged behind that of gerontology research. During the past decade, more universities began offering gerontology courses in several disciplines. However, the aging-related programs at most universities that offer such courses focus only on their own discipline (e.g., sociology, psychology, social work, and economics); there is a lack of collaboration and interaction between the disciplines. More multidisciplinary gerontology programs and courses need to be developed. To-date, the development of gerontology education has not met the needs of Chinese professionals or the older population. Given the tremendous size of the older population, many service organizations for elders, such as residential care facilities and CBLTC facilities, have been established, not all of which are government-sponsored institutions. There has been an uncharacteristic increase in the number of privately-owned organizations serving elders (Wu et al., in press), but very few service providers who work in the field have been trained in gerontology. Therefore, gerontology education in China needs to be developed on two levels: to expand training for future professionals who intend to work with elders, and to provide continuing gerontology education to eldercare professionals who are currently providing care to elders. Given the need for gerontology education for professionals in China, the purpose of this paper is to identify ways for improving teaching methodologies to be used not only with Chinese health care providers, but that can be applied to other settings as well.

TEACHING AT SHANGHAI UNIVERSITY

In 2002, I received a teaching fellowship from the OYCF to teach a short-term, policy-related CBLTC course in the Shanghai University Sociology Department. This course was part of a one-time Sociology graduate certificate program jointly sponsored by the Shanghai University Sociology Department and the Shanghai Civil Affairs Bureau. The Municipal Civil Affairs Bureau is a government organization which is in charge of social welfare. The bureau conducts and disseminates policy-relevant research on issues related to aging and community-based care. The objectives of the graduate certificate program were to provide staff (most of whom were employed by health care service agencies) with the opportunity for continuing education, and to improve the quality of the workforce serving elders. In addition to the course I taught, the program offered nine other courses: Introduction to Sociology, Fundamentals of Sociology, Family Sociology, Social Work, Social Psychology, Survey Methods, Social Welfare, Sociological Theories in Western Countries, and Statistics. Thus, my policy course was the only aging-related course in the Sociology Certificate Program.

Part-time graduate students employed in organizations affiliated with the Shanghai Civil Affairs Bureau were enrolled in my policy course. The 32 students enrolled in the course included administrators from local civil affairs offices and committees on aging, heads of residential care facilities, and administrators from mental health hospitals.

Course Objectives

The course met for six hours a week for four weeks in December 2002. The objectives of the course were to provide students with a basic understanding of major current CBLTC arrangements in the U.S. and of developments of CBLTC in China, and to carry out an analysis of a significant long-term care policy issue in China.

Course Content and Format

The course used a combination of lectures and class discussion. Stone's (2000) report helped shape the outline for the course. The first half of the course introduced CBLTC systems and policies in the U.S. and introduced the main topics: definition and history of long-term care; long-term care financing; long-term care service delivery; long-term care workforce; and the future of long-term care demand and supply. Specifically, I described several successful models and programs of community-based long-term care in the U.S. but also identified the shortcomings of the CBLTC system in the US.

The remainder of the class was devoted to discussions of the current state of long-term care in China and to what extent China can learn from the U.S. experience for developing its own long-term care system. As many students had first-hand knowledge of the Chinese long-term care system, they actively participated in class discussions. Discussions focused on policy and practical implications for developing long-term care in China.

Reading Materials

Reading materials were chosen from multiple sources. The readings in Chinese discussed the Chinese and/or U.S. long-term care systems. I selected these materials from my personal collection of Chinese books and journal papers, Chinese websites, and papers and books from interlibrary loans. Having been a researcher at Shanghai Research Center on Aging ten years earlier and having maintained a close relationship with Chinese in the field of aging, I remain informed of developments in gerontology in China. As a board member of the Shanghai Research Center on Aging, I often receive books and journals from colleagues in China. Reading materials also included articles in English on the U.S. long-term care system and China's support system. Given the fact that most of the students had a limited command of English, most required reading materials were in Chinese.

Class Assignments

Students were required to conduct field visits and to interview two or three administrators from local community service centers. I designed a survey instrument for the students to use in their interviews that covered several dimensions: (1) demographic information of the organization; (2) current long-term care services provided by the organization; (3) workforce issues; and (4) interviewee's job satisfaction. The instrument design was based on the literature about CBLTC in the U.S. and China and on class discussion. In the end, students interviewed administrators from 64 different community organizations that serve elders in Shanghai. These organizations included community-service centers and residential care facilities that recently extended their functions to provide day-care to elders in the community. Students were required to write a policy paper based on readings, class discussion and their field interviews.

CHALLENGES OF TEACHING THE COURSE

Many challenges emerged during the process of preparing the course syllabus and subsequently teaching the course. This was the first time I had taught such a course, although I had conducted research projects on this topic (Wu, 2000, Wu & Emerson Lombardo, 2000). Although I had no language problem in teaching this course, this was the first time I taught a course in a Chinese setting since I came to the U.S. a decade earlier. Below I describe some of the specific challenges I encountered in preparing and teaching the course.

Lack of Appropriate Reading Materials

One of the main problems was the lack of appropriate reading materials. Although English language skills have improved greatly among young college and graduate students in China in the past decade, most nontraditional students still have quite limited English language skills. I was aware of this issue during the process of designing the course and therefore required students to read only one or two papers in English, with additional papers in English being optional.

To enable students to grasp the course content in a reasonable amount of time, most required readings were in Chinese. However, the lack of Chinese materials on the subject was a serious issue. As stated earlier, caring for frail elders has traditionally almost exclusively been provided by family members. Institutional support and CBLTC are only in the initial stages of development. As a result, Chinese literature on this topic is scarce. Most available literature pointed out the challenges to family support for elders (Gao, 2003; Xu, 2003; Yao, 2002; Yao, Xu, Zeng & Fang, 1997). Policy implications for long-term care systems resulting from these studies were broad-based, vague attempts at a macro level analysis and lacked any empirical underpinnings. Furthermore, there is even less literature available in Chinese translation of materials that introduce U.S. or European long-term care systems. Thus, my students had to rely heavily on lectures to gain an understanding of the CBLTC system in the U.S. It was a challenge for me to create succinct and, at the same time, comprehensive lectures given the complexity of the CBLTC system in the U.S.

Interpreting English Terms

Terms that are quite common in gerontology in the U.S, such as Medicare, Medicaid, Supplemental Security Income (SSI), Activity of Daily Living (ADL), and Instrumental Activity of Daily Living (IADL), are not familiar to many people in China. Most of these terms have been translated, and I had to be very careful to use terms consistent with existing Chinese translations with which the students were familiar. Using different terms would have been confusing to students who might have thought the terms referred to different programs or concepts.

Instructor Perceived as an “Outsider”

Another challenge I faced was the need to establish myself as an “expert” and “insider” in the eyes of my students. The students enrolled in the class were non-traditional; most of them were experienced administrators working in the health care field and had first-hand experience and knowledge about long-term care in China. Although I had conducted research on aging in Shanghai for several years and still know many people in the aging network in Shanghai, I have since spent a decade in the U.S. and am currently working at a U.S. academic institution. Thus, at the beginning of the course some students still regarded me as an outsider. As a result of this perception of me as an outsider, some were reluctant to speak freely on current issues of the long-term care system in China.

Instructor Not Perceived as an “Authority”

My age and gender were also challenging issues. Most students in the class were male and older than myself. Traditionally, older males are often perceived as authority figures in Chinese society (Fei, 1985). It was a challenge for me as a female who was also younger than most of the students to establish myself as an authority figure in the class. For example, students thought I was familiar only with the U.S. system and did not have updated knowledge and experience on the current state of the elder-care system in China. It was not easy for me to walk into the classroom and lecture my students on a subject that they thought they knew more about than I did. Consequently, some students never did fully engage in discussions.

MEETING THE CHALLENGES

To overcome these barriers and problems, I used multiple methods. For instance, I devoted a great deal of time gaining more first-hand knowledge about China’s long-term care system. I also made it clear to my students that I learned from them, and I let them know that their opinions, knowledge and experiences were important. I created an interactive learning environment by devoting class time to open and frank discussion of the issues and policies surrounding long-term care in China.

During the course, I became more familiar with China’s recent development of a CBLTC system by conducting field trips and reading policy-related documents and literature. I visited eight representative community-based agencies for CBLTC, including nursing homes that provided CBLTC services in addition to their residential-based services, interviewed policy-makers, government officials and researchers. I also met several officials from the Shanghai Civil Affairs Bureau and researchers from Shanghai University and the Shanghai Research Center on Aging. I had extensive conversations with these native experts on the current state of CBLTC, current issues, and their visions for future development. In addition, I read many documents provided by government officials concerning policy issues in developing a longterm care system in China.

Conducting these activities outside of the classroom made me more knowledgeable about the current state of the long-term care system and more aware of the issues involved. These activities and the additional knowledge I gained helped guide class discussions more appropriately, and to use the reading materials, combined with my first-hand experience, to compensate for some of the gaps in the existing teaching materials.

At the end of the course, one student (the head of the largest residential care facility for elders in Shanghai) told me that he was impressed that I knew so much about China’s long-term care policy and system. Most likely, this was the biggest compliment I could have received.

I was aware that it might be difficult to establish myself as an “authority” figure in this class. Therefore, in the classroom, I acknowledged that there is no single authority and that some of my students may know more about the Chinese system than I do. Through this approach, it became clear to my students that through their participation and sharing of ideas, they could make valuable contributions to the course. The friendly and respectful classroom environment I was able to create encouraged students to ask questions, share their knowledge, and fully engage in discussions.

Initially, students struggled with some of the concepts and issues but were able to grasp them better by formulating and working through questions such as: What suggestions would you make to encourage the government’s current low investment in CBLTC? How would you effectively allocate limited public funding for long-term care institutions? What kinds of training should frontline workers receive? What would you do to improve the quality of care provided in the community? The class then centered all discussions on trying to answer these questions.

This method of approaching the material made the students more aware of the issues and encouraged and empowered them to make policy recommendations they might not have been able to think of before.

COURSE EVALUATION AND OUTCOMES

Students thought the course was timely, significant, and informative. In terms of the teaching methods, students liked the interactive format and thought this to be an effective way of learning. One student wrote “I particularly like the interactive teaching. This is the first time I have experienced this way of learning in the classroom.” Many students thought the method was “creative.”

Some students thought the course should have been longer. They would have liked more reading materials in Chinese and to learn more about the current state of CBLTC in the U.S. and Europe. However, due to time constraints this was not possible.

Based on conversations with the students and on class evaluations, indications are that the course had a direct impact on the students’ daily work. For example, one student, who is an administrator in a residential care facility, told me that she will add more ethics education to her staff training so that they might be more respectful of elders’ rights and privacy. In addition, students made some concrete and insightful suggestions for improving the CBLTC in China. For example, they suggested establishing a tax incentive mechanism for private donations; standardized training for frontline workers; advocating volunteerism in the society; and creating private, nonprofit eldercare service delivery organizations.

CONCLUSIONS

There is an increasing trend toward academic exchanges between the U.S. and other countries around the world. Teaching students abroad is a part of this trend. This paper provides an example of a successful model for teaching health care professionals in China by illustrating that the achievement of course objectives in another country requires multiple considerations. Depending on the experience and educational levels of the students, instructors should develop appropriate teaching methods to fit the special needs of students. Using various ways of drawing upon students’ native knowledge and experiences enriches the classroom experience and helps yield optimal results. More importantly, instructors should be conscientious of how to develop appropriate course materials and teaching methods to enable students to draw on course knowledge derived from other countries and apply these insights to their own country. Instructors need to make an effort to become knowledgeable about the host country’s culture and subject matter to be sure to communicate materials in a meaningful manner. Instructors’ willingness to learn relevant aspects for teaching in the host country and a respectful attitude towards their students will have a positive impact on the classroom environment. Cultural awareness on the part of the instructor will help gain students’ respect, thus assuring good course outcomes.

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