

OFFICE OF INNOVATIVE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING: STRENGTHENING RELATIONS WITH CHINESE EDUCATORS ONE SESSION AT A TIME



Melissa Bradford explained the concept of a Rube Goldberg machine (a deliberately over-engineered device designed to perform a simple task) to an increasingly irate audience of 12th-grade teachers in Beijing. “Why would you ever do something like that? Why would you make something more complicated instead of simplifying it?” Bradford remembers the audience demanding. “They couldn’t understand that it was entertaining, and you learn about the transfer of energy. They are so used to there being a right answer and completing a task as quickly as possible that making something more complicated was a foreign concept to them.”

In June 2015, Bradford, curriculum studies EdD student, and Patrick Cobb (MED ’00), science teacher at Stanley Clark School in South Bend, Ind., traveled to Beijing to teach professional development in math and science as part of a joint initiative with the Office of Innovative Professional Learning (OIPL) at DePaul and the China Education and Research Network (CERNET). During two five-day sessions, they explored various model-eliciting activities with participants, hoping to share new approaches to teaching familiar material.

“Bradford and Cobb utilized project-based learning experiences to train the teachers from China in effective math and science lessons that engage students in critical thinking and problem-solving strategies,” explains Donna Kiel, instructional assistant faculty and OIPL director. Participants built toothpick bridges, bottle rockets and propeller cars, and quibbled over the best way to score winners. At the end, Bradford asked if they could visualize how to apply these activities to their own classrooms. “They were all nodding their heads,” she says. “They could see how it really makes you take an abstract idea and turn it into something that has a practical application.”

Closer to home, OIPL has partnered with the Wisconsin International Academy (WIA), based in Wauwatosa, Wis., as well as its sister organization, the Greater Chicago International Academy (GCIA). Both provide innovative, dormitory-style living and educational and personal support structures for international students attending various Catholic and private schools in Milwaukee and Chicago. In the case of WIA and GCIA, the OIPL engages with American teachers to discuss how best to support international students, which is similar to OIPL’s work with CERNET. “The key distinction is the grounding in learning theory and best practice that is needed for teachers from China who are mainly content experts,” says Kiel. “Both experiences are focused on the needs of the teachers, sharing best practices and engaging teachers in application of best practices in their instructional planning.”

With plans to bring educational researchers from CERNET to study the process of professional development at DePaul, OIPL’s efforts to engage with China are only beginning. “Our relationship with China extends the mission of the college with international partners, thus providing an avenue for our instructors to influence teaching in new contexts,” says Kiel. “The international experiences of sharing professional development and of collaborating on best practices provide a vehicle for our faculty and students to gain international perspectives and a true global experience.”

