

Catch 'Em Young: Teaching Chinese Medicine to College Students

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Since 1989, I have been teaching a class on Chinese medicine at Boston University. Hired to help develop their East Asian studies curriculum, my main task was to create classes on Eastern religions and culture, and for much of the time, that's what I did. Since I was trained in Chinese studies and specialized in Daoism, and since Daoism used a variety of medical practices as part of its self-cultivation curriculum, I decided also to offer a course on medicine. The first reaction was disbelief. How can you teach Chinese medicine in a religion department? In an East Asian studies program? Should it not be taught in the medical school? I persisted, arguing that Chinese medicine involved more than the mere treatment of symptoms, that it required a completely different view of the body and of health, and that it connected closely with the traditional worldview and religions of China.

The first class I ever taught had eight students. Not experienced in the ways of college students, I made them read Manfred Porkert's *Theoretical Foundations of Chinese Medicine*, which is so full of Latin and technical terminology the poor kids sat there with their heads steaming. Still, they enjoyed the class, and my enrollment doubled the next time - and again the next - so that today I have between 60 and 80 students, depending on the time the class is offered - 8 a.m., for example, not being conducive to high enrollments.

Over the years, I have found that students are excellent recipients of new ideas and are very eager to experiment with new ways of seeing and treating their bodies. I have included a practical requirement, asking everyone in the class to go out and have an Asian medical or health experience, whether it be receiving an acupuncture or massage treatment, boiling an herbal decoction, baking macrobiotic cookies, or taking a class in *taijiquan* or *qigong*. They then have to write a short paper on their experience, relating it to the understanding of body and *qi* taught in the lectures. Numerous students, although nervous at first, find themselves very attracted by Chinese health methods, benefit from treatments and practices, and often spread their new ideas and experiences among peers and family members. More importantly, many are pre-med students who will continue to work in the medical field and will have a great future impact on how Chinese treatments are perceived and applied in the general culture.

In content, the class has shifted as it has grown, changing from a seminar with class presentations to a lecture series, and has come to be divided into four parts: the basic worldview, from Dao through *qi*, yin-yang, and the Five Phases to the organs and meridians; the clinical practice of acupuncture and massage, with their diagnosis, history and different forms in various countries; the different ways to manage *qi* personally in interaction with the environment and other people, including sections on feng shui, diets and sexual practices; and the methods self-cultivation that also have spiritual uses, such as *qigong*, *taijiquan*, and various forms of meditation. In all cases, I try to create an active context within traditional Chinese culture and to establish links and comparisons with Western ideas and practices.

To make teaching easier, I recently completed a textbook for the class that summarizes the main topics and provides appropriate readings and Web resources.

Not being a practitioner of acupuncture myself - although I have practiced *taijiquan* for many years and also teach *qigong* - I always invite an acupuncturist to do a demonstration in the clinical part. It always has been a great success. Volunteers abound, and often we have to have a lottery to determine who gets model-treated in front of the class. Once we had too many students, so I asked one of the teacher's assistants to be the volunteer. The visiting acupuncturist had him walk all over the classroom with his tongue sticking out, so that students could see for themselves on what the acupuncturist was basing his diagnosis. Also, rather than proceeding with the diagnosis himself, the acupuncturist asked the students what they made of the various signs he was discerning, inviting them to apply their newly acquired knowledge. He brought different kinds of needles, moxa and herbs, and had students inspect them. He had them gather around as he inserted the needles, asking the subject to confirm there was no pain but that he could feel the *qi*. At other times, the acupuncturist has treated two students to show different diagnoses and possible treatments. Besides enjoying herself hugely, she has acquired students as patients - covered by the university's health insurance - and has been able to help them more permanently. Students have come to establish good relations with the acupuncturist, and even sent their friends and families for treatments.

Giving acupuncture lectures or demonstrations to college students is an excellent way of spreading the word on Chinese treatments. Students are receptive and eager to experiment, many schools cover the treatments, and professors always are grateful to have a specialist present on an area they are not entirely familiar with. There is no need, either, to find a class that teaches Chinese medicine in particular, although that (or a comparative medical systems class in anthropology) is obvious the best venue. If that is not available, there always are classes on East Asian civilization that also discuss the medical system. In fact, I recently gave a talk on Chinese diagnosis in such a general class, offered through the Department of International Relations, no less. The professor was knowledgeable, and the students, although none had had any treatments yet, were very open to the idea.

With the increased interest in Asia, and the proliferation of a college education, there are numerous possibilities everywhere for acupuncturists to make their work known and have an impact on the perception of the field in the general public. Catching them young allows us not only to help college students be healthier and more body conscious, but also opens a vast venue to a better informed public in the next generation.

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