

Chopsticks, calligraphy, and Zen: Cultivating global awareness through Taiwanese culture and dance

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The seminar course “Chopsticks, Calligraphy and Zen,” offered at Shenandoah University, provides a unique interdisciplinary experience for freshmen. The goal is to lift the disciplinary borders within the University while encouraging a deepened and expanded feeling of belonging to the University and to the global community, ultimately encouraging students to make a difference locally and globally. As the teacher of the course, I combine the studies of Taiwanese culture and etiquette, the art of the Taiwanese tea ceremony, Chinese calligraphy, and Zen with the expression of dance. As a Taiwanese native, I am able to provide a unique cultural perspective.

The first-year seminar, which originated in the School of Arts and Sciences, brings unique experiences to the traditional classroom and implements cross-disciplinary, interactive teaching techniques. During the first of four components, students explore Taiwanese culture, etiquette, and the arts. Students are assigned reading in *Taiwan A to Z: The Essential Cultural Guide* (Liu, 2009) to later share with the class via presentations. The presenters are encouraged to incorporate images and video clips in their summaries.

A tea ceremony permits students to learn about the art and health benefits of tea and teamwork. Teams of five are assigned roles and responsibilities, including tea master, host, two guest representatives, and crew member, who is charged with boiling the water and cleaning the cups. Students rotate roles, therefore understanding the importance of teamwork for a successful ceremony.



Image1: Student making tea at the annual First Year Seminar Showcase Winchester, Virginia, USA, 2011. (Photographer: Megan McIntyre)

Through the use of breath (Chi) in Chinese calligraphy, students experience serenity and harmony by creating their own distinct brushwork. During calligraphy, students enter into a meditative state that quiets their minds and increases their ability to focus on the task at hand. A culminating project requires students to translate meaningful or inspirational English phrases into their own brushwork. New millennium learners rarely experience “down time” to relax and rejuvenate. With 24/7 access to cell phone texting and social networking, students are increasingly vulnerable to anxiety, depression, and other related disorders. The calligraphy experience provides students an opportunity to access their inner peace while also being creative.



Image 2: A student displaying her calligraphy, Winchester, Virginia, USA, 2011. (Photographer: Megan McIntyre)

As an extension of the calligraphy, Zen (dance) explores the depth of expression that engages a person physically, emotionally, and spiritually. It begins with movement exercises designed to break personal boundaries and build mutual trust among students. It ends with students performing solo movement interpretations of their calligraphy.



Image 3: Students performing Zen (dance) at the annual First Year Seminar Class Showcase, Winchester, Virginia, USA, 2011. (Photographer: Megan McIntyre)

Integrating traditional instruction with practical experiences provides the opportunity for students to appreciate the importance of discipline, teamwork, and cultural awareness, which is beneficial for their college careers and beyond. Dance as a collaborative art form emphasizes building community, shared responsibility, and cooperation. Through practicing calligraphy and dance, students learn to connect to themselves, experience deeper meditative learning, collapse personal-social barriers, and ultimately create a new self and community identities. They form meaningful relationships with peers from various disciplines, the instructor, the university community, and further their interest in learning about the world in which we live. This course thus facilitates students to become better collaborative learners, reflective thinkers, and responsible citizens.

Keywords: dance, culture, understanding, cross-disciplinary, curriculum

References

Liu, A. (2009). *Taiwan A to Z: The essential cultural guide*. Taipei, Taiwan: The Community Service Center.

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