Colleen Berry Teaches 
More than Chinese

Doctoral candidate wins teaching award for bringing China into the classroom

For Colleen Berry, what began as an escape from the mundane turned into a passion and has now become a livelihood. Berry, a recipient of the 1995 Lieber Associate Instructor Award for her work as a teacher of second-year Chinese, first studied Chinese as an undergraduate at Whitworth College in Spokane, Washington, because of her intellectual curiosity to search out the challenging and unfamiliar. "Chinese was so different from English," she says. "You couldn't fake it at all. It was more of a challenge, like learning to read and write all over again."

That fateful search for challenge led Berry to Taiwan, where she lived for nearly four years, into Hong Kong and mainland China where she has conducted tours for the past 10 years, and finally back to the United States, to the Department of East Asian Languages and Cultures at IUB, where she has been teaching and working toward her doctorate in Chinese literature.

As much as Berry loves teaching, she admits that it's been difficult to balance the competing demands of teaching and studying. "Before I taught languages, I didn't realize how consuming it was," she says. "I think language teaching is more intensive than other kinds of teaching. It demands more time because classes meet more often, and you have to engage each student several times during each lesson. It's not like some other classes where you can stand up in front and give a lecture. Language teaching demands more interaction."

Berry has excelled in the teaching arena in part because she has allowed it to take precedence over her own studies. "I just decided to make teaching a priority last year, because I could. But she didn't manage to get very far in studying for her qualifying exams. This year, however, she won't be teaching, so she should be able to make up for lost time.

Berry's own experiences as a language learner have also made her a more effective teacher. "I'm still learning, and I will be for the rest of my life," she says. "It helps me be more aware of the problems that native English speakers face." Berry noted that she is particularly attuned to her students' difficulties with pronunciation and the Chinese system of tones, which she says is probably the hardest thing to learn.

Whenever possible, Berry goes beyond the textbook to create for her students an authentic context in which to learn Chinese. "As soon as possible I try to introduce materials like Chinese newspapers or stories written for kids or learners of Chinese so they can have something outside the textbook that they can succeed in," she says. "We also try to come up with dialogues of our own emphasizing practical phrases and expressions that people use in everyday life. A lot of textbooks are geared toward teaching grammar and vocabulary, but sometimes people just want to learn how to say something practical like, 'Where's the bathroom?'" Berry also uses videos made in China, which give her class an opportunity to discuss cultural similarities and differences, and help to provide a more holistic learning environment.

Since her days as an undergraduate in the mid-'70s, Berry has noticed a definite increase in the demand for East Asian languages, even at the high school level. "Indiana is among the top five states with the highest number of high schools where Japanese is taught," she says. "It's amazing."

And although she doesn't have the figures to prove it, Berry believes that interest in Chinese is growing even faster. "The more China opens up, the more people are going to want to cash in on it as a market." Last spring, in her capacity as coordinator of the Language Pedagogy Project at the East Asian Studies Center, Berry helped organize the Midwest Regional Workshop on Chinese Language Instruction at IUB, which was attended by more than 25 Chinese-language teachers from regional high schools and universities. Berry also organized the East Asian Studies Center's March 1995 pedagogy workshop for high school and college teachers of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean, and is planning another pedagogy workshop for October 1995.

Berry harbors a genuine love for China and expects to return regularly for research purposes, but she sees herself settling down in the United States. "I'm 41," she says. "I've spent a lot of time in China and Taiwan, and I feel like it's time to give something back here."