IU Education Research Projects Show Professor’s Deep Ties to China

Heidi Ross, professor in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at Indiana University’s School of Education, has taught in China and is fluent in Mandarin. And now, with a number of concurrent research projects that regularly take her back to China, she is helping others to understand China’s complex system of education through innovative projects that go beyond the textbook.

A specialist in the social foundations of education and comparative and international education, Ross researches issues relating to education and society in China, especially those centered on girls’ schooling; gender-sensitive curricula; rural education; and how economic, social, and environmental issues affect parents and communities in regard to the schooling of their children.

One of her projects, “Imag(in)ing the Voices of Chinese and American Middle School Students,” is part of Pathways to Peace, an IU School of Education–funded program that promotes world peace and understanding through educational cross-cultural exchanges. Ross’ project supports three goals: it facilitates short-term exchanges of middle-school teachers between Bloomington, Indiana, and Shangluo, Shaanxi Province (where Ross had previously been a consultant on the “Spring Bud Program”—see below); it engages Chinese and American middle-school students and their teachers in an activity that enhances collaborative learning for peace; and it creates virtual and real “sharing our voices” exhibitions of Chinese and American middle-school students’ photographs and essays.

For this particular project, Ross, who practices a participatory ethnography-based approach to field research and data gathering, used a specific methodology known as “photovoice.” In this project, her method draws out the children’s own perceptions of school and social reality by asking them to take photographs. Each child is then interviewed and asked to talk about why those images were important and meaningful to them.

Ross started planning the project in China when she met with potential Chinese collaborators. Real work began in May 2005 when she began working with Becky Boyle, a social studies teacher at Batchelor Middle School. Ross gave 14 students three disposable cameras each and asked them to photograph their home life, school life, and life in general in the surrounding culture.

In June, Ross, Boyle, and doctoral student Jingjing Lou traveled to Shangluo to work with two teachers, Xiaoli Mei and Na Li, at Xihe Middle School in Dan Feng County. They distributed cameras to a peer cohort of 14 female students, giving them the same “photovoice” methodology and goals.

Back in Bloomington in early fall, Ross’s team interviewed the Batchelor students and then transcribed and translated the Batchelor interviews into Chinese. Later that fall, Ross returned to Dan Feng with doctoral student Lei Wang to collect the Chinese students’ photographs and interviews and to share with them the parallel work being done by their peer group in Bloomington.

In late January 2006, Xihe schoolteachers Xiaoli and Na completed the exchange by coming to Bloomington for two weeks. They spent their time at several local schools and worked with the project’s Batchelor peer group students and teachers. They compared such school aspects as work loads, class sizes, course choices, teacher/student work habits, and skills preparedness. The two visitors shared the Chinese students’ photographs and discussions in group sessions that were highly interactive and cross-cultural. Boyle and her students felt privileged to have had a firsthand perspective and understanding of Chinese schools and Chinese students, far beyond what any textbook could have possibly given them.
For Ross, the project’s educational and cross-cultural objectives are significant: it centers the lives and voices of children in the social studies and global education curriculum, while fostering communication and deeper understanding between Chinese and American school children and their teachers. All the students’ work from Batchelor and Xihe schools are expected to be exhibited on a Web site hosted by the School of Education.

Last summer, Ross worked on another nongovernmental project in China, the Shaanxi Spring Bud Project coordinated by Shaanxi All-China Women’s Federation and Dream Corps for Harmonious Development. The Spring Bud Project is a national movement in China to ensure that impoverished girls have the opportunity to attend school. In October 2005, she and Wang pretested a survey to be distributed this summer to 1,000 eighth-grade girls participating in the Spring Bud Project in the cities of Ankang and Shangluo.

In addition, Ross traveled to Xian, Shaanxi, to work with colleagues on a Ford Foundation initiative that examines the challenges faced by administrators and teachers at China’s private colleges and universities as the country shifts its higher education system from an elite to a mass enterprise in order to cope with the burgeoning demand for higher education. During her October trip, Ross also went to Beijing to participate in a conference, First International Forum on Children’s Development, cosponsored by the Soong Ching Ling Foundation and UNICEF.

Another project that Ross is concurrently working on concerns a historic school that she learned about when she was teaching English in Shanghai just after her bachelor’s degree. The Victorian-style structure known as Shanghai Number Three Girls School was once an elite missionary school run by Southern Methodist women among whose wealthy students were the three famous Soong sisters, as well as girls from often poor Christian families. After completing her Ph.D., Ross started corresponding with alumnae from this school, amassing thousands of pages of life histories. These histories form the basis of a prospective book project.

“It’s a really interesting project because there are several ways that I can go with it,” says Ross. “I could pass on the narrative of the lives of the various women I know, and they would tell us a lot about China at the time as well as about how they have gone out into the world since their school days. Or, I could talk about the school from a more academic perspective, looking at the implications of how this school is similar to or different from other schools at the time. In many ways, the lives of these Number Three Girls School alumnae have become intertwined with my own, so deciding how to put this research on paper is a little overwhelming.”

In addition to her research projects, Ross found time last summer to accompany Richard Rubinger (East Asian Languages and Cultures) on an undergraduate study tour looking at educational reform in Japan and China. After that tour, she stayed on with IU doctoral student Lijing Yang to assist Laura Stachowski, director of the School of Education’s award-winning Cultural Immersion Projects, in setting up a teaching opportunity for IU graduates in Shandong Province (see p. 39).

Ross’s multiple projects and activities attest to her deep commitment to understanding China’s educational system and the sweeping socioeconomic changes it is undergoing. She says that her collaborations...
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Kelley Direct Online Programs in Indiana University’s Kelley School of Business is partnering with the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE), the world’s largest technical professional society, to offer educational programs to its 365,000 members worldwide. Dedicated to the advancement of technology, IEEE publishes 30 percent of the world’s literature in the electrical and electronics engineering and computer science fields and sponsors or cosponsors more than 300 international technical conferences each year.

Under the new agreement, the Kelley School becomes an official affiliate of the IEEE Education Partners Program and will provide IEEE members with online courses that meet their professional development needs. Members will have access to Kelley Direct’s degree, nondegree, and certificate program classes, as well as the array of online graduate programs, including the M.B.A. degree and a M.S. degree in finance, global supply chain management, and strategic management. Kelley Direct courses are taught by the same faculty who teach in the school’s other full- and part-time M.B.A. programs.

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Moshe Kam, IEEE vice president for educational activities, welcomed the Kelley School to the growing number of IEEE Education Partners, saying that “access to reliable and prescreened information of this kind is of increased value in these times of increased globalization and competitiveness . . . . Modern professionals are in need of such information in real time in order to retool, get updated in existing areas, learn about the emergence of new areas, and identify the latest in professional areas of interest and in business climate trends.” Kam adds, “We look forward to growing cooperation with the Kelley School of Business as the program evolves.”

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with Chinese colleagues and her awareness of the complex personal obligations that are present and shape her cross-cultural scholarship are essential to her own learning and thinking as a comparative educator. By traveling to China annually to study the interrelationships involving schooling, gender, social class stratification, reform, and other issues, Ross feels fortunate to be a small part of the fundamental transformations that are taking place: “My efforts to understand the processes of Chinese schooling and culture constantly challenge my ‘taken-for-granteds’ regarding teaching, learning, and living.”

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