

Confucian and Western Teaching and Learning

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ABSTRACT

The authors of this article consider Western teaching and learning alongside Confucian teaching and learning through reviewing the literature. The paper emphasizes that we must teach lower order thinking skills first before we teach higher order thinking skills, and confirms that rote learning and memorization precede critical thinking and creativity. It further confirms Brookfield's theory that cultural differences put a strain on the beautifully, well-reasoned theory of andragogy, which has brought a revolution to adult education and training in North America. Educational implications for instructors in North America who are involved in helping learners from the Confucian culture are such that these instructors should consider incorporating pedagogy into their everyday classroom practice. Andragogy alone may frustrate learners from the Confucian culture. Likewise, Western instructors who wish to practice andragogy in the Confucian culture may find that their practice may be limited by the aforementioned factors. The purpose of this paper is two-fold: Firstly, to contribute to a culturally sensitive discussion of teaching and learning and raise awareness that teaching and learning practices and beliefs are culturally embedded; Secondly, to draw attention to the complementary nature of what initially may appear to be two disparate approaches to teaching and learning. By comparing Western and Confucian teaching and learning perspectives, and reviewing pertinent literature, the authors seek to highlight some important ideas about teaching and learning that should be promoted to achieve the best learning outcomes on the part of all learners placed in this global economy and competition.

Keywords: Andragogy, Bloom's Taxonomy, Confucius, Creativity, Higher Order Thinking Skills, Lower Order Thinking Skills, Memorization, PISA, Rote Learning, Self-Directed Learning

1. INTRODUCTION

“Culture provides tools, habits, and assumptions that pervasively influence human thought and behavior, and the task of learning does not escape this influence” (Brislin, Bochner, &

Lonner, 1975; Bruner, 1996; Cole, 1996 as cited in Tweed & Lehman, 2002, p. 89). Inevitably, views about how learners learn and how educators teach differ, to some extent, according to the culture in which they are embedded. With the internationalization of education, the discus-

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sion of educational approaches across cultures has come to the fore. The potential influence of ‘national culture’ on how students learn and on how educators teach cannot be ignored in the face of globalization, competitiveness and the need to produce individuals capable of success in a dynamic, rapidly changing world.

One thread of discussion commonly found in literature is the juxtaposition of teaching and learning approaches perceived dominant in the West (e.g., North America) with those perceived to be dominant in Confucian culture (Dennehy, 2014; Greenholtz, 2010). Confucian and Western approaches to teaching and learning are sometimes viewed as dichotomous with comparisons of paradigms being characterized with adjectives such as surface/deep and dependent/independent (Ryan & Louie, 2013). It is worth noting that the danger of using such dichotomies is oversimplification because there is little regard for the complexities of the philosophies within each culture (Ryan & Louie, 2013). Keeping this in mind, the purpose of this article is neither to argue that Western teaching and learning is superior to Confucian teaching and learning nor to argue that Confucian teaching and learning should replace Western teaching and learning. Rather, the purpose of the article is to undertake a culturally sensitive discussion of learning and teaching from both the Confucian and Western perspectives and in so doing highlight ideas that may help achieve the best learning outcomes for learners. We consider the questions of ‘what are the perceived defining characteristics of Confucian and Western perspectives on teaching and learning?’ and, ‘How can the two perspectives contribute towards a framework that benefits students in the current environment of globalization and competitiveness?’

The discussion begins by presenting the core ideas of both Western and Confucian theoretical frameworks. We then highlight an interesting situation in relation to the academic achievement of Western and Confucian students, shed some light on why the situation may exist, and in so doing bring to the fore how Confucian and Western perspectives can be viewed as complementary to the benefit of students.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS: WESTERN AND CONFUCIAN

In this section, we review the Western and Confucian theoretical frameworks of teaching and learning with a goal to making a meaningful comparison relevant to both cultures.

2.1. Western Theoretical Frameworks

Western cultures place emphasis on promoting values such as independence or self-reliance. From the perspective of teaching and learning, the qualities of self-reliance and independence are captured in the ideal of self-directed learning, which means learners are made to make the decisions about their own learning, including how they will engage in the learning. Prominent educators such as Malcolm Knowles devoted his life to promoting and popularizing self-directed learning (SDL) (Merriam & Bierema, 2013). Knowles taught a few generations of teachers in the Western cultures that an essential aspect of maturing is developing the ability to take increasing responsibility for our own lives—to become increasingly self-directed (1975). Why is self-directed learning promoted in the Western culture? Knowles provided three answers to this thought provoking question:

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