

KIEM KIOK KWA

A Chinese Christian Learns from Confucius

Abstract

This essay readily admits the deep influence the author's Chinese culture of learning and studying has had on her life and her professional approach to teaching. She believes all teachers, formal and informal, can draw important lessons from the four main principles of Confucius' pedagogy: apperception, activity, individualization and motivation. The author draws parallels between Confucius and Jesus' use of the four principles and uses anecdotes from her own learning and teaching to further illustrate the principles.

KEYWORDS: activity, apperception, Asian-American, Confucius, individualization, motivation

Kiem Kiok Kwa received her Ph.D. from Asbury Theological Seminary in 2007 and is currently Research Director of the National Council of Churches in Singapore.

One of the most satisfying moments for a teacher is to see a light bulb go on in students' minds. Their faces light up as they 'get it.' It is an 'aha' moment when a concept, truth or principle suddenly makes sense to them. The lesson falls in place in their minds, and their faces light up with the joy of learning something new or of making connections for the first time. While these moments may be most encouraging for teachers, often times though, and especially in a school situation, the teacher's concern is for getting through a syllabus, or preparing students to pass exams, and the joy of teaching and learning is lost.

When I went to the United States to do doctoral studies, I presumed that the work involved would be the same as my studying in the past – read a lot, grapple with esoteric concepts, prove that I know all these by passing exams, and then finish by writing an erudite, though obscure, dissertation. Since all my studying thus far had been in Singapore, that had been my experience. However, I found that while indeed there was a lot of reading and exams, the concepts were not esoteric, and I genuinely enjoyed learning. Writing a dissertation, though engrossing and time consuming, was actually an exercise in being the very opposite of obscure: as I sought to be clear and straightforward in both my thinking and my writing. One reason for this positive experience was because my chosen discipline of missiology is a practical one, and I was grappling with tangible concerns in my church. On deeper reflection, I realized that I brought much of my Chinese culture of learning and studying into the process, and that also profoundly shaped the way I approached my studies and the life I lived. Certainly overarching and undergirding these two reasons were, and are, my Christian convictions.

As I reflect on my learning and teaching experiences, I shall focus in particular on how my Chinese culture has influenced me. More than just idiosyncratic reflections, I suggest these thoughts are also relevant for Christians in the United States and Asia. First, Asians, especially East Asians, from China, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, Singapore, Taiwan, are everywhere in this global village. They are settling all around the world and into all parts of the United States. Knowing how they learn would help Americans understand this group of people a little better. As churches and other civil institutions take steps to reach out to them, knowing how they learn would help these organizations tailor their ministries accordingly. American journalist and academician Tom Plate has observed that Asian-Americans will be the key players in the Asia-

Pacific of the future because they are the bridge between the East and the West (*Straits Times*, September 1, 2007, p.S15). This group not only has, but also maintains, business, religious, political and family networks in both Asia and the West. As such, in today's world they are key bridge people between these two regions. Furthermore, there are also hundreds of Asians, like myself, who go to the West for further studies. We are also bridge people between the West and Asia.

For those of us in the ministry of teaching, whether it is our profession or we are volunteers in a church, our hope is that through us, students will 'get it.' To this end, we can learn from one who has been called the greatest teacher in the world, the Chinese sage Confucius. Out of ignorance, some of us may stereotype Confucius as an ancient man who spouted aphorisms, while images of Yoda from the *Star Wars* movies come to mind. It is true that *The Analects*, a compilation of Confucius' sayings, is a collection of short sayings. For example, "Learning without thinking is useless. Thinking without learning is dangerous."¹ But as Chen Jingpan has pointed out, Confucius also had a pedagogy of teaching; as he aimed at social reform through education.² Christians can also learn from this ancient teacher. First, since all truth is God's truth, we can comfortably draw from the good we find in other traditions. As Confucius' teachings and philosophy has so profoundly affected East Asia for centuries, and has been credited with their economic growth, there must be lessons that Western Christians can learn. As we consider Confucius, we shall also draw parallels, where appropriate, with Jesus Christ and his pedagogy. Second, as teachers we can always take steps to learn so that we teach with the best of our abilities. A change in our teaching style may encourage more light bulbs to go on in our students' minds.

Chen identifies four main principles of Confucius' teaching. These are:

1. apperception, that is, teaching by relating new ideas to familiar ones.
2. activity, that is, teaching by fostering personality rather than merely imparting information.
3. individualization, that is, recognizing individual differences and adjusting teaching methods to the needs and capacities of students.
4. motivation, that is, motivating students to read extensively, hear much and see much.

Apperception

Both Confucius and Jesus used examples from their surroundings to teach their followers. When standing next to a flowing stream, Confucius taught his disciples about the "ever-changing water and yet ever-the-same stream of water."³ Jesus pointed to the fig tree to teach his disciples about faith (Matthew 21:18 – 22), and the temple and its adornments, to prepare them for the coming end of the age (Luke 21:5 – 7). Living in urban Singapore,

teaching moments from nature always seem remote. Once, when I worked as a relief teacher in a primary school, at my wits' end about what to do, I brought the girls out to the school grounds for their science lesson, and we spent the time happily studying the different plants and insects, observing patterns and colors, since I was not very well versed in their names. Later, in the staff room, some of the other teachers remarked that they saw me outside and thought that I was "very brave" to do that. I did not find the girls difficult to handle; instead going outdoors was such a novelty that they were well behaved and keen to learn.

Both Confucius and Jesus used these teaching moments not just as examples, but also to teach more profound truths. Jesus' use of everyday examples like salt and yeast as metaphors for the kingdom of God still challenge us today. Abstract truths are always hard to grasp. Teachers today should consider how they can use what students already know to explain what they may not.

Activity

In many situations, students learn best by doing. Skills such as cooking or repairing cars are best learned in the kitchen or tinkering under the hood. Although we know this, yet so much teaching in classrooms, both school and church, is carried out through straight lectures, without even the aid of slides to provide a visual. Most of my learning, including graduate studies at seminaries in Singapore and the United States, was by this method. I actually perform well in that system, developing a neat and legible script of lecture notes (in the days before laptop computers). Even so, I appreciated the service projects that were mandated at school in the United States, which taught me lessons in working with other people, going out to experience serving others and not merely reading about it. It was also in the U.S. where movies were used extensively as teaching tools. A classmate from Africa commented that in his country, only 'carnal Christians,' that is, Christians who were not really committed to the faith, watched movies. Hence it was a shock for him to be watching so many movies, and not just documentaries, in seminary. But watching movies, though more interesting than many lectures, is still not quite the same as learning by doing.

However, although learning by activity is one aspect of Confucius' pedagogy, ironically today *The Analects* are taught today by memorization. Young students at a private school in Beijing memorize and recite the texts up to 600 times.⁴ One wonders how students can make the transition from 'knowing' those principles into action and everyday life. Much of the education in Singapore today is the same. Thus, while Singapore students score well in examinations, the common complaint is that they lack creative and entrepreneurial skills. These latter skills cannot be taught, but grow out of a

healthy learning environment. Unfortunately, these same methods of teaching and learning are also common in the church. Some people lament that fresh seminary graduates have a lot of head knowledge but have poor people skills and unrealistic expectations of the church community. We can change that by incorporating more activities into our teaching.

When we study the gospels, surely one of the most powerful lessons for the disciples was Jesus washing their feet and teaching them about the Eucharist (John 13:1 – 17, Luke 22: 14 – 20). These were tangible actions of the Lord. The times when I participated in a foot washing exercise, especially during a Maundy Thursday service, made a deep impact in my life. I learned aspects about serving others and being served which I could not learn through lectures or even Bible study.

A significant lesson I learned in the U.S. is the place of food and eating together within the learning community. While we often share meals with our friends, I found that after sharing food with relative strangers in a classroom, they became friends. For intensive whole day classes, students were encouraged to bring refreshments each day. While some people made something, others simply bought a pack of chips from the nearby store. Whatever it was, food was refreshment, a rallying point at break times, and a topic of conversation. Here in Singapore, I have introduced this practice in my home church. When I was asked to co-teach an early morning series, I suggested that we all take turns bringing something for breakfast. Bringing something to share and eating together has added a different dimension to our study of the parables of Jesus.

Individualization

Contrary to popular perceptions that Confucius sought to instill conformity, Confucius as teacher was one who was “primarily interested in the development of personality, and since no two persons are exactly alike, they are different in their needs, conditions and capacities, so he had to use different methods and different lessons in teaching different persons.”⁵ This quality of Confucius’ pedagogy came as a surprise to me. Individualization may be a trait of Confucianism which seems to have been lost, and should be reclaimed. Thus, it is noted that he gave different, almost contradictory responses to the same question posed by his disciples.⁶ When asked by Yu whether he should immediately carry into practice what he had heard, Confucius said “There are your father and elder brothers to be consulted, why should you act on that principle?” When asked by Chiu the same question, the Master said, “Carry it immediately into practice.” Confucius answered in this way because Yu had his share of energy and needed to be kept back, whereas Chiu was retiring and slow and needed to be urged forward.

While it is practically impossible to treat a large class of students as

individuals, the attitude of a teacher could make a difference. In my first semester in the United States, I thought that as a good student I should blend into the background. Therefore, it was with some trepidation that I approached individual professors about course work; and was pleasantly surprised to find that they were keen to help me to work through my contextual academic concerns. They viewed me as a person from my own unique context and guided me to find my own answers. Today I am encouraged by the handful of professors who have become friends, sisters and brothers in the faith journey and community.

The gospels tell us that Jesus adapted his teaching to whether he was speaking to large crowds or whether he was speaking to a smaller group of people. For example, while he spoke to the crowds in parables, he explained the meaning of those parables to his disciples (Matthew 13:34 – 36). We read of individuals like Nicodemus (John 3:1ff.), the rich, young ruler (Matthew 19:16ff.) and the Syrophonician woman (Mark 7:24ff.) who all found in Jesus one whom they could approach with their unique concerns, and he responded to each of them as individuals.

Motivation

Motivating students could be one of the hardest tasks of a teacher. It is so much easier to teach those who are motivated, who come because they want to. We find the self-motivated in graduate school like a seminary since they have chosen to be there. We find them in churches when special courses are organized – many parents with young children would chose to attend a parenting talk. Motivating these people is not an uphill task.

Confucius himself recognized that learning for the hope of reward or the fear of punishment, could actually sap the “independence of the learner.”⁷ There is some truth in that for there are those who having been forced to go through school detest learning thereafter. In this regard, Confucius was quite different from Jesus. For Confucius, an ideal teaching and learning situation was where there was an ideal learning environment, where there were not too many in one room, and it was a homogenous group of his favorite disciples who were “men of similar intellectual standards and high ambitions.”⁸

Jesus, on the other hand, while he chose 12 men to be his closest disciples, did not choose who came to learn from him. At the start of his public ministry, Jesus spent time speaking to and teaching the crowds. Jesus used all occasions to teach and did not wait for ideal conditions. He taught Zacchaeus about repentance while the latter was up a sycamore tree (Luke 19:2ff.), and he taught his disciples about forgiveness while dining in the home of Simon the Leper (Matthew 26:6ff.). Jesus did not wait for ideal situations or obedient disciples, but rather, used every opportunity to teach his disciples and those around him. Even when his audience was miserable, like Cleopas and his

traveling companion on the road to Emmaus, Jesus taught and motivated them, with both words and action.

As we said, a self-selected group are often motivated enough to learn. But how do teachers motivate those who have no desire to learn? While this will be different depending on personalities and situations, I suggest that teachers look to other dimensions to instill that motivation. That is, we can be motivated to learn by that which is bigger than ourselves. Often, those ideals are cultural. In the United States, the centrality of sports means that sports personalities have a huge influence on the young, and such influence is often used to motivate youth to better themselves. When I began my doctoral studies, I knew that God had opened the doors and provided for me, so I spent time in prayer to draw strength and guidance from Him. But it was while I was writing my dissertation that I realized that while my Christian faith was a key motivating factor, my culture also played a not insignificant role: I wanted that degree because it would mean so much to my parents. As with many Chinese parents, my parents hold education in very high regard, and a daughter with a PhD was a source of great pride and joy.

Conclusion

Teaching is a most fulfilling task. Most of us adults are involved, whether in formal or informal settings, in teaching others. As we learn from the pedagogy of the sage Confucius, perhaps there can be more light bulb ‘aha’ moments in the experiences of our students.

Endnotes

¹ Confucius, The Analects II:XV.

² Chen Jingpan. *Confucius as Teacher*. (Delta Publishing: Petaling Jaya, Malaysia, 1993)

³ Chen, p.385.

⁴ Osnos, Evan. “Sage for the ages makes a comeback” in *Chicago Tribune*, May 31, 2007

⁵ Chen, p.389.

⁶ Chen, p.389.

⁷ Chen, p.391.

⁸ Chen, p.387

Focus On	
What Teacher Teaches	Who Teacher Is
Traditional Rushdooney	Technician Socrates, Bloom
Progressive Dewey	Model Confucius
Critical Giroux, Fiere, Hooks	Relationship Palmer
Postmodern	Deconstructor Derrida