

THE INFLUENCES OF CONFUCIAN IDEOLOGY ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TEACHING AND LEARNING AT HIGHER EDUCATION IN VIETNAM

Những ảnh hưởng của đạo Khổng tới hoạt động dạy - học ở bậc Đại học tại Việt Nam

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TÓM TẮT

Bài viết nghiên cứu về sự ảnh hưởng của đạo Khổng tới việc dạy-học ở các trường Đại học Việt Nam. Bản chất của đạo Khổng và sự ảnh hưởng tại Việt Nam nói chung và lĩnh vực giáo dục nói riêng đã được khái quát. Ngoài ra, bài viết tập trung sâu vào việc phân tích những ảnh hưởng của đạo Khổng tới hoạt động dạy-học tại các trường Đại học tại Việt Nam đặc biệt là những ảnh hưởng đã ít nhiều kìm hãm sự sáng tạo và hiệu quả của hoạt động dạy-học. Cuối cùng bài viết phân tích và nhấn mạnh những gì mà các nhà giáo dục Việt Nam đã làm và nên làm để mềm hóa và giảm bớt ảnh hưởng của đạo Khổng tới việc dạy-học ở bậc Đại học tại Việt Nam.

Từ khóa: *đạo Khổng; hoạt động dạy-học; giao tiếp thầy-trò*

ABSTRACT

The study has examined contextual influences (Confucian influences) on the relationship between adult teaching and learning in Vietnam. A general picture of Confucian philosophy in Vietnam has been highlighted with regard to the impact of Confucian on regions in general and on educational field in particular. Importantly, the paper has also focused on level of Confucian impacts regarding to adult teaching and learning activities, and especially impacts that inhibit creativeness and competency of teacher and students' activities. Finally, the paper has emphasized on what Vietnamese educators and teachers have tried and should do to modify the impact of Confucian on the relationship between adult teaching and learning.

Keywords: *Confucian ideology; teaching and learning; teacher-student communication*

1. Introduction*

Turner (2005:17) indicates that “Teaching contexts have a significant impact on teaching performance, and there are a range of contextual factors which affect teachers’ development and classroom performance”. Indeed, there are usually a variety of contextual factors such as cultural, personality and organizational which have been affecting teaching and learning activities. What and how do contextual aspects influence on the

relationship between teaching and learning? It depends on specific situations in different countries with different cultures and traditions. In Asian nations such as Vietnam, where the cultural and traditional aspects still exist, the heavy impact of contextual factors is quite apparent.

In Vietnam, Confucian had existed and dominated for thousands of years. The Confucian ideology has deeply affected morals, politics, and education especially. Phuoc (1975 cited in Ellis, 1995:05) shows that “the nature of the teaching and learning

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styles in Vietnam stems from Confucian tradition”. It has been transmitted from generations to generations in Vietnamese society and it has impacted on peoples’ thought and actions. Therefore, in classroom, where the communication and knowledge transmission are usually taken place between teachers and students, the characteristics of Confucian influences have been obviously exposed.

In this paper, I will analyze the influences of Confucian ideology on the relationship between adult teaching and learning in Vietnam. First of all, the overview of the influences of Confucian on educational environment in Vietnam will be highlighted. The second issue is the impact of Confucian methodology on the relationship between adult teaching and learning. The next section is the evaluation of the gap of communication between teachers and students. Then there is the answer for the question: What Vietnamese educators have tried and should do to modify the influences of Confucian on adult teaching-learning relationship.

2. The overview of the nature of Confucian and its influences on educational environment in Vietnam

Confucian was born in China in 551 B.C. According to Chen & Chung (1994: 18), “his teachings are mainly concerned with practical ethics of daily life without any addition of religion elements”. Vietnam was one of the most strongly influenced countries by Confucian because of a thousand years of Chinese domination (111 BC-AD 939). Although Confucianism declined in the country under the invasion period of French and American rule, its basic precepts remained deeply in the morals and values of people, especially teachers and students.

Confucianism consists of a set of pragmatic rules for the daily behaviors of normal people. According to Irwin (1996), this set was based on five basic relationships and moral bonds. The five hierarchical relationships among people are ruler/subject, father/son, husband/wife, older brother/younger brother, and between friends (Chen & Chung, 1994). These relationships and moral bonds also are described as follows:

(Confucianism)... is a practical code of conduct to follow in everyday life, a manual for managing human relationships harmoniously. One core rule acknowledges that there are superiors and inferiors and states that superiors must act with virtues (te) and inferiors must obey their superiors. One should be dutiful towards one’s parents and elders, reciprocal in one’s obligations, respectful of human dignity, and fair towards all. Confucianism inculcates servility, frugality, abstinence, and diligence. It recognizes hard work, patriarchal leadership, entrepreneurial spirit, and familial devotion (Engholm 1991, cited in Irwin, 1996:27).

Contributing to this, Merriam, S. B; Caffarella, R. S & Baumgartner, L. M. (2007:21) assumed that “Adult learning, according to Confucianism, cannot be used as a tool for achieving specific goals in a specific situation. For example, the contents of learning are not related to vocational or skill acquirement. Instead, adult learning is focused on spiritual development”.

However, it is undeniable that, Confucian is a progressive ideology even in contemporary society, especially in oriental countries. It can be said that Confucian has contributed to social construction. Confucian teaches people behave to each other morally and humanely. However, in educational field

which always requires timely reforms to follow the development of society, Confucian in some degree inhibits and negatively influences educational activities.

In Vietnam, education is always put at the top priority: educated people often have honor places in the society. This situation is stemmed from the traditional Confucian philosophy that “a man without education is not a worthy man”. So there are several famous saying that are learnt by heard by most of Vietnamese from their childhood to gratitude their teachers and parents such as:

“Cha mẹ sinh con thầy cho cuộc sống”

My parents give me birth but my teacher made a man of me

(Tran, 198:20, cited in Tran, Ngyen & Le, 1988)

In other words, the teachers’ position is always right at the heard of every learner. At school, there are usually several slogans which are stuck on the class wall to praise the teacher’s credit in graduating, that most of Vietnamese people know since they were small kids for instance:

“Nhất tự vi sư, bán tự vi sư”

(Whoever teaches me a letter, he should be my teacher)

Or

“Tiên học lễ, hậu học văn”

(Learn morals first, learn literacy later)

It can be seen that Vietnamese education in general and the relationship between teaching and learning in particular have been deeply affected by Confucian philosophy. Teaching is seen as one of the most honorable careers in life. Since such high value is set on education so the educators, and teachers are given special

recognition and are considered as fathers or mothers of the learners both morally and academically.

3. The influences of Confucian on the relationship between adult teaching and learning

Kramersch & Sullivan (1996:11) imply the role of teachers that “with Confucian moral lesson, teachers in the classroom have played a role like the father in the family with students as their children. The teacher is responsible for students’ improvement not only in the subject matter but also in moral values”. Because of these influences, teacher must be responsible for students’ achievement and the effectiveness of students is considered as the result of the excellence of the teacher.

With the traditional styles, teachers are considered as the passers of knowledge and students as the receivers. Teachers generally control their students through both legitimated authority and moral norms. In other words, students have to follow their teachers’ instruction without any criticism. According to McLaren (1998:02), in the large power society, “teachers are considered wise, authority figures whose word has great weight”. Hence, the educational process is teacher-centered; in the classroom there is supposed to be a strict order with the teacher initiating communication; students in class speak up only when invited to (Hofsted, 1991).

The teacher in Vietnam is regarded as the fountain of knowledge or the transmitter of knowledge and is dominant in all classroom activities management. The teachers are supposed to know everything. In the class, they act as the “*master*” who lectures to deliver the knowledge to the “*followers*”. The teachers are expected to feed their student everything in the class. This is supported by

Nguyen (1994:12) that “the major methods used by the majority of the teacher are rote learning and one way transmission of knowledge”. Additionally, in a research about the reality of the teaching situation in Vietnam, Nguyen, (1999:34) had an idea from Dinh Quang Bao – Head Master of Teacher training University that “lecturing is still the major method, neglecting the active and creative characteristics of the learners”.

Moreover, the teaching style in Vietnam is much authoritarian. The teacher is usually a bright example and is always right. Normally, at tertiary level, students should be given more independent work because after universities, graduated students will be experts in every region. Additionally, at universities, students often have to work by themselves instead of entire depending on teachers. However, in Vietnam, the situation is much more different. Vu (1995:08) reports that “In Vietnam, the teacher gives lectures in the forms of reading, speaking about the content of the lesson and writing on the board what is required to be remembered. The student listen to the teacher’s talk and take notes in silent”. As a result, the student is the victim of the “spoon-fed” teaching approach. They are really passive and dependent to the teacher.

The teaching and learning styles in Vietnam are really collectivist. Students feel at ease to follow the class activities but not working independently. This is rooted from traditional teaching and learning styles. Nelson (1995:8-9) gives an idea about the Confucian educational system as “Within the Confucian system, students learn through cooperation, by working for the common good, by supporting each other and by not elevating each themselves above others”. The teachers usually focus their teaching to the whole class,

but not at the individual. This extremely contrasts with the Western approaches in teaching and learning. Print (1993:04) demonstrates one kind of teaching method at universities in Australia “a classroom teacher may wish to develop empathic attitudes in students by involving learners in a role-playing exercise based on people with physical deformities”. Therefore, in fact, Vietnamese students are often not competent at soft skills such as group discussion, workshop or presentation which often require students’ constructive opinions.

4. The impact of Confucian regarding to the communication between teachers and students

The communication between teachers and students at universities often play a very important role in enhancement the effectiveness and efficiency in both teaching and learning. Beside the received knowledge in class, students usually need the consultancies and suggestions from the teachers. Furthermore, the close relationship between teachers and students will create a mutual understanding environment and it may lead to an effective and efficient outcome in both teaching and learning. Moreover, through the communication, there could have sympathy from the teacher toward students who come from different socio-economic backgrounds. Hence, it can be argued that, the limitation in teacher-student communication in Vietnam is one of the negative consequences from Confucian influences.

According to Confucian ideology, “argument and question with the elder and the teacher are rude and unacceptable” (Cuu, 2001:11). Because of that, there is rarely any communication between teachers and learners. The learners often feel that their teachers are

so much superior that leads to the situation of feeling fear when working or interacting with the teachers. Consequently, the learners do not dare sharing their opinions. Moreover, the teachers are not able to have a close and friendly relationship with their students because of the tradition that they would lose the power control and great respect over their students. So there exists a long distance between the teachers and the students.

Another factor that makes Vietnamese teacher and learner's communication more difficult is the notion of "keeping face". Wei (1977:21) said that "the Vietnamese traditionally do not reveal any of their problems to outsiders because such of the revelation is view as sign of the weakness. Problems are solved within the family, and exposure of them to non-family member is considered shameful not only for the individual but also for the family and even for the entire nation". Contributing to the perception of *face*, Sullivan (1994:87) notices that "Asian cultures like to pay more attention to face in the form of *saving face* or *losing face*". In the class, neither the teachers nor the students should be made to *lose face*. On one hand, the students keep quiet in the class without discussing and contributing to the teacher's lecture to show their respect toward their teacher and to avoid making mistakes and *losing face* in public. As Hwang (1986: 248) points out "he or she must pay attention to preserving other's face in social encounters, especially the face of the superiors". On the other hand, the teachers rarely give students chances to question and maximum avoidance of answering the learners' question by "I do not know". (They are at all times supposed to know everything). As a result, the communicating transactions between the two

partners are so weak and the students are not really connected to the class and the lessons.

Moreover, Confucian always guides the younger have to absolutely obey and listen to the elder and teachers (Ban, 2000). When talking or addressing the teacher, Vietnamese learners always say "thua thầy", "thua cô" to show their great respect. "Thua" is a very polite form which is used before a personal pronoun to talk to someone superior in both family and social rank. In return, the teachers often address their students by using "con" (child), "em" (younger sibling), or "anh/chị" (elderly brother/sister). The terms "con" and "em" are used in most of the educational level. Hence, the carefulness of students with teachers in communication might make the conversation become less natural and strained.

5. How and what Vietnamese educators have tried and should do to modify the Confucian influences in an effort to enhance teaching-learning outcome

5.1 How have Vietnamese educator tried to lessen the impact of Confucian?

In recent years, the Ministry of Education and Training in Vietnam has realized the negative sides of Confucian and one of the typical negative consequences is teacher-centered teaching methods. Therefore, the traditional Vietnamese learning and teaching styles are changing step by step towards student-centered approach. The statistics of Vietnamese Education and Training Ministry indicated that "from 1990 to 2000, there had more than 1000 tertiary lecturers who have been retrained with new teaching approaches" (Vietnamese Educational Journal, 2005:3). Noticeably, many lectures have been conducted by foreign instructors who come from the progressive educations in the world. It can be asserted that

this reform is extremely beneficial for adult teaching and learning.

One of the most important factors in educational reform is the educational cooperation between Vietnam and other countries. In recent years, there have been a considerable numbers of teachers who were sent to other countries for training. They were selected from lecturers of Teacher Training College or Universities. A typical example is that, at La Trobe University, Australia, from 2000 to 2007 there were more than 100 Vietnamese students, who were lecturers at educational universities in Vietnam, were studying. With the receiving of new teaching methods as well as the progressive ways of learning, those teachers have contributed to reducing the Confucian-traditional influences on teaching and learning, and applying new teaching methods to student-center approach.

5.2. What should Vietnamese educators and teachers do?

It is difficult to put forward the most effective and efficient solution to reduce the contextual influences, especially in Vietnamese situation, where the educational reform is on the way. However, based on the acknowledgeable and reliable evaluation from educational researchers, Vietnamese educators and teachers may flexibly apply in specific situations. Particularly, the prior work of Vietnamese educators is to reduce the Confucian influences on the relationship between teaching and learning as much as possible. The following implications of educational researchers (Zais, 1976; Pratt, 1980; Joyce & Weil, 1992; Brady, 1992; Saylor, Alexander & Lewis, 1981. cited in Print, 1993) are worth to notice:

1. Not all students learn equally well when the same strategies are employed (...)

2. Certain teaching-learning methods are more applicable to particular situations. Lecturers, for example, are not as appropriate when one is trying to develop student self-concepts as small group work or individualized tasks. No one strategy is appropriate, or can hope to be appropriate, to all learning contexts.

3. No single method is superior, particularly in terms of student performance, to another in all learning situation. One may be more efficient in one situation and less effective in another. (...)

The findings mention the important role of teachers in using strategies in their teaching and addressing to students' needs. At universities in Vietnam, students usually come from different geographic areas and socio-economical contexts. Hence, students coming from cities are often less influenced by Confucian and tradition. Conversely, rural students usually still keep traditional characteristics along in their learning style (Phu, 2001). Because of that, coping with different and diverse learning's needs is one of the key tasks of Vietnamese teachers at tertiary level. Darling & Bransford (2005:23) shows the key functions of teachers that:

Teachers need to know that general theories of learning, although they provide guidelines for the design of effective learning environments, cannot produce a single recipe to use in all situations. One of the key features of modern leaning theory is that optimal leaning environment must be tailored to specific leaning goals, to the students' backgrounds and prior knowledge, and to the contexts in which learning will occur. Thus teachers not only need to understand basic principles of learning but must also know how to use them judiciously to meet diverse

learning goals in contexts where student differ in their needs (...). Teachers need to learn how to evaluate the salience of many different conditions that influence learning and the potential effectiveness of different teaching strategies as they make decisions about what to do in particular instances. To do this, teachers need to develop a conceptual map of the domain of influences on learning (including both contextual influences and the impacts of different teaching strategies), and they need to develop means for evaluating how these may be operating in specific instance.

The above evaluation implicates that one of the principle tasks of teachers is how to flexibly adapt with different learning needs. In addition, teachers should know what are learners' lacks and wants. These are very necessary to adult teaching and learning in Vietnam, especially in the effort to shift from teacher-centered approach to learner-centered approach.

One of the important factors which should not be ignored during the transfer from teacher-centered to student-centered is to comprehensively understand and appreciate students. The following typical demonstration, which was conducted by Onsmann, (1991: 51 & 52), can explain more about this.

- Adults learn by doing.
- Adults learn when they have a need to learn.
- Adults learn by solving problems.
- Different adults learn in different ways.
- Adults like variety in learning activities.
- Adults want feedback on performance
- Adults want to apply what they learn.
- Adults learn when the learning fits into their value systems.

- Adults already know lots of things.

It could be explained that there are particular characteristics in adult learning. The purpose of adult learning differs from children learning, not only receiving general knowledge, adults also need the knowledge which they lack and they want. Furthermore, adults learn to seek a job after finishing universities. To address this issue properly and effectively, lecturers should give learners more opportunities to exposure themselves (this is one of the inherent weakness of adult teaching in Vietnam).

Regarding to approach the student-center in adult teaching, the lecturers in Vietnam should apply new teaching methods which are more suitable with students' needs. According to Print (1993:172), teachers should use the method of *inquiryteaching/problem solving* "Instead of teachers providing information for learners to digest, students are first posed a problem, a question to solve, a dilemma to resolve or an issue to address, which they learn about through the process of finding an answer". Print(1993:176) also shows another teaching approach which is the *models of reality* "An alternative way to facilitate effective learning within students is to involve them in learning situations that are as real life as possible". Obviously, in these approaches, teachers only act as guiders and students have to solve the issues by themselves under the guiding of teachers.

However, on the way to implementing the student-centered approach, lecturers should not ignore the previous knowledge and the knowledge which learners already know. As a result, *Constructivism*, which is a progressive theory, indicates the ways to consolidate that issue in the attempt to implement student-centered approach. Following constructivist

theories, Fry, Ketteridge & Marshal (1999:10) express that “Some of the ways in which this was done were to encourage learners to understand how the past is reconstructed and understood (...) Lecturers should be considering how to bring about change or transformation to the pre-existing knowledge of their learner”. Thus, the lecturers’ job is not only transmitting new knowledge and new methods, but also to evoke the knowledge which was already existed in students’ fund of understanding.

6. Conclusion

To sum up, the paper has examined contextual influences (Confucian influences) on the relationship between adult teaching and learning in Vietnam. A general picture of Confucian philosophy in Vietnam has been highlighted with regard to the impact of Confucian in regions in general and in educational field in particular. Moreover, the paper has also focused on level of Confucian impacts regarding to adult teaching and learning activities, and some typical negative consequences of Confucian ideology to

teachers and students. Another influence of Confucian on teacher-learner communication has been evaluated, especially the distance of teacher-student relationship in classroom and outside as well. Importantly, the paper has emphasized on what Vietnamese educators and teachers have tried and should do to modify the impact of Confucian on the relationship between adult teaching and learning.

The above arguments have indicated that the relationship between adult teaching and learning is quite deeply affected by contextual influence. It obviously intervenes in teaching and learning activities, and influences the educational outcome. In Vietnam, the Confucian has existed for ages, so its influences on morals, political and especially in education is unavoidable. In attempts to get it off the ground, Vietnamese government and educational administrators have been trying to reduce the unsuitable impact of Confucian on education in general and in the adult teaching-learning relationship in particular.

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