



Confucian Teaching Re-Examined in Foreign-Language Teaching Settings and Transformative Learning

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Abstract

This paper examines differentiated teaching efficiency through the lens of ancient Chinese teaching philosophy reinforced by transformative learning theory. It discusses how the teacher's role in transformative learning is a natural step for Confucian teaching, especially in terms of how "teaching students in accordance with their aptitude" and Confucius's practices and ideas are followed and shared by other ancient Chinese scholars. The corresponding transformative learning theory is quoted to add depth to the research.

Keywords: *transformative learning, differentiated teaching/learning;*

Having fun in learning. Transformative learning is found in the stereotypically Chinese word *xuexi* (學習). The word means "to learn" or "to study." In the combination of these two characters we see a progression of transformation from *xue* "to learn (a process) to *xi* "acquisition" (a result) . The oracle character 𠄎 *xue* represents two hands(手) grasping from both sides the object of learning (爻), depicting the process of learning. For example, *xueyouyong* (學游泳) "to learn how to swim" highlights the process trying to master a skill. *Xi* is result of effort. The oracle character 翬 is formed by two feathers (羽)above the radical *ri* (日) which means "day". In *Shuowenjiezi*,(《说文解字》), the first Chinese dictionary, Xu Shen (许慎) said *xi* is "the bird flutters and advances daily," (小鳥振翅日有所進, Xu Shen) which implies that *xi* is the result of consistent actions. *Xi*, when used in combination with other characters, contains the meaning of learning result , such as *xishui* 習水 "(knowing how to swim" implies a mastered skill that cannot be unlearned. Confucius lifted the two character *xuexi* to new heights by saying: "To study and at due times practice what one has studied, is this not a pleasure? (學而時習之,不亦說乎? 《論語·學而》 Confucius). Here, Confucius emphasized the importance of *xi*, the result of practice, (i.e. the result of *xue*), implying that what has been learned is enjoyable.

Having fun in learning is crucial, transformation makes sense from this perspective. Confucius stresses this point even more in this statement: "The one who knows how to study is not as good as the one who loves it. The one who loves study is not as good as the one who has fun in doing it." (知之者不如好之者,好之者不如樂之者。- 孔子《論語·雍也》 Confucius). Although Mezirow shares the idea that the "transformation of meaning schemes occurs routinely through learning" (1991, p.167), Confucius's idea of having fun in learning made a unique contribution to modern transformative learning theory.

Another Confucius of contribution was the encouragement of continuous and reflective learning: "If there are men walking together, there must be one who can be my teacher. I learn not by filtering out the good but abandoning the bad." (三人行, 必有我師焉; 擇其善者而從之, 其不善者而改之。《論語·述而》 Confucius) For Confucius, teachers earned their roles from constant learning, but it is not necessary a fixed position. He stated: "If a man keeps cherishing his old knowledge, so as continually to be acquiring new, he may be a teacher of others." (溫故而知新, 可以為師矣。-孔子《論語·為政》 Confucius) The same idea is shared by transformative learning theorist Mezirow who believes that: Transformative learning is "... The process of using a prior interpretations to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience in order to guide future actions." (1991, p. 162) . Mezirow also believes that "In transformative learning ... we reinterpret an old experience (or a new one) from a new set of expectations, thus giving a new meaning and perspective to the old experience. (1997, p.6) Another ancient Chinese scholar also emphasized this transformative self-examination idea: "True learning is



achieved through independent thinking, outstanding accomplishment is realized through practice.”（能思之自得者，真；習之純熟者，妙。-王廷相《慎言·潛心》Wang Tingxiang）

Teacher's role. In Chinese culture, a teacher is expected to do two things well: to serve as a role model and to *yincaishijiao* (因材施教 “teach students in accordance with their aptitude,” or “competence-based teaching,” in modern terms). The former shows the ethics and moral roles teachers play in Chinese society. The role of teachers was earned through their achievements in both moral practice and academic learning— a result of high standard transformation. According to Hanyu (韓愈), a philosopher in the Tang Dynasty, “a teacher’s job is to preach, lecture, and provide solutions (师者，所以传道授业解惑也。- Hanyu) . The three tasks for a teacher here are conveyed through the three development stages of teaching: from traditional transmitting, to the modern transacting, to the present transforming. To help students succeed is to give them a hand on time, just like the touch presented in Michelangelo’s painting “The Creation of Adam”. Imagine, what would become of Adam without that touch from the supernatural force. For Confucian scholars, a teacher should be able to perform such a touch to prepare students in transformative learning. However, in reality, a significant amount of learning and accumulation is required to reach the point of the touch, when the student is enlightened, or *wu*. Confucian *yincaishijiao* had been believed to be the effective teaching method for students to achieve best learning results.

For Confucius, individualized learning targets different levels of transformation according to students’ abilities, social responsibility, personality, age and similar factors. The following story tells how Confucius taught the concept of *Ren* (仁 benevolence) to different students.

Yan Yuan consulted Confucius about *Ren*. Confucius explained: “*Ren* is to comply with the rites by setting restraints on oneself.”

Zhonggong asked what *Ren* is. Confucius responded: “Do not do to others what you do not want others to do to you.”

Sima Niu asked about *Ren*. Confucius said: “*Ren* is just to talk with caution.”

In the original passage (see 《论语· 颜渊》Confucius), Confucius offered different answers to the same concept of *Ren* to students whose abilities, learning styles, personalities, ages and social status differed. Confucius not only helped them understand *Ren* but also encouraged them to practice it in different ways and at different levels. These three students possessed three different social and learning statuses. As Yan Yuan was Confucius’s top student, Confucius wanted him to perform *Ren* at the level of social/political government management. He wanted Zhonggong to practice *Ren* at the inter-personal level, and he believed *Ren* for Sima Niu was to behave himself without disturbing others. The same idea is echoed by such modern transformative learning theorists as Cranton, who says, “Different individuals may engage in transformative learning in different ways; the same individual may engage in transformative learning in different ways in different contexts.” (Mezirow 2000. p. 7), but only in Confucius’s differentiated teaching we see various levels of transformative teaching effectively performed.

“Reading between/beyond the lines” type of transformative learning. As we see here, transformative learning is, for Chinese scholars, a transformation of an individual that goes beyond the confines of language or any worldly forms.

Sun Qifeng (孙奇逢) said: “The most important aspect of learning is grasping underlying principles that are all presented in the way how one handles things. Thus, there is a saying: ‘In study books one must grasp the principle or truth behind language, this is something that is self-evident if or not one is really learned.’” (学以认理为主,而言理即在事上。故其言曰:‘读有字书,却要识没字理’,则公之自得可知矣。) ¹ Wang Bi 王弼 shared this idea with *deyiwangyan* (得意忘言 when we understand the meaning, we can forget the word) .Wang Bi, when working on commentary on the *Book of Changes*, created the principle to deal with the relationship among “work, image and meaning” for the book notary: “Forgetting the words when

¹ Sun Qifeng. *Lixuezhongchuan*. <https://ctext.org/library.pl?if=gb&res=1977&remap=gb>



getting the picture, and forgetting the image when getting the meaning.” (得象而忘言；得意而忘象。--王弼《周易略例·明象》)

Zhuang Zi (庄子), a Taoist scholar shared the same idea in his *Deyuwangquan* (得鱼忘筌): the purpose of making a fish catcher is to catch fish and that is forgotten when fish are caught.(筌者所以在鱼，得鱼而忘筌。—《庄子·外物》)

Therefore, learning, the core of transformative learning is to forget the tools/vehicles we once used to achieve the learning results.

This idea is another transformative learning approach that can supplement to modern transformative learning theory.

The word *wu* (悟) “enlightenment”: Another higher-level transformative learning approach.

In *Shuowenjiezi*, Xu Shen explained the word *wu* thusly, “Enlightenment, feeling from the heart following the sound of *wu*.” (悟,觉也。从心吾声。—《说文解字》) *Wuxin* (悟性) “power of understanding” is generally used to describe a person who is enlightened, thus transformed quickly. This term originated from Buddhism. The following two poems provide a typical example between an enlightened and unenlightened monk.

Shen Xiu (神秀) wrote: The body is like a Bodhi tree, and the heart a bright mirror; you should always diligently clean it, so it does not get dusty. ” (身是菩提树,心如明镜台,时时勤拂拭,勿使惹尘埃。--《六祖坛经》)

Huineng: (惠能) “The Bodhi is not in the form of a tree to start with, and the heart is not in the form of a mirror. It is formless per se, and can it get dusty?”(菩提本无树,明镜亦非台,本来无一物,何处惹尘埃。--《六祖坛经》)

Huineng is the one who *wu*-ed or enlightened with the truth of Bodhi and he became the Sixth Ancestor Chan of China.

When we compare Mezirow’s words that “transformative learning involves experiencing a deep, structural shift in the basic premises of thought, feelings, and actions” and that “it is a shift of consciousness that dramatically and irreversibly alters our way of being in the world” (1996, p.162) we find that *wu* is actually what Mezirow refers to as “a deep, structural shift”. The shift indeed “alters our way of being in the world,” though for the Buddhists, it is more moving toward a spiritual or supernatural world. In foreign-language teaching settings, the concept of *wu* is not usually applied to learning but the effort to transcend the confines of language (or read between/beyond the lines) is always a driving force to motivate effective learning. Effective individualized teaching always helps students achieve enlightenment in learning.

Classroom practice

For this paper, the Confucian teaching and transformative learning methods were applied to classroom teaching at the Defense Language Institute, and below are the results (work from only one student from each group was selected).

The project was divided into two sets assigned to students of different learning styles. Both groups read the same Chinese text. The first set asked students to draw a conclusion using a linguistic approach. The second set asked students to draw a conclusion from pictures in addition to the language.

Please read the passage written in Chinese below and then do activities

大家知道，如果形容学生胜过老师，后人胜过前人，我们常用“青出于蓝而胜于蓝”这句话。如有报道说：“刘翔是孙海平教练一手调教出来的，可谓青出于蓝而胜于蓝。真乃后生可畏！”江山代代人才出，长江后浪推前浪。青出于蓝的事屡见不鲜。

为什么用青比学生，蓝比老师呢？它的来源是荀子著名篇章《劝学》中的一句话：“学不可以已。青，取之于蓝，而胜于蓝；冰，水为之，而寒于水。”这句话用来教导弟子学习永无止境，希望弟子们能够坚持不懈地学习，后代一定超过前辈。一节选自《中华词源》



(the sentences in red are the keys of this reading)

Group A Student 1's work:

1. Please write a gist in 1-3 sentences
This is explaining the meaning of a certain phrase in Chinese, by comparing it to a student-teacher relationship. I think the idea is essentially that students are taught by teachers, and then later those students can become teachers; so teachers beget students and students beget teachers.
2. Please put the sentence into English: “冰，水为之而寒于水。青，取之于蓝，而青于蓝。”
Ice comes from water, and also can make itself by freezing water.
Green comes from blue, and also makes blue.
3. Please give an example to illustrate the meaning “青出于蓝而胜于蓝”
Rain falls from clouds, and when it evaporates the rainwater becomes clouds

Group B Student 2's work:

Activity: Please read the passage above and then study the pictures shown below. Do activities afterwards.



Fig. 1 shows the process of how the color blue is extracted from the plant.

Fig. 2 shows how water is turned into ice when below zero Celsius degree

1. Please put the sentence into English: “冰，水为之而寒于水。青，取之于蓝，而胜于蓝。”
Ice is water turned in to a solid.
Blue, the name of which was changed from the indigo flower (青) to (蓝色)
2. Please give an example to illustrate the meaning “青出于蓝而胜于蓝”
In Chinese, Planes first took the name of “飞船”(flying boat), but later also became known as “飞机”(airplane).
3. Please write a gist in 1-3 sentences
The meaning of “青出于蓝而胜于蓝” is that something completely takes over its predecessor, and this phrase is oft used when a student surpasses their teacher. 青 stands for student, while 蓝 stands for the teacher, because the student came from the teacher. 冰，水为之，而寒于水 goes for the hopes that one's child will be able to study well and surpass whatever lies in front of them.

Teacher's note

Recommended translation of the two sentences:

Blue, subtracted from the indigo plant, is bluer;
Ice, formed by water, is colder.



The order of the questions arrangement is different according to the students' levels and learning styles. Student 1 is at level 2 and Student 2 is at level 1+. Here is the rationale of the question design: Q1. reading between the lines, a gist assessment-- a top-down approach; Q2. a translation, or a reading the lines assessment to assess how well the student can work from the bottom up-- a LOTS (lower order thinking skill) approach, and Q3. a reading beyond the line or a HOTS (higher-order thinking skill), practice to see if the moment of enlightenment *wu*, is realized, or if real transformative learning takes place.

The main idea of the two sentences is "an appropriately trained learner can be transformed into a better person or surpass his or her teachers."

Both students are close in their translations to the basic meaning at the "reading the lines" level. The whole passage elaborates on these two key sentences, and the main idea is expressed in these two lines: that, given some conditions, one thing can be transformed into another, better thing. The key word is "surpass." It is obvious that the Group B student understands it with the assistance of the pictures. The teacher's role of facilitating individualized learning in this activity is clear. Even though the Group B student is at a lower level, his *wuxing* plays a role in his enlightenment/transformation. His translation is not as good as that of the Group A student, but he demonstrates the ability to transcend the confines of language form.

Conclusion

Transformative learning as presented in ancient Chinese texts can be summarized by Zhuang Zi's *Deyuwangquan*. The core of transformative learning is to forget the tools/vehicles we once used to achieve the learning results. This idea encapsulates what *xue* and *xi* are all about: transitioning from process/reflection to result. Confucian *yincaishijiao* guides the application of transformative learning by paying attention to students' individuality, and the ultimate goal is to get students *wu*-ed, or enlightened. This case study supports transformative learning theory and Confucius and Zhuangzi's teachings that linguistic features are like tools or fish catchers to acquire the target or meaning and help students get enlightened or transformed. This re-examination of Confucian teaching theories add depth and different perspective to the understanding of modern theories like transformative learning.

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