

On Reflection: A Simple Philosophy of Education
A Conference Plenary Address
The Impact of Confucianism on Modern Education
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Good Morning. It is my deep privilege to be here today to add my voice to those also responding to the theme of this conference: *The Impact of Confucianism on Modern Education*. The invitation prompted me to be reflective in a way that I haven't been in quite some time, but in a way that has enhanced my reflection on everything I am currently involved in. So, I thank you for the opportunity this invitation has afforded me.

One of the first things that happened as I thought about my remarks today was to recognize the distinction between **education** and **learning**. If I think of education as an accumulation, comprising a totality of knowledge, specific skills, good judgment, a general preparation for life, cultural socialization, etc., then, I think of learning as a dynamic activity. What do we mean by learning? What characterizes learning? What happens to us when we learn? If I polled each of you here, I suspect that your responses to those questions would be phrased differently but would suggest some commonalities. You would tell me that learning is acquiring or getting something; that it involves the retention of information or a skill; that it implies storage systems, memory, cognitive organization; that it involves an active, conscious focus on events outside of one's self; that it is relatively permanent, but subject to forgetting; that it involves some form of practice--perhaps reinforced practice; that learning is a change in behavior. And I would agree with you that all of those attributes characterize learning and its effects on us as learners.

Our lives and those of our students extend beyond the more narrowly circumscribed learning environments, be they classrooms, laboratories, libraries, or even My Space or Facebook. We live in and through the interstices of distinct, yet cumulative experiences. And the quality of that living is in some measure contingent upon our preparedness to continue to learn...to change our behaviors throughout our lives...to acquire what I call a fluency in living. Among our responsibilities as education leaders, I believe, is to encourage and provide for our students/learners **purposeful** opportunities for learning.

In the *Analects*, On Education, Confucius says, "Anyone learning without thought is lost; anyone thinking but not learning is in peril."

I have titled my remarks today, *On Reflection: A Simple Philosophy of Education*. I am not a scholar of Confucius, but from reading his *Analects* (in translation), I find broad themes and general principles that resonate with what I think of as my philosophy of education. It is not a grand, formal treatise; rather, it is a simple philosophy. On reflection, this is what I thought:

I used to tell students in one of my classes that parents, teachers, and doctors have in common a painful measure of their own success: parents succeed when their children don't need them anymore; teachers succeed when their students don't need them anymore; and doctors succeed when their patients don't need them anymore. What is painful about this measure is that, in order to be successful, we must proceed consciously and actively knowing that we are presiding over our own declining purposes. I believe this imperative for us in education is non-negotiable.

I believe we must strive to prepare learners through academic readiness to make themselves more complete human beings. I believe that we have a responsibility to ensure for learners the most favorable environment we can for their integration of knowledge and scholarship and for the acquisition of necessary comprehension and synthesis skills. To accomplish this task we must provide for them ample and purposeful opportunities to develop and to test developing hypotheses and to encourage an advocacy of the notion that a part has coherent meaning only in the context of "the whole." If what we desire for learners is a sustained and productive response to order in flux, then we must stress the plurality of the foundations of knowledge and the diverse angles of refraction on ways of knowing. Becoming a more complete human being means being prepared sufficiently to respond with sensitivity and creativity and to resist the lure of the rigidly familiar. It means allowing dimensions of difference to emerge as components essential to formulations of new orders.

I believe, too, that we must come to understand service as an essential element in one's lifelong learning—that it is not just giving back to society--though it is that, too; rather because it is fitting...and because it is right...but more importantly because the lived through experience of service bestows to our persons the full currency of the human phenomenon.

I believe we must encourage in learners a willingness to engage simultaneity rather than to insist primarily on quantifying discrete bits of isolated information as the "way of knowing;" we must prepare learners to take the risks required by creative acts of the imagination--to guess what is yet unspoken, unseen; we must urge their discovery of secrets still obscured in complexity as much as to remind them to place into coherent sequence that which everybody already knows.

I believe we must exhort learners to remain flexible and adaptable, and to trust in the fundamental connectedness of things, so that they may acquire (learn) whatever they need in order to arrange bewildering fragments of thought and experience into at least a more plausible, if not a more intelligible design. This approach to or philosophy of education promotes a commitment to a capacity for lifelong learning and establishes the essential context of a presiding sensibility, without which the whole seems too much of a random miscellany. Learning is active; it is transitive; it can be reflexive and reciprocal; it illumines.

As an educator, I believe we should encourage in learners a belief that the role of learning in their lives will be central to the creation of coherence, to the negotiation of meaning.

Through learning, I believe, learners should fortify their courage to dream--not merely to plan; through learning, I believe, learners must ensure that their aspirations and ideals will continue to hold their shape in the dissolving images of yesterday's news. I believe we must urge learners to attend to their physical, psychological, philosophical, intuitive, spiritual, intellectual, and emotional selves because attention to this totality of themselves clarifies purpose and the connectedness of life.

This is my simple philosophy of education.

But, I think we want our students to do more than learn. We also want them to dream. Often, people think of dreams as fanciful or soft-headed, as a means of avoiding reality. However, I believe that dreams are what create new realities. I believe that dreaming is an act of courage. To dream is to reach deep within yourself and give life to what you imagine is possible. To dream is to give your unspoken aspirations a name, to utter them with public voice, and to set them before you, as a beacon that will guide your actions.

Yes, doing this requires courage. It also requires such other characteristics as perseverance, optimism, preparedness, trust, flexibility, and an abiding belief in the fundamental connectedness of things.

We are here today because we are *education leaders*. We lead in interesting times. The change that has occurred in the past 30 years is best characterized as transformational. We have undergone global transformation of a multidimensional kind—from orbiting cosmonauts returning to countries different from the one from which they were launched; to seismic upheavals recasting the political balance in the Pacific; from economic recessions to societal depressions; from a general sense of predictability to a random environment where chaos is more the pattern to be discerned—transformations both local and global. We lead in interesting times.

In the first part of my remarks, I asked us to consider what we understand as characteristics of learning. Let me pose the same questions with regard to leadership.

Reflect for a moment on yourselves as leaders. What is it you "intend" or mean when you characterize yourselves as leaders? Or what is it you think others mean when you hear them describe or refer to you as leaders? It is likely that some part of that definition will have to do with a process by which you persuade someone to aspire to objectives, goals, or values that you believe to have worth. In whatever way you define yourselves as leaders, I am confident that in reflection you also think of certain obligations you have needed to fulfill. I shall mention just a few: goal-setting; motivating; affirming common values; assisting in the rediscovery of the values appropriate to present realities; managing—in the sense of priority-setting and planning, organizing and institution building, keeping the system functioning, agenda-setting and decision-making, and exercising political judgment; achieving a workable unity; preserving trust; explaining (leaders need the most appropriate words); serving as a symbol; representing the group; fostering renewal. You might also want to add to this list: sharing information; sharing power; building confidence in others; removing barriers; finding the resources necessary

to support the efforts and aspirations of various constituents; resolving conflicts that stifle action. No wonder we sometimes feel tired! For elaboration on any of these tasks, let me refer you to the work of John W. Gardner (*Excellence* or *Self-Renewal* for good discussions on the characteristics of leaders. Dr. Gardner was himself a president of three different universities and advised world leaders.)

Leadership is not tidy. I think it is important for us to understand that and to tolerate the untidiness that leadership is. Ultimately we find all the connections and intersections, but doing so require a patience and an insistence on the connectedness of things—despite our growing awareness of the unpredictable. For leadership, I believe, is an essentially moral act. A colleague and former president of Yale University, Dr. Bart Giammati, described leadership as the assertion of a vision rather than simply the exercise of a style: the moral courage to assert a vision and the intellectual energy to persuade the community of the wisdom and validity of the vision. Leadership is what makes the vision practicable and compelling (see A. Bartlett Giammati, *A Free and Ordered Space*, a collection of essays written when he was President at Yale).

To conclude, let me say that my reflections on education, learning, and the leadership required to assure dynamic rather than static learning environments that contribute to the development of more complete human beings—these reflections energize me and give me the confidence to believe that, indeed, we, as education leaders, will achieve some success at urging our students/learners to attend to their physical, psychological, philosophical, intuitive, spiritual, intellectual, and emotional selves in their striving to be better human beings.

I thank you again for the opportunity to reflect on these essential elements.

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