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Abstract

Western and Eastern philosophies of education are two contradictory perspectives due to the cultural and traditional differences. Through a reflection on my experiences of studying abroad, in this paper, I look at a comparison between Western and Eastern educational philosophies with the hopes of searching a way to combine these two philosophies. I have explored many similarities in which East meets West with respect to holistic education, such as the wholeness of learning, the significance of mindfulness and emotionality, the values of Indigenous learning approach, and the connections between teachers and students. These commonalities firm my belief in a co-existence of Western and Eastern principles of education, constituting my philosophy of holistic education, symbolized by the Tai-Chi image in Chinese philosophy.

Keywords: East meets West, lived experiences, philosophies of education, holistic education.

Introduction

I have been a college lecturer of English in Vietnam since I finished my first graduate degree in Teaching English for Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) in Australia, and returned to the home country in 2015. As a returnee working at a state-owned college, I found it difficult for me, to integrate into the Vietnamese traditional working environment. After two years, I felt there was a significant gap between my philosophical perspective on education, created during my overseas education, and the traditional educational philosophy of Vietnamese teachers.

I decided to continue to pursue further education in Canada, the graduate degree in Educational Studies, with the hopes of finding a way to bridge the gap between Western and Eastern concepts of education. What I experienced from the conflicts with other teachers in my home country became a driving force for me to read more, learn more, and research more to build a connection between two different philosophies of education. Due to this connection, I can incorporate what I have learned in Western countries into Vietnamese education. “Take the understanding of the East and the knowledge of the West and then seek. Only he who can take care of the property of others can have his own”, a Gurdjieff’s saying (as cited in Walker, 1957).

This paper presents my lived experiences of a Vietnamese teacher attempting to reconcile the so-called two contradictory ideologies of education, the West and the East. During a transcultural journey, my scholarship has been constructed by coming across a variety of intersections and thus supported to frame my educational philosophy, embodied through the term, East-meets-West. East-meets-West, in my paper, illustrates how Eastern learning concepts can interweave with Western didactic principles from the perspective of a Vietnamese international student teacher in Canada.

Understanding Vietnamese Philosophy of Education

“Spare the rod, spoil the child” (Butler, 1883, p. 164)

This has become a common proverb in Vietnam to describe the child-rearing ingrained in Vietnamese mindset and belief. Parents commonly consider physical punishment an effective method to educate their children by fear of the parents (Wolf, 1972).

The acceptance of harsh discipline in Asian cultures, especially in Vietnam, is not only popular in parenting but also schooling (Tran, 2013). According to the principles of Freirean pedagogical theory, this exemplifies a hidden curriculum of schooling that seeks to maintain social order if a classroom or a family is considered an oppressive society, in which parents and teachers are the oppressors, while children and students are the oppressed (Freire, 1970).

Due to a history of 1,900 years of Chinese domination in Vietnam, many characteristics of Confucianism can be found in Vietnamese culture and education (Hieu, 2016; Khang & Van, 2016). Tran (2013) stated that shame is a crucial component of Confucianism in Asia. Harsh discipline through punishment causes shame to young learners, and then, they compel obedience. Good children are described as those that “do as they are told” (Kakar, 1989, p. 24).

The banking model of education is emphasized in the concepts of Confucianism (Khang & Van, 2016). Asian students are taught to passively strive to “memorize the phrases or words used by the authors” (Tweed & Lehman, 2002, p. 93). The banking model is well illustrated in a traditional Vietnamese classroom, in which teachers deliver information to students and, meanwhile students accept the knowledge without question (Freire, 1970). In Vietnamese higher education, the teacher-directed methods are much preferred and “teachers’ mindsets are slow to change” (Lam, 2005a, p. 8), even though lecturers are encouraged to shift from passive to interactive teaching approaches, such as problem-based education (Harman & Bich, 2010).

I was born and brought up in a traditional Vietnamese family where I had much experience of harsh discipline and physical punishment forms from my parents. My mother came from a family with the significant focus on academic accomplishment meanwhile my father's family traditions relied on the societal harmony which directed young people to follow the social norms determining what behaviors and attitudes were normal or abnormal and acceptable or unacceptable (Tran, 2013). I had to conceal my sexual identity at home and in other places, such as schools and workplaces. During my childhood and adulthood, I always felt alienated from my parents, siblings, friends, and colleagues because I was different and not allowed to act differently in the place I called home. The steadily increased degree of coercion I went through in my family demonstrates an authoritarian parenting style growing all children unconditionally obedient and compliant to their parents' wishes. I lost myself due to this hegemonic parenting culture.

What I Experienced from Western Education

After my master's degree in TESOL in Australia, the naive level of my consciousness was confronted, and I became a critical thinker and actor. I now understand that I can change the social order and assist the marginalized in society to change their current social status through education (Freire, 1970). This improvement in my philosophical perspective on living and schooling indicated how the concepts of Freire of education influenced my thinking when I studied in Australia and Canada. In these Western contexts, I have felt included and respected since I am brave to be myself expressing my non-conforming identity; and importantly my voice of a marginalized person is listened.

The Socratic learning approach affected my philosophical view of schooling. A tendency to question is rooted in my mindset. I now believe in self-generated knowledge. These are two

critical components of the Socratic learning approach (Tweed & Lehman, 2002). In Australia, my professors always came up with questions that made me think critically, such as “What made you think this way? Do you think it would be better if you go this way?”. They offered suggestions, such as “I think you should go back to this point/You should search more on this theory.” Self-study was the most essential skill that I learned and developed; therefore, I believe that autonomy is the essence of learning in higher education.

Pragmatism was what I learned in Australia and Canada. Interestingly, the significance of pragmatic learning can be found in Confucianism too. Confucius’ s idea about a pragmatic orientation to learning is to emphasize that learners should be aware of cultivating knowledge for civil service positions (Tweed & Lehman, 2002). In Western education, John Dewey, a pragmatist philosopher in education, and Paulo Freire, a critical theorist went against traditional education (Theobald, 2009). A progressive education promotes social interactions, and school is “a form of community life” (Dewey, 1897, p .81). In Australia and Canada, I was actively involved in many activities on campus that helped me learn a range of social skills that empower my wholeness and well-prepared me for the future life (Dewey, 1897). I believe this is what modern Asian education lacks, and educators forget what matters is outside the schools (Eisner, 1993).

How East Meets West

“It is not enough to be industrious, so are the ants. What are you industrious about?”, a Thoreau’s saying (as cited in Maher, 2001, p. 38).

I consider myself an ant, looking for my philosophy of education. In a Vietnamese proverb, teachers believed in a common metaphor that they are described as the boat rowers to carry their students over the ocean of knowledge to the place of wisdom, happiness, and success (Thi,

2009). During my schooling in Vietnam and years of teaching at a local college of education, I experienced the disconnections between teachers and students due to the traditional education, which I believe, is a form of the banking concept of education (Freire, 1970). I, as other Vietnamese students often felt oppressed and feared to challenge teachers about the information provided in class. I was taught with the knowledge of normality indicating boys with physical activities interest and abnormality indicating I in the body of a boy with physical weaknesses. This kind of gender stereotype shows the influence of Confucianism on Vietnamese culture and philosophy promoting banking education to destroy students' power of creativity and diversity (Khang & Van, 2016).

However, my pedagogical philosophy was believed to be inappropriate for the Vietnamese educational culture by other teachers who had not had experience in Western education. According to Hoang, Tran, and Pham (2018), internationalization, which has become one of the priorities in Vietnamese higher education growth and reform. Therefore, it is important for Vietnamese education to shift from traditional education to a more Western educational style. The challenge for me is how to incorporate Western education with Eastern education.

I use the Tai-Chi symbol which has been personalized by my lifelong constructed scholarship of experiential education and a biographic narrative of an artist-teacher-researcher to describe my philosophy of education in which Western and Eastern education are interwoven with each other (Fig. 1). In Chinese philosophy, yin and yang represent the dark side and the bright side in the Tai-Chi symbol. They are contrary forces but can give rise to each other, and interrelate to one another (Taylor & Choi, 2005). In my philosophy of education, Western and Eastern education are symbolized as yin and yang, which exist in harmony to build a wholeness.

The Wholeness of Body-Mind-Heart-Senses

My personal philosophical belief of education is reflected in both Indigenous education, and Dao-Zen thought. Both value a vital combination of body-mind-heart to create the wholeness (Cajete, 1994; Cohen & Bai, 2007). Through the senses of listening, seeing, touching, and feeling, learners experience how the knowledge is generated, and that is when the knowledge becomes “food for the mind and heart” (Cohen & Bai, 2007, p. 2). This is the moment East meets West. The Dao-Zen approach meets an Indigenous educational philosophy at the point of honoring the wholeness of learners.

The Nurture of Teacher-Student Relationships

On my transcultural journey from the East to the West, I have realized that it is not my purpose to deny one characteristic of one educational philosophy and incline to believe in another one. Both are important to build my philosophy of education.

In Confucianism, respectful learning is one of the core principles of culturally Eastern education (Tweed & Lehman, 2002). When I studied in Canada, I practice a gift-giving culture towards my professors as a gratitude for their inspirational teaching. Even though this is not encouraged in Western culture, I have received many meaningful responses from them. “How nice for me to arrive at work and get the beautiful plant that you left for me. It was very kind of you. I love spring flowers. Thank you for your great contributions to our class and with your presentations” (Lister, 2018, personal communication). “Thank you for being a good student in my class” (Ramirez, 2017, personal communication). We employed a dialogical approach to better understand each other (Freire, 1970); consequently, the reciprocal teacher-student relationships, were nurtured. This is where East meets West.

In traditional Asian education, teacher-student relationships play a significant role in student's performances and attitudes towards teachers and schools. The essence of interaction between teachers and students is believed to be a pivotal contribution to develop a student's wholeness (Birch & Ladd, 1997). Howe and Arimoto (2014) described the experiences of Howe, a Canadian teacher, in the special bonds built between Japanese teachers and students. He had precious emotions with his students when he "witnessed the growth of these students from wide-eyed high school grads to accomplished novice teachers" (Howe & Arimoto, 2014, p. 11).

Surprisingly, I also had seen this unique teacher-student relationship in Canada when my supervisory professor came to hug her old students as old friends or her family members. That moment touched my heart, "what good teachers always do-give heart to our students" (Palmer, 1997, p. 18). In feminist pedagogical principles (hooks, 1994), teachers are encouraged to reveal their vulnerability in the classroom; thus, the boundaries are diminished. That is East meets West. I value the unique bounds constructed between teachers and students in my philosophy of education.

The Values of Indigenous Education

In Australia and Canada, I have learned about Indigenous education which acknowledges the traditional ways of knowing, such as storytelling, and spiritual and cultural rituals (Cajete, 1994). Indigenous people believe in a flow of life-long learning that is strongly connected to individuals, community, nature, and the cosmos. Elders are the most important teachers to maintain knowledge, cultures, and traditions by passing them on to the next generations (Gray, 2008).

In Vietnam, I identify many familiarities between Canadian Indigenous education and Vietnamese ethnic minorities. For example, according to Cory (April 4, 2016), ethnic minorities,

especially in Northern Vietnam, concentrate on sustainable environmental conservation which indicates a strong connection to nature. They also consider the crucial role of elders in learning and knowledge preservation. Vietnamese minority people relate their traditional knowledge to the conservation practices by gathering elders who collect and maintain ecological knowledge (Cory, April 4, 2016). This is another example of East-meets-West. Both Vietnamese and Canadian Indigenous people nourish their love to the lands where they inhabit. I take this core principle of sustainable environmental development for my ideology of education which acknowledges the reciprocal relationships between humans and nature and values of Traditional Indigenous ways of knowing, doing, and being.

Mindfulness and Emotionality

I am a Buddhist; hence, I follow the four core principles of Buddhist philosophy of education. I am committed to my compassion to think of creating a better world with peace and justice (Martusewicz, 2001).

I am emotional. I was moved as I could feel the pain through the stories of the Indigenous tour guide at Secwepemc museum, Canada. I had been to this museum before this tour; however, I completely forgot the previous scholarly explanations, and I was filled with the emotions of pain and loss by the Indigenous guide's shared experiences of her family and what they have suffered from the history of Canadian colonialism. I realized that I unintentionally practiced the Dao-Zen learning approach to empty my mind and connect my feelings with the emotions the girl (Cohen & Bai, 2008). During half an hour of listening to her story, I used Zen to clear my discursive mind, and thus the empty dao field was finally created with full of critical energy to make room for new knowledge and emotions (Cohen & Bai, 2008). Therefore, I value my

emotionality as a way to connect effectively with my students and read their emotions or reactions to my teaching.

My philosophy of education has been firmly constructed, based on holistic education principles. Forbes (2003) asserted that holistic education concentrates on the fullest development of an individual by encouraging that learner to experience from life. Life experience and learning opportunities can be found beyond the classrooms to build the wholeness of learners (Miller, 1991). The teacher-student relationships are promoted in holistic education. It also empowers students to analyze their social and cultural principles (Miller, 1991). As a consequence, my educational philosophy has been built holistically by my lived experiences of Western and Eastern education perspectives.

Conclusion

It is unnecessary to deny the Eastern philosophies of education and only consider Western education as superior philosophies of schooling. I recalled my memories to identify the times the intersectionalities of these educational philosophies emerged and considered the evidence for a possible co-existence of Western and Eastern philosophies in my inner world. I have symbolized my philosophy of education by the Tai-Chi image in Chinese philosophy. Western educational ideologies and Eastern educational ideologies can come together and give rise to one another without conflict. I have taken the term, East meets West to become my educational philosophy, in which I define myself as a holistic educator who builds a connection with students through a dialogical approach, respects nature as an open learning environment for both teachers and students, focuses on the fullest development of learners, has compassion and advocate for social justice in education, and uses my emotionality to better understand students for an optimum learning experience.

Last but not least, Zen has become a practical approach for me to confront the traditionally Vietnamese teacher's mindset grounded by the social norms promoting harsh discipline and punishment in schooling and authoritarian parenting. I have emptied my mind to build a vital, energetic dao field where I prefer to consider myself a co-learner with my students welcoming the new knowledge and being honest to our emotions. The classroom now is a dao field. We, as teachers and students heal each other, giving rise to one another; hence, we understand the power of love, peace, and compassion within us to solve the conflicts we encounter. It is the true meaning of Tai-Chi ideology built in my heart of a teacher with a faith in holistic education where teachers and students like Yin and Yan, are always complementing one another. To create a unity of two contrary components, each needs its opposite to survive. This unity illustrates the intersection of the East and the West in my philosophy of education emphasizing the connection between teachers and students. They are eager to come to understand each other, disclose and love the vulnerability hidden in the inner world, and heal one another. As a consequence, I believe the significance of knowing, loving, and healing is the only solution for addressing the conflicts in today's uncertain world.

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Figures:

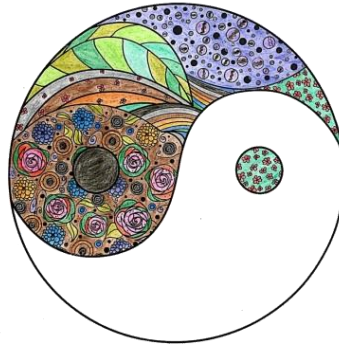


Figure 1. My Harmonized Tai-Chi Image of “East-meets-West” Philosophies of Education.