

CULTURALLY APPROPRIATE PEDAGOGICAL DEVELOPMENT FOR CLASSROOMS WITH CONFUCIAN HERITAGE VALUES: A PERSPECTIVE WITH VISUAL COMMUNICATION STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT:

Over the last decade, learning styles of Confucian-Heritage-Culture (CHC) have been widely discussed as typically passive – learners showed unwillingness to ask questions and often hesitant to speak up. It has been suggested that the collectivist nature of Confucian values such as keeping social harmony, avoidance of conflicts and having great respect for the teacher have resulted in a passive learning environment for CHC learners with high reliance on the teacher figure. Classroom activities that require active verbal interaction often results in awkward silences. This becomes a problematic issue within a design classroom setting where critique session is a common form of pedagogy used to provide opportunities for students to inquire and reflect about their design work by interacting with a community of shared interest and learning. Our paper attempts to adopt a practical inquiry into how theories of social constructivism in particularly learning via social interaction and Confucian influences can be fused and adapted for CHC visual communication students.

Keywords: Confucian-Heritage-Culture, Social constructivism, Interaction, Design Pedagogy, Asian Pedagogy

1. INTRODUCTION

Challenges are often presented when instructors try to create an active social learning environment for students of the Confucian-heritage-culture (CHC) (Chiu, 2009; Penfold & Van Der Veen, 2014; Sng, 2011; Tran, 2012; Nyugen, Terlouw & Pilot, 2006). The scenario is not unusual in the first author's visual communication classroom in Singapore, a multicultural society with open reception to the practice and teaching styles of Confucianism. Among challenges observed in the classroom, the lack of dialectic interactions with peers and the instructor in the classroom likely results in a "passive", teacher-centered experience of learning. As the students enter into the 21st century workplace, skill sets such as critical thinking and collaborative learning are believed to be imperative. These higher order thinking and interactive skills are honed via dialectic learning in class. What factors likely contribute to the notion of CHC students' seemingly "passive" learning styles? What could be

the causes of the less active learning styles of CHC students? Could they be cultural influences, instructors' teaching methodology, or the adaptation of theories that were appropriated from the West (Nyugen, Terlouw & Pilot, 2006; Wong, 2004)? The authors recognize the importance to design pedagogical strategies that embrace the culture of the globalized world and that of the tradition. Accordingly we propose a theoretical framework that sets the preliminary platform to explore practical pedagogical interventions. Our interventions aim to facilitate CHC students to actively interact with one another for effective design critique sessions while considering values of their cultural and tradition influences including Confucianism.

2. THE IMPORTANCE OF INTERACTION IN DESIGN CRITIQUES

The twenty-first century education challenges us to embrace the effort to construct spaces of interaction (Dewey, 1938/1997) for creative learning. Learning is an interactive process among the learner, materials, and the instructor (Vygotsky, 1978). The learner discovers, the instructor scaffolds, and together they interact with the materials of learning. In the journey of discovering, the learner assimilates and accommodates new information. During scaffolding, the learner moves his(her) zone of potential from the actual to the proximal. Culture as a source of materiality converges with the interactive processes during discovery and scaffolding. In this manner, interaction precedes and mediates development (Ponomarev, 2008). We reflect upon culturally appropriate pedagogy from the perspectives of two rich traditions of learning: Confucian Heritage and Social Constructivism. Briefly Confucianism refers to the scholastic tradition of learning that highlights transforming humanism within the persons and their societies. Social Constructivism refers to psychological theory of learning that treasures active discovery and transformational collaboration. We attempt to fuse these two traditions of learning with reference to a pedagogy of critique session.

Around the world in the context of design education, critique session is a form of pedagogy that is essential and commonplace (Dannels & Martin, 2008; Mayer, 2005; Oak, 2006; Uluoğlu, 2000). It is a phase in design learning where students get the opportunity to socially inquire, reflect, explain and contemplate about their design (Mayer, 2005; Oak, 2006). Design knowledge is transferred and exchanged amongst students and instructors at this crucial phase of their design learning via means of feedback (Dannels & Martin, 2008; Uluoğlu, 2000).

Interaction between peers, instructor and the design pieces during critique sessions therefore becomes a key in resolving problems via "dialogical relation" (Tan & Wong, 2007). It was reported that students from the Confucius-Heritage-Culture (CHC) have had its struggles against class participation especially that of class critiques that requires active social interaction to develop important critical thinking skills (Chiu, 2009; Penfold & Van Der Veen, 2014; Sng, 2011; Tran, 2012; Nyugen, Terlouw & Pilot, 2006).

3. CONFUCIAN HERITAGE CULTURE LEARNING STYLES

Confucius-Heritage-Culture (CHC) is a large part of East Asian culture which is influenced by the philosophy of Confucianism. Countries such as Singapore, China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korean and Vietnam are often classified as societies with CHC influences (Zhao, 2012). Over the last decade, learning styles of students with CHC values have been widely discussed with regards to its learners' struggles to speak up, ask questions and participate in classroom activities. It has been suggested that due to the influences of Confucianism such as the emphasis of collectivism traits of valuing social harmony and avoidance of confrontation have led to learners' hesitant to speak out in class discussion. Confucianism's respect of authority figure based on the hierarchical system could also mean an overly reliance on the teacher figure, giving rise to a teacher-centered, passive learning environment (Chiu, 2009; Nisbett 2011; Penfold & Van Der Veen, 2014; Sng, 2011; Tran, 2012; Zhao, 2011).

There are however, a number of contrasting academic perspectives challenging this criticism as to whether CHC passive learning styles are problematic due to cultural values or due to instructors' teaching methodology. According to Wong (2004), students from the East Asian countries accepting CHC values were highly adaptive to new styles of teaching and learning if given the opportunity with the appropriate methodology. There have been calls in recent years to foster culturally appropriate pedagogical interventions for learners in societies with CHC influences (Zhao, 2010).

4. TOWARDS A FRAMEWORK OF SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVISM

Social constructivism emphasized the importance of the learners constructing their own knowledge via means of social interaction and experiential learning as the basis of a life-long learning attitude (Bruner, 1960; Nuthall, 2015; Vygotsky, 1978). Briefly, Vygotsky (1978) suggested that a learner's existing knowledge can be immensely developed via interaction with peers and instructors. In his theory of proximal zone of development, Vygotsky (1978) argued that a learner's mental development has the potential to grow beyond that of the actual development when given the opportunity to collaborate with others. The learners' intellectual can also be enhanced when the combination of speech and activity comes together. Vygotsky's (1978) view of learning fuses with that of Bruner (1960). In essence Bruner (1960) presented that self-generated discovery learning achieved via interactive means with others has the potential to instill self-confidence in learners when they are able to make connections on their own. Rather than relying on "mere presentation of fundamental ideas", he encourages instructors to devise teaching methods that provide structure to allow learners to discover knowledge on their own thus embracing ambiguity and possibilities as part of the cognitive process.

To learn well, Tan (2014) argued for the presence of congruence in the teacher roles and coherence in instructional elements in addition to social interaction and interactions with objects. She theorizes that interacting and speaking up within a classroom can be effective when the learners and the instructor cognize the cultural boundary of harmony and regard it

as an interactive platform for learners to learn from peers, reflect upon their own work and make further design improvements. With an active dialectic interaction, a critique session will effectively enable learners to inquire about the in-depth issues of their design work and to make effective design adjustments. In a CHC design classroom context, this can ultimately affect the students' ability to articulate critically within a community of shared practice for effective improvements on their design work. With conversing and interaction with others, the potential to expand beyond one's own existing knowledge thus widens. Devising methods and environments that encourages CHC design students to interact with one another at a critique session is therefore crucial if they are to graduate with 21st century skills sets such as critical thinking and collaborative learning. Figure 1 outlines a pedagogy of critique session in the context of fusing the Confucianism and social constructivism traditions of learning.

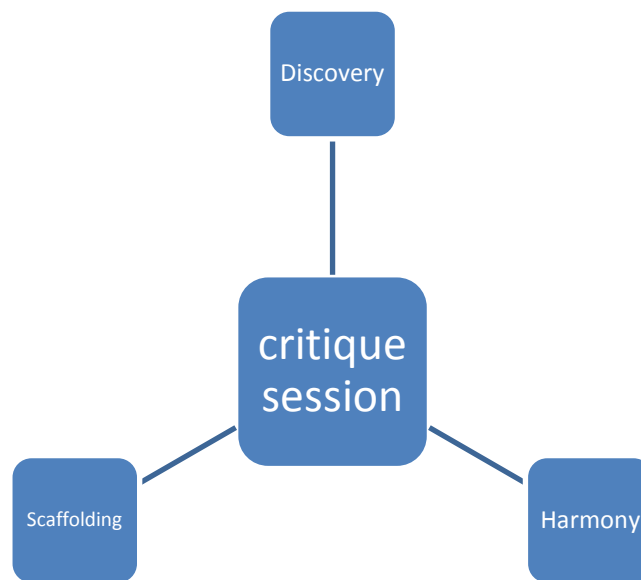


Figure 1. A Pedagogy of Critique Session (CHC-Social Constructivism)

5. A PEDAGOGY OF CRITIQUE SESSION

A pedagogy of critique session is constructed in the context of fusion between social constructivism and culturally appropriate pedagogy induced by Confucianism. The principle of interaction intercepts with the principle of continuity in the experience of culturally appropriate pedagogy (Dewey, 1938/1997). A feature of a pedagogy of critique session is that it is an instructor facilitated yet student centered classroom. The experiences of the instructor and the learners interact and continue in the critique session. The culture of the classroom following a pedagogy of critique session is dialogical and problem posing. Tan & Wong (2007) suggested that in a dialogical relation classroom situation, the instructor and learners are cognitive actors jointly responsible for problem solving process. Together with their peers and their instructor, the learners approach the question collaboratively and

reflect in action. Our pedagogy of critique session is in line with that of Nuthall's (2002), i.e., the social constructivist teaching when the teacher facilitates and involves a significant group of students. Our pedagogy is grounded in Vygotsky's (1978) proximal zone developmental model and Bruner's (1960) scaffolding theory with focus on the instructor providing support in the initial phase of the students' learning process and then gradually allowing them the freedom to make connections and allow for self-discovery. The role of the instructor in a culturally appropriate social constructivism framework is therefore to adopt everyday values (e.g., harmony, respect, diligence), to furnish fundamental knowledge and support enough to engage a learner's cognitive participation, and to provide the opportunity for social interaction thereby leading to self-discovery and self construction of knowledge.

6. OVERCOMING INTERACTION INADEQUACY: A CASE STUDY

Using a case study of a group of undergraduate year 2 visual communication class studying a typography module attempting to design a poster, the first author explored pedagogical interventions that aimed to improve learning via social interaction as encouraged by social constructivism while taking into considerations the CHC influences of the students.

An assignment was briefed requiring students to design an A3 poster to communicate and promote an imaginary event of their own choice. Objectives were such that they have to use the design principles of the International Swiss Style typography, taking into considerations of applying an invisible mathematical grid system on the poster for information organization, developing a keen eye for information hierarchy and being conscious of white spaces used on the posters.

Bruner (1960) called for facilitating learning in pedagogical structure. In this study, we adopted a cycle of reflective learning (see Tan & Law, 2004) and introduced a structure of culturally appropriate pedagogy to guide doing the assignment. The cycle of learning see the importance to acknowledge implicit theories (or conceptions) of the learners in the interactive space for the instructor to build relations to them and to execute the structure of instruction within the dialogical space. At each momentary stage of doing, the structure of instruction embedded in the cycle of reflective learning fuses with conceptions of the learners. Other than being able to grasp fundamental principles of poster design, it is also the desired outcome that the CHC students embrace social interaction and dialogical relations within a classroom setting as a means of the learning process that may take them beyond their existing developmental stage and learn to construct new knowledge and meaning for themselves.

The structure of instruction for doing the assignment comprises four continuous and interactive steps that attempt to create interaction and dialogue participation, namely **facilitating with creative scaffolds, permitting freedom and sense of belonging (or ownership), creating guided inquiry-based learning opportunity that is intimate and concluding with small group cooperative learning critique.**

STEP 1: FACILITATING WITH CREATIVE SCAFFOLDS

Following the principle of continuity (Tan, 2014), the teacher in the first step “facilitating with creative scaffolds” ensured that the fundamentals of the course were presented in an engaging way prior to the attempt of the assignment. The instructor presented the factual information through the traditional slides presentation. Before starting the design process, students were required to look for grid and hierarchy system outside that of the classroom and present the importance of how it holds everyday life together. Working in pairs, they improved their understanding on the importance of a grid system and type hierarchy in the typographical context by leveraging on their exploration of the everyday grid and hierarchy system first (Figure 2). This understanding was then further practiced onto existing magazine layout mapping in small groups. (Figure 3)

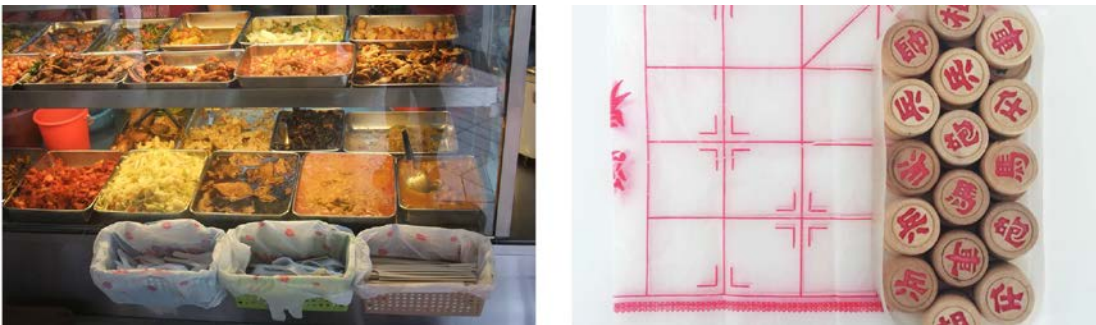


Figure 2: Outside-of-class examples of grid and hierarchy system

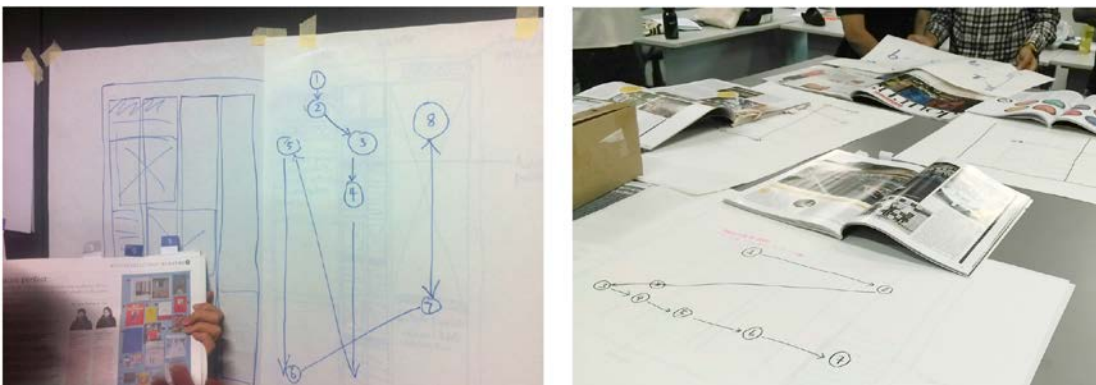


Figure 3: In-class exercises of typographical grid mapping and type hierarchy

STEP 2: ALLOWING FREEDOM AND SENSE OF BELONGING (OWNERSHIP)

After disseminating the poster design brief, students experienced freedom to invent through designing an imaginary event of their own choice. They are to communicate this event via a poster design exercising the typographical learning of the International Swiss Style. The students experienced freedom of choice and communication. They developed sense of belonging and ownership towards their work, and cultivated self-reliance from the beginning of the assignment. Examples of imaginary events ranged from simple Hitchcock Film Screenings to an Apocalypse Believers conference.

STEP 3: CREATING INQUIRY-BASED LEARNING OPPORTUNITY

The first poster design draft was completed within one week. Thereafter, students were paired up with other students whose events they did not know. The student pairs were given about 30 seconds to look at each other's poster on the wall. After that they returned to their seats and filled in a questionnaire with a guided list of implicit questions probing whether the poster design were effective in communicating the event. The details inquired of the poster were such as title of event, purpose of the event, date, time, location etc... (see Figure 3).

Based on the information they gathered using the questionnaire and together with the poster draft, the student pair discussed each other's understanding of the poster for 20 minutes. Both had to expand on the reasons why some of the event details did not communicate effectively to the other classmate and what are some of the suggestions that they can provide to assist their classmate in improving the designs. The instructor then took the opportunity to go around each pair and participated in the discussion. She facilitated a dialogue session with the student pair and went through the questions and answers on the questionnaire.

The intimate setting of being in a pair was well received by the student pair as it stimulated discussion without any awkward silence. Often students were amused by how their paired up partners did not manage to understand the intended communicated messages and information in their own posters. The feedback via the questionnaires sparked further conversation between the student pairs especially on ways to improve their design. The questionnaire cum dialogue opened up the space of learning by discovery. The questionnaire created by the instructor became a tool that facilitated dialogue, and the contents of the dialogue were materials to invite the student to participate and discuss issues emerging in poster designs without "offending" another classmate (Figure 4).



Figure 4: Example of a Peer Review Questionnaire and a poster development

STEP 4: CONCLUDING WITH SMALL GROUP COOPERATIVE LEARNING CRITIQUE

The peer review questionnaire session was fruitful. Students refined their work based on the feedback they received in this session. For a week, they made adjustments and changes to their poster design. Thereafter students returned to a small group critique of 5-6 people. According to the first author's prior experiences, students in the CHC classroom tended to be less willing to speak out in a larger group. Hence, she design small group critique sessions but ensured that the number of students in the group was larger than two students.

In the small group cooperative learning critique sessions, students displayed their second poster drafts on the table. The students used the first set of sticky notes provided to the group and noted the elements of the posters of their classmates that they thought were well done. After that, they were given another set of sticky notes to identify areas of improvement of their classmates' posters (Figure 5).

After the exercise, students had some time to internalize the comments left on their posters and to discreetly discuss with anyone (Figure 6). The instructor then reconvened the group and led the critique session by addressing comments on the sticky notes left by other students and by adding onto anything that is missing. Depending on the type of comments, the instructor might ask who left the comment and asked for clarification or elaboration on the comments. The instructor invited the student designer of the poster to speak out whether they agreed or disagreed with some of the comments left behind for them. The exercise garnered a substantial amount of feedback on the posters as compared to the large group critique sessions. According to the first author the latter simply opened up the floor for feedback and hence received less responses and less duration of intensive interaction.



Figure 5: Use of Sticky Notes and sample comments



Figure 6: Student viewing their feedback and internalizing it

7. LEARNING POINTS

Devising Implicit Critique Tools – Maintaining harmony is of paramount in a CHC learning environment. As such, we considered devising tools to facilitate dialogue such as using a questionnaire or sticky notes that can raise students' cognitive learning (Vygotsky, 1978). The students in the above sample group engaged with due diligence in the culturally appropriate implicit teaching tools. The instructor introduced a structure (Bruner, 1960), i.e., using peer review questionnaire for example allowed the students to mutually pen down their thoughts about what they saw without the worry of seeming confrontational. The questionnaires were enthusiastically filled up without hesitation and thus through their answers, signs of critical and cognitive thinking revealed. The instructor facilitated discussion based on the questionnaire which turned out to be highly interactive with little inhibitions. In the small group cooperative learning style critique, sticky notes allowed the students to practice voicing out their thoughts. The notes bridged the fear of being face to face confrontational. Most students comfortably expanded their thoughts based on reference to the written feedback on the sticky notes.

Start Small to Build Trust - Students responded well to smaller group critique sessions. Interaction within a small group seemed to be productive in terms of gathering feedback and comments (Dewey, 1938/1997; Ponomarev, 2008). Students interacted well with each other and were able to expand on their written thoughts confidently than when they had to be in front of a larger group. In comparison to an open group critique session, a smaller group critique session, a cultural appropriate tool, aided with the sticky notes method seemed to be less intimidating and thus creating a safe and supported environment for openness. The ease of openness became a key in the creation of a critical dialogue which seemed manageable and achievable in smaller groups.

8. CONCLUSION

To prepare our undergraduates for the 21st century society we think that it is crucial to develop their ability to participate in social-cultural interaction that allows them to think

freely and do responsibly. In interaction with their peers and instructors they extend the relations of their own designs to the others. Creative dialogues are spaces for emergence of “secondary” relations between their designs and those with the others. Creative teaching and learning provide spaces for the emergence of secondary relations that are reflective in action and that enrich higher order design thinking (see Tan & Wong, 2007; Tan, 2014). Our theoretical converging approaches that “fuse” social constructivism and Confucianism embrace the learners’ cultural considerations. In dialogical settings, Confucian values (e.g., diligence and harmony) converge with openness to discover, and cooperative learning fuses critical social interaction (in critique sessions).

A pedagogy of critical session is innovative as it attempted in *fusing* both cultural traditions of learning of the CHC students (e.g., desire and diligence) and modernized curricula influenced by the West (e.g., logical and critical thinking). In this manner, the students of our study were able to engage socially during the design thinking learning process with sufficient considerations of their cultural influences. Implementation of implicit teaching tools and smaller group critiques was an alternative pathway that encouraged CHC students to interact with less inhibitions paving the way forward to create open dialogues in the hope of self-constructing new knowledge beyond that of the teacher. Our observations and pedagogical interventions were at their initial and preliminary stage. We hope to continue our culturally appropriate pedagogical attempts in a series of action research on CHC Visual Communication students’ learning. Our efforts to fuse social constructivism theories and culturally appropriate pedagogical strategies have just started. We are patient to induce and encourage “bitesize”-like transformation in the culture of learning of our graduates, a part of goodness of the twenty-first century.

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