

The Confucian Concept of Learning

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This chapter focuses on the concept of learning in Confucianism, laying out the Confucian emphasis on learning as a process, and delineating relations between learning and thinking, learning and questioning, learning and practice, and learning and teaching. Drawing mainly from Confucius' *Analects* and partially from his later followers, Mencius' eponymous work *Mencius*, Xun Zi's eponymous work *Xun Zi*, and the chapter of *Xue Ji* (*On learning*) from the Classic *Li Ji* (*On Rites and Rituals*), this chapter will highlight the unique constructive nature of knowledge acquisition in Confucian educational thinking. In conclusion, the chapter addresses some implications of the Confucian concept of learning for current educational practice.

BACKGROUND

Confucianism has been the greatest influence on Chinese education for more than 2000 years (Chen, 1993). Confucianism is broadly and briefly defined here as a school of thought that originates from and centers on Confucius' thinking, advocating a harmonious society through individuals' moral cultivation and humanistic ways of government (Yao, 2000).

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Educational thoughts play a critical role in Confucianism as the premise for self-cultivation and social improvements.

Born into a war-torn society that saw rapid social changes and the crumbling of traditional social orders, Confucius was determined to devote his life to restoring the social harmony and political order through re-establishing the ancient rites and rituals. At the center of this restorative effort was education (Gardner, 2014; Ni, 2002). To Confucius, education was the means to cultivate talents who would adhere to the appropriate rituals and were morally upright as individuals and administratively capable as officials who would govern through humaneness (Qian, 2011). Both the internal development of personal traits and external knowledge acquisition for administrative abilities were predicated on the participation of individual learners in education.

It is clear that politically Confucius was a conservative who wanted to restore the old traditional social orders. It is also clear that the social order he yearned for and sought to restore had already collapsed by his time (Yao, 2000). Yet, as a serious scholar who used education and learning as the means to achieve his political goals, Confucius was quite an avant-garde path-maker in Chinese education. He was not only the first in record to make education available to all who were willing to learn in spite of their social status, but he also advanced significant educational thoughts and practices that have had long lasting influences on China's education and society (Lee, 2000).

WHAT IS LEARNING?

To Confucius and Confucian scholars in the pre-Qin period (before 221 BC), learning was a complex process that involved the following essential relationships: those between learners and learning, between learning and thinking, between learning and questioning, between learning and practice, and between learners and teachers. In educational practice, these relationships have served continually as the foundation for education in later China and have influenced many Asian countries (Chung, 1995; Wang, 1990; Yun, 1996). These relationships, though, are not conceived as attributes separable from each other. Instead, they are best perceived as part of an interrelated whole.

Confucius (511 BC–479 BC?, 1980) believed that learning starts with the learner. The emphasis on learners is subtly played out in a pair of synonyms about the word learning in Chinese. Etymologically, the concept of learning and studying are represented in the same Chinese character Xue

学 (learning or studying). In practice, they are mostly interchangeable and almost inseparable in Chinese. To Confucian scholars of the pre-Qin period, the use of the same character Xue to capture these two slightly differentiated aspects of knowledge acquisition was only natural because for Confucius and his followers, learning entails studying by the learner. What this implies is that learning is effortful. Learners have to set their minds on the objectives of learning, be persistent through the process, be open to diverse perspectives, and immerse themselves in what they are studying without thinking of exterior gratification. One's learning starts with oneself (9.19)¹ and is for oneself (14.24). Confucius emphasized the importance of setting his mind on learning (2.4), seizing learning whenever appropriate (7.22; 19.22), and being a joyful learner (1.1). Yan Hui, one of Confucius' best students, showed these desirable characteristics and was described in *the Analects* as persisting in learning even when living in poverty (6.3; 6.7; 6.11).

It is worth pointing out now that Confucian scholars at that time were aware of the differences between these two concepts of learning and studying. In *the Analects*, Zi Xia, a close disciple of Confucius, made the point that "even if someone is known to have not studied, I would say he is learned if he is performing filial duties with elders, serving rulers with loyalty, and keeping promises with friends" (1.7). It is the learner that matters, and it is the ultimate purpose of learning that matters in defining what is learning. This point will be revisited later. For now, differences between learning and studying are noted; it is the ultimate goal of self-transformation that infuses these two aspects into one. Self-transformation is not easy. It requires effort and consciousness, whether in studying or in the practice and application of learning. Learning therefore has its roots in learners, who take initiatives, are committed to learning, and award themselves with the process of learning itself (8.17). Those who set their minds on learning have taken the first step toward self-transformational learning (2.4).

According to the Confucius, learning can only occur when studying goes hand in hand with thinking: "studying without thinking leads to confusion, and thinking without studying is dangerous" (2.15). I will consider only the first half of the statement here, and will leave the comment on the second half to the next paragraph. It should be pointed out that the word Wang 罔 (confusion) has several connotations in Chinese. Aside from "being confused" or "being perplexed," it can also mean "being gullible" or "being deceived." Confucius' statement can have all these connotations. Confucius highlights three relevant points here about the important role thinking plays

in learning. First, it implies that learning is learner based. It can only occur when the learner is actively engaged through thinking, whether to adequately capture the essence of what one is learning or to integrate it into one's knowledge structure as Xun Zi (313 BC–238 BC?, 1974, p. 8) claimed that “one needs to think through one's readings for comprehensive and integrative understanding.” Studying without thinking could also cause confusion when what has been studied is not integrated into a connected whole, leaving the learner unaware of the big picture. Second, learning also involves making a value judgment through careful thinking about the substance of what one is learning. While the learner should not have any preconceived bias when approaching learning something new (9.4), he/she should have a critical stance toward the subject matter. Mencius (372 BC–289 BC?, 2015, p. 285) made a similar but explicit claim that it is better not to have the book than to have one if one completely trusts it. Third, knowledge or what one can learn really does not all reside in books or any other material representations from which one is studying. Knowledge, as implied in the statement, resides between the learner and the books or other material representations of knowledge. In fact, learning only occurs when the learner can think through one's own thinking, “discern other three corners by knowing one corner” (7.8), or the ability to generalize one's learning to something new. Therefore, thinking is a constructive step in which progressive knowledge acquisition is achievable.

The latter half of the statement emphasizes the reciprocal nature of the relationships between learning and thinking. It is obvious that Confucius was emphasizing a necessary balance; the danger can come from empty thinking or baseless speculations that are not bolstered by studying, because such thinking can lead to erroneous decisions and wrong actions. Therefore, thinking all day and all night without serious study is useless to a learner (15.31). Purposeful studying provides the necessary content for thinking, requiring a learner to be continuously engaged in reflecting upon knowledge. Confucius noted the gradual nature of knowledge acquisition and the growth of our understanding when he said that we “learn new insight by reviewing the known” (2.11). By reviewing what we have learned, we are capable of deepening our understanding and therefore constructing new insight from it. It should be noted that the Confucian role of thinking is almost always learning related and reality based (16.10), focusing on specific contexts and showing a clear pragmatic tendency (Li, 2015) toward content-based and context-based thinking.

Community also has an important role to play in learning. *Xue Ji* explicitly lays out the importance of study with peers in a learning community: “If students study alone without the company of peers and friends, they become superficial in understanding and limited in their learning” (Xu, Yang, McEwan, & Ames, 2016, p. 13). The importance of community support for knowledge acquisition is realized in the third pair of relationship in the Confucian concept of learning, the one between learning and questioning. Questions arise when one is actively engaged in studying and thinking. Raising these questions to one’s teachers, peers, and other knowledgeable participants in various learning contexts is a vital part of learning. The interactions that occur as a result of asking questions can expand one’s views, help one to clarify confusions, and consequently contribute to a continuous process of deepening understanding. Therefore, questioning is practiced and encouraged by Confucian scholars as a crucial part of learning. Confucius is well-known for asking questions whenever he visited Duke Zhou’s Temple, asking for information or for clarifications (3.15). He would even ask questions in earnest of those considered to have lesser knowledge than him (5.15; 8.5). Asking questions is, in fact, the main approach in Confucius’ teaching, a distinctive format of his interactions with his students and visitors. Questions do not always have to have ready or known answers. They often serve as the means to lead discussions to obtain answers (9.8) or explore learning at a different level (1.15; 3.8). *Xue Ji* comments: “Those who are good at asking questions approach their task as if carving hard wood. First, they chip away at the soft parts and then set to work on the knots. If they keep at it, the difficulties are gradually resolved” (Xu et al., 2016, p. 15).

Interestingly, *Xue Ji*’s description also presents a unique image of Chinese belief about knowledge. It is an image of methodically chipping away the puzzles and doubts around the clouded body of knowledge, echoing the learner-centered mentality. It is an active image that highlights the significance of the internal nature of learning even when knowledge is constructed through a process of outward interactions. It is this inward–outward integration of Confucian concepts that informs the unique Chinese compound word for knowledge or scholarship: Xue Wen 学问 (learning and questioning),² leaving no doubt about the active integration of questioning as part of the knowledge acquisition process. Knowledge takes on an active identity in the Chinese compound word Xue Wen. The level of learning-related sophistication in asking appropriate but differentiated questions was used by Confucius as a way to assess and guide students’ progress (1.15).

Students' questions were used as indicators of their learning progress and signaled to the Master whether to move on with the next stage of instruction.

Similar to the relationship between learning and questioning, the relationship between learning and practice and application also highlights the perception that practice and application are necessary for learning. To Confucian scholars, practice and application constitute a natural part of learning as well as a reflection of learning. While Xue 学 (learning) and Xi 习 (practice/application) are two different Chinese characters for different concepts, they were promoted and perceived together for the first time in Confucius' *Analects*: "Is it not a pleasure to learn and practice the learning from time to time?" (1.1). Since self-transformation is the ultimate purpose of education and learning, it is natural to believe that the final assessment of learning is to find out how transformed one has been in the real world. This is exactly what Zi Xia, a prominent Confucian disciple, meant when he stated that one's practices of filialness with elders, loyalty to serving superiors, and trustworthiness with friends would make that person a learned man (1.7). While he might seem extreme in making this statement, Zi Xia was actually emphasizing the importance of using practice and application in real life as the yardstick for learning, making practices and applications an ultimate means of assessment. It should be pointed out that even in this statement, learning is not overlooked but is implied to have different possible forms, as elsewhere presented in the *Analects*, such as learning through observations (7.22) or emulating righteous behaviors (1.14). In fact, learning as a process involving both learning and practice and application has become a unified concept as reflected in the compound word in Chinese for study or learn: Xue Xi 学习 (study or learn), signifying the essential role of practices and applications in learning. The compound word of Xue Xi shows that practice and application of what one learns are not conceived as extensions of learning but themselves are part of learning and can feed back into one's learning, making them a natural touchstone for learning. Xun Zi in his *Exhortation to Learning* has an interesting description of how laudable learning and despicable learning are different from each other in real life:

What a Jun Zi has learned would go into him through his ears, be understood by his heart, be distributed to his limbs, and eventually show up in his postures. . . . What a petty man has learned would go into his ears and come out through his mouth. There are only four inches between a man's ears and

mouth, how can it transform and beautify his whole person? . . . While a Jun Zi's learning transforms and beautifies his whole person, the petty man's learning is only used to please others through words. (Xun Zi, 1974, pp. 5–6)

While we do not precisely know how to measure personal qualities based on learning, it is quite clear that treating personal transformation as the outcome of learning was popular among Confucian scholars (Li, 2015). For example, Mencius (2015, p. 91) touched upon the educational outcome as understanding and sticking to the moral principles governing human relations. *Xue Ji* has a description of the annual assessments for students that accentuates moral growth and personal transformation as the most important outcomes of learning (Xu et al., 2016, p. 11). Xun Zi (1974, pp. 6–7) likewise insisted on moral cultivation as a measure of one's book learning. All this points toward the inseparable role practice and application have in learning.

Confucius believed that teachers are also learners. *Xue Ji* has famously summarized this reciprocal relationship:

it is only in learning that we realize our inadequacies, and it is only in teaching that we realize our limitations and perplexity. It is only in realizing our inadequacies that we are able to become self-critical, and only in realizing our limitations that we are able to improve ourselves. Teaching and learning complement each other. This is what the “Command of Yue” means when it says: “teaching and learning are two halves of a whole that inform each other.” (Xu et al., 2016, p. 10)

Making learning part of teaching and teaching part of learning has many ramifications. This statement highlights the parallel processes, challenges, and potentials that learning and teaching share. Learners and teachers alike are engaged in a process of studying, thinking, and reflection that leads them to ask questions about the adequacy of their own knowledge and discover their own limitations. In turn, such questions and discoveries provide motivation and directions for their further learning. Learning and teaching are contexts which engender further learning needs: the more one learns and teaches, the more one needs to learn. Teaching thus involves a tremendous amount of learning. As part of teaching, learning comes naturally as an outcome of an interactive as well as a reflective and self-discovery process. Learning is necessary not merely in response to learners' puzzles and questions, but is also necessitated by one's own need for deepening and

broadening contextual understanding of issues at hand or as indicated by Confucius' insistence on a teacher's capacity of discovering new insight through reviewing old and familiar things (2.11). In this light, as a teacher Confucius would happily declare that he was never fed up with learning and never tired of teaching (7.2). The proposition that teachers are also learners shows that teachers are and should be practicing what they are teaching, engaged in doing what they are advocating—learning for self-transformation and self-cultivation. Confucius presented himself as an exemplary model of a life-long learner, continually engaging in the process of self-transformation (4.8). Such an approach is hailed by Confucian scholars as absolutely necessary (Xun Zi, 1974, p. 6). It implies how important it is for teachers to always have the mindset of a learner. It not merely sensitizes them to their own continual needs for knowledge, but also helps them empathize and put themselves in the position of learners, develop the capacity to view learning from a learner's perspective, and be responsive to their students' needs, questions, and challenges.

This relationship between learning and teaching brings us back to the Confucian concept of learning as an effortful, volitional, and learner-centered process. Teachers are not merely knowledge-givers, but more importantly, seekers of ever-deepening and expanding knowledge, engaged in thinking, reflection, questioning, interactions, self-discovery, and practicing what they are teaching through learning and self-cultivation. They are part of the learning community they help to build. It is perhaps this particular emphasis on teachers as learners that has brought a high esteem to teachers and a reverence for knowledge (with the teacher as the embodiment of it) in traditional Confucian societies.

These key elements of learning are inter-connected. Changes in one would generally affect the others. Central is the learner's mentality, which would impact learners' engagements in the learning process of studying, thinking, questioning, and practicing. Teachers as learners could and should provide motivational and exemplary models to naturally inculcate learners with appropriate values. While thinking and asking questions about learning-related issues are important, the concept also emphasizes the indispensable role of practice and application as part of learning, indicating the essentially active nature of learning as captured in personal practice and application. Effortful and conscious engagements in thinking, discussions, and practice are conceived as a gradual knowledge acquisition process, affecting not merely the learning but more importantly the learners and their self-transformation.

In short, it is a process of learner-centered, constructive, and continuous efforts that is directly connected to social practices and to learner growth. This Confucian concept of learning has set the tone for how knowledge has been perceived and acquired in China over two millennia, and in other Asian countries for hundreds of years.

IMPLICATIONS OF CONFUCIAN CONCEPT OF LEARNING: WHAT IT MEANS FOR US TODAY

While the Confucian concept of learning has morphed and changed through history with both positive and negative consequences, its main themes still generally hold in educational circles in China and many East Asian cultures. The Confucian concept of learning offers three implications for current Western educational practices.

First, the Confucian concept of learning can help us take another look at how knowledge acquisition occurs. Confucian scholars are not expressly interested in epistemology but demonstrate their pragmatic insight in their teaching and education practices. Knowledge acquisition has been treated as an effortful constructive process in which learners deepen their understanding, enrich their knowledge, and practice learning in real contexts, continually refreshing knowledge. In contrast to treating knowledge as a prescribed body of standards and curricular prescriptions external to learners, this focuses education on learners, individual growth, encouraging learner involvement rather than a rigid and presumptive format, and on developing inter-connections and reflective learning rather than superficial copying. Such classrooms would emphasize learners' engagements in the learning process, and learning situated in individual students' prior knowledge, learning needs, and learning paces. This conceptualization of learning emphasizes the continuous and connected nature of learning, integrating personal efforts with group interaction and discussions. In sum, this conceptualization tells us three things about knowledge acquisition: personal efforts are a necessary part of knowledge construction; acquired knowledge emerges as inter-connected rather than a group of discrete objects; and knowledge acquisition is a process that is generative of further learning needs.

Second, the Confucian concept of learning can help us re-conceive what can serve as the indicators of such knowledge acquisition. Reliance on standardized tests is not adequate because the summative, outside-learning

process does not reflect the true nature of learning and account for the learning process. The Confucian concept of learning suggests possible points in the process where assessments can occur and what principles of assessment should be. In order to contribute to continued learning, assessments must reflect that learners are engaged in thinking and reflection, and developing questions. Assessments can take place when learners ask questions. Learner questions could be used to evaluate whether they have thought through what they have been learning and can move to the next stage of instruction. Levels of questions should reflect the gradual process of deepening and broadening understanding about a subject area. Another possible point of assessments is at the stage when learners are practicing what they have learned. Instead of treating practice and application as mere extensions and enhancements of learning, teachers need to recognize practice and application as authentically capturing the performance of learning, a naturally occurring assessment of the learning growth. More importantly, assessment based on practice and application should not be separated from the learning process. Instead, it should be used as feedback on what is being studied and provide formative rather than summative information about learning. In this sense, practice as assessment is not disruptive to the learning process but occurs naturally as part of learning. Formats of assessment could include teacher observations or student self-monitoring checks or both. While teacher observations may be used for summative purposes, learner self-monitoring checks would greatly contribute to learner-improvement as a whole person. Teachers can play an important role in assisting learners with self-monitoring checks, which are not merely a list of dos and don'ts; learners should come to evaluate their own learning practices.

Two principles of assessment are highlighted in the Confucian approach. Generalizing learning to new contexts focuses learners on the intricate relationship between in-depth understanding of the subject matter and a sensitivity to contextual requirements. Homeostasis between the knowledge level of the subject and the contexts means that changing one affects the other. In addition, discovering the new through reviewing the old and familiar shifts focus from connecting the studied subjects to new contexts to developing new insights into those subjects. Both principles can help educators conceive and design assessments that, as a non-intrusive part of the learning process, contribute to bringing about desired learning outcomes.

Considering the naturally occurring assessment possibilities, the Confucian concept of learning can provide some dearly needed counter-balance perspective to current accountability measures that are based on

a-contextual universal standards and criteria. Accountability can be realized in a less rigid, non-intrusive, form in which learners who are engaged in the learning process at various stages are assessed to help them progress through the process. The focus is making sure that a non-intrusive form of assessment is used to account for and enhance the learning process.

An additional benefit is that the Confucian concept of learning may help us understand Chinese immigrant students and many East Asian students in our classrooms. As one of the fastest growing student populations in our school systems, these students warrant our educational attention to ensure they receive adequate educational services. The Confucian concept of learning, as a cultural mark for many East Asian countries, has become an important component of immigrant students' educational identity. The learning behaviors exhibited by these Confucian heritage students must be appropriately interpreted by Western teachers to facilitate their successful inclusion into learning communities in the West. There are several features that can usually be observed in these students. These students are usually pretty good at completing assigned work; they expect to expend such efforts. Accordingly, using preview and review assignments is one way to capitalize on their strengths. They are not shy about asking questions if the questions arise from effortful engagements with assignments, whether as a preparatory study for class or a practice exercise in the form of homework. These students are not inclined to ask questions as a result of quick associations without careful and adequate thinking time. But teachers need to provide guidance about asking questions in a Western classroom. The down side of students' efforts might also be seen when they use rote memorization, instead of questions, to respond to preparatory assignments.

Due to the heavy emphasis on learning and knowledge acquisition, Confucian heritage students tend to exhibit different personal choices in school subjects than their Western peers. For example, they tend to select and perform well in math and sciences classes, usually perceived as subjects that entail both gradual knowledge buildup and constant practice. But their participation in other subjects such as sports, arts, and the humanities tend to be more limited. There might be various reasons (in addition to language) for this. But one reason is the Confucian emphasis on the types of knowledge that can be pragmatically and visibly reflected in math and sciences, particularly when mediated through strong parental input, thus limiting their own personal choices. Such limitation of personal choices may be detrimental to them in Western contexts. School counselors and teachers can help them realize the value of personal choices in school and beyond.

Finally, these students usually respect teachers. This view of teachers could be used to interpret some observable student behaviors in classrooms. At times these students appear to be reticent, seldom challenge teachers or peers and are usually not confrontational, listen to teachers' words intently, sometimes literally, and appeal to teachers for conflict resolutions. Their silence in class, barring language difficulties, could simply be the result of respect. In addition, in their silence many of them engage actively in thinking through note-taking and give their full attention to listening during instructional times. Teachers should be sensitive to these psychological characteristics and avoid interpreting these behaviors exclusively from a Western cultural perspective. Teachers can also turn this respect into powerful learning opportunities for students by giving them sufficient time to reflect on learning, and ushering them into an educational culture that values active and brainstorming group discussions and dialogues. This should not, however, be interpreted as an absolute characterization of Confucian heritage students. After all, they are also immersed in the Western culture's social and historical contexts.

The Confucian concept of learning has undergone continuous changes since its inception, and has also left some worthwhile lessons for us to ponder. I will briefly mention two salient educational practices in Chinese history in which the Confucian concept of learning was misapplied. First, in the ancient Chinese school curriculum, particularly after Confucian classics were installed officially as orthodox texts for learners (Chaffee, 1995), memorization of texts became a primary means of learning; Confucius was opposed to this learning practice (13.5). To avoid such a trap, he emphasized the needed balance between learning and thinking, and between learning and practice. Second, overemphasizing superficial forms and formats in learning, a harmful practice, prevailed for many years. China used to have a special kind of essay format in the Ming and Qing times called *Ba Gu Wen* 八股文 (literally Eight-Legged Essay), a stereotyped writing with very limiting requirements for forms and content. Premised upon the idea that learned Confucian scholars were the most talented government officials, the essay was introduced to the civil service examinations to identify those who could articulate Confucian thoughts. However, the targeted Confucian content was actually stifled by the restrictive format. Many a test-taker resorted to learning that was removed from practice and application, and had nothing to do with self-transformation. Consequently, learners wasted many productive years in preparing for such examinations. The restrictive rules and format of these essays were eventually eliminated. Too many rules and restrictions in form, even though in the name of Confucian learning, thwarted the true purpose of learning. The key to

averting such distortion is to keep education learner-centered, constructive, and transformational.

The Confucian concept of learning provides a perspective on knowledge and knowledge acquisition process that can enrich discussions of current educational practices. But without guarding against possible misinterpretations, the Confucian concept of learning, like any other theory of learning, can also be misused.

NOTES

1. A reference to Confucius' *Analects* will be cited in parentheses with its book number followed by a period sign and a chapter number. To make the discussion concise and the chapter within the length limit, most of the quotations to the *Analects* are not directly cited but referenced.
2. The compound Chinese word Xue Wen (literary learning and questioning) as knowledge or scholarship, still in use today, appeared already in the Warring States Confucian scholars' works such as in *Mencius* and *Xun Zi*, indicating the long existing traditional acceptance of this active view of knowledge as underlined by learning and questioning.

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