

## Asian Ways of Teaching

In this article the author reflects on methods of teaching that may be suitable to (East) Asian cultures. Now is a good time to discuss the way we think about teaching in Asia, and how that may differ from the way Westerners think about teaching.

It is not altogether clear what we mean when we talk about teaching in an “Asian way”, or using an “Asian Pedagogy” (*pedagogy* meaning ways of teaching).

However, there is a growing awareness among Asian educators that Asians teach and learn and perhaps think differently from their brothers and sisters in the West.

This awareness is particularly strong in China, where there is a great deal of interest in not only the philosophy of Confucius and Mencius, but in the way they instructed their students and expected them to learn. Together with the rebirth of Confucian studies in the past twenty-five years, there has been widespread acknowledgement that Chinese students do not always feel comfortable with the teaching methods of their Western professors, particularly in the universities, but also perhaps, in schools as well. It’s not

that the Chinese students deny the *competence* of their Western teachers; it’s just that they don’t always like their *methods*. (However, it should be noted that, in a study done here at one private bilingual school in Bangkok in 2003, M5 and M6 students clearly indicated a preference for more participatory and speaking-based methods of teaching in their English-medium classes, methods usually associated with Western pedagogy.)

### ***Asian models and approaches***

The findings of some of the Chinese studies have been disputed. However, it is fairly well acknowledged that perhaps too much faith has been placed by Asian educators on Western educational research findings and the advocacy of Western pedagogical models. On the other hand, too little respect, perhaps, has been paid by reforming Asian educators – scholars and bureaucrats in particular – to Asian models. In China there is a need to rediscover the educational insights and instructional methods of Confucius and Mencius. In Thailand, while much can be learned from the Chinese sages, the example of the Lord Buddha may provide a more familiar and widely accepted model. The way the Buddha taught his disciples

for 45 years provides a pedagogy that not only venerates wisdom in the teacher and values humility in the student, but also promotes reflection and a willingness to investigate truth claims rather than merely accepting them. After all, the Buddha taught that one should not accept the truth of a proposition simply on the authority of the speaker or even by the plausibility of his arguments, but also to apply the knowledge one has gained through experience. And this experience need not be confined to one's own limited environment. Experimentation in the scientific sense is a structured and controlled experience that enables truth claims to be tested. The Buddha's teaching, therefore, is quite consistent with critical thinking and empirical investigation, the pillars on which Western education and science are based. Yet it is Asian, not Western pedagogy. It incorporates the tradition of critical inquiry, but in the Asian tradition of Buddhist teaching.

1,600 academics and schoolteachers gathered recently in Singapore for the second Redesigning Pedagogy Conference held at the Nanyang Technological University. Probably 80-90 per cent of the participants were from Asian countries (but unfortunately only a handful from

Thailand). The theme of "Asian Pedagogies" was taken up in a number of keynote addresses and forums. While the Chinese appear to be taking the lead in exploring the possibilities of a less Western-dependent pedagogy by drawing on their sages, the Singaporeans are vigorously investigating the application of home-grown approaches, such as the "teach less; learn more" initiative and the implications of using an inquiry-based approach in a multi-racial society using English as the medium of instruction. Singapore wants to move beyond its already high international status in mathematics education to a similar high status in critical thinking and problem solving. Likewise many, perhaps most, Muslims from Southeast Asian nations emphasize the importance of scholarship in Islam and an educational tradition that is formal and Qur'anic, but also analytical and reflective.

### ***Student-centred education***

However, in a culture such as we have in Thailand, while it is all very well to encourage reflective and inquiry-based learning, in fact it is not easy to question, let alone challenge the wisdom of one's seniors and those who are acknowledged experts. Politeness conventions form a

barrier. However, the officially approved philosophy of student-centred education can enable students to discover, examine and question new understandings without challenging the wisdom and authority of the teacher or senior members of the community. This is possible because it is the student, singly or in cooperation with peers, who is seeking answers to questions from a variety of sources. Students are not just absorbing the teacher's instruction. (The teacher's role in student-centred learning is to help students construct the right questions, identify helpful resources, validate their findings and organize their presentation.) The student also has to apply criteria for evaluating the truth or validity of a finding and for forming conclusions. Hence, in this approach, the search for truth never ceases and the awareness that real learning involves trial and error liberates us from the fear of "getting something wrong".

### ***Bilingual and bicultural education***

One of the confirmed findings of research into bilingualism is that bilinguals have greater cognitive flexibility than monolinguals. They can see more than one side of a question and they apply more diverse methods of seeking

answers. This begins in early childhood when bilinguals come to realize that an object has more than one name depending on which language is used. Cognitive flexibility, together with awareness of diversity in the way people think and act, is one of the benefits of bilingual schooling. Students in Thailand who become academically bilingual not only experience both Thai and Western pedagogies in their daily experience, they are better equipped for a future that requires them to see the world from different points of view.

Program and supports the teaching of drama, dance and the visual arts to the point that students and teachers could not imagine an education without a major contribution from music and the arts.