

Teaching and Learning in Chinese Schools: Core Values and Pedagogic Philosophy

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To understand better teaching and learning in schools in modern China, it is not enough to see its pedagogic philosophy as merely a reflection of communist ideology. Core values derived from China's ancient civilization, especially the teachings of Confucius, arguably exert as much, maybe more, influence.

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Interactive Whole Class Teaching

My aim in this short paper is to describe and evaluate the most prevalent teaching style which I observed in a very small sample of elementary and middle “key” schools in Chongqing Municipality in China, where I was recently based during two extended residencies in the Faculty of Education at Southwest University, to which I am attached as a Visiting Professor of Education. This style, which I call “interactive whole class teaching”, is immediately recognizable, because it is the default pedagogy found in the majority of the world's schools, including therefore very many of them in my own country, England, and the PRC.

By “interactive whole class teaching” I mean to refer to a way of teaching that has two distinguishing features. On the one hand, the teacher uses a particular organizational device, that of working usually on a single task, and with all or most of the students at the same time. The hallmark of such teaching is thus the disavowal of individualized and student-centered learning. The absence, or near absence, of group or paired work is also an authenticating feature. To facilitate this, desks or tables are frequently arranged in rows; and the teacher teaches mostly from the front. On the other hand, its “interactive” characteristic means that “interactive whole class teaching” is not a synonym for lecturing. Rather, unlike the lecturer, the interactive whole class teacher deploys a variety of ways of asking questions, handling answers, explaining, instructing, giving feedback, and getting students to volunteer and explore ideas. Students studying in classrooms that privilege “interactive whole class teaching” are thus not necessarily passive or inactive learners, as is often incorrectly inferred by its critics.

It follows that it is a mistake to assume that “interactive whole class teaching” always, or nearly always, elicits student boredom and general disinterest. It can do. But these are not inevitable outcomes. On the contrary, a well-planned and taught lesson using this approach can bring about the exact opposite

effects, being inspiring, interesting, and stimulating. Indeed, there is nothing that makes group work or personalized learning approaches, by definition, better than “interactive whole class teaching”, or other methods of instruction for that matter. However, as I will explain later, what distinguishes China's version of “interactive whole class teaching” from the UK's is the manner in which it articulates directly with an assortment of distinctively Chinese mores and standards, some ancient, others modern. In the UK, by contrast, the popularity of “interactive whole class teaching” is founded less on a clear-cut set of identifiable values and intentions, least of all on an explicit theory of learning, as on a nostalgic reverence for a so-called “traditional” form of instruction, the merits of which are mostly assumed rather than corroborated by evidence.

Observing Teaching and Learning in China's Schools

I want now to describe and comment on some observations I made in four classes in each of three urban key schools in Chongqing. Irrespective of school phase and subject matter being taught, the teaching in these classes, in each of which there was present nearly sixty students, had a similar and familiar form, being examples of “interactive whole class teaching”.

Seven features stood out:

- Lessons were very teacher-directed, with the teacher talking a lot to the class as a whole, nearly always from the front.
- There was an almost complete absence of unwanted behaviour; students attended closely to what they were being told by their teachers who deployed a strategic mix of open and closed questioning.
- Group activity was rare.
- The relevant subject text, which usually doubled-up as an exercise book, was to the fore, being referred to regularly by the teacher, whose whiteboard power-point slides often

mirrored what it contained.

- Corporate chanting of correct answers, usually learnt by rote, featured strongly.
- Praise from the teacher, directed to both individuals and to the class as a whole, was evident throughout. Tributes from student peers were also a strong feature, with the whole class applauding the efforts of particular individuals when they answered correctly a question asked by the teacher.
- Also routine was students “coming out to the front” to demonstrate some aspect of the lesson’s subject matter.

Western advocates of the personalized learning perspectives of the so-called “effective learning” movement regularly criticize teaching conducted in this way (Watkins, Carnell, & Lodge, 2007): students are not “active” learners, they say, but merely non-participative ones; the teacher dominates, while the students are totally or largely subordinate to the teacher’s will; students memorize and recall facts, which they do not show evidence of understanding; and students are given insufficient opportunities to use their own imaginations, frustrating any aim to enable them, with their teachers, to “construct” knowledge together. “Effective learning”, these critics conclude, is not going on in any of the classes in which I observed in Chongqing simply because the teachers working in them frustrate its achievement; they merely “instruct” their students; at worst, they indoctrinate them. To be “effective” as teachers they need instead to encourage more group deliberation in class, while adopting a more “child-centred” approach that stresses the importance of learning from experience, rather than from text books and power-point slides.

How fair is this assessment? “Not very” is my immediate answer, chiefly because it fails entirely to understand teaching and learning in China’s schools in its terms, preferring instead to impose uncritically on it a Western evaluation of what counts as preferred practice, which paradoxically has only a minority following even among its teachers who mostly, like their Chinese counterparts, prefer to teach interactively “from the front”.

Core Values and Virtues

Why they do so is not clear, however. Contextual constraints excepted, which include very large classes and the demands of high stakes testing, China’s preference for “whole class teaching”, by contrast, is founded on a series of positive negatives, beginning with the denial that student participation in class has intrinsic value. Chinese teachers and teacher educators are more likely to think that classroom discussion, and participatory methods generally, waste precious time, which is better taken up with the direct transmission and absorption of knowledge, with the teacher taking the lead (Hu Wenzhong, Grove, & Zhuang Enping, 2010; Thorsen, 2005).

This way of teaching connects with a preferred way of thinking in China which, unlike the West’s operational or inductive approach that reasons “upwards” from facts, begins with general theory, which is customarily taken as given, reasoning “downwards” deductively to derivative propositions. While Western inductive thinking leads to conclusions which are treated as tentative, Chinese deductive thinking realises outcomes that are regarded as certain or highly likely. China’s more deductive epistemology consequently places a lot of emphasis on learning by heart facts and theories, which accounts for the mimetic emphasis in the classrooms I described earlier. Indeed, the Chinese are uncomfortable with the West’s tenden-

cy to de-emphasize factual memory, taking very seriously the importance of knowing both particular facts and theories, notably as set down in assigned texts and other readings, which are mostly taught as authoritative givens.

While the mimetic approach, in which students are required mechanically to reproduce text-book knowledge, is a favourite method of teaching in Chinese classrooms, China’s new national curriculum includes a strong steer on approved learning styles which move beyond traditional rote attainments. In particular, stress is laid upon the importance of encouraging students to become “active” and “creative” learners, rather than “passive” and “imitative” ones. Consequently, official documentation includes “exploration”, “co-operation”, “interaction” and “participation” as central leitmotifs. Relatedly, the role of the teacher is redefined away from that of a mere instructor towards being an “enabler” of learning, a position set within a broad democratic context that seeks to promote students’ “rights” and “voice” (Halpin, 2010). However, the expectation is that these more progressive approaches should be adopted within classroom contexts possessing customary features and conventional rules and routines. The most important of these is the respect that students are expected to have for the authority of their teachers. Chinese students behave well in class because that is how they have been generally socialized to conduct themselves—to defer largely to the authority and say-so of their elders. It is important, even so, to know the Chinese do not defer to authority in an unqualified way. Deference has to be earned. There is nothing unusual in that, of course, except that in China this has a basis in Confucian ethics. Specifically, one is respected in China if you are sincere, civil, committed, trustworthy, truthful, reliable, hard working and efficient.

Orderly virtues also matter a lot in China. They matter a lot in the West, of course. But they are far more central to China’s ways than the West’s, as is “rule-following” generally, and acting as much collectively as individually. This restraint is manifest in school classrooms in China where students do not restlessly move around, rarely talk among themselves, and only very occasionally step outside of expected convention. On those infrequent occasions when the teacher asks for silence, it is usually obtained fairly quickly and without fuss. And, remember, this is being achieved in a class of nearly sixty students, a factor of course which must have an influence on teaching styles and strategies, constraining China’s teachers to use methods that focus less on individuals and more on the class as a whole, despite the fact that it is individual performance, in the form of test results, that matters the most in the final analysis. But, the number of students in the class is not the key variable, but rather Confucian notions of deference, which always trump the teacher-student ratio, whatever its size.

There are other considerations which contribute to this contrasting cultural mix. China is not just a differently disciplined society to my own, but also a greater listening and patient one, which means its students are not averse to the idea of being talked to, and for extended periods of time. Learning facts by rote, and committing them to memory, is not then regarded as retrogressive in China. Indeed, the idea that classroom knowledge should mostly be a consequence of a “co-constructive” process, implicating equally teachers and individual students, appears very bourgeois to teachers in China, not to mention based on an epistemology which they do not recognize as legitimate. Some knowledge is precisely that, many Chinese students and teachers told me, which means it does not need to be

bargained about, but rather directly passed on, with explanation provided where necessary.

Some “effective learning” (Western) advocates of “co-constructivism”, it occurs to me, overreach themselves, arguing less on the basis of genuine psychological insight and more with a pedagogic ideology in mind, the direction of which many Chinese simply find perplexing, because they not only think it embraces a mistaken epistemology, but also an exaggerated stress on individual cognition (which they interpret as weak knowledge) at the expense of collective understanding (which they regard as strong knowledge).

In this regard, as with all the other aspects of classroom life in China I have described, it is important to know that the majority of students when they are being “instructed” and “learning by rote” do not self-present as either miserable or oppressed. For sure, as in any classroom found anywhere in the world, teachers in China’s schools can teach badly and ineffectively. But, it is a mistake to conclude that the way they use “interactive whole class teaching” leads inevitably to their students being browbeaten and intimidated. China’s authoritarianism, in fact, is far more cheery than many in the West like to imagine, which means the students in the classes I described earlier gave every impression of enjoying their lessons and being stimulated by them, without their teachers having to resort to ingenious stratagems either to keep them attentive or to increase their time on task.

A mix of relatively recent history and ancient cultural factors contributes to China’s contemporary philosophy of pedagogy. Recent history takes the form of the influence exerted on China’s educational reformers in the 1950s by its “older socialist brother”, the Soviet Union. The personification of this influence was Ivan Kairov, whose 1939 textbook *Pedagogics* was translated into Chinese and read widely by China’s teacher trainers at the time. Kairov, who was the USSR’s Minister of Education from 1949 to 1956, wrote in direct opposition to Western trends toward child-centred teaching methods, emphasising instead the systematic transmission of academic knowledge according to detailed curriculum guidelines and teaching plans. Writing in direct opposition to Western trends toward child-centred teaching methods, Kairov’s pedagogic philosophy emphasised the systematic transmission of academic knowledge according to detailed curriculum guidelines and teaching plans. He insisted that teachers must be in full control of classroom activities, all of which should be underpinned by a socialist moral, political and patriotic education aimed at making students useful and compliant citizens.

Kairov’s teaching methods gained traction within China for cultural as much as ideological reasons, given that many of its central organising ideas can be made to articulate with particular Confucian views, notably those which stress the importance of studiousness and working hard generally, moral discretion, the legitimacy of social hierarchy, civility, harmonious benevolence and respect for others (*ren*), each of which predate the *Thoughts of Mao Zedong* by some two-thousand years, being a central feature of China’s historic collective consciousness.

Conclusion

Accordingly, to understand better teaching and learning in schools in modern China, it is not enough to see its pedagogic philosophy as merely a reflection of communist ideology.

Core values derived from China’s ancient civilization arguably exert as much, maybe more, influence. The pedigree of the West’s version of “interactive whole class teaching”, and broad common sense approval of it, on the other hand, is not so easy to explain. Most often it is lauded as the best teaching method simply because it is a “traditional” one, without any attempt made to explain what tradition or traditions make it worthier than other approaches with which it is positively contrasted.

As such, “interactive whole class teaching” in the West is frequently defended in a traditional way—that is, by reference solely to tradition itself, giving rise to a form of pedagogic fundamentalism in which its merits are insisted upon without the need for supportive evidence or reasons (Halpin & Moore, 2000). Not so in China, as I have argued here, where it links directly with a set of identifiable core values, whose origins are *both* Confucian and socialistic.

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