

Review

Confucius' style of teaching and education

*Liam J. Clafin, woody Cyrus Tatum and Sam K. Evans

Faculty of Business, Economics and Policy Studies University of Sydney, New South Wales, Australia.

*Corresponding Authors. E-mail: laim.clafin33@sydney.edu.au

Accepted 3 June, 2015

A Chinese proverb has it that, “learning colors a man more than the deepest dye”, and indeed learning and education is critical. Here, in this paper, the practitioner-academician author examines the various teaching methods and ways of Confucius or Master Kung. Interestingly here, various vital don'ts of teaching, and in fact, several gems of teaching methods, done the Masterly way, are highlighted. The teaching methods, just to mention a few, discussed are to be the role model, to deliver and teach according to the students' needs, learn from others, generate stimulation and exude influence as well as to love all and serve all.

Keywords: Confucius, learning, teaching; example; common mistakes in learning and teaching.

INTRODUCTION

“*Learning colors a man more than the deepest dye.*” (Chinese proverb, cited in Low, 2005: 9).

Fung Yu-lan, one of the great 20th century authorities on the history of Chinese thought, compares Confucius' influence in Chinese history with that of Socrates in the West (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/confucius/>). Confucius, *Kong fu zi* – traditional Chinese) or Master K'ung, is said to be of the greatest influence on the Chinese character, and this is also felt in the area of learning and education. An intellectual himself, he was an upright man and pursued truth, kindness and perfection throughout his life. Indeed, for Confucius, everyone should aspire to be a gentleman (lady). Confucius stressed on learning and education, and for him, “a gentleman is always eager to learn” (*The Analects*, Chapter I verse 14) – after all, by filling one's head instead of one's pocket, one cannot get robbed; one's education can indeed never be stolen.

According to Confucius, a person who is bent on remembering things in order to answer pupil's questions does not qualify to be a teacher; he is rigid, inflexible or not teaching-friendly. Here, in this paper, the aim and purpose is to examine the teaching ways of the Master, Confucius. And how one can be an effective or a successful teacher; and this will give us the framework [the critical don'ts of teaching and good teaching methods to deploy and helpful learning ways to apply] for what we are going to discuss about.

A ready teacher, Confucius would not refuse anyone who would wish to learn from him (*The Analects*, Chapter VII verse 7). He once said that, “There was never yet a

person who came to me with the present of dried meat (equivalent of tuition) that I have refused to teach something.” (Lin, 1994: 163). Confucius, in fact, brought education to the masses.

For Confucius, a teacher must be a willing teacher – willing to serve and do one's best (*The Analects*, Chapter IX, verse 25). Likewise, a student must have the needed quality as well as wanting to learn; otherwise, the teacher cannot use “rotten wood (as it) cannot be carved.” Nowadays, these Confucian wise words, “Rotten wood cannot be carved” have become a common saying among the Chinese.

The Successful Teaching Ways of Master K'ung: Some Critical Don'ts

Teachers, according to Confucius, should, undeniably, not be merely repeating things in a rigmarole fashion, annoying the students with unbroken questions and repeating the same things over and over again. This ordinarily frustrates, if not, makes the students bored, and often they do not know what good learning and their studies can do for them; they miss the essentials of learning, see it as irrelevant and become unmotivated.

Another common sin or mistake which teachers do is that they do not find out the natural inclinations and interests of their students, and thus not able to bring out the best in their talents. Students, as a result, hide their favorite readings and instead dislike their teachers.

Note that any discussions on effective teaching must consider how students learn and their motivations, we will also consider this when we next examine the teaching ways of Confucius, one by one:

1 Revise, Review And Be Reflective

Learning without thought is an opportunity lost. A teacher should reflect on what (s)he has learned, and in that way, (s)he gains new insights. Confucius said, “A man who goes over what he has already learned and gains some new understanding from it is worthy to be a teacher.” (Lin, 1994: 203).

A famous Germany psychologist, Hermann Ebbinghaus uncovers that the information will be easily forgotten without timely or pertinent revision, and in fact, our own experiences also confirm that reviewing and rethinking helps an individual to learn things better. If one takes an examination without reviewing and thinking further, one is likely to fail or in fact, will do worse than those who have reviewed.

2 Be Aware of the Common Errors in Educating Students

The teacher should be aware of the common problems of education. Some students may attempt to learn too much or too many subjects, some learn too little or too few subjects; some learn things too easily and some are easily discouraged. All these show that individuals differ in their mental endowments, and only with a good knowledge of the different mental endowments can the teacher correct the students' errors.

A good teacher is a person who attempts to bring out the good and (s)he does not help the students to realize what is bad in them. Instead a good teacher remedies the weakness(es) of the students, and on the other hand, a bad teacher does not help to bring what is good or seeks to remedy the weakness(es). (The Analects, Chapter XII verse 16).

3 Deliver And Teach According to the Needs of the Students

In Confucius' view, when the teacher has a good student, (s)he does not have much to do and the results are double. With a bad student, the teacher has to work hard but the results are only half of what is to be expected – besides, being disliked by the student.

Nonetheless, there is a need for the teacher to pitch his or her teaching of the students according to their needs; (s)he has to apply different strokes for different folks. There is a Chinese saying which goes like this, “Teach a person based on one's ability” in Chinese it is (因材施教

Hanyu Pinyin: yin chai se chiao). Interestingly, this saying is actually derived from *The Analects*, Chapter XI verse 22. Confucius then gave two answers to the same question put forward by two different students independently. To the one student, Confucius advised him that he should consult with his father or brother before making a decision, and to the other one, he said that he should go ahead with the request.

Why then these two answers for the same question? Confucius explained that the first one was too daring in decision making so he asked him to slow down, and for the other student, he was always hesitant in making decision so Confucius encouraged him to make the decision immediately.

4 Learn From Others

A good teacher learns from others. For Confucius, for one to be capable, one must study; to be intelligent and smart, one must learn from others. (Zhou, 2005).

To learn well from others, one should especially listen; and listen well. Confucius said that, “(S)he who talks too much is prone to failure” (Zhou, 2005: 69). Because (s)he who does not listen, does not learn.

5 Learn Well When One is Young

A good teacher is aware and knows that one learns well when one is young. It is critical to learn when young; bad habits can then be better avoided. Like young bamboo shoots, they are pliable and can be bent when young. Learning, in most ways, best takes place when one is young.

Confucius once expressed that, “If one doesn't study when he is young, he will be of no use when he grows up.” (Zhou, 2005: 34).

6 Prevent Bad Habits Before they Arise

A successful teacher should nip bad learning habits of the students in the bud.

Students when young are like young bamboos, they can bend and not be broken. It is critical for the teacher to prevent bad habits in his (her) students before they arise. For Confucius, he who learns, but does not think, is lost, and who thinks but does not learn is in great danger (Lin, 1994).

7 Gather and Learn from Positive and Negative Examples

A good teacher ensures learning from both positive and negative examples. Gathering knowledge and learning

can take place anywhere and at any time. Even when walking with others, there is always someone from whom one can learn a great deal. Find their plus points and discover their shortcomings. Learn from their plus points to improve oneself; and study their shortcomings to help overcome one's own shortcomings. (*The Analects*, Chapter VII verse 22).

Overall thus, before one gathers and learns from others, one needs to ...

8 Understand Motivations to Learn and be Self-motivating

The successful teacher should also understand the motivations of the students.

Briefly, the students must be keen and motivated to learn; if students do not find the content of the course interesting or relevant, they may see little or no value in mastering it and may fail to engage in the behaviors needed for deep learning and thinking. Students' motivation is thus critical in their wanting to learn and be successful. The teacher must connect the course and its materials to the students' interests.

If the teacher is so passionate about the course content and finds it so inherently interesting, it should occur to him that the features of the course that excite him most should also hold the same value for his or her students. If so then as a consequence, the student will approach the work whole-heartedly, be motivated and successfully master the material. In other words, the goals as well as the passions of the students and those of the teacher must match. And a successful teacher empathizes (in *The Analects*, Chapter VII verse 9, empathy is stressed) and understands the students, and facilitates to bring about this match by showing the relevance and benefits of the course, the value of the qualifications as well as arousing curiosity and stimulating learning and thinking among the students, getting them motivated and energized to learn. The teacher also provides a good supportive learning environment so that the students learn well and stay motivated.

It is worthy to note that the successful teacher and a good student also need to be self-motivating or directing; after all, (s)he knows others is good, but (s)he who knows himself well is wiser. Research on the effects of students' self - monitoring activities has highlighted that students who naturally monitor their own progress and try to explain to themselves what they are learning along the way generally show greater learning gains as compared to students who engage less often in self-monitoring and self-explanation activities (Ambrose, Bridges; DiPietro; Lovett and Norman; 2010).

The Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) Handbook on coaching speaks of self-awareness. It is good for the students (coaches) should know their strengths and

development needs; this is a prerequisite to developing as leaders. By learning to better recognize their own behaviors and understand the impact they may have, students are better able to assess or predict the outcomes of their interactions with others and take steps to achieve desired results.

Confucius spoke of the measure of a person is a person, (s)he who loves to live according to the true principles without external inducements, and (s)he who dislikes all that is the opposite to the principles of true personhood without outside threats of punishments.

"Never feel contented in study and teach others tirelessly." (Zhou, 2005: 24) (*The Analects*, Chapter VII verse 2). Be it the teacher or the student, they should thus be self-motivating. And here one can argue that motivation should spring from within, intrinsically, "he cultivates himself" (*The Analects*, Chapter XIV verse 42). "What the gentleman seeks, he seeks within himself" (*The Analects*, Chapter XV verse 21). Students should particularly want to learn and willingly learn. This notion shares the same meaning as the popular Chinese proverb that goes, "One can bring a horse to the pond, but one cannot force it to drink."

9 Ensure Timeliness, Reveal Relevant Examples and Tell Stories or Show Visuals at Appropriate Time

What is meant here is for the teacher to give the students tools or learning aids when they are ready for them. Good timing allows the student to be better influenced or persuaded by the new knowledge, (s)he better remembers the point uncovered or revealed.

In providing examples, the teacher should also share his or her experiences, tell relevant stories and give visual images or pictures on what (s)he is explaining on; the student learns better this way. For instance on the topic of filial piety, Confucius pertinently used animals as analogies to explain his perspective. When asked about being filial, Confucius expressed, "Nowadays for a man to be filial means no more than that he is able to provide his parents with food. Even hounds and horses are, in some way, provided with food. If a man shows no reverence (*towards his parents*), where is the difference?" (*The Analects*, II verse 7) (Lau, 1979, *italics, the author's*).

10 Check Orderliness

When teaching, the Master is good at leading one on step by step. (*The Analects*, Chapter IX verse 11). There is a need for the teacher to check organization and ensure orderliness in teaching. The teacher is to teach the different subjects in proper sequence. And (s)he should also consider winning learning place and setting. In this connection, Low (2010: 45-46; 2005) highlights

that when planning the learning area/ room, one should consider **SALT**, that is, the:

- Seating arrangements
- Atmosphere or ambience
- Lighting: Make sure that the lighting is just right, not too dim or too bright and harsh
- Temperature: Ensure that the room temperature is just nice, not too cold or too warm

11 Generate Stimulation

"In my view, there are high spots in all our lives and most of them come through a few words of praises or encouragement from some one else." (Low, 2005: 8).

As it is natural for young plants to produce blossoms and blossoms to produce fruits, an effective teacher arouses learning, stimulating and promoting active change, self-growth and development among his or her students. [This is also reflective of the practical aspects of teaching, the Confucian way.]

To be sure, as highlighted by the Center for Creative Leadership (2006), basic coaching principles and skills include listening and questioning techniques, plus many other principles that most coaching authorities share, and have articulated. These principles commonly focus on the coachee's development and performance not as a problem to be solved but as a path toward learning, growth and change.

In similar vein, for Confucius, it is good to keep the mind active, a path toward growth and change. For him, it is better to play than to do nothing. Confucius' methods were very informal; the teacher ordinarily generates mutual simulation (or what is referred to literally as "friction"). Normally, the teacher allows the students to admire the excellence or brilliance of the other students.

If a student was passive, Confucius would not go on with the lesson. If he held up one corner and a student cannot come back to him with the other three, he would not go on with the lesson (*The Analects*, Chapter 7 verse 8). The point is not that Confucius would not go on to teach the passive but really the key note is that Confucius is underscoring the fact that high stimulation for learning is needed for all for us, a good teacher needs to engage his (her) students to want them to learn and indeed change.

When stimulating learning among students, not only should the good teacher makes comparisons and uses metaphors and analogies, (s)he should also ask questions, causing them not to 'blink' (thinking on the surface), but reflecting and engaging in deep thinking. One Confucian proponent conveyed his views to this researcher-author, saying that "Not only did Confucius give real examples sometimes of his life experiences, but

he also really welcomed questions from his disciples; he taught his disciples to ask any questions especially on the way of life and human relationships." It is said that a good questioner proceeds like a man chopping wood – (s)he begins at the easier end, striking the knots last, and after a moment, the teacher and student come to understand the point with a good judgment of pleasure. (Lin,1994).

Encouragement is normally often very motivating for the students to learn and change. The teacher guides and encourages the students to move forward; (s)he does not suppress them. (S)he opens the way but does not take them to the place. Guiding without pulling makes the process of learning gentle; urging without suppressing makes the learning process easy and opening the way without leading the students to the place allows them to think for themselves. Once the learning process is made gentle and easy and the students are encouraged to think for themselves, then we may call the person a good teacher.

12 Use the Right Side of the Brain Too!

A good teacher stimulates every part of the students' brains, students become mentally aroused and excited.

A picture or a visual conveys a thousand words and it induces and stimulates the students' imagination.

Confucius said, "Wake yourself up with poetry, establish your character in *li* and complete your education in music" (*The Analects*, Chapter 8 verse 8). Music would stimulate the right side of a person's brain, and this would be good. [Note that the right brain has much to do with music, colors and intuition while the left brain is more onto logic and mathematical constructions/ structuring as well as sequential thinking.]

A good teacher, kind and trusted by many if not all, exudes influence and the students and people respect the person. For Confucius, the most difficult thing is to establish a respect for the teacher. When the teacher is respected, then people respect what (s)he teaches, and accordingly, they respect learning or scholarship; and they learn well.

13 Be the Role Model

The Master said, 'How I have gone downhill! It has been such a long time since I dreamt of the Duke of Chou.' (*The Analects*, VII verse 5).

For Confucius, imparting knowledge is only part of teaching. Confucius was the living example; for Confucius, the teacher should not show or illustrate the examples, but be the example him(her)self.

"In life, we need examples to learn from" (several respondents' input), and this match with Low's (2005:

8) words, “when we have role models, we learn better”. One would definitely agree with Chandler and Richardson (2009) that teachers should “always show them”, and it can be encouraging and motivating, if not, inspiring.

Besides, an excellent teacher is “expressive, casual but full of hidden meaning” (Lin, 1994: 248). A good teacher, to Confucius, is excellent in drawing ingenious or meaningful examples or live illustrations to make people really understand him or her. In this way, (s)he may be said to be a good person to make other people follow his or her ideal.

14 Exude Influence

Force implies that there is no choice or that there is only one way. For teachers to apply or use force, it is no good. Forcing students to learn is not effective or influential. Force can be intrusive and is never motivating. It can instead make the student resent the teacher and worse, learning itself.

To be influential is to be persuasive, and one can then convince or talk into others, getting them to see one’s view, perspective or angle (Low, 2010). Competent, benevolent and example-setting, the teacher grows the trust of the students in him. These are winning ways for a teacher to be convincing; soft power is better preferred.

15 Teach Humanistic Values

Confucius was interested and concerned with people. The key idea of Confucian philosophy is *ren*, that is, humanity. Confucius explained that *ren* is to love people. One should have compassion. Yes, “one could not love only one’s parents, brothers, sisters and sons”, but one ought to also love the masses to a great extent. The masses here did not signify certain kind of people but rather like Buddha’s saving all living beings and Jesus’ loving all the people including one’s enemy.

When a certain stable was burned. On returning from the court, Confucius asked, “Was any man injured?” And he did not ask about the horses (*The Analects*, Chapter X verse 17).

Truly Confucius saw that values of kindness, benevolence and humaneness needed to be taught, and self-cultivation is critical in overall learning and growth of a person. And for Confucius, “It is man that makes the truth great, and not the truth that makes man great” (Lin, 1994: 183).

16 Love All and Serve All

As a teacher (*teacher, trainer or coach*), Confucius further believed that to elicit good results, he must love his pupils (*staff*) (Yang, 1993; *italics mine*; Low, 2008).

(S)he needs to know them well, understand their psychological particularities, give thought to ways and means of making easy their access to knowledge and, to that end, develop an effective methodology.

The teacher should have ‘a loving heart’, doing what the heart is set on (that is, the teacher likes to teach and is passionate and enthusiastic in teaching.) (*The Analects*, Chapter V, verse 26). For Confucius, to be loving of something is better than simply to know it, and to find joy in it is better than simply to be fond of or loving it. (*The Analects*, Chapter VI verse 20). And one can say that for teachers and students, finding joy can also bring fun and pleasure into teaching and learning respectively (Please see **Appendix A** – Confucius did apply humor).

The hallmark of a teacher’s virtue, in Confucius’ eyes, is that of loving the students as well as being committed via his (her) lessons to his (her) students’ development. When the teacher teaches with love, (s)he is likely to be patient and caring towards the student. And the student enhances his (her) learning.

A bird cannot fly until its feathers are fully grown, and there should not be unnecessary meddling by the teacher of the student. More so, some decent amount of patience is definitely required in line with the spirit of the Chinese proverb, “one should do not pull the seedlings to help them grow faster” as this can be counterproductive. It is worthy to note that inspiration for the students comes from both patience and perspiration.

Holding character and high integrity (*lien*), the teacher also needs to look into the moral development of his (her) pupils too, and that is an attractive way or value that a teacher may want to have and maintain. It is teaching about life and living, and about good living. Everyone should uphold virtue, and when one puts virtue into practice, one enjoys a clear conscience. And “a clear conscience is like a soft pillow, and one sleeps well” (Low, 2008a: 33). Moral education, to Confucius, is important because it is the way by which one can rectify the situation of ill-matching of actions and behaviors or proper roles as well as restore meaning to language and values to society.

CONCLUSION

Overall then, teaching through various strategies and ways enables one to improve one’s teaching ways while learning through various strategies causes one to learn in smarter and better ways. And successful teachers should realize that variety is really the spice of life and learning, and students indeed enjoy a mixture and combinations of learning ways. And that can be fun!

REFERENCES

Ambrose SA, Bridges MW, DiPietro M, Lovett M, Norman MK (2010). How learning works - Seven research-based principles for smart

- teaching, Jossey-Bass: USA.
- Boneau CA (1998). 'Hermann Ebbinghaus: On the road to progress or down the garden path?' In G. A. Kimble, & M. Wertheimer (Eds.), Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum. Portraits of pioneers in Psychology. 3:51 - 64.
- Chandler S, Richardson S (2009). 100 ways to motivate others, McGraw-Hill: Singapore.
- <http://www.ibe.unesco.org/publications/ThinkersPdf/confucius.PDF>. Accessed on 29 June 2008.
- Lau DC (1979). The Analects, Penguin Books: England.
- Lin Y (1994). The wisdom of Confucius, The Modern Library: New York.
- Low KCP (2005). Training success. The ICFAI University Press: India.
- Low KCP (2008). Confucian ethics and social responsibility – The Golden Rule and responsibility to the stakeholders', Ethics Crit. Thinking J. 4:46 - 54.
- Low KCP (2008a). 'Value-based leadership: Leading, the Confucian way'. Leadersh. Organ. Manage. J. 3:32 - 41.
- Low KCP (2010). Successfully negotiating in Asia, Springer, Heidelberg London/ New York.
- Ting S, Scisco P (eds.) (2006). The CCL: Center for Creative Leadership handbook of coaching: A guide for the leader coach, Jossey-Bass: USA.
- Websites: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/confucius/> Accessed on 3 November 2010.
- Yang H (1993). 'Confucius (Kung Tzu) 551 – 479 BC', Prospects: the Quarterly review of comparative education, UNESCO: International Bureau of Education Vol. XXIII No. ½ 1993, Web-site: pp. 211 – 219.
- Zhou K (2005). A basic Confucius. Long River Press: USA.

Appendix A

Confucius Used Humor

One can also argue that Confucius can be humorous, seeing the lighter side of life, and he did apply humor though to some, it could be dry humor. Nonetheless, humor in whatever forms when applied to teaching can add fun, joy and the lighter side of things; learning among the students would certainly be enhanced.

To show the light side or humor in Confucius, this example in *The Analects* can perhaps be cited:

On one occasion, Tzu-kung asked Confucius metaphorically, 'If you had a piece of beautiful jade here, would you put it away safely in a box or would you try to sell it for a good price?'

The Master said, 'Of course I would sell it. Of course I would sell it. All I am waiting for is the right offer from the expert.' (The *Analects*, Chapter IX verse 13).

Author's explanations and interpretations: In this conversation, a piece of beautiful jade is a metaphor for a talented person and the question put forward by his disciple was should he stay out of sight or come out to take office? Confucius was in favor of the latter; however, he stressed that the talented came out only when the state was ruled by a wise and able monarch, just as a lovely jade could be sold for a good price only to an expert.