

Chinese View of Learning and Implications for Developing Human Resources

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Chinese society has a unique view of teaching and learning that has evolved from its long history and is heavily embedded in its social and cultural roots. However, no systematic effort has been made to outline how cultural factors such as values and beliefs influence learning. This paper identifies traditional Chinese values and beliefs in relation to education and learning. Implications for developing human resources are discussed.

Keywords: Culture, Epistemological Belief, HRD

China appears to be a mysterious place for the perspective of Western civilization. For the most time of the past two millennia, China was able to maintain as one of the world's greatest economies and most technologically advanced societies. However, the Chinese society stagnated as the Western society experienced the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution during the past several centuries. Since leader Deng Xiaoping opened its door to the outside world after its turmoil Cultural Revolution in late 1970s, China has been injected a tremendous vitality with the infusion of market economics, foreign capital, and modern technology. Many predicted that China will soon restore its historical prominence (Grasso, Corrin, & Kort, 2004).

China is the leading country of the third-world in terms of its population and economic development and thus studying Chinese view of learning has far-reaching implications for international business and education, as well as for human resource development. Yang (2002) contended that the contemporary management theories and organizational behaviors in the P. R. China should be understood as conflicts and convergences of three ideologies and cultural values—Confucianism, socialism, and capitalism. Nevertheless, Confucianism represents that traditional culture and has the most enduring impacts among these three value systems. Confucianism is used interchangeably with the traditional Chinese culture in this article. The purpose of this paper is to identify Chinese cultural values and beliefs relevant to human resource development and draw implications for theory and practice.

Traditional Chinese Values and Beliefs

Yang (2001) proposed a conceptual framework of cross-cultural study of education and learning. It was suggested that educational philosophy and teaching and learning practice are both influenced by social and cultural factors. Culture is viewed as a complex system with three interrelated components: values, beliefs and social norms. A value system is a set of explicit or implicit conceptions of desirable or preferable ends shared by a group of people. A belief system consists of explicit conceptions that have been viewed as true representation of reality. Social norm is habit or behavior of individuals or groups implicitly existing in their daily lives. This conceptualization of culture implies dynamic relationships among three major components corresponding to three knowledge facets in a holistic theory (Yang, 2003). Culture is a unique aspect of group or social knowledge. Consequently, the value system reflects critical facets of knowledge, the belief system is explicit or technical facet knowledge and the norm system is implicit or practical knowledge. Yang (2003) also outlines the interactive patterns among three knowledge facets. These interactive patterns seem to be applicable for the dynamic relationships among three cultural components. Take the value system as an example, a value is a conception of something preferable by a person or a group. At the nation or country level, a value is something socially preferable or desirable. On one hand, individuals acquire a value under the influence of the existing belief system (what is believed to be true) or social norm system (what is

actually happening in the environment). The learned value then is integrated into the value system, resulting in either a consistent integration (simply knowledge accumulation) or inconsistency (which may bring a transformative learning). On the other hand, values and value systems are relatively stable and tend to influence the other two sub-systems of culture. The value system is critical in guiding action (within the social norm system) and in regulating human beings' technical knowledge (within the belief system).

Chinese Traditional Values

Six dimensions of a value system can be identified for the purpose of cross-cultural study (Yang, 2001, Yang & Zhang, 2003). The first dimension is human beings' relation with the natural world. The Western culture seems to place value on mastery, while Eastern culture emphasizes harmony. Chinese traditional culture views harmony as the ultimate goal of human kind (i.e., "*Tian Ren He Yi*," or "The great harmony between human and the nature."). The second dimension within the value system is the relationship among people. While the Western culture is characterized by individualism, Chinese traditional culture is typified as collectivism. In the collectivistic culture such as Chinese, individual is less valued than a perceived collective interest. The third dimension within the value system is the perceived importance among various activities conducted by human beings. This dimension reflects the priority of activities. The Western culture places priority on thinking and then doing, whereas Chinese traditional culture emphasizes on being and doing. The fourth value dimension is the basis of moral standard. Western culture tends to use reasoning as a tool in making moral judgments (Kohlberg, 1969) and is concerned with different levels of judgment: good, right, and ought. Thus, Western moral standard leans toward fairness and duty while Chinese culture tends to use sympathy and self-control as the moral standard. The fifth dimension in a value system is the priority along time and it directs our main concerns and energy along the nature-time framework. Western culture tends to be future oriented and the traditional Chinese culture emphasizes on present mode in decision-making process. The sixth dimension of a belief system is concerned about the ideal destination of human beings. Western culture emphasizes individual rights and freedom and views fully developed individuals as the ultimate goal. Chinese traditional culture places the harmony among human beings and the nature as the ultimate goal. Thus a harmonized society is viewed as much more important than an individual's right or growth in Chinese society. Western culture seeks fully developed human potential with an active, individualistic approach.

Chinese Traditional Beliefs

Under the perspective of holistic theory of knowledge and learning, belief system is different from the value system because the former concerns the priority or importance while the later assumes what is true in the world. While these two terms have been commonly used interchangeably, it is critical to distinguish them as values and beliefs serve different functions in a culture. A value system indicates the preferences of a culture, whereas a belief system is composed by those basic assertions about the natural world and human beings. These assertions are basic and fundamental hypotheses that cannot be easily proven to be true or false, and thus human beings have to accept such assertions. Human beings have to hold some basic beliefs as guidelines for their actions. Thus, the belief system also includes basic assumptions about the nature world and human beings. While the value system reflects the priorities of an individual and a group of individuals, the belief system contains views about the natural world and human being that cannot be easily tested.

The first dimension of the belief system that distinguishes different cultures concerns the nature of human beings. The Chinese belief about human beings tends to assume the basic nature of people is essentially good, or at least is changeable. The second dimension concerns if there is a superpower external to human beings. The Western culture seems to have a strong religious faith than Chinese society. The major religion in the Western world, Christianity, views God as single superpower external to human beings. The traditional Chinese religion did not have such a belief about a single superpower. The Chinese view of knowledge is subjective and has an instrumental function. Different perspectives on the nature of knowledge are related to the views about reality. The objective perspective of knowledge might be a result of a view of a single reality, which is assumed to be created by a single superpower and to have consistent and lawful relationships among its elements. The subjective perspective of knowledge views multiple realities and implies an interpretive approach to the natural world (Roth & Yang, 1997). This cultural dimension is important because learners' epistemological beliefs, that is, their beliefs about the nature of knowledge, play an influential role in the learning process (Chan & Elliott, 2002).

The fourth dimension of the belief system is about the change of the natural world. Marshak (1994) compared the Western organization development (OD) approach with the Eastern approach. It was concluded that the Western OD model is based on certain beliefs and assumptions that view change as linear, progressive, destination or goal oriented, based on creating disequilibrium, and planned and managed by people who exist separate from and act on things to achieve their goals. On the contrast, the Eastern or Taoist model comprises beliefs and assumptions that

change is cyclical, processional, journal oriented, based on maintaining equilibrium, and observed and followed by people who are one with everything and must act correctly to maintain harmony in the universe. The Western culture holds that there is a single best reality [created by the God] for humans to achieve in a forward way. The Eastern [particularly Taoist] culture assumes multiple realities and that there is no best or better mode of change.

The fifth dimension of the belief system relates to the inherent motivation of human beings. The Western culture presumes a materialistic motivation. The Eastern culture, however, maintains that the essence of human kind is in its spirit. People should pursue the spiritual direction rather than the material one. While it recognizes that people might be seduced by the materialistic world and by selfishness, this culture calls for self-control and cultivating.

Teaching and Learning Practice in the Traditional Chinese Culture

The traditional Chinese culture, dominated by Confucianism, has a profound influence on teaching and learning philosophy and practice. Culture has direct impacts on philosophy of teaching and learning, epistemological belief (Chan & Elliott, 2002), learning style (De Vita, 2001; Kennedy, 2002; Oxford & Anderson, 1995) and the conception of what is good teaching (Pratt et al., 1999).

Educational Philosophy

Contrast to the Western technical-rational philosophy of education and learning, the Chinese traditional view tends to be holistic. Over 2,500 years ago, Confucius proposed a comprehensive framework of education. It was suggested that the ultimate goal of education is to develop learners in five interrelated areas: (1) benevolence and morality, (2) intelligence and knowledge, (3) courage and constitution, (4) aesthetics and music, and (5) talent and faculty (Guo, 2002). Therefore, it can be concluded that the traditional Chinese approach to education and learning is based on holistic and relational thinking. The Chinese approach tends to heavily emphasize social moral aspect.

Viewing the world as chaotic and human beings as naturally good (or at least can be educated to be good), Chinese educational philosophy takes a vastly different stand from the West. The traditional Chinese culture impels individuals to enter into worldly affairs to find their spirit. Education is believed to serve for social justice. Education is viewed as an instrumental entity to cultivate noble persons in order to fulfill its social responsibility. The overall administrative strategy is reactive (i.e., “*Ying Bian*”) or sometimes passive (“*Wu Wei Er Zhi*”, i.e., “manage by letting things take their own course”). Such philosophy is consistent with the naturalistic/interpretive problem solving method. Education activity is believed to link to practice. The essence of the traditional Chinese approach can be found in the dated Confucianism classic “The Golden Mean.” This mean method calls for educators and rulers to bring about equilibrium rather than to create disequilibrium. It requires balance not only between human beings and the environment but also among people in the society. The underlying force that drives such philosophy is social morality that calls for educational ethics and social responsibility.

Teaching and Learning Practice

Both cultural and social contextual factors impact teaching and learning practice in a variety of ways. On the other hand, adult learning practice has been integrated into its social and cultural systems and become part of social norm system. In the Western society, the preferred means of generating knowledge and conducting research tends to be analytic method. Educational research and evaluation is largely dominated by quantitative method. In the field of HRD, adult learners are viewed as resources to yield returns on investment. Under the influence of individualistic perspective, individual learners are expected to develop their ability and competence during the learning process. Creating knowledge (i.e., researchers) and using (i.e., practitioners) are separated due to job classification. Consequently, teaching learning practice in the Western society can be characterized as differentiating thinking and doing due to the influence of market and social priority of efficiency.

The traditional Chinese learning practice emphasizes on unity because of cultural influences. Educational research and evaluation are based on qualitative method. For example, Chinese society has a long tradition of national wide examination for its civil servants. Evaluation of such examination heavily leaned toward descriptive and heuristic. The exam tested the ability to memorize classical works and thus mostly measured learners’ ability merely to repeat information. It was difficulty to test a real understanding of meaning or of how the new information relates to previous knowledge. In fact, today’s exam systems in China and other societies in the region still rely heavily on memorization. Consequently, teaching and learning process is driven by the exam and too much attention is paid to learning to learn for the sake of passing the exam. Under the influence of traditional culture, less attention is paid to creative expression, critical thinking and problem-solving in education process. To educate the learners in morality and social responsibility is valued higher than to discover the truth and generate new knowledge. Therefore, the traditional Chinese approach to teaching and learning is indicated by transmission and apprenticeship perspective

(Pratt, 1998). Teaching is largely didactic and text-bound, with little time allowed for discussion. Overall, teaching and learning practice tend to emphasize on a combination of thinking and doing (i.e., “*Zhi Xing He Yi*”).

The traditional Chinese teaching and learning was instructor-centered rather than student-centered. The traditional culture places social harmony as one of the key priority and emphasizes a social hierarchy to achieve the harmony. In such society, young people are demanded to obey the seniors and learners to the instructor. Such approach is still relevant in modern time. In a case study of a technology-enhanced educational reform initiative at a university in eastern China, Fang and Warschauer (2004) found that instructors were reluctant to teach project-based courses. It is because student-centered learning clashes with more traditional norms and incentives in the traditional Chinese education system. In a study of “effective teaching” perceived by Hong Kong Chinese teachers and Western expatriate teachers, Pratt, Kelly and Wong (1999) revealed significant differences in their perceptions. The instructor was perceived to be the authoritative source whose job is to take students systematically through a set of tasks, step by step, in order to enhance learners’ understanding.

In the traditional Chinese culture, instructors are required to be the experts in the field and to pass on their knowledge and skills to the learners. Learners are supposed to be recipients of that knowledge. In the Western society, learners are expected to assume autonomy and own responsibility. Consequently, critical analysis and exploratory techniques of teaching are preferred in the Western context. Tsang, Paterson and Packer (2002) concluded that Confucian thinking emphasizes that knowledge arises in a linear way, first through memorizing to familiar with the text, which then leads to understanding, and finally involves reflection and questioning. In contrast, the Western culture holds that memorizing does not enhance learning, whereas knowledge is values for the purpose of self-actualization for individual learners. Teaching and learning is viewed as a process of discovering the truth. Consequently, the Western culture tends to value such developmental and critical instructional methods as debates, group discussions, and field experiences. In today’s Chinese society, although few learners will recited the traditional Confucian doctrines, their thinking and learning style have been shaped by generations of scholars, parents and teachers. The social norm expect them to behave in the traditional role of hard-working, passive, compliance, obeying and dedicating to the respected instructors. They often feel uncomfortable about confronting or disagreeing with the instructors who are normally regarded as authority or experts.

Epistemological Beliefs

Cultural values and beliefs may also have a strong impact on epistemological belief held by both instructors and learners. Schommer’s (1990) proposed five epistemological dimensions: source of knowledge, certainty of knowledge, organization of knowledge, control of learning, and speed of learning. However, this conceptualization of epistemological belief originated and has been validated in North American context could not been replicated in Hong Kong (Chan & Elliott, 2002). Through a study with Hong Kong teacher education students, Chan and Elliott (2002) discovered four dimensions of epistemological belief: source of knowledge, certainty of knowledge, fixed/innate Ability, and learning effort/process.

One epistemological belief, source of knowledge, ranges from a belief that knowledge is handed down by omniscient authority to a belief that knowledge is reasoned out through objective and subjective means. As far as Chinese culture is concerned, it is commonly recognized that Chinese learners tend to believe in knowledge from authority and expert. Although a recent study with Hong Kong teacher education students has failed to confirm such hypothesis (Chan & Elliott, 2002), it was reasoned Hong Kong has a unique context that simultaneous exposures to both Chinese and Western cultures.

Another epistemological belief, certainty knowledge, relates to the nature of knowledge. It ranges from a belief that knowledge is certain, unambiguous, and unchanged on one end to a belief that knowledge is tentative and ever changing on the other end. Researchers tend to hold that this epistemological belief is strongly related to one’s developmental stage. Younger learners usually hold relatively naive beliefs about the nature of knowledge, assuming that knowledge is certain and unambiguous. As learners grow older and acquire more knowledge, they begin to refine their beliefs and to adopt a more sophisticated viewpoint about knowledge and believe knowledge is changing and tentative. The traditional Chinese culture acknowledges the uncertainty and changeable world. As a result, Chinese learners tend to recognize the tentative nature and uncertainty of what they had learned instead of strongly believing in the certainty and unchangeable nature of knowledge.

Learning Styles

Learning styles can be defined as “the composite of characteristic cognitive, affective and physiological factors that serve as relatively stable indicators of how a learner perceives, interacts with and responds to the learning environment” (Keefe & Ferrell, 1990, p. 59). Oxford and Anderson (1995) reviewed a number of major cross-cultural studies of learning styles and identified six interrelated aspects. In terms of preferred patterns of

mental functioning, they concluded that the Chinese learners tend to be field-dependent learners who prefer classrooms where rules are emphasized and learning is inductive. In contrast, field-independent learners enjoy greater personal autonomy, deductive learning and does not readily accept other people's views before making a judgment. Oxford and Burry-Stock (1995) describe Chinese learners as adopting a concrete-sequential cognitive style as opposed to an intuitive-random one. The latter type of learner seeks out 'the big picture', while the former prefers to follow the teacher to the letter and to use strategies such as memorization, lists and repetition. Chinese learners are more reflective than impulsive, that is, they prefer a slow, accurate, systematic approach and are less comfortable with guessing or predicting. They feel the need for rapid and constant correction and have a low level of tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty.

The issue of Chinese learners' extroversion or introversion—their preference for group work and interactive activities or for working alone—is more complex. It is said that Chinese students seldom work in small groups in class but co-operate readily in groups outside the classroom (Su 1995). In terms of sensory and perceptual tendencies, Rossi-Le (1995) reports that Chinese learners—particularly older students—have a strong visual orientation. Su (1995) found that Chinese students prefer kinaesthetic movement and like to work with tangible objects. While these studies of learning-style typologies would only claim to be identifying general tendencies, the obvious drawback of such a broad, inclusive category as 'the Chinese Learner' is that gender and age differences as well as differences between Hong Kong, PRC and other Chinese learners may be obscured.

Implications for Developing Human Resources

The Chinese cultural characteristics discussed in the previous section carries significant implications for HRD professionals who are helping develop HRD practices in China or other areas that had strong influence of Confucianism. Direct transplantation of certain western HRD practices to the Chinese context may cause serious drawbacks to the organization. Ensuring consistency with Chinese cultural characteristics is a key step in designing and implementing successful HRD practices. The following paragraphs attempt to explicate ramifications of the Chinese cultural characteristics for three core HRD areas: training/learning, organization development, and performance improvement.

Training/Learning

As discussed in the previous sections, Chinese traditional learning adopted a trainer-centered approach, while trainee-centered learning constitutes a larger portion of instruction and learning in the western world. Converting trainer-centered approach to trainee-centered approach for Chinese trainees may encounter problems at initial stages. For example, because the traditional Chinese trainee has been immersed in an instructor-centered learning style since they entered the formal schooling system, it is usually hard for them first to understand what a different set of responsibilities they are taking as learners, and second how to carry out their newly acquired responsibilities under a student-centered approach. A large number of western trainers or educators who had experience training/teaching Chinese learners found that their biggest problem in class at the beginning was to get students open up and share opinions. Trainers who plan to adopt a trainee-centered training approach to their Chinese trainees need to be aware of such a cultural characteristic, and be prepared to spend time explaining their expectations and help trainees grow accustomed to a more trainee-centered approach, or implement incrementally instructional methods that tend to be trainee-centered, or adjust their own training style closer to the comfort zone of the trainees.

Organization Development

Organization development (OD) is largely absent from the traditional Chinese setting (Yan & McLean, 1997). Chinese organizations, traditionally under a centrally-planned system, usually adopt a top-down approach to management, and so they have not been consciously resorting to organization development interventions to improve their overall organizational effectiveness. Consequently, Chinese employees do not have adequate knowledge or skills for participating in small or large group interventions. Foreign ventures, joint ventures, or some local companies in China may want to adopt organization development strategies, and cautions need to be taken as the Chinese cultural characteristics imply differing practices from what have been applied in the western world. Collective orientation, the concept of harmony, and larger power distance in China may become barriers to implementing OD interventions. Larger power differentials, some call it paternalism, exist between superiors and subordinates in China. Subordinates show a lot of respect and caution when they are in the same room as their superiors. According to the cultural norm of collectivism and harmony-seeking, they are not supposed to voice their disagreement with their superiors. People also do not want to disagree with each other too much to destroy harmony among the group members. Yu (1998) studied differences between Mainland Chinese and Americans regarding some

communication-related work variables, and found that fewer Chinese view conflicts between people as constructive, and that more Chinese avoid discussing conflicts directly with someone. HRD professionals need to be mindful of the cultural characteristics in designing and implementing interventions. Explicitly explaining how organization development activities work, securing superior support and encouragement for divergent opinions, and providing rewards for employee input could be some of the possible strategies for alleviating cultural barriers to organization development effectiveness.

Performance Improvement

Cultural barriers to performance improvement have been a much discussed area. Performance improvement included listening, giving and receiving feedback, counseling, and dealing with emotions (Huo & Glinow, 1995). Many cultural factors come to play in impacting these activities. The Chinese emphasis on sympathy pushes performance evaluation toward the norm, which means interpersonal differences are hard to be found among coworkers when peer reviews are involved. When it comes to manager reviews, high power distance makes employees hold back from challenging the authority of their managers. Plus, interpersonal frictions can occur between managers and employees because of differing opinions which could cause a breach in harmony. Therefore, Chinese managers are reluctant to pursue two-way communication with their employees (Huo & Glinow, 1995). Performance development professionals need to adjust their coaching approaches to managers and employees and help them foster a relationship that can accommodate divergence and encourage conversations.

In Summary, Chinese cultural characteristics exert a considerable influence on the strategies and practices of training, organization development, and performance improvement interventions. In order to enhance learning in the Chinese context, HRD professionals need to remain flexible and be willing to adjust their work styles to fit the cultural assumptions, values, and norms in the Chinese culture.

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