

Teaching Management to Chinese Students: a few notes from theory and practice

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1 Introduction

In 2004 and 2005 I taught management – organizational design and behaviour, human resource management – to MBA students in Shanghai and Nanjing in the People's Republic of China. I had no previous experience in teaching outside Europe. My students were well-educated modern managers from the industrial urban regions of Eastern China. Many of them had some international experience and especially the younger students had a good knowledge of English. Through previous experience and study, they were quite familiar with basic concepts of management in the context of a market economy.

I designed my lectures and group work on the basis of my experience of teaching Dutch students of different ages and occasional work for groups of American MBA students in the Netherlands. My basic philosophy of teaching adult students is that they know more about practical management than their teachers. It is the teacher's task to help them organize their knowledge, reflect critically on what they think they know and to offer abstract concepts as well as methods to do so. So my lecturing concentrates on abstract concepts and methods and group work is used to create a connection between the often tacit knowledge of the student with research-based knowledge from the management sciences. My role as a teacher is to create the conditions for learning and to provide rules for dialogue and discussion.

All this seems fairly standard in present-day management education. In China, this approach may create some problems however. Students seemed to require a more explicit leadership style from their teacher than I offered them, they wanted more structure in assignments and they seemed to assume that my knowledge would contain the solutions to their problems; instead I created more problems with my difficult questions!

So I had to adapt my teaching approach to the learning styles of my students and to their expectations of the teacher's and student's role. Talks with students who shared their ideas on teaching and learning with me, books and articles on Chinese cultures and exchange of ideas with colleagues convinced me that conceptions of learning and teaching rooted in traditional Chinese culture, notably Confucianism, were still very powerful. So thinking about the consequences of these Confucian patterns for my teaching was the first step in a systematic reflection which could lead to a systematic improvement of teaching management in China.

This attention to the traditional elements of Chinese culture led to a question of the cultural bases of my own teaching style, which, at least implicitly, I considered to be better (more effective, more human, more democratic) than traditional Chinese approaches. By reading, talking and listening I became aware of my own biases. These seemed to be rooted in classical Greek philosophy – especially Socrates and Plato – as well as modern conceptions of 'constructivism' and 'pragmatism'. Being able to see these European assumptions as choices, rather than as the truth, is the first step towards a less ethnocentric paradigm of education than many Western teachers seem to bring to countries as China.

In paragraph 2 I present some of the traditional elements of Chinese cultures and their influence on education as I observed them and interpreted them in my practical work. For the sake of exposition, it presents these elements in terms of dichotomies of traditional Chinese versus modern Western. This can easily lead to a form of stereotyping which is not intended, however. By no means it is implied that all Chinese are only influenced by traditional Confucian patterns and neither do I intend to say that these influences are negative. What I do want to

show, however, is that exactly these traditional patterns, insofar as they play a role, can bring a Western teacher into difficulties, if he is not well-prepared for them.

In paragraph 3 I deal with the question, how a European (or North American) teacher can prepare adequately when designing and delivering courses to Chinese students in China or at home. The message is certainly not to become a traditional Chinese teacher, but to create a situation where the added value of the Western style will be recognized and effectively used.

I conclude in paragraph 4 with a few remarks on what Western education might learn from China.

2 Traditional assumptions in Chinese education

2.1 Teaching is a vertical relationship: once a teacher, always a father

In the Confucianist view, the teacher-pupil relationship is like the father-son relationship. There is an old, but still popular, Chinese saying: ‘once a teacher, always a father.’ In this view the pupil depends on the teacher and the teacher cares for the pupil. Pupils who violate this dependency relationship must be punished. Teachers must not abuse their power position, they must show moral quality.

Developing a good relationship between teacher and pupil is a basis for learning everywhere, but in the Chinese situation the vertical ‘filial piety’ dimension is important. The teacher can only build a good relationship with the students, if he is prepared to accept the role that students give him. This is an authority role which does not need a legitimation from below as in the democratized universities of the West. Students will easily make themselves dependent on the teacher if he cares for them, shows his expertise, is a strong person and has the necessary moral qualities as an example. Horizontal relationships with the teacher – the teacher as friend or colleague – can be confusing for many Chinese students.



Teaching as a vertical relationship: sculpture in the centre of Nanjing

Part of this vertical relationship is also that the teacher must accept the ritual in which this position is affirmed: sitting at the most favourable position at the dinner table, being honoured as an important person etc. This vertical relationship may come into conflict with learning an teaching modes in which the teacher does not have the authority role. It may still be very useful to use these more participative models, but they should be introduced carefully, in a secure context.

2.2 Learning is listening and following a good example

Much traditional Chinese education consists of listening to the teacher. In my experience Chinese are good listeners. While listening they try to find out what the teacher wants from them and they try to please him. In

traditional Chinese education they are not supposed to start discussions with the teacher. Asking questions may even be 'not-done', because it would imply that the teacher is not teaching well.

This listening should not be misinterpreted as passive behaviour: it is an active process in which the student tries to understand what is taught. In this 'absorptive' learning style, the learner assumes a sequential learning process: memorizing, understanding, applying, questioning and modifying (Tweed and Lehman, undated). Western teachers who ask the student to question knowledge in the early stage of learning, disrupt this process and may confuse the student.

Too early discussion

In first lesson of a course on Human Resource Management in China I asked all the students to tell something about themselves and the problems of HRM they were familiar with as managers. After this session, one of the students came to me in private and complained about this assignment: 'how can you ask us to give answers before you have taught us what we need to know to give a good answer? We are not used to this style of teaching.' I had to change my approach drastically. I began with presenting a theoretical framework and a method to solve cases. Then I presented the case and made them solve it according to clear norms that were explained to them.

In a Confucian style of education, the teacher is seen as an example to be followed. This central role of 'learning from examples' may also lead to a need from students for success stories, preferably stories where the teacher plays a positive role.

This principle contradicts the Socratic assumption in much Western education, which assumes that the knowledge is already in the student, and that the role of the teacher is to help make this explicit. In this education we want students to speak, present their own cases and ask questions, even criticize the teacher. We tend to see dependence on the teacher as a weakness. Applying such Socratic methods in the Chinese context requires sensitivity to the different assumptions many students may have.

2.3 Never wash your dirty linen in public

In management education we want managers to be critical of their own organizations, analyse them from a general abstract point of view. Chinese managers find such a detached and distanced view of their businesses very difficult. Not only may they have a problem with the abstract and deductive Western way of thinking (see below), they may also feel it to be inappropriate to criticize the company for which they work. It is like bringing family conflicts outside your family. This is not done.

Does your organization fit the environment?

In an MBA group in Nanjing, I asked the students to describe their own organizations in terms of a number of structural characteristics, like centralization and standardization. I also asked them to make an assessment of the environment: how turbulent is it, how complex? The next question was: how well is your organization designed given this environment.

From the theory, it followed that most of these (state-owned) companies had too bureaucratic (centralist etc.) organizations. Nevertheless, the students presented only positive conclusions: their organizations were well-adapted. In a private conversation, one of the students explained to me, that this did not mean that these organizations were actually well-adapted. 'We just don't say this so openly'.

The solution to this problem in management education is to frame it differently: instead of asking for problems in the functioning of the business, we ask student to contribute to improvement. That works much better.

2.4 *Chinese students prefer the concrete and the specific*

In teaching management subjects to students all over the world, framing concrete business situation as specific instances of abstract principles and laws, creates problems for the action oriented and pragmatic managers. This problem seems to be even bigger in China. Chinese thinking is more sense-based, pragmatic and focussed on concrete things than Western thought. Putting concrete observations in a general frame (induction) from which specific conclusions are derived (deduction) is relatively weakly developed. This may have a basis in the language as well as in the absence of abstract moral or religious principles.

In papers written by Chinese students we often notice the tendency to develop conclusions on the basis on very specific ad-hoc reasoning, which circles around the problem rather than following a straightforward inductive and deductive scheme.

We want cases!

I usually begin a new subject with presenting main concepts, definitions and so on. This is based on my assumption that you cannot talk about something when your language is a mess. So I spend quite some time on analysing seemingly self-evident words like 'management' or 'organization.' The underlying assumption is that most people use such words uncritically. We as academics must be critical.

In my Chinese classes this exercises in abstract reasoning are even a greater problem to students than in Europe. Many students ask me when I will present 'useful cases' which they can apply in their own practice. And they want me to tell them about my own business experience from which they want to learn.

Special attention should therefore be given, when teaching to Chinese, to the connection between abstract concepts and concrete phenomena. The teacher should show, rather than explain, how he uses abstract knowledge to solve concrete problems, using the well-developed competence of learning by example of his Chinese students. The pragmatic attitude of the students should be accepted, but the usefulness of the abstract way of problem solving should be shown.

2.5 *Chinese students are very pragmatic, also in their study behaviour*

The pragmatic nature of the Chinese has often been mentioned. Their first commitment being to their families, Chinese people often see the rest of the world as a means to attain the end of providing their family with the means of living. This instrumental and pragmatic attitude is also visible in education. In combination with the fact that morality in Chinese society is less based on general abstract principles than obligations to your own group, means that students will often be quite pragmatic when dealing with their education. They expect to become better managers, increase their position and their income. The fact that many people have to pay their own education puts extra pressure on getting results.

This situation means that the teacher should emphasize the practical value of his knowledge and avoid to value 'extrinsic motivation' negatively. He must not assume an intrinsic quest for the truth. This assumption is questionable in the case of many Western student, but it is likely to be even more irrelevant in China.

This pragmatic attitude may sometimes lead to fraud in tests and the writing of papers, pressure on teachers or administrative staff to get a favourable treatment and so on.

Copying as a practical solution

In my very first assignment in China, I gave the student an assignment which turned out to be very difficult for them. They had to write a paper about HRM in their own business. From my point of view, it seemed rather straightforward, but it was really difficult. There was first of all the language problem. Second, these students were not used to writing such papers with their own analyses and opinions. Third there was a problem with access to data.

A number of students solved this problem by copying complete papers from Internet. The high quality of the English in these papers told me that something was wrong and the papers could easily be traced by Google. When these students were confronted with this fact, they admitted that this had been wrong, but I did not have the feeling they felt very guilty about it. No one told me why he had chosen this solution. I interpreted this as a problem of losing face and I helped create a solution with which everyone could be happy.

Dealing with these problems, the Western teacher must understand that the logic behind this behaviour. First of all, he must be aware of his own culturally shaped assumptions. These are likely to reflect two Socratic assumptions: first that an independent truth exists, and second that this truth is sought for its own sake. Both assumptions contradict traditional Chinese culture, which does not assume abstract truth and which sees learning as a pragmatic activity, motivated by practical aims.

In the case the instrumental behaviour of students leads to problematic behaviour, moralist behaviour, based on Western assumptions may be ineffective. Rather than appealing to general principles which these students may not share, the teacher must be quite clear about the rules and the consequences of breaking them.

2.6 *Trust is scarce, also in the classroom*

Being focussed on the own in-group, Chinese people tend to distrust outsiders, or at least be very careful with them. Where relationships across group boundaries are necessary, a lot of investment is needed to create the necessary trust. Mutual obligations (*guanxi*) have to be created.

When teaching to Chinese managers, we must also accept that they tend to be a bit careful to each other and do not easily share information. On the other hand, courses can be an excellent place for network building.

When designing educational settings we must not expect or demand 'open communication' from the start. That is true for Europe, but it may be especially true for China, where the starting level of trust should be expected to be lower. Creating culturally accepted forms of trust building - like dinners - should therefore be part of programs.

2.7 *The most important things are never said*

In our Western culture, being explicit about almost everything has become the norm. We also expect a teacher to explain his learning philosophy, his personal attitude towards the subject, the way the course is structured and what choices have been made and why before he begins with his actual teaching. Where the teacher is not clear, we want students to ask questions, if necessary interrupt the teacher.

This obsession with clarity by means of explicit open communication can be contrasted with traditional Chinese communication rules. One of the most important things in civilized communication is that people will not say things, that they invite others to guess what they feel and think. Reading body language of other people and noticing small signs becomes an important skill in this context.

This also applies to teaching. On the one hand, the students will do their best to guess what the teacher really wants, what he finds important, not by asking directly, but by observing his behaviour. On the other hand they expect the teacher to be sensitive to the small signals they send to him.

For Western teachers this means that they must be aware that they are being observed more than they think. And they must observe body language more than in a culture where people talk more freely to say what they think. This may also help to bridge the inevitable language gap between teacher and student. Maybe he should also suppress his own tendency to make everything explicit when teaching to Chinese students.

3 **Teaching in China: Linking Innovations to a Traditional Context**

Western teachers are welcomed in China because they are different: they have knowledge, skills and attitudes which are seen as a valuable supplement to what the country already has. Chinese students study abroad to find what they cannot easily find at home. So the value of the Western teacher is his being different. This difference not only consists of the knowledge he brings to the classroom, but also in his different attitudes and skills as a teacher.

So, when dealing with Chinese students, it is not my advice that Western teachers try to become Chinese. Apart from the fact that they will never manage to do that, it would make them less interesting for the Chinese student.

On the other hand, if the teacher does not succeed in bridging the cultural gap between himself and the class, he also loses his attractiveness and effectiveness as a foreign teacher.

The problem the teacher must solve in this situation is a special case of how to create communication where difficult barriers exist. It has everything to do with creating 'rapport'. Understanding the way that the Chinese student is likely to see me as a teacher, enables me to go along with this definition as far as I need to create that rapport. If this means creating a greater power distance than I generally feel happy with, so be it. If it means bringing more structure to my lessons than I like, this is the cost I have to pay. If students assume that they must first memorize and understand and then discuss, don't involve them in early discussions. So just move along as much as you need to avoid unnecessary insecurity or a fight over who is defining the situation.

This moving along with accepted cultural definitions, rather than fighting them, should clear the way for introducing innovations like participative groupwork, experiential learning etcetera. These innovations should be carefully (re-) framed in culturally acceptable terms. Then the Western contribution to teaching and learning will be more effective than when the teacher – as I unwillingly did sometimes – creates a cultural conflict. Innovation is more about seducing than about forcing people to learn differently.

The most crucial factor in this whole process is the teacher. He must be sensitive enough to cultural differences and especially to his own cultural assumptions to be able to combine his innovative approach with the context. These assumptions cannot be traced to one single origin, but most Western teachers seem to share a number of assumptions which go back to Greek antiquity, German rationalism and American pragmatism. From Socrates, whose ideas were brought to us by Plato, we learned that asking difficult questions is the core of the task of the teacher. In the 'Socratic dialogue' we help the student to discover his own knowledge and to question the knowledge of others, including authorities. From German rationalism we have the ideal of the Enlightenment: that knowledge makes people free, creates morally better people. So seeking the truth is good in itself. And from American pragmatism – especially Dewey - we have learnt that people have to discover their own knowledge by experimenting with the world. In the form of constructivism it is very much at the basis of official educational ideologies at the moment. It emphasizes the role of the individual who constructs his own knowledge and fits in very well with the individualism and low acceptance of power of the Western student.

The teacher teaching in China must become aware of these philosophies and how they shape his attitudes and behaviour. He must be prepared to see the limits of their applicability in a specific context, regard them as valuable ideas to solve the problem of education rather than the 'one best way'.

4 Learning from China

Dutch students love listening

Coming back from China, and still in my jet-lag, I had to introduce a subject to a group of students. My usual approach in such a session was a relatively short introduction, followed by discussion.

This time I decided to do 'old-fashioned teaching' and I gave them a well-prepared long lecture without any discussion and no break, in which I tried to give maximum clarity about the subject, its main research themes and approaches.

Later I heard from some students that they loved this approach: a good story in which the teacher shows his expertise. They were a bit tired of all this discussion and wanted new ideas.

Afterwards I realized that I had applied to them what I rediscovered in China: that students want to learn from a teacher.

Our Western educational models with their emphasis on active individual learning, group work, reduction of power differences, the role of the teacher as a counsellor rather than an authority, little time spent on memorizing facts and maximum freedom for the expression of opinions and debate, are not always effective even at home. They work better for some types of learning tasks than for others, they work better for some students than for others. Often they are based on motivational assumptions which are not valid for large groups of students.

My experience with Chinese students with their different assumptions and motivations pointed at the necessity to be also very critical about our own assumptions in designing and delivering (management) education at home. Elements from the Chinese tradition, like following good examples and learning from persons, memorizing facts and postponing discussion, might exactly be elements which need some more attention in Western (management) education.

References

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