Socratic Teachers and Confucian Learners: Examining the Benefits and Pitfalls of a Year Abroad

Joe Greenholtz
University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada

This paper explores the interplay between Western conceptions of education and students from other educational traditions, most specifically Japan, through the lens of the author’s practice in international education. He examines models of the private and public spheres and public discourse advanced by Hannah Arendt and Jurgen Habermas in relation to the purpose of education, and discusses the transferability of these concepts to cross-cultural contexts, through an analysis of the nature of the public and the private in Japanese society. Finally, the paper urges international educators to take responsibility for the message they send exchange students by providing the mediation necessary to put their exchange experience into the proper context.

Keywords: intercultural, learning styles, mediated learning, public-private

This paper grew out of an examination of my own practice over the past seven years, as Executive Director of a programme that brings Japanese students to Canada to study for an academic year, and in teaching a course in culture and social psychology. I do not presume that Japanese society represents ‘the East’, so colleagues familiar with Chinese, Korean and other Confucian societies (which I am not) can draw their own conclusions as to whether the arguments presented here are more widely applicable.

In my practice, one question that constantly recurs is how to reconcile a Socratic approach, as espoused in Canadian education, with the students’ expectations and the expectations of the society to which the students will return. A Socratic approach, as I am using it here, is one that values the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Priority</th>
<th>Performance Measure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Quality Enhancement</td>
<td>Student Outcomes: critical thinking, communications, problem solving.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Ministry recognises that quality is in part reflected by the value students place on the education they receive.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 Improve quality of education

1470-8477/03/02 0122-09 $20.00/0 ©2003 J. Greenholtz
Language and Intercultural Communication

process of generating knowledge over knowledge accepted from others, even authoritative sources. It manifests itself in the emphasis on developing critical-thinking and problem-solving skills as the highest priority educational outcome. Evidence for this can be found, for example, on the Government of British Columbia’s (2002) website (see below) in which the goal of improving the quality of education is stated in terms of developing these skills.

I find this problematic from a cross-cultural perspective in that it devalues the educational traditions of the students’ own cultures and smacks of intellectual imperialism.

Thinking about this first question led me to a second question around the purpose of education within the context of international exchanges. My conception of the purpose of education is grounded in Arendt’s (1968) writings that see the central function of education as preparing the young to take their places in society. Given the fundamentally different nature of the society in which those students will ultimately take their place, how well can an exchange experience serve them?

In considering these issues, I explore the following questions:

1. What are we trying to accomplish by exposing students from Japan and other non-Western countries to Socratic notions of education, which differ significantly from their expectations of teaching and learning and from the expectations they will return to when they go home?
2. Does this approach to education serve the purpose of education, which is to prepare the young to take their places in society?
3. In not being mindful of the pedagogical traditions our students bring with them, is there not an implicit assumption that our approaches and methods should inform their pedagogy?
4. If we are trying merely to broaden their outlook by giving them a variety of experiences, do we believe that simple exposure is an effective approach?

Learning as Constructed

The first two questions led me to the idea that students from non-Socratic, teacher-centred, canonical learning environments may not recognise that they are being taught anything. Kelley’s (1963) personal construct theory informs us that learning is constructed within the learner. In order for this process to be successful, the learner must recognise incoming stimuli as something that can be organised as new knowledge. As Kelley (1963: 73) observed:

A person can be witness to a tremendous parade of episodes and yet, if he fails to keep making something out of them ... he gains little in the way of experience from having been around when they happened. It is not what happens around him that makes a man experienced; it is the successive construing and reconstruing of what happens, as it happens, that enriches the experience of his life.

If students come from an educational tradition that does not emphasise the process of generating knowledge (but rather, the product), they may not recognise what is happening in a Socratic classroom as legitimate pedagogy. Tweed
and Lehman (2002: 1) nicely summarise the key differences between these two educational philosophies as follows:

Socrates, a Western exemplar, valued private and public questioning of widely accepted knowledge and expected students to evaluate others’ beliefs and to generate and express their own hypotheses. Confucius, an Eastern exemplar, valued effortful, respectful, and pragmatic acquisition of essential knowledge as well as behavioral reform.

Respondents in studies conducted by Pratt (1992) on the mutually exclusive expectations of teachers (Western) and learners (Eastern) in cross-cultural contexts revealed that Confucian learners considered knowledge to be a commodity to be transferred between teacher and student; that teachers were providers, and students consumers, of knowledge. Western teachers, conversely, thought that the ability to examine information critically was the goal of education, that content was dynamic, not fixed, and teachers and students were partners. They advance knowledge by examining and challenging current theories.

Moreover, Pratt (1992) tells us, Confucian learning is not merely the uncritical rote learning of whatever is in the textbook. Before one wins the right to depart from the material, one must be deeply steeped in it. This is accomplished through successive repetitions and iterations, each of which drills deeper and deeper into the material. Thus, to Eastern eyes, the fervour with which Western students are exhorted to question and to challenge, especially early on in the learning about a topic, is foolish. How can one challenge what one does not understand properly and how can understanding result from free-for-all questioning rooted in ignorance?

Frequent comments in our year-end course evaluations from Japanese students that they had or hadn’t found the courses ‘useful’ highlight the idea that what we think we are teaching may not be what students believe they are learning. In my experience, Canadian students generally evaluate courses as interesting, boring, thought provoking, easy, or difficult, but ‘useful’ is not commonly used. In discussing these evaluations with students, I finally realised that they believed the ‘critical thinking’ elements of the course to be exercises in one of two things, clearly stating their opinions, which they understood to be a skill required of individualistic Westerners, or conversational skills. Japanese stereotype themselves as unable (or unwilling) to clearly give an opinion for fear of offending. In this light, they saw class discussion as providing practice in rhetorical technique and evaluated the course’s ‘usefulness’ on that basis. They did not understand that they were actually being asked to critically engage with and evaluate content. The Socratic idea that ‘truth is not prescribed by authority figures nor socially negotiated’ (Tweed & Lehman, 2002: 91), but rather resides within everyone and needs only the right questions to be drawn out, was not available to them.

It follows that if we are trying to bring about a qualitative change in thinking, whether it be simply to broaden students’ cognitive repertoire or, more subversively, to convert them to the superiority of critical thinking over acquisition of content, then mere exposure, even repeated exposure over a span of time, is not
enough. The learning experience must be mediated and our goals and techniques made explicit and transparent.

**Mediated Learning**

Feuerstein and Feuerstein (1991) define mediated learning as ‘a quality of interaction between the organism and its environment. This quality is ensured by the interposition of an initiated, intentional human being who mediates the stimuli impinging on the organism.’ Making the intention to mediate explicit, heightens the salience and the impact of the material.

Students may well not be able to successfully construct learning in an unfamiliar paradigm unless it is mediated for them. Classroom activity must be tied explicitly to the more general underlying principle of evaluating truth claims and knowledge, and explicitly examined against other truth claims, in order to have a lasting and farther-reaching impact.

Mediation requires that the mediator impose a meaning, what Arendt (1968) called ‘taking responsibility’ and also provide the learner with an ongoing “need” to look for the “meaning” in a wider sense of the term. This includes the search for causal as well as teleological relationships between events and not just the “meaning” of the mediator’s efforts to convey them to him’ (Feuerstein & Feuerstein, 1991: 26).

However, the effort to mediate students’ learning, making content more salient and teaching more effective, does not address the question of what we hope to accomplish in this educational exercise, and whether we should be embarking on this particular course at all.

**The Purpose of Education**

Let us consider the purpose of education through the lens of Arendt’s (1958) powerful and poetic conceptualisation. To broadly paraphrase, education is preparation for democratic citizenship, enabling society to benefit from the renewal that comes from the addition of new members, without being destroyed in the process. Arendt speaks of education in terms of natality (the fact that human beings are born into the world and must be prepared to take their place in it) and plurality (the contribution to society that each individual can make because she or he is equal to all others, but at the same time unique). She tells us that being an educator means taking responsibility for protecting the young from the world at large, and the world from the young, until they have been prepared to take their places in it. Once prepared, mature individuals contribute to society by taking action, that is, by inserting themselves into the debate about the public good.

I admit I had trouble with the concept of protecting the world from the young until I added an online discussion component to my cross-cultural communication course. Students’ contributions were sometimes thoughtful and well reasoned, but far more often they were simplistic and shallow; unexamined stereotypes and one-time personal experiences expressed as (and understood by the author to be) universal truths. That permitted me to understand the type of damage that could be inflicted on the body politic if it weren’t protected from the young by educators willing to take responsibility for their teaching.
The Socratic approach to education is intensely individualistic. Socrates stressed finding truth within oneself. This is not to say that truth was variable, only that it should not be accepted without question from ‘authoritative’ sources. It follows then, that the public that this type of education prepares the young for is one based on individuals participating as equals.

Habermas (see Fraser, 1992), the German political philosopher, also conceives of the public sphere as a meeting place in which individual citizens appear as equals, ‘with their differences bracketed’ as he puts it, to engage in what he calls *communicative* discourse, a disinterested discussion of what is best for society. From the perspective of my own socialisation within the liberal Western tradition this represents the democratic ideal; citizens contributing their own perspectives on an equal basis, always keeping the larger picture of the public good in the forefront.

This democratic ideal with its cornerstone concepts of equality in public discourse, and the uniqueness and distinctiveness of individual voices is, in turn, predicated on Western notions of the self, and the interaction of selves.

**Independent and Interdependent Selves**

In Japan and other collective societies, however, the self exists in relation to others. It is the *relationship*, not the individual, which is central. Markus and Kitayama (1991) illuminated this key cultural difference in the construal of the self with their concepts of independent and interdependent selves, bringing the macro idea of individualist and collective cultures to the level of the individual. Under this framework, the self as individual has no reality in a collectivist culture. As Shinobu Kitayama put it (private communication) ‘a man drinking sake by himself does not really exist’. Only within their relationships to others do individuals have weight. Both the logistics and substance of a discussion of the public good becomes immensely more intricate when webs of relationships and the relationships among webs replace individual perspectives as the basis of that discussion. Add a Confucian propensity to entrust decision making to authority to the mix, and the role and the nature of education, in preparing individuals to take their places in that interdependent discussion, undergoes a significant shift.

Let us examine what preparing the young to appear in public might mean in terms of an interdependent Japanese society. One of the most important distinctions in Japanese culture (and language) is the *uchi/soto* (inside/ outside). Echoes of Markus and Kitayama’s concept of the interdependent self emerge when one realises that *uchi* and *soto* do not correspond to the English concepts of private and public. As Doi (1981) explains it, ‘... the Japanese term *uchi* ... refers mainly to the group to which an individual belongs and not, as with English terms such as “private”, to the individual himself. In Japan, little value is attributed to the individual’s private realm as distinct from the group’.

This concept of ‘unspoken’ consensus is in fundamental violation of Arendt and Habermas’ prescriptions for public participation, but it makes perfect sense in the Japanese context. One of the elements of popular mythology that in their minds distinguishes the Japanese from *gaijin* (non-Japanese) is the Japanese’ (self-reported) ability to understand each other without words, *haragei*. In any conversation concerning cultural difference or international relations the phrase
'we Japanese' (who think alike and speak with one voice) will be heard repeatedly. I am reminded of a Japanese colleague describing restaurant portions in Canada as being ‘too large for we Japanese’ – not just for him personally, but for the entire Japanese nation.

There is no public–private distinction in Japan, as we understand it in the West, where the private is where an individual can retire to a zone of safety. Within one’s own home, there is some refuge from formal social interaction in Japan, the never-ending chess game in which every interaction must be plotted several moves in advance, relative status guarded, words carefully chosen so as not to give or invite offence, personal desires subordinated to the needs of the in-group at hand, and appearances (dress, makeup, appropriateness to occasion) carefully considered.

The public, too, is unlike anything Arendt describes because one brings not plurality to the public, but a familiarity with the script, and a sense of one’s role, not oneself. This stage metaphor is perfect for Japan except the performance is of highly stylised Noh theatre in which every movement of the hand and eyes is scripted and significant, not improvisation or theatre sports. Without structure there is only chaos, not communicative discourse.

In the Japanese public sphere, there is no Habermasian meeting of equals with their differences bracketed, for such interactions would be impossible for selves defined in relation, which, in turn, define themselves by those differences.

Confucian societies are based on mutual obligations in strict hierarchical relationships that mirror the six essential relationships: ruler/subject, father/son, husband/wife, older brother/younger brother, teacher/student, and friend/friend. Plurality in the Arendtian sense is literally foreign to Japanese culture because the social structure respects position more than individual attributes. It judges a person not on their individual talents, but on their ability to contribute to the collective. Arendt is ultimately seeking a contribution to the collective (society as a whole) when she argues that individuals must appear in public to create the public good, but her notion is predicated on equality, not on hierarchy.

In contrast to Arendt’s notion of plurality, Eastern thinkers such as Balangagndada (cited in Sparrow, 2000) describe the core difference in Eastern and Western approaches to ‘self’ as follows,

the Western man feels of the presence of ‘something deep inside himself’ even if he is unable to say what it is (and) builds an identity for such a self (which) is what makes such an endowed organism unique ... By contrast, the Easterner would experience nothing, or some kind of hollowness, the psychological identity of such a self is a construction of the ‘other’, an agent is constituted by the actions which an organism performs, or ... is the action performed and nothing more.

From Arendt’s perspective, Japanese society is the social writ large. The social is undemocratic because, to paraphrase Arendt’s (1958) definition, it is based on interactions in which roles and institutions dominate with no room for the individual to take action, i.e. to insert herself into the public. This vision is predicated on a particular view of what the ‘self’ needs and the role it should play. As long as that Western yardstick is employed, societies based on interdependent selves
will be found lacking in democracy as defined by individual freedoms. However, the Western yardstick oversimplifies the picture, as does the Japanese self-image of a harmonious society moving to a collective heartbeat.

From a Japanese point of view, the West is a chaos of egos run amok; strident individual voices competing to shout the loudest and win the most. Liberal individualism, even in the ideal visions of Arendt and Habermas, does not conform to the topography of the Japanese mind.

**The Goals of Internationalisation in Education**

Increased intercultural sensitivity and tolerance, and greater insight into one’s own culture are the expected outcomes of student exchange. However, empirical examinations of the student-exchange experience do not support these expectations. Feinberg (2002), for example, makes the case that study abroad experiences as currently structured do not profoundly alter students’ perceptions.

Students return from study-abroad programs having seen the world, but the world they return to tell tales about is more often than not the world they already knew, the imaginary world of globalized, postmodern capitalism where everything is already known, everyone speaks the same language, and the outside world keeps its eyes on those of us who come from the center.

And for those who come to the ‘center’ Bochner (1986) cites a number of studies in the social psychological literature which indicate that:

increased contact does not necessarily reduce inter-group hostility, and under some conditions actually increases friction and animosity (Bloom, 1971; Mitchell, 1968; Tajfel & Dawson, 1965). Even in culturally mixed residential settings such as International Houses, where there are explicit pressures to form cross-cultural friendships, studies in the United States, England, and Australia have shown that the various groups prefer the company of their fellow nationals (Bochner, Bunker & McLeod, 1976; Bochner, Hutnik & Furnham, 1985; Bochner, McLeod & Lin, 1977; Bochner & Orr, 1979; Furnham & Alibhai, 1985; Furnham & Bochner, 1982). In many cases, the foreign students had not made a single host-country friend even after a lengthy sojourn.

Since the goal of education is to prepare the young to appear in public, to engage in debating and shaping a good and worthwhile society, we must be careful about the role we play in preparing international students to appear in public. Unless we engage in a public discussion about pedagogy and cultural difference, in other words mediate the experiences of exchange students (and the domestic students with whom they interact) we fail to take responsibility in Arendt’s (1968) terms because we are forcing a choice appropriate to the adult world, a choice that can only be made by fully formed individuals capable of standing on their own in public, onto half-formed adults who are not. This is not an attempt to denigrate students. It is, rather, a recognition that in this intermediate stage between childhood and adulthood, mediation is the crucial variable. I have seen students who have exiled themselves from the Japanese system because they
have bought into the superiority of the Socratic approach and the individualist model. They mope around their home campus bewildered and bitter that their newly found ability to criticise and question is not considered praiseworthy in Japan. They were not guided into internationalisation by a teacher willing to take responsibility for the journey.

It is incumbent upon those of us involved in cross-cultural educational initiatives to be cognisant of the fact that internationalisation is a fuzzy and largely unexamined concept. It is also incumbent upon us to recognise that if we fail to properly mediate our students’ experiences we are in danger of abandoning our responsibility as educators. Without the benefits of mediation, students are left without a full set of tools to effect a critical examination not only of the relative merit of the alternative model in the abstract, but where and how it can be applied to their context.

Educators must be ‘wide awake’, in Maxine Greene’s (1978) terms. Greene warns that, ‘In many places, too, because of the proliferation of bureaucracies and corporate structures, individuals find it harder and harder to take initiative. They guide themselves by vaguely perceived expectations; they allow themselves to be programmed by organizations and official schedules’ (1978: 43). To combat this tendency, Greene admonishes us to be ‘wide awake’, i.e. attentive to the consequences of our actions. We must be wide awake to the possible repercussions on students of our foisting upon them an ill-defined notion of internationalisation, and to mediate the onslaught of ideas and experiences by helping students to contextualise and honour their own cultural traditions.

**Correspondence**

Any correspondence should be directed to Joe Greenholtz, UBC-Ritsumeikan Exchange Programme, University of British Columbia, Ritsumeikan-UBC House, Room 330-6460 Agronomy Road, Vancouver, British Columbia V6T 1W9, Canada (joe.greenholtz@ubc.ca).

**References**


