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Rocky Road: East Asian International Students' Experience of Adaptation to Critical Thinking Way of Learning at U.S. Universities

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Keywords: Confucian Philosophy, Critical thinking /reflection, East Asian students

Abstract: This roundtable seeks to understand how Confucius-influenced East Asian international students learn to adapt to and participate in the countervailing Western pedagogy that fosters independent critical thinking and reflection and how these Asian students reconcile these seeming polarities as they engage in their doctoral studies at U.S. universities.

Globalization is an emerging trend in the field of education as more and more international students come to America to pursue their education. Higher education is among the United States' top service sector exports as international students provide revenue to the U.S. economy and individual host states. According to the U.S. Department of Commerce, international students, through their expenditures on tuition and living expenses, contribute \$20 billion to the U.S. economy (Institute of International Education, 2011). China, South Korea, and Japan are the leading countries of origin for international students in the United States.

Rooted in Confucian teaching and philosophy, East Asian learners are taught to absorb structured ideas and knowledge and learn to apply concepts taught by the instructors. In Confucian tradition, teachers are considered as authorities and transmitters of knowledge, and students as receivers of knowledge. Confucius asserted that students would need a competent teacher to guide them and believed students would better spend their time absorbing structured ideas than thinking independently (Confucius, 479 B.C./1947).

In contrast, the ultimate goal of western-style universities is creating self-directed, self-motivated, independent learners who are able to critique and direct their own work with critical thinking and rational judgment. Many adult educators have identified critical thinking and reflective practice as important elements of adult learning. Dewey (1933) identified reflective thinking as a goal of education and believed that reflection was foundational to learning and essential to the process of rational problem solving (as cited in Mezirow, 1991). Like Dewey, Mezirow (1990) sees reflection as crucial to the learning process and states, "by far the most significant learning in adulthood involves critical reflection, reassessing the way we have posed problems and reassessing our own orientation to perceiving, knowing, feeling, and acting" (p. 13). Mezirow suggests that the ability to critically reflect on underlying assumptions will lead to transformative learning.

It is evident that different cultural concepts and approaches to teaching and learning exist between Confucius-influenced learners and Western-influenced learners. The pursuit of autonomy and independence in American education, consequently, clashes with Confucius-influenced Asian learners who are accustomed to and familiar with their own way of thinking and learning.

Numerous opinions arise as to whether or not independent and critical thinking is suitable for Confucius influenced East Asian learners. According to Kutieleh and Egege (2003), the underlying idea of critical thinking, being a Western constructed approach to knowledge, represents a challenge for Asian international students to incorporate critical thinking with their transition in the first year of higher education programs at Western universities. Hemphill (1994) argues that a concept of critical thinking/rationality is presumed to be culturally universal and context free. As a result, no one questions whether people from diverse cultural, social, and gender positions feel comfortable or even desire to exercise critical thinking. Atkinson (1997) and Fox (1994) are even more explicit in arguing that critical thinking is incompatible with Asian cultural attitudes. On the other hand, Paton (2005) argues that, rather than culture, insufficient knowledge about critical reflection and lack in English proficiency are the key factors that affect East Asian students' critical thinking.

Learners from different cultures may face difficulties in employing learning styles that do not coincide with their own cultural traditions and educational approaches. If, as some studies suggest, independent critical thinking based on Westernized beliefs and individualistic attitudes is incompatible with Asian cultural beliefs and collectivist attitudes, this raises the question of how Asian students reconcile these seeming polarities as they engage in their studies at U.S. universities. With respect to the question, this roundtable discussion will shed a light on learning strategies employed by East Asian international students on their learning transition and adaptation into Western pedagogy.

The information and insights from the session could be used as guidelines not only for individual learners but also for the stakeholders like administrators and educators. For individuals who are interested in and/or preparing for studying in the U.S. universities, it could help them to prepare for their new learning journey in America. For administrators and staff in the institution of higher education in the U.S., this will provide information on how colleges and universities can plan and make international students' transition into new culture and school less threatening and hence less stressful. For faculty, teachers, and educators, it will help them to develop and facilitate curriculum and teaching methods that meet the needs of international student to help their learning experience in the U.S.

Many studies have been conducted to address how adult learners learn to function in new and/or different cultural contexts, yet not enough is known about the processes associated with different cultural learning, and very few learning models attempt to explain how learning takes place in that setting. It is evident that international students make economic contributions in the U.S. economy yet their valuable educational contribution in the field of education in the U.S. remains unexamined and unappreciated. It is important to learn more about the lived experiences of international students so that the academic community can meet the learning needs and better serve these students.

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