

OTHER CONTRIBUTIONS

A Perspective of Democratic Teaching Through the Lens of Research on the Application of Daoism

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My perspective of democratic teaching, and my attempts to embrace it, are shaped by my life-long interest in ancient Chinese philosophy and its practical application to my teaching through reflective research based on teacher diary studies.

Teacher diaries are written accounts of experiences that teachers encounter, and their entries are examined for recurring patterns leading to deeper insights into the teaching and learning experience.

My approach is to read texts on Daoism in the evenings and highlight parts that give me insights into my teaching. I then contemplate how best to embrace these insights the next day while teaching in the classroom. After each experience, I write a page or two, reflecting on the extent to which the experience is helpful.

Through the lens of Daoism, everything coexists mutually because of the interaction of two interdependent elements known as yin and yang. Daoism regards all elements as being complementary in that each defines itself in relation to the other.

The Dao, meaning “the way” in Chinese, could be said to be inherently democratic in that it transcends all

conventional definitions, contemplations, introspections, feelings, anxieties, interpretations, analyses, self-consciousness and judgments. Daoism encourages us to follow and tap into our individual natures and to be open to all approaches depending on prevailing situations.

When infused with education it makes it more democratic in that it requires being flexible and tolerant, and accepting of unanticipated changes as an inherent part of the process. It requires the will to think holistically, to be mentally uncluttered, uncomplicated and attentive to the infinite subtleties of change in a subtle and nurturing way.

Teaching and learning can be especially challenging when, as soon as it all seems to be figured out, there come a myriad of unanticipated hurdles. These happen so suddenly, and do not wait for us to make up our minds. Teachers and students become easily overwhelmed by their excessive cognizance of unexpected situations. This is because teaching and learning is so multifaceted that much of it is beyond mental rationalization and mechanical implementation.

The influence of Daoism in teaching promotes mutual respect, diligence, creativity and simplicity between the students and myself. There is considerably less stress and more mutual respect because of the appreciation of appropriate actions within changing circumstances. In this way, impulsiveness is tempered with spontaneity, and intellectual understanding is supplemented with insights and self-awakening.

Given that there is less focus on contradictions (based on diametrically opposed notions of “right” or “wrong”) and more on paradoxes (based on complementary notions of “yin” and “yang”), divisions between the students and myself, and between the students themselves, become less stark, making goals less competitive and outcomes more shared. Students also become more curious, self-reliant and inquisitive.

Democratic education based on Daoism works because it replaces the conventional top-down mechanical teaching process with one that emphasizes the role of reasoning and self-discovery. The classroom atmosphere has subsequently come to emulate more of the real world, and less of an artificial environment based purely on orthodox educational protocols and conventions.

There is no need to enforce anything because everyone has an equal voice. This, in turn, enables the trust that replaces the once stifling fear among students, and has become the driving force behind their own initiatives towards new levels of curiosity and self-awareness.

It also provides an appreciation for flows and rhythms to have an important

place in classroom interactions alongside the scaffolding of activities and the unfolding of lesson plans. This facilitates the ability of tapping into instincts that solve many problems intuitively without even thinking too much about them. There is more of a sense of going with the flow of situations through the accommodation of different perspectives and less emphasis on extremely rigorous analysis and inflexible perspectives that merely compounds and perplexes situations.

The end result of this teaching philosophy based on Daoism is a democratic educational experience where my students and I walk a simple path, are humble and open-minded, love and enjoy the classroom and life in equal measure, are grateful for each other and our circumstances, follow the way of nature which never hurries yet leaves nothing undone, are accepting of the way things and people are, and are deeply caring and compassionate of each other and the world beyond the classroom.

References

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