

On the Different Social Scripts of Teaching and Learning Between Chinese and Westerners

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The influence of social scripts is omnipresent. Everyone behaves in one's own culture following the relevant social scripts without realizing them. Social scripts are built up day by day; they are rooted in people's mind. This is one part of culture. This paper attempts to illustrate the respective social scripts of learning and teaching between Chinese and western students. Detailed social script tables are presented to compare and contrast the respective social scripts. The underlying causes for the differences in this regard have been dug out and elaborated on. Finally, the problems existing in current Chinese education and its reform have been analyzed and discussed.

The influence of social scripts is omnipresent (Schank & Abelson, 1977). Everyone behaves in one's own culture following the relevant social scripts without realizing them. When people attend a wedding ceremony, they follow the social scripts definitely different from the ones in a funeral occasion. Social scripts are built up day by day; they are rooted in human minds. This is part of culture. According to Edward Sapir (1949), "...Culture...is essentially a systematic list of all the socially inherent patterns of behavior which may be illustrated in the actually behavior of all or most of the individual in the group" (p. 515).

This paper aims to illustrate the respective social scripts of learning and teaching between the West and China. Detailed social script tables will be presented to compare and contrast the relevant social scripts. The underlying causes for the differences will be expounded by tracing back to the origins of education: Confucius and Socrates. Finally, the problems of Chinese current education and its reform will be analyzed and discussed briefly.

Social Script Theory

According to social script theory, most human beings are not able to envision themselves in terms of grand theories or models of social thought. However, they all know they live day by day in a certain context. They are just as actors and actresses or form an audience in mini-dramas and interrelated social acts (Lyman & Scott, 1976), through which they interact, learn, experience, and obtain the meanings of feelings, perceptions, emotions, moods, thoughts, and values among their members of society. Naturally they are able to analyze and understand social situations from the standpoint of the members of a group or community. It is by being in the situation that one comes to recognize and know the social scripts within their own culture (St. Clair, 2006).

From the experience and actual participation in a variety of situations, people are able to develop a great number of social scripts of events or actions. Chinese and Westerners live in totally different societies with their specific political systems and living environments, which lead to various feelings, emotions, preferences, thinking modes, and value systems. For

Table 1: Social Scripts for Chinese Teaching and Learning

	The Teaching & Learning Schema under Social Script Theory
Event Frame	Teaching and Learning in Classroom
Social Role	Teacher and Students
Episodic Function	<p>Students enter the classroom. Students sit down on their own seats. Students take out books and notebooks. Teacher comes into classroom on time. Teacher stands straight and high above students on the podium in an authoritative position, bird view to students. Teacher greets students. Students greet teachers. Teacher begins to teach by explaining and expounding the textbook. Teacher focuses on the textbook or course materials. Teacher talks most of the time. Students listen to the teacher quietly, attentively, and respectfully. Students take notes on the important points. Teacher dominates the class; students mainly accept the input. Teacher asks questions, and students feel nervous and reluctant to answer the questions. Teacher assigns homework. Class is over. Teacher leaves the classroom. Students leave the classroom.</p>
Lexicon	teacher, students, textbook, accept input, quiet, attentive, reluctant, questions
Script	<p>Students: enter classroom, sit down, take out books and notebooks, greet teacher, listen to teacher attentively and respectfully, accept input, are not very active in class, are reluctant to answer questions, and create a quiet classroom atmosphere</p> <p>Teacher: teaches, explains, dominates almost the whole class, maintaining a one-way communication from teacher to students</p>

example, Chinese advocate collectivism, but Westerners, especially Americans, advocate individualism; Chinese are basically introverted, while Westerners are generally extraverted. All the differences are reflected in the social scripts of learning and teaching.

Comparing and Contrasting Between the Two Social Scripts

Table 1 and Table 2 compare and contrast the social scripts of learning and teaching between Westerners and Chinese.

From Table 1 and Table 2, which have compared and contrasted the Chinese and western social scripts in teaching and learning, it can be seen that many procedures of teaching and learning between Chinese and Western ones are similar, nevertheless, the major differences are the different ways that a teacher conducts their teaching and the different manners in which students behave in class.

Table 2: Social Scripts for Western Teaching and Learning

	The Teaching & Learning Schema under Social Script Theory
Event Frame	Teaching and Learning in Classroom
Social Role	Teacher and Students
Episodic Function	<p>Students enter the classroom.</p> <p>Students sit down on their own seats.</p> <p>Students take out books and notebooks.</p> <p>Teacher comes into classroom on time.</p> <p>Teacher may stand or sit down as one of the class members in an equal position.</p> <p>Teacher may greet students or not.</p> <p>Teacher gives lecture by defining, expounding, exemplify, and extending the textbook or materials briefly.</p> <p>Teacher may not focus on the textbook.</p> <p>Students listen, think, and raise questions.</p> <p>Students take notes on the important points.</p> <p>Teacher talks, but does not dominates the whole class.</p> <p>Students take active roles in expressing their views freely, asking questions, some of them very challenging.</p> <p>Students may give comments.</p> <p>Students regard themselves as equal to the teacher. They enjoy discussing with their teacher and classmates.</p> <p>Teacher assigns homework.</p> <p>Class is over.</p> <p>Teacher leaves the classroom.</p> <p>Students leave the classroom.</p>
Lexicon	teacher, students, active, express, view, freely, challenge, discuss, comments
Script	<p>Students: enter classroom, sit down, take out books and notebooks, listen to teacher critically, frequently ask questions, express views freely, prefer discussing in class, and create an active classroom atmosphere</p> <p>Teacher: teach, define, expound, exemplify, do not dominate the whole class, frequently invite students to express their views, discuss with students, and promote two-way communication</p>

Chinese people are influenced by Confucian philosophy and teachings; the basic virtues are: respect, loyalty, obedience, humility, and trustworthiness. Owing to these deep-rooted traditional values, Chinese students in class are always respectful and obedient to teachers. Teachers hold an authoritative and, sometimes, awesome position among Chinese students (Gao, 2000, p. 99). Students are willing and prepared to listen to what their teacher lectures to them about in the course. They are not supposed to raise challenging questions to argue with the teacher. They form the habit of listening to the lectures and taking notes, accepting what the teacher presents to them. It is natural and common that the teacher dominates the whole class and elaborates the course materials in a systematic and logical way. The classroom atmosphere is always quiet. Chinese teachers always focus on textbooks and course materials. Convergent thinking and focus on the course materials are the features of Chinese teaching.

Contrary to Chinese, Westerners emphasize and advocate “individualism and

expressiveness” (Yankelovich, 1998). Everyone is equal with others. If they have anything in mind, students are encouraged to take the freedom to speak out. With such values, teachers and his students are equal; they sit down in a circle. The classroom atmosphere is relaxed and active. Western students are ready to raise questions, doubts, and give comments. They enjoy discussing the materials in class. If they are robbed of opportunities to express their opinions, they are quite unhappy. Teaching with divergent thinking is appreciated, which is always the sources of interesting and humorous classroom atmospheres.

The Underlying Causes on the Differences of the Social Scripts

The different social scripts on learning and teaching between Western countries and China can be traced back to the respective origin of education in history: Confucius and Socrates. They are the pioneer educators in East and West civilization. Their educational thoughts share some similarities, meanwhile diverse greatly. Confucius and Socrates realize the importance of education in the development of society and individuals, and both of them adopt question-and-answer models to conduct education. The similarities are a reflection of the “common law of human pedagogical activities” (Zhang, 2006). However, owing to the differences in the societal and political systems, as well as different living environments and value concepts, even the similar models reflect different pedagogical philosophies.

Confucius lived in the period of 551 BC to 479 BC, while Socrates lived from 469 BC to 399 BC. In Confucius’ time, in order to maintain the social hierarchical system, Confucius advocated respect for one’s teachers and authorities. Ever since then, respecting teachers has been Chinese traditional social script. Dependence on each other and social harmony are the other aspects considered important then. Openly challenging or questioning others may destroy the harmony of the group or the community; one should be humid and reserved rather than be proud and different from others. Such behaviors should be avoided and discouraged. Chinese has many proverbs and sayings to show the value orientations of modesty, conformity, and solidarity, such as 谦虚谨慎 (“modesty and humidity”), 戒骄戒躁 (“to guard against arrogance”), 树大招风 (“A person of high position is liable to be attacked.”), 枪打出头鸟 (“The bird who goes ahead of the group will be shot.”), 满招损, 谦受益 (“Pride hurts, while modesty benefits.”), 团结就是力量 (“Solidarity is power.”), 随大流 (“to go with the stream”), 严于律己宽于待人 (“to be severe with oneself and lenient towards others”).

Confucius’ philosophical thoughts are mainly reflected from the work, *Lun Yu* or *The Analects of Confucius* (《论语》). The prime minister of Song Dynasty once said that he ruled the empire half with *Lun Yu* (Yu, 2007, p. 2). From this, it shows the enormous impact of Confucius philosophical thoughts on the later Chinese society. According to Yu (2007), Confucius’ philosophy in *Lun Yu* generally includes the following seven fields: the relationship among the heaven, the earth, and human beings; the soul; how to behave and deal with affairs in society; man of honor; making friends; ideals; and life, etc. (天地人之道, 心灵之道, 处世之道, 君子之道, 交友之道, 理想之道, 人生之道).

Socrates lived in the most important and democratic *polis* (city-state), Athens, in the Classical period in Greece, which “was ruled by an assembly and a council of five hundred male citizens and ten generals” (Adams, 2006, p. 111). With such a political system, the

Athenians felt very proud of their democratic values. Individual rights and opinions were emphasized and valued. The most famous saying, “Man is the measure of all things” (Adams, 2006, p. 123), by Protagoras, was an evidence to show the value. And since the Archaic period, Greek philosophy was an important part of Greek culture. In the fifth century, teaching rhetoric, the art of eloquent argument, was very popular.

As a consequence of living in this social and political system and environment, Socrates’ teaching method differs substantially from Confucius. His students were not sitting in the classroom waiting for him to teach, rather he found his students in citizens wandering around the streets of Athens, discussing philosophical issues. Pretending that he knew nothing himself of the issue or the knowledge (it is often referred to as “Socrates irony”), Socrates adopted a dialectic process of question and answer to elicit truth from his questioners. He was talented with and interested in inductive argumentation, which was “arriving at generalities from particular instances—which he used to lead his followers to conclusions he himself had already reached” (Adams, 2006, p. 123). Socrates did not write down his philosophy; his most distinguished student, Plato, summed up his philosophy, which mainly tackled the fields of the nature of Good, the True, and the Beautiful.

Four differences in their teachings can be summed up from Zhang (2006), Yang (2005), and Fan and Li (2006), if we take a comprehensive consideration.

First, Confucius greatly emphasizes the deductive ability of students and held that the cultivation of students’ operational ability is the purpose of education. Confucius considered the right thinking mode to be from the general to the specific, so he taught the general principles, so that students can apply the general to specific situations or practices.

Contrary to Confucius’ model of question and answer, Socrates emphasizes the thinking mode of moving from the concrete to the abstract, from the specific to the general, so as to cultivate students’ abilities in induction and synthesizing.

Second, Confucius takes a direct and linear way of conducting his question-answer education. His model of teaching is to offer answers directly to students’ questions. If students ask questions, he would give answers directly. His purpose of teaching is to guide students in their practice. If students learn to apply his theories or general principles into practice, his teaching aim is reached. For instance, 樊迟问仁。子曰：“爱人”。问知。子曰：“知人¹”。 (Fan Chi asked about “benevolence.” Confucius said, “To love others.” Fan Chi asked about “intelligence.” Confucius said, “To understand others.”) According to Confucius, you love others, and it is benevolence; you understand others, and it is intelligence and wisdom. Another example, 子贡问友。子曰：“忠告而善道之，不可则止，毋自辱焉²”。 (Zi Gong asked about “friends, and how to get along with friends.” Confucius said, “When you see that they do something wrong, give them sincere and friendly advice, which may guide them to the right way; if they refuse to accept your advice, then give it up. Don’t enforce them to accept, which may make yourself humiliate.”) Students learn the general concepts and principles, which will guide them in their daily conduct and practice.

Socrates takes a diverse way with his question-and-answer model. His teaching is full of rhetorical questions so as to dig out students’ potential. He adopts heuristic methods and leads students to think of and probe out the answers by themselves. The students’ ability of logical thinking and analysis can be developed and cultivated in the process. The following example shows how Socrates conducts his question and answer education about “the nature of justice”

with a student, Euthydemus.

Socrates asked, "Does falsehood then exist among mankind?" "It does, assuredly," replied Euthydemus, "Under which head shall we place it?" "Under injustice certainly." "Does deceit also exist?" "Unquestionably." "Under which head shall we place that?" "Evidently under injustice." "Does mischievousness exist?" "Undoubtedly." "And the enslaving of man?" "That, too, prevails." "And shall neither of these things be placed by us under justice, Euthydemus?" "It would be strange if they should be," said he. "But," said Socrates, "if a man being chosen to lead an army, should reduce to slavery an unjust and hostile people, should we say that he committed an injustice?" "No, certainly." replied he. "Should we not rather say that he acted justly?" "Indisputably" "And if in the course of the war with them he should practice deceit?" "That also would be just," said he. "And if he should steal and carry off their property, would he not do what was just?" "Certainly," said Euthydemus; "but I thought at first that you asked these questions only with reference to our friends." "Then," said Socrates, "all that we have placed under the head of injustice, we must also place under that of justice?" "It seems so," replied Euthydemus. "Do you agree, then," continued Socrates, "that, having so placed them, we should make a new distinction, that it is just to do such things with regard to enemies, but unjust to do them with regard to friends, and that towards his friends our general should be as guileless as possible?" "By all means," replied Euthydemus. "Well, then," said Socrates, "if a general, seeing his army dispirited, should tell them, inventing a falsehood, that auxiliaries were coming, and should, by that invention, check the despondency of his troops, under which head should we place such an act of deceit?" "It appears to me," said Euthydemus, "that we must place it under justice." "And if a father, when his son requires medicine, and refuses to take it, should deceive him, and give him the medicine as ordinary food, and, by adopting such deception, should restore him to health, under which head must we place such an act of deceit?" "It appears to me that we must put it under the same head." "And if a person, when his friend was in despondency, should through fear that he might kill himself, steal or take away his sword, or any other weapon, under which head must we place that act?" "That assuredly, we must place under justice." "You say, then," said Socrates, "that not even toward our friends must we act on all occasions without deceit?" "We must not, indeed," said he, "for I retract what I said before, if I may be permitted to do so." "It is indeed much better that we should be permitted," said Socrates, "then that you should not place actions on the right side. But of those who deceive their friends in order to injure them (that we may not leave even this point unconsidered) which of the two is the more just, he who does so intentionally or he who does so involuntarily?" "Indeed, Socrates," said Euthydemus, "I no longer put confidence in the answers which I give; for all that I said before appears to me now to be quite different from what I then thought; however, let me venture to say that he who deceives intentionally is more unjust than he who deceives involuntarily."³

Third, in conversation between Confucius and his students, most of the cases, students raise questions when they feel confused or ignorant. Confucius tells his students the correct answers or the right solution to the questions/problems. According to one statistic, among 86 conversations between Confucius and his students, there are 65 conversations that students ask the master, which accounts for 75.65 percent of the total; In only 21 conversations did the Master ask his students, which accounts for 24.4 percent (Zhang, 2006). Confucius' teaching mode is weak in encouraging students to think for themselves or find out answers by

themselves, but the teacher offers the ready one. What they need to do is to command them. Through question-answer, Confucius tells his students what to do exactly, and how to do so in a way that his students can understand and find out a general principle to guide their practice in specific situations.

Socrates exposes students' conflicts of cognition by challenging or refuting students in order to elicit the answer by questioning the students. Students need to think hard to analyze, induct, and synthesize in order to find out the hidden principles or draw a conclusion by themselves. Socrates wants to show students that every particular involves a general concept; every concrete involves an abstract notion. This is the origin of Western educational foundation in reflection, argumentation, and reasoning.

A summary of the different pedagogical methods between Confucius and Socrates based on Zhang's (2006) diagram is shown in Figure 1.

Fourth, as to the attitudes of study, Confucius emphasizes hard work and diligence. He firmly believes that good records and great achievements can be accomplished with one's effort rather than ability. Besides, students should show obedience to authority, the elder, and book-knowledge. He also emphasizes that rote learning or memory studying is equally important as thinking (Fan & Li, 2006). As a result, they learn to be reticent and reserve in class, and not to speak out their own opinions freely. They learn to think profoundly by themselves rather than in the process of discussion, arguing, questioning, challenging, and critiquing others.

For Socrates, to openly question and challenge others, even one's own ideas, is the proper attitude for studying. People learn in the process of questioning, challenging, evaluating, and even criticizing. Individual interest, ability, and creativity are appreciated and encouraged in learning. To command the proper way of thinking is more important than the knowledge itself. The sense of competitiveness, critique, and surpassing the previous was developed and has been cultivated ever since.

With the diverse social scripts established on so many differences in philosophies and methodologies of teaching and learning from the origin, Chinese students, from generation to generation, fail to learn to think critically; they are weak in creative thinking, they dare not to, and eventually become lazy and reluctant to think, use their brain to evaluate and comment authority, teachers, textbooks, etc. In Chinese, there is a saying, 一日为师, 终身为父 ("One day you are my teacher, the lifelong you are my father."). Chinese is a highly patriarchal society; the father is the authority in a family. With such regard and respect to one's teacher as a father, Chinese students are accustomed to listen to, accept, and memorize what their teachers teach them. Western students are likely to take teaching and learning in a critical manner. They are accustomed to expressing their own opinions and challenging teachers and textbooks when they doubt or disagree with them.

Some Western scholars, such as Roger G. Tweed and Darrin R. Lehman (2003) comment that Chinese students show more obedience to authority and they lack their own opinions in academic pursuits. In class, they tend to listen quietly and accept the viewpoints of their books and teachers instead of expressing their own perspectives. All such behaviors in class can be found rooted in the social scripts of learning and teaching in history.

Current Situation of Chinese Education and Its Reform

In China, the grave problem existing in current education between teachers and students is that most of the teachers consider themselves, and are considered, the owner and passersby of knowledge. In class many teachers conduct one-way communication with students. Teachers dominate the whole classes (Yang, 2005). They psychologically take it for granted that they are the sources of knowledge and learning, that they are always correct all the time, and therefore they behave in an authoritative way to students. Students are in a passive, obedient position in receiving knowledge.

Sometimes, the relationship between teachers and students is rather nervous, and passive. For the nationwide proficiency examinations, such as Grade-4, Grade-6 for non-English majors, Grade-4, and Grade-8 for English majors, teachers are all eager to pass their knowledge to students so that more students can pass the examinations. The pass ratio is one of the evaluating factors for a teacher. Consequently, the teachers have to control the class to pass the knowledge and make students to accept as much as possible.

In most cases, the relationship between teachers and students is the controlling and the controlled, the active and the passive, the authority and the obedient. For students, they are accustomed to learning from and listening to their teachers; they are most of the time dependant on their teachers to “feed” them. Without teachers, they may feel confused, lost, and even blind to learning. To some extent, they enjoy and even appreciate the teacher-controlled class and feel that a good teacher should dominate and teach the class instead of asking them to learn by themselves.

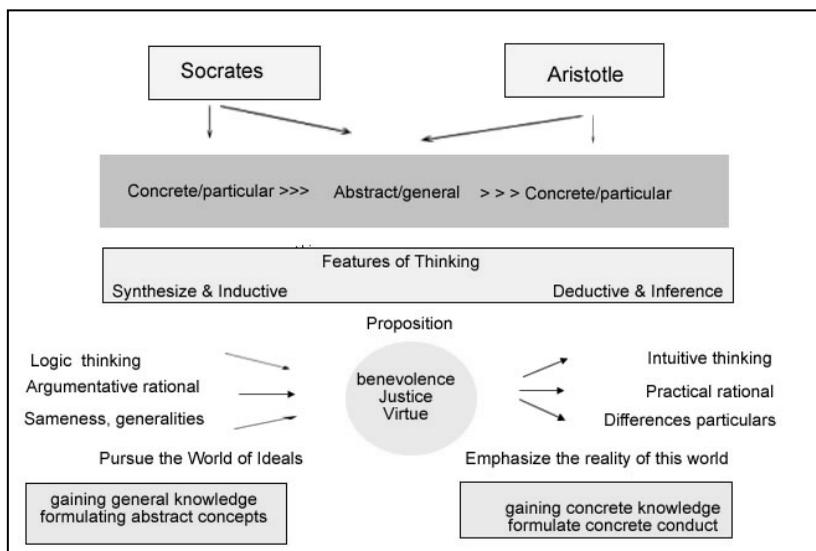


Figure 1

Clark Webb and J. Hugh Baird (1968) recommend:

...to modify this traditional pattern of teaching-learning is to give the student more responsibility for his own learning. Some educators have maintained that the teacher at best can only establish an atmosphere for learning; the student must learn as a result of his own efforts...Evidence gathered...has frequently shown that there is no significant difference in quality or quantity between what students learn this way and what they learn in the conventional manner. (p. 457)

In America, according to Gary Rybold⁴, every course and even every class is required to show how a teacher develops the students in the ability of critical thinking. Since Americans are very young, they are cultivated and encouraged to challenge and ask questions; while in China, even in colleges, it is still difficult to conduct critical thinking in every course.

In the new century, with the trend of cultural globalization, the tendency of educational reform and development will proceed from diversity and differentiation to integrity and amalgamation. Both Chinese teachers and students confront a severe task with the social scripts of teaching and learning. It is a tough issue concerning how to improve and cultivate more students with critical thinking and creative ability. This issue requires profound reform in the social scripts of pedagogical philosophy and practice.

In the recent decade, Chinese educators found out the weaknesses of Chinese traditional stereotypes of teaching and learning. Chinese students form the habit of learning passively, that is, accepting what the teacher has said without thinking and doubting. Chinese students accumulate a great amount of knowledge, but they are weak in critical thinking, challenging, and originality. The Minister of Education, Zhou Ji, commented when asked by a CNN reporter at a news conference on September 12, 2007: Chinese students “lack creative spirit and creative ability, which is a fatal weakness in our education.” Teacher-centered class, student-passive learning, as well as convergent thinking of teachers brings out the fact that Chinese students are inactive in thinking and less creative in ideas and concepts. They are accustomed to the restrictions of thinking and dare not violate or attempt to break through tradition.

Realizing the problems of the conventional teaching and learning, Chinese are now carrying out educational reform. Student-centered classes are advocated to take the place of teacher-centered classes. It takes pains and efforts to change and reform the established social scripts in teaching and learning since it has been built up through a long process and rooted in our mind and blood. This is a psychological phenomenon. Just as Ratner’s idea, “Psychological phenomena are formed as people engaged in socially organized activity. Since their activities are socially formed, they provide a social and cultural influence on cognition” (St. Clair, 2006, p. 6).

Conclusion

The social scripts are a powerful theory to explain the diverse attitudes of Chinese and Western teachers and students. People get to learn and build up the social scripts of proper teaching and learning in their own context/community. “The social scripts dictate what one should be doing at a particular time and in a particular place if one is to play the role

characteristically associated with the script” (St. Clair, 2006, p. 14-15).

This paper has mainly focused on the social scripts of teaching and learning between Chinese and westerners. From a detailed comparison of the social scripts of teaching and learning, some similarities and differences have been revealed. For the differences, the paper has analyzed the underlying causes in detail by tracing back to their respective origins of education. Through comparison and contrast, it has also shown that the methodologies of Chinese education are problematic in a certain way. Understanding the limitations in learning and teaching, Chinese education now experiences reform, although it may be a long-term task to reach an ideal stage.

Besides the different social scripts concerning teaching and learning, it is beneficial that both Chinese and westerners get acquainted with the respective social scripts in the relevant fields if they intend to carry out their work properly and successfully. A mutual understanding can be achieved with the others’ social scripts in mind.

Notes

¹ From 《论语·颜渊》, see 《于丹<论语>心得》。

² From 《论语·颜渊》, see 《于丹<论语>心得》。

³ A discourse on the art of questioning as found in Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, Book IV, Ch. II, Socrates - The Nature of Justice, Original Historical Documents. Retrieved from <http://www.specialtyinterests.net/socrates.html>

⁴ Gary Rybold is a department chair at Irvine Valley College and also a PhD candidate, currently doing his research on critical thinking at BFSU in China.

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