

## What are We Doing Here? (Notes toward a Theory of the Pedagogical Encounter)

Joseph Duemer\*

*Clarkson University*

Received 22 March 2015

Accepted 20 December 2015

**Abstract:** The author's career as a university teacher began in 1980. Drawing on personal experience he develops here a theory of the Pedagogical Encounter and its place in the modern, globalizing university. Using as analogies the three Asian sacred traditions of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism, the paper develops a description of the role of educational managers and the responsibilities of all the members of the academic community.

The author's career as a university teacher began in 1980. Drawing on personal experience he develops here a theory of the Pedagogical Encounter and its place in the modern, globalizing university. Using as analogies the three Asian sacred traditions of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism, the paper develops a description of the role of educational managers and the responsibilities of all the members of the academic community.

Nearing the end of a thirty-five year career as a university professor, a career spent mostly in American classrooms, here I am in Hanoi. That fact continues to astonish me, though I have been coming to the city regularly since 1996. For an American of my generation, Vietnam looms large in the imagination—but that is a story for another occasion. In any case, I am almost equally astonished that, after all these years someone has finally asked me how universities ought to be run. Better late than never.

I've spent a good deal of time in Hanoi over the last twenty years. I find myself drawn to Vietnam's ability to improvise elegantly under constrained resources. That cultural character is of course relevant to a conference such as this, dedicated to exploring how best to manage the

resources of the modern university. Virtually all universities around the world, with the exception of a very few immensely rich institutions, must find creative ways to deal with limited resources, though this problem is particularly acute in developing nations.

Management under conditions of constrained resources is an important, an essential, topic, but I hope you will allow me to step back from that subject in order to ask a basic, even simple-minded, question: What is the *purpose* of such management? What is it that our best practices in higher education administration and management designed to sponsor? That is, What are we doing here—*here* being the modern university.

During my three and a half decades as a teacher I have worked at four American universities, three public and one private, but most of my teaching experience has been at Clarkson University, a small private university in northern New York State. (I also taught American Literature for one semester at Hanoi National University back in the late 1990s.) At Clarkson I have progressed through the academic ranks, reaching my current rank of Professor of Literature. In less than two years I

will retire and devote myself to writing, mostly poetry, attaining, perhaps, the rank of Professor Emeritus. Mine is a fairly common path for an academic of my generation, though the ground is trembling, now, beneath such neatly determined paths and younger scholars will I think have a more difficult—or at least less predictable—path. During my time at Clarkson, I have also served on many committees at various levels of organization. During the late 1990s I served as the Chair of the Faculty Senate. And so on.

I mention these details—all fairly generic—to emphasize that my experience of *management* (in the US we usually call it *administration*) comes largely from being one of the *managed* rather than one of the managers, though some of my administrative experience, especially on the Faculty Senate and in directing a small interdisciplinary program for a few years, has shaded over into managing rather than being managed. Let me say, here at the beginning, that I am grateful for the decades of institutional support I have received from Clarkson and other universities. I have been granted the privileges of time to pursue my own inclinations and I am aware of just how unusual this is in a world constrained by economic and political limits. It is, in fact, my gratitude for this very freedom that motivates the suggestions that follow. The perspective I bring to this discussion of higher education management, then, is the perspective of the classroom teacher.

What interests me is what I will call the *pedagogical encounter*.

The modern university, both in the West and in Asia, is an institution situated between the larger context of a particular society within what we might call the global educational economy, and the needs of its own constituents—teachers, researchers, students, and administrators. This is an interesting and unstable location to occupy. Its geography that of a liminal space. Within that liminal space—the university hovering between the larger society and those it serves most directly, its

students—the classroom is a focal point, the stage on which our pedagogical encounters take place. If we lose sight of the pedagogical encounter, then all our best practices of management and administration will not figure. The responsibility of managers and administrators is to protect and foster the relationship between teachers and students. It is a relationship—an encounter—that can take many forms, some more obvious than others. It is in the nature of higher education management that managers want to understand and control what occurs within their institutions. This is perfectly natural and administrators need not apologize for it, but at the same time administrative legitimacy will be amplified if administrators understand the pedagogical encounter in some detail.

Without wishing to minimize their importance, I think we can agree that we understand, in a general way, what higher education management is. Higher education management is a collection of techniques and procedures designed to accomplish the end of providing appropriate post-secondary education to a wide range of students. We may not always know which techniques or procedures are appropriate in a given situation, but we are not in doubt about the nature of our activity. Nevertheless, it is possible, in our hurry to perfect our administrative techniques, that we lose sight of just what it is we mean by “education.” This is perhaps surprising since we are educators; perhaps it is our very closeness to the subject that causes us to lose focus. I want to try to sharpen this focus, both for myself and for my colleagues across the global university—what the writer Robert Pirsig<sup>1</sup> has called “the church of reason.”

<sup>1</sup> Because this essay was written without access to printed texts, citations are limited to author and title, without page numbers, within the body of the essay. Consult the Works Cited list for specific editions. Because of the limited time available for writing this essay, it is both shorter and more informal in tone and style than the usual academic paper presented at a conference. Indeed, it is frankly autobiographical and anecdotal.

A pedagogical encounter is only a particular kind of human encounter. Perhaps there is an even wider field of encounters—we confront animals and gods from time to time—but such a consideration take us away from the particular case. We usually imagine the pedagogical encounter as occurring between a teacher and a student, though of course such encounters can take place between and among students. The energy in any PE flows both directions, if not always with equal intensity. All of us can remember instances in which our students have taught us important truths, sometimes without their even realizing the contribution they have made to our own education. As a working definition, I see the pedagogical encounter as that human moment in which a teacher and student (usually) mutually create some deeply rooted understanding. Such a definition must

remain provisional and plural—its nature in any instance is unpredictable.

Pirsig's introduction of the religious metaphor, noted above, is significant, and it serves my end, which is to try to characterize, if not exactly define, what I am calling "the pedagogical encounter." Whole libraries of educational theory have been accumulated, even if we limit the scope of interest to recent decades. As a heuristic only, I want to use three Asian sacred traditions to map, by way of analogy, the different types of pedagogical encounter, or some of them—the territory is probably infinite. In any case, I am using the terms Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism as if in scare quotes, though I will dispense with the actual punctuation for the sake of typographical elegance.

Confucianism	Sincere adherence to abstract principles. Public sphere. Presence of a teacher.
Buddhism (Zen)	Striving for personal insight. Private sphere. Teacher to be left behind.
Daoism	Attunement to flow & change. No distinction between private & public. No teacher just teaching.

#### "Confucianism"

"If you can revive the ancient and use it to understand the modern, then you are worthy to be a teacher." (*Analects*)

Confucius "was China's first professional teacher, founding the idea of a broad moral education," David Hinton writes in his introduction to *The Analects*. He also "established the enduring principle of egalitarian education—that all people should receive some form of education, that this is necessary for the health of a moral community." Hinton goes on to note, however, that the subsequent evolution of Confucianism presented certain problems for liberals and humanists, a group among which most, if not all, educators count themselves:

The brand of Confucianism wielded throughout the centuries as power's ideology of choice focused on select ideas

involving selfless submission to authority: parental, political, masculine, historic, textual. And the "sacred" Ritual dimensions of these hierarchical relationships only made them that much more oppressive. It is this aspect of the Confucian tradition that has become so problematic in modern times, for intellectuals came to recognize it as the force that was preventing China's modernization (Gardner).

Confucianism as an analogy for the pedagogical encounter, then, presents us with a paradox: in its initial conception it is egalitarian, but in subsequent development has tended to be authoritarian and repressive. For the purposes of the pedagogical encounter, we need to recover and restore the initial impulse of this philosophy:

The purpose of such education and cultivation is to become a *chiin-tzu*, a “noble-minded” one. And here again we find Confucius forging a philosophy by reshaping terminology. *Chiin-tzu* had previously referred to those of noble birth, but Confucius redefined the term (and what it is to be noble) to mean those of talent and intellectual accomplishment (Gardner).



Of the three traditions I am using as analogies, Confucianism has the most to say, directly, about education. It is an almost entirely secular set of practices, leading many to see it as a philosophy rather than a religion. (The same is often said, at least in the West, about Buddhism, with less warrant, I think.) There are sections of *The Analects* that read like a handbook for teachers and other sections, dealing with leadership, that remain relevant to those engaged in the management of higher education. Confucius particularly concerns himself with the problem of ritual, for he knows how easily ritual can calcify into doctrine. “The Master said: “The noble-minded are all-encompassing, not stuck in doctrines. Little people are stuck in doctrines” (Hinton). *The*

*Analects* extends the concern to the realm of language:

Adept Lu said: “If the Lord of Wei wanted you to govern his country, what would you put first in importance?” “The rectification of names,” replied the Master. “Without a doubt.” “That’s crazy!” countered Lu. “” What does rectification have to do with anything?” “You’re such an uncivil slob,” said the Master. “When the noble-minded can’t understand something, they remain silent. “Listen. If names aren’t rectified, speech doesn’t follow from reality. If speech doesn’t follow from reality, endeavors never come to fruition. If endeavors never come to fruition, then Ritual and music cannot flourish. If Ritual and music cannot flourish, punishments don’t fit the crime. If punishments don’t fit the crime, people can’t put their hands and feet anywhere without fear of losing them. 1 “Naming enables the noble-minded to speak, and speech enables the noble-minded to act. Therefore, the noble-minded are anything but careless “(Hinton).

The Confucian pedagogical encounter might be summarized as one in which distinctions are made and maintained, but in a way that does not harden into doctrine. Education becomes dance and music—ritual that vigilance keeps supple.

In this model of the pedagogical encounter, the responsibility of administrators is to maintain the living flexibility of educational ritual, preventing it from hardening into bureaucratic doctrine.

#### “Buddhism”

“The principle underlying the elaborate training [in meditation] is one directed precisely to this end of living radiantly in the present.” (Michael Carrithers)

One idea that connects the three sacred / philosophical traditions I am taking as analogies for education is self-cultivation, though each tradition means something quite

different by this notion. Nevertheless, the idea that one is always a student, always trying to understand one's place in the world, is important across the range of these traditions. In Buddhism, such cultivation is often divided into three parts: moral self-discipline or morality, meditation, and wisdom (*sīla*, *samādhi*, *paññā*). And many Buddhists speak specifically of "training" in these areas of practice. In my own Buddhist tradition, indeed, every person in the sangha is referred to as a student, and it is explicitly understood that the purpose of our practice is training in morality, meditation, and wisdom.<sup>2</sup>

Zen Buddhism, in particular, pays close attention to the relationship between student and teacher, institutionalizing the bond through the ritual of *shoken*, when the student formally asks the teacher for the teachings, and the ongoing practice of *dokusan*, in which the student and teacher meet face to face in formal interview. Training is also understood to include meditation and less formal activities such as work, eating, and study.



<sup>2</sup> The author practices in the Mountains and Rivers Order of Zen Buddhism, a Soto lineage of American Buddhism founded by John Daido Looi (1931-2009). Daido Roshi received dharma transmission from Taizan Maezumi 1986 and also received a Dendo Kyoshi certificate formally from the Soto school of Japan in 1994. In 1997, he received dharma transmission in the Harada-Yasutani and Inzan lineages of Rinzai Zen as well.

If Robert Persig, working from a Western philosophical tradition imagines a "church of reason," let us imagine a "monastery of practice" ". . . in which the principle underlying the elaborate training is one directed precisely to this end of living radiantly in the present" (Carrithers). The "elaborate training," however, includes much more than ritual and formal interactions. In our educational monastery, as in the Buddhist, even mundane acts become part of training, involving:

. . . an interested, indeed fascinated, absorption in what they called their 'work', which referred to the hour-by-hour, minute-by-minute prosecution of the daily round—study, careful eating, hygiene, meditation, exercise—which makes up the monk's life. In the reflective execution of these ordinary tasks they clearly found tremendous satisfaction. . . . [S]ome did nevertheless also pour tremendous energy and years of their lives into long-term projects, such as the founding of forest hermitages. Yet they still remained without anxiety and relatively indifferent to the results of their efforts. They were both remarkably successful and remarkably uninterested in success (Carrithers).

The Buddhist pedagogical encounter involves discipline and submission and even devotion, initially, to a teacher, the ultimate goal being to transform both student and teacher. There is a Zen saying that "When the student appears, the teacher appears." Such pedagogical encounters might displease—or at least discomfort administrators—but it is their duty to protect them. Doing so will in the end make the institution flourish, for it will be an institution of enlightened beings, though the Buddha reminds us that we are all already enlightened—it is the job of the teacher to reveal this truth. And it is the job of managers and administrators to safeguard the "monastery of practice" in which such transformations can take place. That is a very high calling indeed.

"Daoism"

“The Way that can be named is not the true way.” (Lao Tzu)<sup>3</sup>

Of the three traditions discussed here, Daoism is most resistant to description. The philosophy traditionally ascribed to “the old master” Lao Tzu is distrustful of any definition that is not provisional and subject to change. This might seem at first to make Daoism useless as a pedagogical mode, but if we look a little closer we will discover that the Daoist skepticism about words and definitions (shared to some extent by Zen) can have a salutary effect on teaching and learning. The American poet Walt Whitman challenges the validity of our academic enterprise in his short poem, “When I heard the Learned Astronomer,” a poem written in a spirit of “daoist” skepticism about words and from the student’s point of view when confronted by a certain kind of teacher:

When I heard the learn’d astronomer;

When the proofs, the figures, were ranged  
in columns before me;

When I was shown the charts and the  
diagrams, to add, divide, and measure them;

When I, sitting, heard the astronomer,  
where he lectured with much applause in the  
lecture-room,

How soon, unaccountable, I became tired  
and sick;

Till rising and gliding out, I wander’d off  
by myself,

In the mystical moist night-air, and from  
time to time,

Look’d up in perfect silence at the stars.

<sup>3</sup> The translation is by Stephen Mitchell. David Hinton renders the passage “A Way called Way isn’t the perennial Way” and Ames and Hall translate “Way-making (dao) that can be put into words is not really way-making, And naming (ming) that can assign fixed reference to things is not really naming,” appending the following note: Or more simply, perhaps, “Speakable way-making—this is not really way-making, nameable naming—this is not really naming.”

Lao Tzu’s successor Chuang Tzu tells the story of how he fell asleep and dreamed he was a butterfly:

Long ago, a certain Chuang Tzu dreamt he was a butterfly – a butterfly fluttering here and there on a whim, happy and carefree, knowing nothing of Chuang Tzu. Then all of a sudden he woke to find that he was, beyond all doubt, Chuang Tzu. Who knows if it was Chuang Tzu dreaming a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming Chuang Tzu? Chuang Tzu and butterfly: clearly there’s a difference. This is called the transformation of things (Hinton).

Such ontological uncertainty makes us uncomfortable, but it is the product of the most subtle kind of pedagogical encounter, one that simultaneously calls all our knowledge into question while affirming the exquisite value of our lives as they are lived under conditions of radical contingency. I will bring this discussion of the Daoist pedagogical encounter to a close with two more quotations from Chuang Tzu, both in David Hinton’s translation:

We set out like ingenious machines declaring yes this and no that. Or we hold fast like oath-bound warriors defending victory. We can say that to fade away day by day is to die like autumn into winter. But we’re drowning, and nothing we do can bring any of it back. We can say this drain is backed up in old age, full and content, but a mind near death cannot recover that autumn blaze. Joy and anger, sorrow and delight, hope and regret, doubt and ardor, diffidence and abandon, candor and reserve: it’s all music rising out of emptiness, mushrooms appearing out of mist. Day and night come and go, but who knows where it all begins? It is! It just is! If you understand this day in and day out, you inhabit the very source of it all.

A cook was cutting up an ox for Wen Hui, the king of Wei. Whenever his hand probed or his shoulder heaved, whenever his foot moved or his knee thrust, the flesh whirred

and fell away. The blade flashed and hissed, its rhythm centered and ancient and never faltering, like a rainmaker dancing Mulberry Grove or an orchestra playing Origin Constant and Essential. “Unbelievable!” said King Wen Hui. “A skill so perfected – it’s unbelievable!” The cook put down his knife and replied: “Way is what I care about, and Way goes beyond mere skill. When I first began cutting up oxen, I could see nothing but the ox. After three years, I could see more than the ox. And now, I meet the ox in spirit. I’ve stopped looking with my eyes. When perception and understanding cease, the spirit moves freely. Trusting the principles of heaven, I send the blade slicing through huge crevices, lead it through huge hollows. Keeping my skill constant and essential, I just slip the blade through, never touching ligament or tendon, let alone bone. “An exceptional cook cuts, and so needs a new knife every year. An ordinary cook chops, and so needs a new knife every month. Now, I’ve had this knife for nineteen years: it’s taken apart thousands of oxen but it’s still sharp, still fresh from the grindstone. There’s space in a joint, and the blade has no thickness. Having no thickness, it slips right through. There’s plenty of room – more than enough for a blade to wander. That’s why, after nineteen years, it’s still fresh from the grindstone. “Even so, I often come up against a knotty place where I stop and study the difficulties. Growing timid and cautious, I focus my vision, then work slowly, moving the blade with great delicacy – and suddenly thomp! thomp! things come apart, like clumps of dirt falling back to earth. Holding the knife, I stand back and look all around me, utterly content and satisfied. Then I wipe the blade clean and put it away.” “How marvelous!” said King Wen Hui. “I listen to the words of a butcher, and suddenly I’ve learned how to care for life itself!”

Whether we are administrators responsible for managing the resources of our institutions of higher education, or academics doing research and teaching, or students placing ourselves so as to gain mastery, such should be our aspiration: effortless perfection of technique that disappears as we perform our duties.

#### Conclusion: Critical Theory

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the West, philosophy came to a point of crisis with the emergence of global capitalism and mass technological societies. In Europe a school of philosophy emerged that came to be known as “critical theory.” This way of thinking bears certain similarities to the ideas I have been distilling from Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism. The earliest critical theorists—known collectively as the Frankfurt School, after the city where they lived and worked—shared the humane skepticism of these Asian sacred traditions. In *The Analects* we read, “The Noble Man is not a tool,” a sentiment that would certainly be welcomed by the members of the Frankfurt School, who “. . . investigated the ways in which thinking was being reduced to mechanical notions of what is operative and profitable, ethical reflection was tending to vanish, and aesthetic enjoyment was becoming more standardized” (Bronner).

Any sort of management structure must involve standardization and the management of higher education is not an exception. For critical theory, as for Buddhism and Daoism, and to a lesser extent Confucianism, standardization looms as a problem because it tends to erase human differences:

A bureaucratically administered mass society was apparently integrating all forms of resistance, obliterating genuine individuality, and generating personality structures with authoritarian predilections. Conformity was undermining autonomy. If capitalist development is connected with standardization and reification, then progress actually constitutes a form of regression. (Bronner).

What, then are we to do? Working together, administrators, teachers, and students—each fulfilling his or her proper Confucian role while at the same time maintaining a Buddhist sense of equanimity and Daoist flexibility—need to evolve a global critical theory of education appropriate to our lives as they are lived in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

As each of these traditions reminds us, we do not exist alone—this is the great philosophical error of Western philosophy, that something like an isolated self exists—but in relationships. These relationships can be thought of in many ways, some of which I have suggested with my analogies. Once we recognize that our lives are caught up in a web or network of relationships, we will be in a position to discharge our responsibility, which

is, for members of the academic community, to always value the pedagogical encounter above everything else. It is our reason for doing whatever it is that we do.

### Works Cited

- [1] Carrithers, Michael. *The Buddha: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001.
- [2] Gardner, Daniel K. *Confucianism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2014.
- [3] Hinton, David. *The Four Chinese Classics*. Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2013.
- [4] Pirsig, Robert. *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. New York: Morrow, 1974.
- [5] Bronner, Stephen Eric. *Critical Theory: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011.