CONFUCIAN DISCOURSE
AND THE BECOMING OF HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONALS

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Abstract

The Analects or sayings of Confucius have endured through time and are still in use today in philosophical thought and as a framework for discourse. Confucius taught that self-becoming, being virtuous, and continually evolving are worthy traits. By applying his sayings, students can be stimulated to be reflective, to think critically, and continually be self-awakening as they seek to be virtuous persons. Students learn from their teachers just as teachers learn from their students. “Even when walking in the company of two other men, I am bound to be able to learn from them. The good points of the one I copy, the bad points of the other I correct in myself” [Book 7.22]. Virtuous teachers question the ideas of students, demonstrate respect, and role model their own behaviors. While teachers are themselves continually evolving, they teach students how to grow and become the persons they wish to be. This paper discusses using the Analects in cultivating virtuous traits and the behaviors of students, as they become professionals.

KEY WORDS: Professionalism, education, teaching and learning, Confucius

INTRODUCTION

Confucius was Born circa 551 BCE near Qufu, China. He acquired the name Confucius from a transliteration of his name by Jesuit missionaries in the sixteenth century. The Analects have numerous translations, and due to the conceptual form of characters in Chinese writings, there are also numerous interpretations of their meanings. The interpretive debate is compounded by the fact that this is ancient Chinese. It is widely believed that Confucius himself did not write the Analects, but rather they were written by disciples after the fact, and based on their recollections. Ultimately, this has contributed even more to disagreements regarding their meanings.

This paper is predicated on a previous presentation entitled “New Times – Ancient Philosophy: Education and the Analects of Confucius” [Rosenkoetter & Rosenkoetter, 2004]. The current emphasis reflects the application of the Analects in the actual teaching of health care students. The fundamental Confucian teaching strategy would be to encourage dialogue regarding how students can be approached in their learning, the goal of that learning, and how teachers can facilitate their becoming, as well as the application of his “sayings” in their lives. [The word teacher is used here and throughout the paper rather than faculty. “Teacher” implies one who teaches. “Faculty” generally has a much broader meaning and encompasses the many other responsibilities such as research, professional activities and publications.]

Perhaps the most prominent of Confucius’ teachings has become the concept of ren, or the “lifelong striving for any human being to become the most genuine, sincere, and humane person he or she can become” [Li, 2003]. “His focus was on self-discipline, lifelong learning, ever-becoming, a virtuous life, and
self-awareness. Much of this stemmed from the era in which he lived which was fraught with war, chaos, and both civil and political unrest — a time of moral decay and social injustice. He believed that recognizing one’s wrongdoings was righteous. Knowledge for the sake of knowledge alone was not wisdom and learning should be a lifelong process that is ever evolving” [Rosenkoetter & Rosenkoetter, 2004]. The following are excerpts from the original paper.

Reflective thinking is essential for learning and involves reflecting on the materials of knowledge to synthesize and systematize them into a whole as well as reflection on oneself in order to incorporate them into oneself [Kim, 2003]. In today’s world, Confucian students would develop virtue and self discipline; they would be kind to others and respectful; and they would be able to listen effectively [Lam, 2001]. His mode of instruction “was based on the assumption that the accumulation of virtue (de) is not merely a question of acting according to a clear set of objective guidelines, but also involves an appreciation of how to realize one’s humanity (ren) within a complex web of human relationships and in a multiplicity of circumstances” [Setton, 2000, p. 546]. The mentor facilitates self-perfection in students and serves as a role model for the same. Yet, since “self-perfection is in fact not obtainable, the real meaning of it lies in the person’s commitment to seeking it” [Li, 2003, p. 146]. [Excerpted, Rosenkoetter & Rosenkoetter, 2004].

The challenge now is how to facilitate development within students, to interact with students in such a way to assist them in becoming self-disciplined, seeking the virtuous way, and to seek to be ever-becoming. Given that we live in a highly technological society such concepts may not always be the most significant, or even important. The task for educators is to examine their own goals and their interactions with students and to encourage students to seek out themselves and the selves that they want to become. How can these goals not only be achieved, but how can they be meshed with the goals of our educational institutions and our societies? Do these factors transcend cultural boundaries and international borders in such a manner that are applicable in any setting? And do they apply equally well in the mentoring of the less experienced and less skilled in non-educational settings such as business and industry, health care, and politics? Those questions are left to the reader to ponder.

THE ANALECTS: EXCERPTS

The primary sources for the translations and interpretations of the Analects of Confucius’ used in this paper include, [Ames & Rosemont, 1998; Applebaum, 1995; Crofts, 1995; Kaizuka, 2002; Lau, 1979], and source information is provided in the references.

Excerpt Book 1.4  Every day I examine myself on three counts. In what I have undertaken on another’s behalf, have I failed to do my best? In my dealings with my friends have I failed to be trustworthy in what I say? Have I passed on to others anything that I have not tried out myself?

Students are encouraged to do their best, but many rarely do. This has plagued teachers and scholars for centuries. Perhaps the most relevant method of teaching about doing one’s best, is to do one’s best, oneself. As students observe their faculty, and they indeed do, when they encounter excellence, they have role models to follow in their own pursuits. Being trustworthy with students and with colleagues provides a model of trustworthiness and teaches it’s true meaning. When we teach students concepts and skills that we ourselves do not fully comprehend or can not do, we convey a lack of importance to the matter. If not my mentor, then why me? Nursing is particularly vulnerable in this area because many faculty teach “practice concepts” and skills, but they themselves do not practice. While this is changing, it has long been a criticism of nursing academe. “A man is worthy of being a teacher who gets to know what is new by keeping fresh in his mind what he is already familiar with” [Book 2.11]. Each person has a responsibility to well-informed, knowledgeable, up-to-date, and skillful in practice.

Excerpt Book 7.3  It is these things that cause me concern: failure to cultivate virtue, failure to go more deeply into what I have learned, inability, when I am told what is right, to move to where it is, and inability to reform myself when I have defects.

Surely these concepts run in parallel form – being trustworthy and seeking virtue. How can one be virtuous if one is not trustworthy? As we seek greater truth, greater wisdom, we teach our students that this is virtuous. As we ask them to seek greater truth, greater wisdom, perhaps they will find this virtuous.
Encouraging students to follow what they believe is right, what is virtuous, in turn helps them become the selves that they wish to be. We ask them to grow, to change, and to learn, yet we must set the example by following the same path. Each of the health care professions demands trustworthiness and virtue among its members. And “Virtue never stands alone. It is bound to have neighbors” [Book 4.25].

Health care students face moral and ethical dilemmas in their practice, in educational settings, and in their own lives. “In his dealings with the world the gentleman is not invariably for or against anything. He is on the side of what is moral” [Book 4.10]. Forming both a moral and an ethical base for decisions is critical in health care. Who is to receive the heart transplant? Does this research violate patients’ rights or place them in potential harm? Should I report this error to someone else? Has an error indeed been made or have I made an error that needs to be corrected? Ethical study is a part of the curriculum in any professional program, but helping students to internalize and demonstrate ethical principles is a different matter. Each person has the responsibility to be respectful of patients or clients, of their rights and their rights as human subjects, as well as respectful of their religious, cultural, social, and related beliefs and values. Through critical examination and discourse, the study of situations and dilemmas, and role modeling, students have the opportunity to learn, to grow, and to become both ethical and moral in their decisions.

Excerpts Book 9.22  There are, are there not, young plants that fail to produce blossoms, and blossoms that fail to produce fruit?

Students fail and they need to be given permissions to do so, keeping in mind that they must also deal with the consequences of those failures. Some university students do not achieve what the teacher considers to be their fullest potential. This is something that educators must accept; however, students are responsible for their own learning. At the same time, it is the goal of the teacher to continue to lead the way. Regardless of which path the student chooses, the mentor continues to be a mentor with encouragement, role modeling, and facilitating the student’s thinking and growth. “I watched him making progress, but I did not see him realize his capacity to the full. What a pity!” [Book 9.21]. Does anyone ever realize one’s potential? Does anyone every realize one’s full capacity? If Confucius’ premise is correct that we are ever-becoming, then one never realizes one’s potential. This is a constant and on-going quest. Then what is the reason we have these expectations of students? If we do not have these expectation, will students continue to strive to reach their potential? Will they be competent to practice? “The common people can be made to follow a path but not to understand it” [Book 8.9]. Students do not always understand the reason they have been asked to pursue a particular path and it is the responsibility of the teacher to illuminate the way.

Excerpt Book 7.8  I never enlighten anyone who has not been driven to distraction by trying to understand a difficulty or who has not got into a frenzy trying to put his ideas into words.

Teachers can not lead students unless there is motivation on the part of the students to be lead and to learn. Cultivating this search for knowledge, this quest for truth, is the role of the teacher. When teachers are readily available, willing to listen, able to understand, and are present when these distractions and frenzies occur, they are more in a position to be a part of the student’s development and growth. Teach – teachen to show. Educate – educatus to rear. Teachers can show students the way, lead them to finding their own answers or solutions, and rear them in such a way that they are ever-becoming.

Excerpt Book 5.15  The Master said, “He was quick and eager to learn: he was not ashamed to seek the advice of those who were beneath him in station.”

It is important for students to understand that just as they learn from others, their teachers are also students. Teachers learn from one another, from their colleagues and from students as well. Only then will students be able to understand that it is acceptable, reasonable, and desirable to seek the advice of others. In most of health care, as well as business and industry, people work in groups or teams. There is constant interaction among the members and the opportunity to learn from one another. Frequently the newer member, the younger member, or the junior person brings fresh new ideas and options to the group. Some are acceptable and workable and others are not; however, when the group is open to these new ideas there is greater opportunity for growth. More specifically, in the health care arena, one must always be open to new ideas and input from colleagues in order to prevent errors, maintain progress, and create new solutions to existing problems.
Excerpt Book 2.15  The Master said, “If one learns from others but does not think, one will be bewildered. If, on the other hand, one thinks but does not learn from others, one will be in peril.”

Students need to learn the importance of learning from one another and from their mentors, but they further need to understand the importance of processing what they know in order to utilize it to the fullest and most wisely. Those who think about what they believe they know, what they feel, or what they do, can profit from discussing such matters with others, if for no other reason than doing a reality check. Often times, students formulate a response, a solution, only to find out that it is not workable in the situation or is not acceptable to those around them. This is particularly evident in beginning level health care professionals. Faculty are ever-present not only for guidance, but to prevent potentially costly and harmful errors. Through interaction and discourse with others, they can examine their ideas more closely, more deliberately and develop experience, and perhaps even wisdom.

Excerpt Book 7.22  The Master said, “Even when walking in the company of two other men, I am bound to be able to learn from them. The good points of the one I copy, the bad points of the other I correct in myself.”

Learning from others is a part of human development, but learning wisely is progress toward wisdom. Emulating the good in others can lead to virtue and self-becoming, while examining the qualities of others that are not virtuous can lead to an inner examination of the personal self. Using this process to correct things in oneself also leads to a virtuous self. By being able to see qualities in others that one finds unacceptable, and then seeing those same qualities in oneself, is progress toward change. Through change, a person can truly be ever-becoming. The Master said, “When you meet someone better than yourself, turn your thoughts to becoming his equal. When you meet someone not as good as you are, look within and examine your own self” [Book 9.17].

Excerpt Book 4.24  The exemplary person wants to be slow to speak yet quick to act.

Students are especially vulnerable to making comments before they have thought through the total situation. With mentoring, they can question and be encouraged to process their ideas, while examining the many facets of a problem or decision before it is implemented. Once they have made a decision, however, it is important to implement that decision and not equivocate – unless new facts arise. Procrastination has lead to many failing grades. Being thoughtful and decisive is particularly important in health care; otherwise critical and sometimes fatal errors can indeed occur.

Excerpt Book 12.19  The virtue of the exemplary person is the wind, while that of the small person is the grass. As the wind blows, the grass is sure to bend.

Teachers have a tremendous opportunity to have an impact on their students – through their behaviors, by living according to socially acceptable beliefs and values, by demonstrating their own virtues, and exemplifying what is good. Students frequently try to “copy” their teachers, their mentors, and try to become as they are. While students need to evolve into their own selves, emulating the exemplary qualities of others in one of the ways that they grow and develop [assuming that these are positive traits and behaviors]. Because of this need to copy, teachers need to be particularly careful about what behaviors and qualities that they make evident when around students. Yet, they must be genuine, which implies being the persons they exemplify for students. Teachers need to understand that they, as teachers, as persons, are continually changing and becoming. Demonstrating compassion for a patient, being aware of family needs or being considerate of a student in distress reflects the teacher's own values.

Excerpt Book 19.5  A person can be said to truly love learning who, on a daily basis, is aware of what is yet to be learned, and who, from month to month, does not forget what has already been mastered.

The most important concept that a student can learn is what he or she does not know. Through this a student can seek new knowledge and new skills. Teachers assist students as they learn and help them determine what they know and what they do not. While testing has become the preferred method for examining what a student knows, dialogue and discourse bring out much more about the student. They encourage the student to think critically, examine the many parts of the puzzle and develop alternatives and solutions. Through continuous and continually changing processes students are reminded of what they do not know, but also of what they do. Retaining what is mastered is important if students are to build on previous knowledge and skills. This also places greater emphasis on the testing modalities, on discourse, and higher levels of learning. In health care, it is essential for practice providers to know what...
they do not know, to ask questions, to seek solutions, and be willing to ask for advice and counsel. Without this, the patient or client can be placed in jeopardy.

Excerpt Book 19.6 Learn broadly yet be focused in your purposes, inquire with urgency yet reflect closely on the question at hand.

Education varies considerably from one country to another, and therefore, it is difficult to characterize “learning broadly”. Yet, when health care students study a variety of disciplines it assists them in thinking about complex factors when they contemplate solutions to a problem. When they can address a problem while considering the sociological, cultural, political, aesthetic, and other facets, they bring to the solution greater depth and understanding. One of the challenges for teachers is to help students choose a designated course of study through which they will gain this broad understanding – not only in their disciplines, but in their lives as they continue to mature. It is further the responsibility of the teacher to help students focus on the issue at hand, eliminating or isolating irrelevant and competing forces. When problems arise, the teacher encourages the student to acknowledge it immediately, reflect, and be decisive in actions.

Excerpt Book 15.24 Do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire.

This is a familiar phrase in Christian doctrine and known as the Golden Rule. Faculty are role models for students and as such need to treat students they way they would want to be treated. We have all had faculty in our pasts that we did not like, who were hurtful, and whose behaviors we did not value. Unfortunately, we tend to remember those people and not too kindly. To be remembered as a valued mentor, as a wise person, and one of virtue, the teacher must act accordingly. And in most instances students will respond accordingly. Health care students have a responsibility to their patients to treat them with respect, understanding and kindness, as well as to treat their peers in the same manner. Too often in complex health care systems the hectic pace, the crisis orientation, and the emergency nature of many situations tend to overshadow the importance of the interactive nature of the professional/patient interaction and bond.

Excerpt Book 15.30 Having gone astray, to fail to get right back on track is to stray indeed.

Students are going to make mistakes and indeed go astray. They may not understand the content, they may have chosen other priorities rather than learning, or they have made commitments that they could not fulfill. Helping them to recognize the problems, develop solutions, and change their ways is the mentoring role of the teacher. If they choose not to change their behaviors, the consequences are much more profound than just having erred in the first place.

CULTIVATING STUDENTS – THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER

Question the ideas, conceptual frameworks, and solutions of students.
Help them to think critically when solving problems.
Be a role model.
Treat students fairly and equitably.
Show respect for students and their ideas, yet challenge them.
Be continually evolving and changing toward a more virtuous self.
Seek to realize your own potential.
Listen with attentiveness and understanding.

CONCLUSIONS

The Analects of Confucius can be a framework for teaching and interaction with students in modern society just as they were over 2000 years ago. Cultivating the development, the evolving self of students is an appropriate role for the teacher, the mentor. Through thoughtful interactions and stimulating discourse, students can be challenged to find their own solutions and to seek virtuous ways. After all, we are all ever-becoming.
REFERENCES


