Chapter 12

Learning to Unlearn: 
Using Taoism and Critical Pedagogy in Language Education to Foster Global Unity

Matthew E. Lewerenz 
Walden University, USA

ABSTRACT

The U.S. and many countries across Europe and around the world are currently experiencing increased cultural tensions and xenophobia, particularly against those whose ethnic, religious, or linguistic orientations make them a minority or an otherwise vulnerable group. This comes despite the fact that we are a more interconnected global society than perhaps ever before in our history. Communication is central to overcoming this obstacle, and language instruction can be an integral locus for directly confronting perceptions and prejudices. Creating practical learning applications and assessments that foster critical thinking and utilize ontological, ethical, and educational practices rooted in the Tao Te Ching, integrated with a critical pedagogical framework, can effect positive social change and help foster global unity through mutual linguistic and ontological identification.

INTRODUCTION

Positive social change is something that is very easy to visualize and discuss, yet often very difficult to enact. The Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu, in discussing his own ideas about the individual and society, said “My words are very easy to understand, and very easy to put into practice, but no one is able to understand them, and no one is able to put them into practice” (Tzu, 1990, p. 45). Educators from Lao Tzu’s time to our own often like to think of themselves as philanthropists of a sort, responsible for transmitting vital knowledge that students did not previously have, and bringing about positive social change, one class at a time, through a kind of intellectual alchemy created by their own knowledge of subject matter combined with their ability to transmute and implant this understanding into the minds of students capable of understanding and synthesizing it. Nonetheless, educators from antiquity to now have struggled with how to most effectively accomplish this task, as well as whether or not their efforts are truly in the best interests of their students.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-3082-4.ch012
Within the various Western traditions that have sought to codify this endeavor through formal educational systems, there has been, since at least the time of the Greeks, a dichotomy between teacher and student, one that Brazilian educator Paolo Freire famously termed the “banking concept” of education and which linguist and philosopher David Abram (1997) tied into both the Platonic dichotomy of the natural and human worlds and the concurrent Greek adoption of the Semitic phonetic alphabet (or “aleph-bet”). This system is dependent upon an underlying ontological structure that takes *a priori* the distinct separateness of both the teacher and the student as well as the knowledge to be transmitted. In contrast to this approach, philosophical strains and cultural practices arose in the cultures of Eastern societies that took a unified approach to the practices of self-identity and education. Within a critical pedagogical framework, elements of these can be put to use in the service of transformative education that can educate as well as liberate and unify those engaged in it.

This approach sees, as does the critical pedagogy of Freire, to dissolve the teacher-student dichotomy, but it goes a step further in asserting that, praxis aside, the teacher and the student and every other person on earth are less individuals, ontologically, and more a part of a collective whole. Knowledge is less an objective thing to be possessed by one person and transmitted between discrete individual units than it is a cohesive affirmation about the state of things within a collective consciousness. It is unorthodox in the Western tradition to assert as much, but this approach would say that there is, in fact, nothing to be learned, and no one to learn it. In taking this approach, however, anyone can learn anything.

**TAOISM**

Depending on the source, Lao Tzu, the founder of Taoism, was either a real or fictitious person who may have lived in China during the Warring States period, before China’s unification under the Emperor Qin. The fundamental elements of Taoist philosophy include a rejection of division and labels and equality between masculine and feminine energies. “Tao,” which is both a noun and a verb, translates roughly as “way,” is conceived of as a unifying force that comprises and runs through all things. Taoism’s central text, the *Tao Te Ching*, which translates roughly as “Way integrity book,” as its name implies, deals with way of all things, the way to live, and how to cultivate integrity. There are also adages addressed to rulers dispensing advice on governance. This text and its accompanying corpus of work, along with those of Confucianism and Buddhism, laid the foundations for Chinese thought for the next two thousand years. As this essay will go on to discuss, many aspects of Taoism can be integrated with a critical pedagogical context to inform effective pedagogies that offer unique perspectives on the learning process which, interestingly, have their own corollaries within the words of some of modern critical pedagogies prominent thinkers, like Paolo Freire and Henri Giroux.

“If you follow the realized mind you’ve happened into, making it your teacher, how could you be without a teacher?... When mind turns to itself, you’ve found your teacher” (p. 21). Here Chuang Tzu (1997), one of Lao Tzu’s disciples, articulated ideas about pedagogy in ancient China that might resonate today with Freire and Giroux. Chuang Tzu discussed breaking down the dichotomy between teacher and pupil nearly two thousand years before they were discussed in the West.

In addition to the *Tao Te Ching* and the works of Chuang Tzu, another text, the Hua Hu Ching, plays an important role in the Taoist canon. This text represents a written compendium of two thousand years of oral teachings—similar to the Hadith within Islam—and it elucidates and expands and many of the ideas in the *Tao Te Ching* and the works of Chuang Tzu. The 51st verse of the Hua Hu Ching offers moral im-