

Diversity, Language, and Discovering Oneself Through Philosophy of Education

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Introduction

The themes for research and related questions posed for this conference, on globalisation, internationalisation, and universality in philosophy of education, are critical to consider in higher education and research. Given the polarisation of conversations across the world and within many societies today, these questions help us to explore our responsibilities as educators and academics, to understand diversity, and to enable others, our colleagues and students, to do the same. This work involves cultivating and sustaining dispositions of open-mindedness, as well as tolerating awareness of the ‘known unknown’.

In this paper, I share some anecdotes, or vignettes, to stimulate discussion around some issues faced when grappling with diversity, language, and cultural difference in philosophy of education. These problems, as revealed within my ‘case studies’, are not particular to philosophy of education, but the stories expose some concerns relevant to our work, as international and cross-culturally engaged scholars. They are based on my experiences as a scholar in different parts of the world. I will conclude by discussing some points related to philosophy of education in the Asia-Pacific region.

I start with real-life stories rather than abstract theories for a few reasons. First, I do not want a reader’s experience of my story to be made distant and foreign, due to the use of a specific theorist or theory. I do not want to distract from our capacity to understand each other, by focusing on a third party, which we may understand differently. I also do not want to rely on a philosophical argument that involves understanding a concept according to a particular thinker. Such a style is used in analytic philosophy and pragmatic

philosophy. However, it is likely across language communities that we will learn more about our differences, than about any idea, by following such a strategy. Here I am inspired by Ono Fumio's writing on philosophy in the age of globalisation (2018), and Naoko Saito's work on the difficulties and impossibilities of translation (2016; 2018; Jackson, 2016). In this paper, I do not want to needlessly confuse, by presenting a sophisticated argument that may not be useful to people. Therefore, I ask you to consider my perspective in the following stories, and see if you have similar experiences, of cross-cultural differences in life and philosophy. Readers may ask if telling stories is a good methodology for philosophy, since they are not generalizable, and not framed by logic or analysis. I leave it up to others to respond to this, based on their views of this work.

1. We see what we look for

After earning my PhD and before moving to Hong Kong, I worked for two years in international development in South Africa. I worked with the United States Peace Corps, one of the largest international aid organisations. The Peace Corps aims to build capabilities in disadvantaged areas, in line with nations' own priorities (Jackson, 2013). It also works to promote the United States, through its presence in a country, and the good intentions of the volunteers. I worked to support the volunteers in training and development in the country. The volunteers were mostly young Americans, with little international experience, who wanted to make a difference in the world.

In my work I found that Paulo Freire was beloved by volunteers. They particularly liked his view that a community must decide dialogically what matters to it, in education as praxis (theory/practice). Volunteers were passionate about this justice-based approach. In their spare time they would organize to study Freire (1989). In formal trainings, they also learned how to facilitate open, dialogic "community needs assessments." They would learn how to discuss what people in the local area wanted, their needs, threats, and challenges, and then collectively decide on ways to fix community problems. They took several months of language training and lived in rural areas of the country before entering their work sites, to prepare to do this work effectively.

However, at their sites, the volunteers did not have an easy time. They found that dialogue for praxis is difficult, even when both parties apparently intend to engage, and seem to have a nice time talking to each other. In an article, a former volunteer discusses that she "had lengthy, optimistic conversations with a village chief about starting a community garden only to discover that I misread his reaction and that he was, in fact,

against the whole endeavor” (Lau, 2011). Such challenges are common. The Peace Corps warns volunteers about this, as a ‘cross-cultural challenge’. Yet the volunteers were always surprised, after months (and sometimes years) of cultural and language training, that they lacked basic cultural understanding needed to do their work. Local people would not be aggressive in the way they expected, using a passive-aggressive manner, as they often found it offensive for young people from the United States to enter their space, full of complaints, and obsessed with local problems. In the local view, this was a disrespectful way of behaving to generous hosts, especially as the volunteers also claimed they wanted to learn from local people.

In this case, the volunteers were not listening, because they did not know how to hear. They did not see signs of disagreement. The late African HIV/AIDS activist David Ross Patient, wrote that in cross-cultural work, responses are prescribed by questions: “If you communicate, then the response (or lack thereof) is simply a reflection of your communication. If you communicate differently, you will get different results. Examine their map of the world again” (2012). In an article reflecting on this challenge, I noted that this problem is not only faced by young volunteers (Jackson, 2013). Wealthy benefactors face the same challenge. Melinda Gates made it her goal to provide millions of women in Africa with contraception. To justify her view, she relied on statistics on maternal and infant mortality, and the voices of African women. She noted that “We have 100,000 women who didn’t want to get pregnant who die in childbirth. We have 600,000 babies, where mothers say they didn’t intend to get pregnant and their child dies—every single year” (Hultman, 2012). Various African leaders, as well as the Pope, contend that contraception goes against their faiths. Others are suspicious of Gates, responding that “African babies are not the threat” (Wirnkar, 2012). Gates ignored the fact that contraception is available all over Africa. She herself stated in 2006 that condoms were not making a major impact on HIV/AIDS in Africa because of stigma, “cruel” and “irrational.” Gates did not think about if stigma would be associated with other forms of contraception.

In South Africa I participated in a workshop on HIV/AIDS with local community members. The community members were school principals, health department officials, clinic managers, and health teachers. When they were asked if they knew how HIV was spread, they all knew. They all knew that condoms can prevent sexual transmission. Yet when they were asked if they used condoms, they all said no. Finally, we asked what we should have asked in the first place: Why don’t people use protection? To have children is essential in their communities, they said. To use a condom would offend a partner, because everyone wants children. In their view, it was deviant to not want children. Then

they asked the Americans: Why don't you want children? Why would you want to avoid having children?

This experience taught me that people have very different concerns across cultural and social contexts. People assume that they have the same values, concerns, and hopes and fears, but this is not necessarily the case. Sadly, these situations often end negatively. Everyone feels confused and disheartened, challenged by the lack of commonality or universality of experience, helpless to benefit others. Such experiences can make people fear difference, and feel cynical about helping others, but such experiences should educate people. People should not be disturbed to learn that other people are different from them. This means that they themselves are a certain kind of way, not universal subjects themselves.

2. Happy classrooms

When I moved to Hong Kong, I had some challenges with teaching, since I came from the United States (via South Africa, the United Arab Emirates, and other countries). I knew the students wanted me to act in a way that seemed, from an American perspective, to be like a 'serious authority figure': Not smiling, serious, hierarchical, possessing all the knowledge. Since the University wants to Americanise the campus and globalise students, I was encouraged to be 'myself' and teach my own way. In the United States, I would want students to feel free to smile, laugh, and have fun in the classroom.

Yet I realised that my requests for students to act more relaxed and equal to me in the classroom were hopeless. The more I wanted them to relax, to be casual and comfortable, to treat me like a friend, and to say their opinions, the *less* they appeared to relax. My requests resulted in them becoming more serious, less smiling, more dedicated, and more respectful and hierarchical. Despite the view in the United States that professors and students act like friends and act like they are equal, there is still a kind of respect demanded. In this regard, I felt disrespected that the students did not trust my judgment, and act more friendly and casual. After the class, I realised they were doing everything in their power, based on their life experiences, to respect me, and learn from me. Yet it is not professional or intelligent in Hong Kong to act casual, and smile and be informal in classrooms. The more I wanted them to respect me—by being casual—the more they worked hard to respect me—by being formal. We all had a painful experience with each other.

Of course, not all Hong Kong students are the same, and I am not a typical American.

With time, I am a part of Hong Kong culture. Now I go to the United States, and I remind myself to smile and act casual. New colleagues to Hong Kong from the United States are surprised I am formal and follow conventions.

Some people hold the idea that all happiness is the same, and seen the same around the world. But smiling is not the same in Hong Kong and the United States. The best smile is toothy in the United States, which is not the same in Great Britain. In Hong Kong and China, happiness is found more, according to research, in the wellbeing of one's community, rather than as individual pleasure (Ho, Duan & Tang, 2014). While people may have the same emotions in a basic sense, they make sense of them in different ways, based on language and conventions of relationships. To the extent that emotions are cognitive, this means the emotions have different flavours across contexts. Many people observe that they 'feel different', or their personality changes, when they speak in a second language. Words and concepts, and feelings about relationships, are different around the world. This adventure is ignored in the quest for universal understanding, or the embrace of global homogeneity.

3. Is it logical?

Based on experience writing philosophy of education in different parts of the world, I have learned that what is prized as intelligent, clever, rational, and logical changes across contexts. In a simple way, this can be seen in relation to the Philosophy of Education Society (PES), and the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain (PESGB). There are differences among American styles, British analytic genres, and European continental styles. I trained for my Master's work at Cambridge in England, where I did an analysis of liberal political philosophy, and the work of Kant and Rawls. I am only fluent in the English language, but I realised in England that my English was not 'English' English. I had to learn English grammar anew, as much as possible. Grammar is important to arguments: for example, if you are saying concepts are like each other, the same, or one is required for the other, or vice versa. At the same time, there are argument conventions, like saying what one is going to say before they say it in the introduction, or showing the arguments against one's view before giving arguments one prefers. English theorists argue in a subtler way, I learned, while American scholars tend to value arguments that are more obvious and politically oriented.

I learned these things not when I went to England, but when I returned to the states, for my PhD. At Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, where Dewey and pragmatism are valued,

I discovered many professors there found English philosophers ‘snobby’, ‘elitist’, or not interested in real-world issues. This surprised me, because I found that are equally concerned with real-life issues, but these issues vary across societies, while the way to express concern is not the same. This can be seen in the way emotions are treated across the two countries generally. Americans are usually more dramatic and emotionally showy than English people. To not be emotionally showy is not to lack concern, among the English.

I knew cultural logics were different when I worked in Africa and the Middle East, and I expected them to be different in Hong Kong and Chinese society. Indeed, I learned how the language itself is different, and how this changes perception. To use tones to convey meaning is different in Chinese languages than in English—while there are also differences in how to inflect tones properly in American versus British English, and in Cantonese in Hong Kong and in Mainland China. Meanwhile, those who use tones to change words seem to speak English less emotionally. I learned that categorising things for the purposes of grammar is quite different in Cantonese. Learning Cantonese gave me a new way of seeing the world.

I heard that Chinese and Asian philosophies were more holistic than western ones, which are more binary, either/or, and categorising, with more emphasis on yes/no, one or the other. I learned how this made a difference for conducting philosophy of education at a seminar in the United States. At the seminar, most of the people were Americans, but there were a few Chinese and Japanese participants. The seminar was focused on responding to one Chinese woman’s paper. The paper was about her perception of a situation, and a memory she had, from the past. In my understanding, her view was that memory changes perception, and made it difficult to describing the situation as being one kind of situation, or another. In the example, she wondered whether she had experienced discrimination, due to her identity in the United States as a Chinese woman, or whether she was too sensitive. Her point was that there was no way to make a conclusive judgment. I thought it was a very provocative educational argument, and a strong piece of writing. However, most of the Americans there expressed that they did not think she was not telling her story properly. They wanted her to give more details, and to say that things were either one way, or the other: that she was discriminated against, or that she was not. They acted as if she was failing to do what she was supposed to do. However, she explained that this was the point of her paper: that perception could be faulty. I was astonished to see in this case how colleagues treated this senior woman, as if she needed help to write a paper like a student, because they did not understand that things do not always fit into their categories.

After the event, I spoke with another American woman, and I told her that I did not understand her concern. I told her that I thought the paper was a brilliant example of how memory and perception are subjective. She replied to me just as she did to the author of the paper, saying that the story was ‘not clear’. When I asked what was ‘not clear’, I did not understand her reply. It may be part of pragmatism that one is always convincing others about strong views—I cannot say this with certainty, because I never studied pragmatism. However, I later discussed it with other Asian participants in the seminar, who all agreed there had been an uncomfortable misunderstanding.

I later had a conversation with another Asian scholar, in a different context, who remarked, ‘Americans have to put everything in boxes’. Now I tend to agree. I have also had experiences where I feel that American editors want me to make my point more dramatically, or make recommendations about things I do not have expertise or knowledge about. The way to do philosophy of education is at debate here.

4. ‘Passive’ Asians

Since I live in Hong Kong, colleagues in North America, Europe, Britain, Australia, and New Zealand ask me: How do I work with the ‘passive’ Asian students, from Hong Kong, China, Korea, and Japan? When I entered Hong Kong, I did not assume or expect that my students would be passive. I have not found them to be passive. There is a cultural difference, however. It goes back to my ‘happy classroom’ example. My students in Hong Kong do not think it is intelligent or respectful, to themselves, their peers, or their teachers, to say their opinions when they feel they have no basis or foundation for them, in theory or data. As in the last example, my students question that which they do not know, and they will not assert something for the sake of asserting something. This stance is not passive. My students have judgments about things. They do not assume the value of a lesson where students express baseless opinions, as in some student-centred education (Jackson, 2015). They reject education they disagree with, on the streets in Hong Kong (Jackson & O’Leary, 2019). They ask me for help with things they do not know about, or feel they understand sufficiently. How it this be passive?

These colleagues are similar to those described in the last example, who feel that making bold claims is better than exploring the complexity and challenges of knowing. These colleagues do not recognise that there are different logics than the ones they live with. We are here because we are interested in understanding more about these logics, and what to do about them. Yet many around us in daily life, our students and colleagues,

do not recognise that they are particular kinds of people—it is not just others who are ‘different’.

Concluding Thoughts: Globalising Philosophy of Education

I find travel to be the best education. One does not understand how they are American or Japanese, and what that means, until they leave their country. For this reason, it is heart breaking to me when scholars fail to see differences as different logics, and instead just see them as failures of understanding, on one side or another.

Besides serving as the President of the Philosophy of Education Society of Australasia (PESA), I am the only regular member and conference attendee in the Society from the United States. Most members of PESA are from Australia and New Zealand, followed by Japan, Korea, and other countries in Asia and Europe. One thing I have learned in my time at PESA, and other conferences such as PES and PESGB, is that traditions are important to people. This includes traditions in organising conferences, as well as scholarly traditions. However, how traditions are conceived in philosophy of education is skewed in some ways, often biased toward western scholars and western philosophies. At an excellent presentation by Mika Okabe at PESA (2018), I learned that in Japan there is a focus on western theory, while there are also questions among Japanese philosophers about how to make philosophy of education more Japanese. These problems are not unique to Japan. China, Taiwan, and Korea also study western traditions of philosophy of education. Australia, New Zealand and the United States also follow European and British ways in part, as traditions.

This is not too problematic, from a certain perspective. All fields have their histories. These histories can be seen in a political way, and changed, if people desire, or not changed, while they are reflected upon. However, sometimes it can become a source of cross-cultural challenges, when Japanese and other Asian scholars interact with western scholars in relation to these traditions. The problem occurs when western scholars claim a monopoly on what a scholar from history said, based on linguistic knowledge, or even cultural or historical knowledge. In other words, western primacy is inequitable, if it used to suggest or imply that Asians know less than westerners do about philosophy. This can happen if the topic being explored is what westerners, or particular western scholars think. However, I am not sure these are productive or significant topics in philosophy of education. I am not a Dewey scholar, compared to many people in China, or a scholar of Derrida, like Ruyu Hung in Taiwan, or Stanley Cavell, like Naoko. In this case, I can

learn as much about Dewey from someone in the states or in China, but I am not really interested in what Dewey thought, or the ‘right way’ to think about him. In my view, the more interesting question is how he resonates with scholars, and in what ways.

To me, the interesting topics relate to how similar issues are experienced and understood in different parts of the world, by different people. My biggest concern in the context of this work is the supremacy of the views of English speakers, who are often ignorant about different logics in the world, and often lack a sense of other people’s inner worlds, yet attribute this to a failure to understand. This should not be seen as a problem for which non-native English speakers are to blame. However, in a globalised context where English is primary, misunderstanding puts an unfortunate burden on non-native English speakers, who often work and study in other languages, to translate themselves, and educate people who do not know what they do not know. This translation work takes patience, like working with a student who does not realise the need to study or think about something they have never thought about. A reward of being bilingual and cross-cultural is that those of us living in a heterogeneous world get to occupy diverse logics and various worlds, while those in one homogeneous logic are impoverished as humans experiencing things. How can others see the diversity of the world as a gift? How can we make them see this is worthwhile, when they feel vulnerable (to misunderstanding, to not being right or best), in the way that the rest of us are?

Finally, as President of PESA I want to welcome PESJ members into more PESA spaces. I am afraid that sometimes PESA hospitality does not seem genuine. Hospitality in Japan is exceptional. Australia and New Zealand are casual by comparison. Nonetheless, I invite you to take up space, explain what Cavell, Heidegger, Arendt, and Tesuro Watsuji mean for you, and in Japanese society. I also encourage moving away from getting logics right, including the logics of PESA. I will never get the logic right, myself. However, you will gain something from being misunderstood, including a new vision of yourself. And if you persist, you might just get others to misunderstand along with you, in a peaceful and delightful way.

As I write this, China and Hong Kong are in crisis. I am planning the PESA Conference in Hong Kong in December, and Australians and New Zealanders do not understand the crisis, and are afraid to come to Hong Kong, seeing media coverage which is negative and dramatic, meant to impart fear. In Hong Kong, we pride ourselves on efficiency, safety, and civility. Here is an example of missing the world. The media is not concerned with educating, but profits from fear, so people keep watching, dependent on media for security. Yet security can never come. The world is dynamic and unsafe, from an existential or experiential, emotional view. While I deplore violence, injustice, and

oppression, we must think through what is safe or unsafe, when it comes to the logics of the world. It is not safe to cling to one's view, and appeal to its correctness. This leads to more camps against each other. We must share what is human about us, to learn about ourselves while learning about each other.

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