RECOGNISING TRADITIONAL COLLECTIVE IDENTITY FOR IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF LEARNING IN VIETNAMESE HIGHER EDUCATION

LE VAN HAO, PHD.

Department of Quality Assurance & Inspection, Nhatrang University, Vietnam
E-mail: haolv@ntu.edu.vn

ABSTRACT

For improving the quality of education, one of the priorities of the current wide ranging reform in higher education in Vietnam is to enhance the quality of teaching and learning. Several “new” teaching and learning models designed from western countries have been introduced and implemented in university classrooms. Most emerging from those models is probably “cooperative learning” or “collaborative learning,” as many Vietnamese graduates have been viewed as lacking team-work skills in the workplace.

By analysing history and daily activities of people, this paper aims to prove that cooperative or collaborative manner does exit in the traditional collective identity of Vietnamese people and it can contribute to the development of student learning. This identity was formed under special social and historical conditions of Vietnam and then nurtured/modified under the impacts of Confucianism and Buddhism. However, such traditional identity has not been cultivated in higher education context because of a variety of constraints and conceptions.

Making change by cultivating traditional and valuable identity is believed much more available than by adopting similar “foreign” patterns. Therefore, helping people to recognise such identity and then making use of it is necessary and needs to be done with priority in education. Because Confucianism and Buddhism also make great impacts on some other countries in Asia, the analysis in this paper may shed some light on the identification of teaching and learning styles in higher education of these countries.

Keywords: Collective identity, Collaborative learning, Confucianism, Buddhism

1. SOCIAAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE COLLECTIVE IDENTITIES OF VIETNAMESE PEOPLE

The collectivism of Vietnamese people include the collective and collaborative lifestyle, the inter-dependency and caring spirit, and the attitude of “standing or falling together” (Pham, 2000b). The history of Vietnam reflects a high level of collectivism and collaboration among people during the course of national defence and development. This lifestyle has long been one of the traditional qualities of the Vietnamese people (Do & Nguyen, 2000; Pham, 2000b). Historically, Vietnamese society developed from systems of agricultural villages. Each village had its own verbal and non-verbal regulations besides the state laws. These regulations mentioned mostly the relationships among people within each family and within a village. Therefore, each Vietnamese person in such a village was connected to his/her community by mental, legal, and productive relationships with people around. All these values have become embodied in the Vietnamese people in their traditional collective and collaborative lifestyle. "La lanh dum la rach" [The good leaves must cover the bad ones], "doan ket la song, chia re la chet" [United we stand, divided we fall], and "mot cay lam chang nen non, ba cay chum lai nen hon nui cao" [One tree cannot make a hill, but three trees can form a high mountain] have long been the popular proverbs expressing the spirit of unity, of supportive, caring and collaborative relationship among the Vietnamese. In addition, Vietnam has long been a country threatened by flood and drought. For surviving such serious natural disasters, Vietnamese people have chosen the "community lifestyle" in which
the local culture has emphasized the subordination of the individual to collective discipline of family and village. Both the family and the village have been relatively closed, corporate entities, self-reliant, and responsible for the action of their individual members. (Jamieson, 1993, p. 5)

In Vietnamese life, in cities or rural areas, enhancing community relationship is always an important task of any family as proved in the saying: "Ho hang xa khong bang lang gieng gan" [The close neighbours are more helpful than the distant relatives]. Inter-responsibility and caring behaviours have also been the traditional values of the Vietnamese people when they work together. Pride and shame often have a collective or group-based meaning rather than individual as reflected in the popular proverbs: "Con sau lam rau noi canh" [A slug can spoil a whole pot of soup], or "mot con ngua dau ca tau khong an co" [One ill horse can result in a whole herd not eating grass].

An important aspect of Vietnamese collectivism is that family is usually perceived as a basic social unit. It is considered as the best place to preserve, nurture, and develop the Vietnamese traditional culture. In a Vietnamese family, both the pride and shame of each family member are shared by the rest. If there is any conflict inside the family, it is often handled among its members without exposing it to "outsiders". In contrast, if any family member attains great achievement, this would be publicised to friends or neighbours.

2. INFLUENCES OF CONFUCIANISM AND BUDDHISM

Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism combine to form the underpinnings of the Vietnamese culture. Among these, Confucianism and Buddhism have remained important influences on the Vietnamese culture until now (Pham, 2000b). These religions or philosophies, combined with national and historical characteristics, form the traditional values of the Vietnamese people which exist until now. In education, however, Confucianism has had the most significant impact (Tran, 1995).

2.1 Influences of Confucianism

Confucius (551 - 479 BC), the founder of Confucianism, has been seen as the most eminent philosopher of the Chinese people and is popularly known around the world. His philosophy "has for these 2,500 years summed up and included in its system nearly all that is good in the original Chinese cultural heritage, and has from time to time assimilated and absorbed good elements from alien systems, thus constituting what we have in Chinese civilization" (Jingpan, 1990, p. 7). Confucianism is an extensive philosophical system of cultural and social ideals, political principles, moral codes and educational theories. For centuries, it has influenced the development and social structure of many East Asian countries.

Confucianism was introduced to Vietnam with the invasion of the Chinese empire in the first century. At that time, Confucianism was accepted as a national philosophy in politics, education, and social life of the Chinese people. It had maintained an important role in establishing and maintaining a stable and hierarchical society in China from the sixth century BC. When the first feudal governments (typically the Ly and Tran dynasties, from 11th to 14th centuries) were established in Vietnam, during the period of national independence, Confucianism continued to be considered as an ideal philosophy for political administration and education (Tran, 1995). Books written in Chinese with Confucian content were used to educate the Vietnamese elite and also pupils in the village schools for hundreds of years. Confucian moral values were practised and seen as "standards" in governmental administration, in social interaction, and also in Vietnamese families.

Although the influences of Confucianism on the Vietnamese character are deep-rooted, research on Confucianism and these influences had not been well developed before the "open stage" (1986 onwards) in Vietnam (Nguyen, 1997). In recent years, Confucianism has gained significant attention as being an important source of the Vietnamese tradition. Many Confucian values are believed to have contributed to the Vietnamese human development (Tran, 1995).

At the individual level, the most significant contribution of Confucianism to the Vietnamese people is probably the spirit of self-cultivation. This spirit encourages people to always further their moral development, intellectual ability, and physical health. Morality and qualification are often the two most important factors to be considered for promotion in Vietnamese workplace. Morality in Vietnam is not a personal...
matter. It is really a matter of concern not only in education but also in social life and workplace. Confucianism has contributed greatly to this Vietnamese tradition. However, there have been several controversies among Vietnamese educators and historians on these values. Tran (1995) summarises studies on the influences of Confucianism in Vietnam. According to him, Confucianism has imposed both positive and negative influences on the Vietnamese characters which relate strongly to education.

Confucianism has developed in the Vietnamese people a fondness of learning and understanding, an eagerness of whole-life learning, and a spirit of social contribution. Confucianism also contributed to the Vietnamese people a system of flexible and proper conduct. [...] Confucianism has developed in people a blind loyalty, an attitude of unchallenging, and a self-strict life style. It also made the Vietnamese people be mainly interested in repetitive learning and examination, and devalue practical activities…(p. 60)

But to Doan (2000), Confucius always encouraged effective teaching and learning strategies such as inquiry teaching, discussion methods; and he was interested in promoting understanding in learning and how to make knowledge become useful. This comment is similar to Jingpan’s study in China. Jingpan (1990) devoted a large chapter in his PhD thesis (Chapter Six: The Methods of the Teaching of Confucius) to discuss the invaluable contribution of Confucius to teaching and learning. According to Jingpan (1990), Confucius always urged his students "to be doers and not hearers of learners" (p. 387) and encouraged them "to put his teaching into action" (p. 387).

2.2 Influences of Buddhism

Historically, most Vietnamese have identified themselves with Buddhism, which originated in what is now southern Nepal around 530 B.C. as an offshoot of Hinduism (Cima, 1989). According to Nguyen (1996b) Buddhism was first imparted to Vietnam during the first century A.D. when Indian businessmen and monks came to Vietnam. But according to Cima (1989), Buddhism spread first from China to Vietnam's Red River Delta region in approximately the second century A.D., and then from India to the southern Mekong Delta area at some time between the third and the sixth century. Throughout the history of Vietnam, Buddhism contributed greatly to the nation's welfare and enriched Vietnamese culture. During the feudal dynasties (typically during the Ly and Tran dynasties, from 11th to 14th centuries), several eminent Vietnamese monks served as national advisors to the kings on important national matters (Thich, 1975). Buddhism was the national religion under some dynasties (e.g., Tran and Dinh's dynasties).

The philosophy of Buddhism matched with the Vietnamese character and tradition, therefore, it was quickly accepted by the Vietnamese people. Buddhism is believed to play the most significant role in forming the Vietnamese lifestyle and their world outlook (Nguyen, 1996a). Almost every village in Vietnam has at least one pagoda which is established, protected, and cared for by the villagers. Going to the pagoda for praying or attending services has become a normal activity of many Vietnamese, especially the elderly. The Buddhist concept of morality and right behaviour, which has had strong influences on the Vietnamese, consists of right views, or sincerity in leading a religious life; right intention, or honesty in judgment; right speech, or sincerity in speech; right livelihood, or sincerity in making a living; right effort, or sincerity in aspiration; right mindfulness, or sincerity in memory; and right concentration, or sincerity in meditation. (Cima, 1989, p. 120)

One of the most significant values that Buddhism has developed in the Vietnamese people is Tu Bi, the spirit of humanitarian, open-heartedness, sympathy, and forgiveness. This spirit emphasises kindness and care among people. It discourages jealousy, selfishness, and individualism (Pham, 2000a). In regard to education, this spirit encourages collaboration among people in doing something they think valuable to the others and to one's self. Individual competition is less preferred to the progress of all as the whole. However, Nguyen (1996a) argued that the belief in destiny/fate rooted from Buddhist philosophy, which views one's life being pre-defined by the Supreme Lord, can make many Vietnamese less interested in devoting themselves to challenging in life or changing the world around them.
In summary, the collective identities of Vietnamese people are shaped by different sources. Confucianism and Buddhism contribute grounded philosophies for proper individual behaviour and social interaction, while the history and the social development of Vietnam has nurtured and promoted traditional collaboration among Vietnamese.

3. COLLABORATIVE LEARNING AND STUDENT-CENTREDNESS IN VIETNAMESE HIGHER EDUCATION

The shift from teaching to learning, which characterises the transition from teacher-centredness to student-centredness, has been endorsed by many Western educators and theorists in higher education (HE) since the mid-1980s (Huba & Freed, 2000, p. 3). This shift emphasises the role of students in the learning process and challenges basic assumptions about how people learn and what the roles of a teacher should be. It also re-examines the type of environment or culture that supports learning. Huba and Freed (2000) compared the teacher-centred and learner-centred paradigms and argued that in the teacher-centred paradigm the "culture is competitive and individualistic," while in the learner-centred paradigm the "culture is cooperative, collaborative, and supportive" (p. 5). Therefore, establishing a collaborative learning environment should be seen as a substantial step in the shift from teacher-centredness to student-centredness.

Despite the traditional collaborative culture of Vietnamese people, most teaching practices at any level in Vietnam have not nurtured or taken advantage of it by the end of 20th century. At university level, this conclusion has been reached in several studies, for example:

- In reality, many of our students at most universities are not familiar with the "group work" terminology. It's simply because they rarely have opportunities to experience it.
  (Pham, 1999, p. 15)

The lack of learning space in schools in many years could be seen as a crucial reason in hindering any kind of group work among students, especially at higher education level. Besides, examinations which mostly count on individual efforts seems foster competitive ways in learning. Since the beginning of 21st century, the value of collaborative learning has been recognised and studied at different levels of education in Vietnam. Le (2001), Do (2004), and Nguyen (2005) can be seen as the typical studies on this matter. These studies have proved that the implementation of collaborative learning can improve learning quality and develop social skills in students, enhance classroom dialogue among students and between students and their teachers.

A reconsideration of the role of teachers and students in university classrooms has emerged as a major issue of reform in Vietnamese HE. Many Vietnamese educators have called for a shift from "teacher-centred" models to "student-centred" models (e.g., Thanh, 2000). In 2005, a long-term strategic plan issued by the Government of Vietnam (2005) encouraged a substantial change in teaching methodology and the active role of students in higher education. Recently, another strategic plan of the Government of Vietnam (2014) has established a number of strategies for education reform which includes solutions for improving the quality of teaching, learning, and assessment at all levels.

Under the sponsor of Vietnam Education Foundation (VEF), the second report prepared by a group of US senior educators based on their observations at a number of universities in Vietnam in 2013 has revealed a significant change in teaching methodology, especially in promoting "active learning, discussion, and group projects" (VEF, 2014). However, large classes and high teaching load are still major challenges for such innovation so far.

4. COLLABORATIVE LEARNING OF VIETNAMESE PEOPLE: HOW IT DIFFERS FROM WESTERN MODELS

Improving collaborative learning in Vietnam is not a move toward Western values, rather it is embedded in Vietnamese tradition. The collaborative form of student learning in Vietnam should not be seen simply as a general endorsement for collaborative learning modes which have been proposed in the West. Differences in cultural purposes make collaborative learning in Vietnam different from Western collaborative learning. Nevertheless, all collaborative learning forms have common characteristics such as student-to-student interaction in small groups and the features of a task or learning activity which is more suitable for group work.
Collaborative learning in Western classrooms has emerged as a learning mode which can balance the dominant individual learning orientation (Davidson & Worsham, 1992). In contrast, collaboration and collectivism are the Vietnamese traditions. The implementation of any collaborative learning approach in Vietnamese classrooms can benefit from these traditions. The practice of collaborative learning in Vietnamese classrooms should also be seen as a process of moral development among students. In addition, smooth interpersonal relations between people, which receives full ideological backing from Confucianism, are highly valued in Vietnam. Among Vietnamese people, an ideal social order is one where harmony is maintained and conflicts are avoided. This characteristic may lead to a basic difference between the collaborative learning forms in Vietnamese classrooms and those in the West, where self-assertion in group relations is traditionally accepted. The collective spirit of the Vietnamese people encourages conformity in community or group relationships. Competition and self-assertion are less favoured. The Vietnamese conformity in group situations is similar to what Ho (1993) observed in different Asian societies:

The individual's orientation toward the group is characterized by conformity, not self-assertion. Collectivism, other directedness, and smoothness of interpersonal relations combine forces to generate pressures on the individual to conform to cultural norms and to yield to group demands. Social behaviour is regulated by what is considered proper or acceptable; individual sentiments and volition are secondary to group requirements. Thus conformity is highly predictable in Asian societies. (p. 252)

5. CONCLUSION

Change may not be advanced if factors which can affect change are not studied seriously. Recognising cultural background and traditions and their influences on education is a substantial step in making change possible. The shift of focus from teaching to learning in university education in the West and in the East is likely to be experienced differently. The establishment of a genuinely collaborative and dialogical classroom environment in the West, as characterised in student-centred learning models, may be expected to encounter opposition from colleagues and institutions who see motivation to learning to be embedded in a culture of competition and individualism. However, this kind of shift in practice in Vietnam may be supported rather than contradicted with the Vietnamese culture. Traditional collectivism in Vietnam may make collaborative learning more attainable than in the West.

Collective identities have been found to be common among the Confucian-heritage countries such as China, Japan, Korea, Singapore, and Vietnam. In these countries, collectivism and interpersonal dependency are highly valued and encouraged. For Asians, "individual identity tends to be intertwined with collective identity," and this means "each shares the pride that the group claims, and bears the burden of its collective humiliation" (Ho, 1995, p. 117). While Western collaborative modes are generally established in the "culture" of individualism and competition, collaborative modes in Confucian heritage countries are grounded on the tradition of collectivism and conformism. Therefore, it should be convincing to say that any Confucian-heritage country like Vietnam can inherit the benefit of its traditional collective identity in implementing collaborative learning modes to improve learning quality.

REFERENCES


7. Government of Vietnam (2014). Nhi quyet ban hanh Chuong trinh hanh dong cua Chinh phu thuc hien Nhi quyet so 29-NQ-TW ngay 04 thang 11 nam 2013 Hoi nghi lan thu 8 Ban chap hanh trung uong Khoa XI ve doi moi can ban, toan dien giao duc va dao tao [Resolution on Government Master Plan in implementing the 29-NQ-TW Resolution of the 8th Meeting of the Party Central Committee on substantial and comprehensive reform in education issued on November 04, 2013].


17. Nguyen, Hien Minh (1998). Thuc hien nghi quyet trung uong 2: tiep tuc doi moi, nang cao chat luong va hieu qua qua dao tao dai hoc, dap ung yeu cau cong nghiệp hoa, hien dai hoa dat nuoc [Implementing the resolution of the second Central Party Meeting: continuing to renovate and upgrade the quality and effectiveness in higher education, satisfying the needs to industrialise and modernise our country]. Ha Noi: Bo Giao Duc va Dao Tao.


