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## **Beyond ‘either-or’ thinking: John Dewey and Confucius on subject matter and the learner**

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This article compares the educational thought of John Dewey and Confucius on the nature of and relationship between subject matter and the learner. There is a common perception in the existing literature and discourse that Dewey advocates child- or learner-centred education whereas Confucius privileges subject matter via textual transmission. Challenging such a view, this article argues that both Dewey and Confucius reject an ‘either subject matter or learner’ thinking that recognises no intermediate possibilities in between. Instead, both thinkers emphasise the importance of both subject matter and the learner, and maintain that educators need to direct learning by integrating appropriate content into the learner’s total experience. The article concludes by highlighting the contemporary relevance and educational implications of the views of Dewey and Confucius for the current trend to promote ‘student-centred education’.

**Keywords:** John Dewey; Confucius; subject matter; learner; student-centred education

### **Introduction**

At first glance, a comparative study of John Dewey and Confucius appears incongruent, given the very different time periods they lived in, and their resultant contrasting cultural backgrounds and philosophical traditions. Such a perception is understandable: after all, Confucius was a Chinese philosopher who lived more than 2000 years ago (*c.*551–479 BCE) whereas Dewey was an American philosopher who lived during the first half of the twentieth century (1859–1952). However, a number of scholars have thought it appropriate to compare their philosophies, as evident from a growing body of published works (e.g. see Radcliffe 1989; Hall and Ames 1999; Tan 2004a; Grange 2006; Sim 2009; Ames 2009; Shen 2012). It is also noteworthy that Dewey had spent two years lecturing in China (May 1919–July 1921), and was even bestowed the title of ‘second Confucius’ by his

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Chinese supporters (Grange 2006; on Dewey's influence and impact in China, see Keenan 1977; Jin and Dan 2004; Tan 2004b; Zhou 2005; J.C.-Z. Wang 2007). It is therefore instructive to compare the educational thought of Dewey and Confucius as well as discuss their educational implications and contemporary relevance.

The focus of this essay is on the views of Dewey and Confucius on the nature of and relationship between two central components of education, namely subject matter and the learner. The term 'subject matter' (a term used by Dewey himself) refers broadly to the content of study or learning object: Dewey (1997) conceptualises it as the 'material of study' that is 'defined and classified' for the learner (in *How We Think*, hereinafter *HWT*, 52). In this article, I have opted for the terms 'subject matter' (instead of 'curriculum') and 'learner' (instead of 'student') as the preferred terms are more appropriate for Confucius who lived in ancient times before the introduction of modern schooling as we know it today. Another clarification is that although Dewey was primarily concerned with educating children (especially in his book *The Curriculum and the Child*) whereas Confucius' target audience were mostly adults, I have used the term 'learner' as a generic term to refer to both children and adults.

There is a common perception in the existing literature and discourse that Dewey advocates child- or learner-centred education whereas Confucius privileges subject matter via textual transmission. For example, Lipton and Oaks (2007) aver that Dewey and his followers champion a child-centred curriculum; O'Neill and McMahon (2005) maintain that Dewey's writings have formed the basis for the movement on child- or student-centred learning. In contrast, Confucian education is perceived to be predominantly text-centred, characterised by rote-memorisation, the teacher as content expert and transmitter of knowledge, didacticism and passive learning (Han and Scull 2010). Confucius' emphasis on textual transmission, it is further argued, was motivated by his desire to transmit traditional norms and customs; as Baskin (1974) puts it, Confucius was a 'traditionalist who tried to reform society by educating people in what he thought to be the right traditions' (1, cited in Radcliffe 1989, 220). Radcliffe (1989), in an essay comparing Confucius with John Dewey, asserts:

The goals of education that the American philosopher John Dewey held did not lie primarily in the realm of traditional truth [as was the case for Confucius] but, rather, in the process of discovery... Confucian goals were based on adherence to a collection of social rules and conventions, passed down from the past. The source of knowing could be said to be authoritative statements. For Dewey, the source of knowing was the inquiry itself, or the process of learning, rather than the product of learning... The process of inquiry that involved everyone affected by the result was primary to Dewey.

Confucius, on the other hand, had a body of social norms he was intent on transmitting through repetition, modelling, practice, meditation, and other more traditional methods (221–222, 229).<sup>1</sup>

Such a view tends to reflect an ‘either subject matter or learner’ thinking that recognises no intermediate possibilities in between. But do Dewey and Confucius hold to an ‘either-or’ thinking on the subject matter and the learner? A related question is the one posed by Dewey himself: ‘How shall the young become acquainted with the past in such a way that the acquaintance is a potent agent in appreciation of the living present?’ (*Experience & Education*, hereinafter *EE*, 23). Put otherwise, what should be the relationship between the *past* (as contained in the subject matter) and the *living present* (as experienced by the learner)? This article aims to answer these questions by examining and comparing the views of Dewey and Confucius on the subject matter and the learner. This article begins by discussing Dewey’s views as he was the one who directly addresses the debate on subject matter and the learner. Against a backdrop of Dewey’s views, I shall then explore and compare Confucius’ views to those of Dewey’s. The final section highlights the key educational implications of their views for contemporary policy-makers and educators.

### John Dewey

To understand Dewey’s position, it is necessary to situate them within the educational landscape and debate of his time. Dewey observes that human beings like to think in terms of extreme opposites by formulating their beliefs in terms of ‘either-or, between which it recognises no intermediate possibilities’ (*EE*, 17). Dewey’s concern with the relationship between subject matter and the learner stems from the debate between ‘traditional education’ and ‘progressive education’ during his time. The former emphasises the importance of cultural heritage rather than the learner’s experiences whereas the latter replaces tradition with the learner’s impulse and interests (Hall-Quest, as cited in Dewey 1938, 10). While traditional education results in ‘rigid regimentation and a discipline that ignored the capacities and interests of child nature’, progressive education is guilty of fostering ‘excessive individualism, and spontaneity, which is a deceptive index of freedom’ (*ibid.*).

John Dewey (1990), in *The Child and the Curriculum* (hereinafter *CC*) identifies two main schools of thought during his time. On the one hand, the ‘subject matter school’ emphasises the importance of the subject matter over and against the learner’s own experience. The focus here is on ‘an objective universe of truth, law, and order’ as encapsulated in the subject matter – studies that ‘introduce a world arranged on the basis of eternal and general truth; a world where all is measured and defined’ (*CC*, 181–182). Seeing the need to ignore and minimise the learner’s ‘individual

peculiarities, whims, and experiences’, proponents of the ‘subject matter school’ aim for learners to receive and accept ‘logical subdivisions and consecutions of the subject matter’ so that they become ‘ductile and docile’ (186). Dewey elaborates as follows:

The subject matter of education consists of bodies of information and of skills that have been worked out in the past; therefore, the chief business of the school is to transmit them to the new generation. In the past, there have also been developed standards and rules of conduct; moral training consists in forming habits of action in conformity with these rules and standards... Since the subject matter as well as standards of proper conduct [are] pre handed down from the past, the attitude of pupils must, upon the whole, be one of docility, receptivity and obedience. Books, especially textbooks, are the chief representatives of the lore and wisdom of the past, while teachers are the organs through which pupils are brought into effective connection with the material. Teachers are the agents through which knowledge and skills are communicated and rules of conduct: enforced (*EE*, 17–18).

It follows that learning becomes the mere ‘acquisition of what already is incorporated in books and in the heads of the elders’ (*EE*, 19). Any form of education that is teacher-centred to the detriment of the learner’s growth is one where the learner’s primary concern is to satisfy the teacher rather than the inherent conditions of the problems of subject matter (*HWE*, 51). Driven by the emphasis on the acquisition of skills, the learning methods are primarily ‘sheer imitation, dictation of steps to be taken, mechanical drill’ rather than the training of the learner’s intellectual and reflective powers (*HWE*, 52).

At the other end of the spectrum is the school that underscores the importance of the learner rather than subject matter. Placing the learner as the ‘starting-point, the centre, and the end’, proponents view the learner’s growth through self-realisation as the ideal (*CC*, 187). Dewey is critical of teachers who abdicate their responsibility to direct the learners in their learning. Commenting that he has heard of cases in which the teacher simply surrounds the child with objects and refuses to suggest to the child what to do with them lest the child’s freedom be infringed upon, he counters,

Nothing can be developed from nothing; nothing but the crude can be developed out of the crude – and this is what surely happens when we throw the child back upon his achieved self as a finality, and invite him to spin new truths of nature or of conduct out of that (*CC*, 196).

Dewey further observes that the debate of the subject matter vs. the learner has generated other dichotomous terms (*CC*, 187). I have labelled the two positions as ‘Subject matter School’ and ‘Learner School’, and summarised their main differences using Table 1.

Table 1. Contrast between the ‘Subject matter School’ and the ‘Learner School’.

| The ‘Subject matter School’   | The ‘Learner School’   |
|---|--|
| Discipline  | Interest   |
| Logical: adequate training and scholarship on the part of the teacher                                   | Natural or psychological: sympathy with the learner, and knowledge of his or her natural instincts |
| Guidance and control  | Freedom and initiative   |
| Law   | Spontaneity  |
| Old education: the old, the conservation of what has been achieved in the pain and toil of the ages     | New education: the new, change, progress   |
| Criticised for its inertness and routine, and suppression of individuality through tyrannical despotism | Criticised for its chaos and anarchism, and neglect of the sacred authority of duty                |

Proponents of the ‘learner school’ favour the ‘natural’ or ‘psychological’ school of educational theory by marginalising subject matter in support of ‘freedom, self-expression, individuality, spontaneity, play, interest, natural unfolding, and so on’ (HWE, 58). At the other extreme is the ‘subject matter school’ that privileges the ‘logical’ school of educational theory; its advocates call for ‘discipline, instruction, restraint, voluntary or conscious effort, the necessity of tasks, and so on’ (ibid. 61).

Rejecting such an ‘either-or’ thinking, Dewey argues for the need to ‘get rid of the prejudicial notion that there is some gap in kind (as distinct from degree) between the child’s experience and the various forms of subject matter that make up the course of study’ (CC, 189). Instead, there is a need for ‘both subject matter and learner’ thinking, as explained by him:

From the side of the child, it is a question of seeing how his experience already contains within itself elements – facts and truths – of just the same sort as those entering into the formulated study; and, what is of more importance, of how it contains within itself the attitudes, the motives, and the interests which have operated in developing and organising the subject matter to the plane which it now occupies. From the side of the studies, it is a question of interpreting them as outgrowths of forces operating in the child’s life, and of discovering the steps that intervene between the child’s present experience and their richer maturity (CC, 189).

Rather than subscribing to this ‘either natural or logical’ position, Dewey maintains the need to see the validity of both. The ‘logical’ is simply ‘the logic of the trained adult mind’ while the ‘natural’ or ‘psychological’ refers to the stage of development in the learner’s experience. The ‘psychological’ and the ‘logical’ therefore ‘represent the two ends of the same movement’, with the former representing the earlier stage in the learner’s process of growth and understanding of the world while the latter representing ‘the goal, the last term of training, not the point of departure’ (HWE, 62).

Simpson and Jackson (2003) add that Dewey regards the subject matter as an indispensable means to 'interpret the child's tendencies and abilities – to see their potential to grow into fuller, richer understanding; it can then be used to direct or guide the child's growth' (26).

Subscribing to a '*both* subject matter *and* learner' thinking, according to Dewey, requires discarding some misconceptions regarding the subject matter and the learner. First, Dewey points out the need to abandon the assumption that subject matter and the learner are unrelated. Subject matter is not something fixed and ready-made in itself that is outside the learner's experience; the learner's experience is also not hard and fast that is unconnected to the subject matter. The correct relationship, according to Dewey, is represented by the metaphor of two points of a straight line: the learner and the subject matter are the two points or limits that define a single process. Instruction, it follows, should be a 'continuous reconstruction, moving from the child's present experience out into that represented by the organised bodies of truth that we call studies' (CC, 189). This metaphor of two points of a straight line effectively integrates the subject matter and the learner into a single process. Such a metaphor rejects the inclination of the 'old education' (traditional education during Dewey's time) that ignores the learner's present experience, as well as the tendency of the 'new' education' (progressive education during Dewey's time) that wrongly expects the learner to develop on his or her own, without a foundation.

Dewey also relies on another metaphor, that of a map, to elucidate the interactive relationship between the subject matter and the learner. A map, as we know, is an 'objective and generalised record' and 'a summary, an arranged and orderly view of previous experiences' that result from the explorations of others who have travelled before us (CC, 197, 198). Just as a map is an indispensable tool to direct a traveller on a journey, the subject matter is essential to direct the learner in one's learning. The subject matter, like a map, serves as 'a guide to future experience; it gives direction; it facilitates control; it economises effort, preventing useless wandering, and pointing out the paths which lead most quickly and most certainly to a desired result' (CC, 197). But we should guard against over-relying on the map; just as a map is not a substitute for an actual journey, the is no substitute for the learner's individual experiences in learning. The subject matter, as the 'net product of past experience', facilitates the learner's experiences in his or her journey of observation, reasoning and discovery (CC, 199).

Another misconception, according to Dewey, is to see subject matter as one-dimensional. Dewey highlights two aspects of every study of subject: 'logical' when viewed from the perspective of a 'scientist', and 'natural' or 'psychological' when viewed from that of a 'teacher'. A 'scientist' regards a subject matter as a self-contained and given body of truth that focuses on new problems and outcomes, and is independent of the learner's experience.

A ‘teacher’, on the other hand, situates the subject matter as a given state of the development of experience; rather than focusing on adding new facts to the science one teaches, he or she aspires to make the subject matter a part of the learner’s total experience so as to promote the latter’s growth. While both aspects of the subject matter are equally valid, an educator needs to go beyond being a ‘scientist’ to being a ‘teacher’ by ‘psychologising’ the ‘logical’ aspect of the subject matter to make it real and relevant to the learner. Smith and Girod (2003) elaborate on Dewey’s distinction between the logical and psychological thinking of every school subject:

The logical aspect embodied what we typically think of as the subject matter itself. It represented the understanding of disciplinary experts who developed and used what Jerome Bruner later termed ‘structure’ – the conceptual frameworks, central questions, and processes of inquiry of that subject. It was the human experience of the subject but distilled, codified, and abstracted into forms quite distinct from that experience. The psychological aspect represented the elements of the child’s interests and experiences that concerned the fundamental phenomena of that subject. It was the growing bud of the logical – what would become the logical given sufficient interest, study, and focus (297).

It is interesting to note that although scholars agree with Dewey that both aspects are important, they hold on to different views when it comes to emphasising one aspect over the other. Bruner (1960) and Schwab (1964, 1978), for example, focus more on the logical aspect whereas Shulman (1986, 1987) draws our attention to the psychological aspect (Smith and Girod 2003). Regardless of one’s position, the consensus is that teachers need to consider both the logical and psychological aspects in their teaching and interaction with students. Put otherwise, both the curriculum knowledge – defined in its wider sense to include all those knowledge constructs, skills and dispositions that a society deems to be of value – as well as the pedagogical knowledge of and about the processes of learning, are essential for effective teaching. In this regard, Shulman’s concept of Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) is a useful category for educators to integrate the curriculum and pedagogy. Shulman (1987) posits that PCK ‘represented the blending of content and pedagogy into an understanding of how particular topics, problems, or issues are organised, represented, and adapted to the diverse interests and abilities of learners, and presented for instruction’ (8). Pointing out that PCK encompasses ‘an understanding of what makes the learning of specific concepts easy or difficult: the conceptions and preconceptions that students of different ages and backgrounds bring with them to the learning’, Shulman (1986) adds that PCK includes ‘the most useful forms of representation of those ideas, the most powerful analogies, illustrations, examples, explanations, and demonstrations - in a word, the ways of representing and formulating the subject that make it comprehensible to others’ (9).

So crucial is the need to acknowledge both the logical and psychological aspects of subject matter that Dewey states that it is ‘the failure to keep in mind the double aspect of subject matter which causes the curriculum and child to be set over against each other’ (CC, 201). It is therefore a fallacy for educators to assume an ‘either-or’ logic in instruction: to either leave the learner to his or her own unguided spontaneity or to inspire direction on him or her externally. Instead, educators need to do both: to direct indirectly. In Dewey’s words,

Now, the value of the formulated wealth of knowledge that makes up the course of study is that it may enable the educator to determine the environment of the child, and thus by *indirection to direct*. Its primary value, its primary indication, is for the teacher, not for the child. It says to the teacher: Such and such are the capacities, the fulfilments, in truth and beauty and behaviour, open to these children. Now see to it that day by day the conditions are such that their own activities move inevitably in this direction, toward such culmination of themselves. Let the child’s nature fulfil its own destiny, revealed to you in whatever of science and art and industry the world now holds as its own (CC, 209, italics added).

In short, Dewey urges educators to ‘direct the child’s activities, giving them exercise along certain lines, and can thus lead up to the goal which logically stands at the end of the paths followed’ (*The School and the Society*, 37). The need for teacher direction was significant during Dewey’s time as there were teachers, as is the case now, who ‘grabbed onto terms like “progressive education” and “the project method” and made them into empty, albeit at times fun, classroom actions’ (Breault 2014, 48). To direct indirectly is to utilise the surroundings, both physical and social, that are conducive to having experiences that lead to growth in the learner. This would ensure that there is not just continuity between the subject matter and the individual experiences (recall the metaphor of two points on a straight line), but also interaction between the external conditions and internal factors for the learner’s experiences. Throughout the process, the learners are given the ‘time to reflect, combining memories of past actions and their consequences with careful observations of the situations before us’ (O’Neill 2014, 105). Doing so will promote ‘active learning that involves reaching out of the mind and organic assimilation starting from within’ (CC, 187). The desired outcome, to answer Dewey’s question posed at the start of this essay, is that the young may become acquainted with the past as contained in the in such a way that the acquaintance is a potent agent in appreciation of the living present and future for the learner.

### Confucius

‘Confucius’ is a Latinised version of Kong Fuzi which means ‘Kong Master’. The Spring and Autumn Period (c.722–468 BCE) that Confucius

grew up in was a period rife with political and social turmoil, with rulers of different states vying for power and control. Appalled by the political and social chaos in his time, Confucius hoped to restore order and harmony by spreading his teachings and serving in the government. He desired to replace the prevailing rule by law and punishment with rule by virtue, through reviving the traditional practices of the sage-kings from the Zhou dynasty. Confucius' teachings are found in the *Analects* (*Lunyu*; literally 'compiled sayings') that comprises a collection of the sayings and conduct of Confucius and his followers.<sup>2</sup>

A pre-modern form of education had already existed during Confucius' time. Available only to the aristocrats, such instruction was provided by private tutors from the *shi* class – a group of learned people sandwiched between the aristocrats and the common people who sought to be employed as court officials and teachers. Although Confucius was credited as the first teacher in China to offer private education to the masses, his 'school' was not the modern educational institution that we know today, with established school rules, classes, subject teachers, formal assessment and so on. Nevertheless, we can identify the broad subject matter taught by Confucius. The *Analects* informs us that Confucius taught culture (*wen*), conduct (*xing*), dutifulness (*zhong*) and trustworthiness (*xin*) (*Analects* 7.25, all subsequent citations are taken from this book; all the passages from the *Analects* cited in this article are translated into English by the author). Under the category of 'culture' includes the 'six arts' (*liuyi*) (7.6; 1.6), namely, propriety or normative behaviour (*li*), music (*yue*), archery (*she*), charioteering (*yu*), calligraphy or writing (*shu*) and mathematics (*shu*). At the heart of the subject matter for Confucius is the *dao* or 'the Way', a cardinal Confucian concept which will be elucidated later.

Like Dewey, Confucius does not subscribe to an 'either-or' thinking, but believes in underlining both the subject matter and the learner. On the one hand, Confucius underscores the primacy of learning the *dao* (the Way). Confucius urges all learners to 'set your heart-mind on the Way' (志於道) (7.6) and even 'hold fast to the good Way till death' (守死善道) (8.13). The goal of learning is to become a *junzi* (noble or exemplary person) who is 'anxious about the Way' (15.32) (君子憂道) and 'learns in order to reach that Way' (君子學以致其道) (19.7). Dewey's two aspects of the subject matter – logical for the 'scientist' and natural/psychological for the 'teacher' – provides a useful interpretative framework for us to understand Confucius' concept of the Way.

Recall that subject matter, when viewed by a 'scientist', is a self-contained and given body of truth that is independent of the learner's experience. The logical aspect of subject matter draws our attention to the value of the old, the conservation of what has been achieved in the pain and toil of the ages, and attributes such as discipline, guidance, control, adequate training and scholarship. From the logical perspective, Confucius'

Way is a ‘straight Way’ that contains the truth or knowledge that has been passed down from earlier dynasties. Confucius avers as follows:

15.25 子曰：‘吾之於人也，誰毀誰譽？如有所譽者，其有所試矣。斯民也，三代之所以直道而行也。’

The Master said, ‘When it comes to people, who has been condemned or praised? If a person is praised, it is because he has been put to the test. That is why the people of the Three Dynasties acted based on the straight Way.’

The adjective ‘straight’ used to describe the Way highlights the unbroken continuation of the Way down the three dynasties. It is interesting to note that while Dewey turns to the metaphor of a map that is used by the traveller, Confucius relies on the metaphor of the Way that is travelled. This ‘Way’ is not the path trodden by any particular traveller or dependent on the experience of any learner; it is, instead, the way of antiquity, as declared by Confucius: ‘I transmit but do not make; I trust in and love antiquity’ (述而不作，信而好古) (7.1). ‘Antiquity’ refers to the era before Confucius’ time, namely the Xia, Shang and Zhou dynasties where sage-kings such as Yao, Shun (8.18, 8.19, 8.20) and Yu (8.21) lived. Confucius looks up to the normative attitudes, values and behaviours of the sage-kings as a guide for all learners. We know that Confucius thinks highly of them from verses such as this:

8.21 子曰：‘禹，吾無間然矣。菲飲食而致孝乎鬼神，惡衣服而致美乎黻冕，卑宮室而盡力乎溝洫。禹，吾無間然矣。’

The Master said, ‘As for the Yu, I can find no fault with him. His drink and food were meagre yet he was filial in his offerings to the ancestral spirits and gods; his clothes were coarse yet his ceremonial robes and caps were splendid; his dwelling was humble yet he devoted all his energy to the building of drain canals and irrigation ditches. As for Yu, I can find no fault with him.’

Confucius regards Yu as faultless because the latter has observed the Way completely and faithfully. Other virtuous rulers praised by Confucius include the Duke of Zhou, King Wen and King Wu (cf. 7.5, 8.20, 9.5). Confucius’ Way, like Dewey’s map, is arguably an ‘objective and generalised record’ and an ‘arranged and orderly view of previous experiences’ of the explorations of others who have travelled before the learner (CC, 198), Confucius’ followers should therefore hold on to the Way as a guide to future experience, prevent useless wandering and walk ‘the paths which lead most quickly and most certainly to a desired result’ (CC, 197). Learning and attaining the Way would naturally require much discipline, guidance, control, adequate training and scholarship – qualities that describe the logical aspect of the subject matter – through the study of the six arts and other cultural content taught by Confucius.

However, the Way as a given set of truth transmitted from the past should not lead us to conclude that the past and its cognates such as traditional norms and customs should be upheld as ‘Law’ that is fixed, unchanging and accepted wholesale. Rather, like a scientist who employs the given body of truth to connect new facts to it, locates new problems, institutes new research and obtains verified outcomes (CC, 199), Confucius teaches that we should constantly extend the truth and knowledge as contained in the Way. This point was encapsulated in Confucius’ call for human beings to ‘broaden the Way’:

15.29 子曰：‘人能弘道，非道弘人。’

The Master said, ‘It is human beings who are able to broaden the Way, not the Way that broadens human beings.’

To ‘broaden the Way’ is to ‘make and remake appropriate ways of living’, as Kim (2004) puts it. It refers not to a predetermined, transcendental way of living or a mere chronicle of past events, but to the Way’s ‘unfolding, as human beings take their place in the development of tradition’ (Chan 2000, 247). Noting that the Way ‘consists of the process of generating an actual order in the world rather than an already fixed order’, Li (2006) posits, ‘Without a predetermined truth, human beings have to set boundaries for themselves and for other things as they move forward in the world.’ (594). Confucius’ vision is for the learners to ‘experience, to interpret, and to influence the world in such a way as to reinforce and extend the way of life inherited from one’s cultural predecessors’ (Ames and Rosemont 1998, 45). The possibility of broadening the Way signifies that the Way is not divinely ordained or complete; human beings are empowered to realise the Way through their collective actions on earth (Tan 2013a). The Way, for Confucius, is not just about the past, the old and tradition, as represented by the ‘subject matter’ proponents, but *also* about the new, change and progress, as advocated by those who support the centrality of the ‘learner’. The desired outcome for Confucius, in a fashion similar to Dewey, is that an acquaintance with the past as embodied in the Way provides a potent agent for the learner to appreciate the living present and extend the Way.

To broaden the Way involves reviewing, selecting, adapting and even changing our traditional norms and practices when the occasion calls for it. An incident demonstrates Confucius judiciously selecting normative practices and values from the past:

15.11 顏淵問爲邦。

子曰：‘行夏之時，乘殷之輅，服周之冕，樂則韶舞。放鄭聲，遠佞人。鄭聲淫，佞人殆。’

Yenhui asked about governing a state.

The Master replied, ‘Follow the calendar of the Xia, ride on the carriage of the Yin, wear the ceremonial cap of the Zhou, and as for music, play the *shao* and *wu*. Abandon the tunes of Zheng and keep glib people at a distance. The tunes of Zheng are lewd and glib people are dangerous.’ (cf. 3.25 and 7.14 on the beauty and felicity of the *shao* music).

It is apparent that rather than subscribing to tradition in an unquestioning, wholesale and dogmatic manner, Confucius advocates eclectic borrowing from the best parts of the tradition (Hagen 2010; Tan 2015a).

We have seen how the subject matter, when viewed from the logical aspect by a scientist, is a given body of knowledge that is external to the learner’s experience. But the subject matter can also be viewed from a natural/psychological aspect through the eyes of the ‘teacher’. Here, the educator’s aim is not so much the discovery and transmission of more facts, but the relevance of them for the learner’s total and growing experience. Unlike the approach adopted by the ‘scientist’, the ‘teacher’ spotlights the new, change and progress; attention should be on the learner’s interest, spontaneity, freedom and initiative, with the educator ‘psychologising’ the subject matter by showing sympathy with the learner and knowledge of his or her natural instincts.

Reflecting the ‘natural/psychological’ aspect of the subject matter, Confucius is known for pioneering the *yincai shijiao* (literally ‘teach according to talent’) or ‘customised teaching’ method in China. A classic passage is the following:

11.22 子路問：‘聞斯行諸？’

子曰：‘有父兄在，如之何其聞斯行之？’

冉有問：‘聞斯行諸？’

子曰：‘聞斯行之。’

公西華曰：‘由也問聞斯行諸，子曰，“有父兄在”，求也問聞斯行諸，子曰，“聞斯行之”。赤也惑，敢問。’

子曰：‘求也退，故進之；由也兼人，故退之。’

Zilu asked, ‘Upon hearing something, should one act upon it?’

The Master said, ‘Your father and elder brothers are still alive. So how could you, upon hearing something, act upon it?’

Then Ranyou asked, ‘Upon hearing something, should one act upon it?’

The Master said, ‘Upon hearing something, act upon it.’

Gongxi Hua said, ‘When Zilu asked, “Upon hearing something, should one act upon it?” You said, “Your father and elder brothers are still alive.” But when Ranyou asked, “Upon hearing something, should one act upon it?” You said, “Upon hearing something, act upon it.” I am confused and I would like to ask about this.’

The Master said, ‘Ranyou is diffident, and so I urged him on. But Zilu has the energy of two, and so I reined him in.’

Here is a situation where two disciples asked Confucius the same question about whether they should put into practice what they have heard. Confucius gave them diametrically opposing answers because he was sensitive to the dissimilar character of his disciples – one was diffident while the other was impulsive. His advice to his disciples was therefore tailored to suit their specific personality traits and needs at that particular point in time.

The reason why it is paramount for educators to link the subject matter to the learner’s lived experiences and present social conditions is because of the Confucian concept of moral self-cultivation. Such cultivation requires the learner to actively, reflectively and continuously internalise and demonstrate virtues such as *ren* (humanity or benevolence), *li* (propriety or normative behaviour), *xiao* (filial piety), *yi* (rightness or appropriateness) and so on. Due to space constraints, I will elaborate only on the last virtue to explain why Confucius stresses the need for active learning and application of the content learnt.

Confucius teaches that the *junzi* (noble or exemplary person) possesses, among other attributes, the virtue of appropriateness:

4.10 子曰：“君子之於天下也，無適也，無莫也，義之與比。”

The Master said, ‘The *junzi*, in one’s dealings in the world, is not for or against anything; such a person goes with what is appropriate (*yi*).’

Appropriateness (*yi*) refers to thinking, feeling and doing what is right by exercising one’s individual discernment and discretion. The exercise of appropriateness necessitates rational autonomy for one to arrive at the best judgement or decision in a particular situation. Confucius states that a *junzi* is ‘proper but not inflexible’ (貞而不諒) (15.37), and ‘is not inflexible in one’s studies’ (學則不固) (1.8). In the *Analects*, we are told that Confucius rejects certainty and dogmatism (毋必，毋固) (9.4), hates inflexibility (疾固也) (14.32) and chooses to retain what is good and works well (擇其善者) (7.28). The cultivation and mastery of such flexibility requires the learner to go beyond memorising the facts contained in the subject matter to a constant and lifelong appreciation and appropriation of the knowledge gained in his or her life.

To sum up Confucius’ educational philosophy, all learning should culminate in application where the learner orders his or her thoughts, feelings and

actions in accordance with the Way. Confucius' concept of subject matter is one of 'personalisation through reflecting on what we have learned and the application of this learning in an appropriate way to the business of the day', as well as 'inheriting, reauthorising, and transmitting one's cultural legacy' (Ames and Rosemont 1998, 59–60). It is a significant point that Confucius, like Dewey, believes that the educator should not abdicate his or her responsibility to guide the learner, even as the learner has the responsibility to cultivate him/herself. Instead, the educator should determine the learning environment, select appropriate content and direct the learner's activities. As noted by Wong and Loy (2001), 'Confucian teaching is much more than a matter of how the Master *transfers* information to a disciple: It is a matter of how the Master in some sense *reshapes pre-existing material*, responding to the particularities of the individual cases' (221) (italics in the original). Such an approach supports Shulman's PCK that integrates and presents content and pedagogy in a manner that is adapted to the diverse interests and abilities of learners. For both Dewey and Confucius, the past, including traditional customs and habits, is essential for the learner to undertake intelligent action when it is judiciously appropriated and applied to the present social conditions (Hall and Ames 1999; Tan 2013b).

## Conclusions

This article has maintained that both John Dewey and Confucius reject an 'either subject matter or learner' thinking that recognises no intermediate possibilities. Instead, both thinkers place an accent on the importance of both the subject matter and the learner where the educator directs the learner by integrating selected content into the learner's growing and total experience.

That I have highlighted the parallels between Dewey and Confucius does not imply that I see no philosophical and pedagogical differences between them. On the contrary, I am aware of a number of fundamental differences between them, such as their contrasting and even antipodal views on the ultimate goals of education, virtues and democracy, among others (for discussion on these topics, see Radcliffe 1989; Tan 2004a, 2004b; Sim 2009). Even in cases where there are similarities between Dewey and Confucius, I am not asserting that they hold identical views on the same issue. For example, while both affirm the need to select and adapt the past to meet present social conditions, Confucius is relatively more conservative than Dewey in making such modifications to the past. This explains why researchers have described the mission of Confucius as a 'conservative innovation' (Tan 2013a), 'selective traditionalism' (Hagen 2010) and 'refined traditionalism' (Ivanhoe 1990). In contrast, Dewey is relatively more open to a revolutionary change in customs, traditional norms and values where necessary. Another major divergence between Dewey and Confucius is that the former highlights the value of science for human

progress whereas Confucius' focus is more on the spiritual, ethical and aesthetic dimensions of humanity. There are also other components of their philosophies that are worthy of comparison and recommended for future research, such as their views on learning for social engagement and the common good, and the pragmatist nature of 'truth' and 'knowledge'.

In terms of the contemporary relevance and the educational implications of the views of Dewey and Confucius, I shall highlight two main implications for policy-makers and educators today. The context for our discussion is the current trend for governments across the globe to promote 'student-centred education' or 'learner-centred education' (European Higher Education Area 2010; Parsons and Beauchamp 2012; Schweisfurth 2013a, 2013b). 'Student-centred' methods such as problem-based learning and project-based learning are viewed by many policy-makers and educators as the means to foster twenty-first century skills (Rotherham and Willingham 2009). The shift from 'teacher-centred' to 'student-centred' education is particularly apparent in East Asian societies that have traditionally adopted didactic and text-based methods. For example, the Ministry of Education in China aims to replace its time-honoured 'teacher-centred' education that 'over-emphasises textbook knowledge, passive learning, rote-memorisation and drilling' with a more 'student-centred' education that seeks to 'strengthen the connection between the content and the students' lives, focus on the students' learning interests and experiences, judiciously select the basic knowledge and skills necessary for lifelong learning, [and] promote the students' active participation' (Ministry of Education 2001; Tan 2015b, *in press*).

The promotion of 'student-centred' education is often premised on its opposition to 'teacher-centred' education. For example, some researchers have described teacher-centred learning as one where the 'teachers perceive themselves as transmitters of existing knowledge, whereas in the student-centred learning classroom, teachers see themselves as facilitators of active student learning of new and changeable knowledge' (Jacobs and Toh-Heng 2013, 56). Such a dichotomy unfortunately reflects and perpetuates an 'either-or' thinking that is eschewed by Dewey and Confucius.<sup>3</sup> We have seen how Dewey and Confucius exhort educators to be *both* transmitters and facilitators of knowledge for the purpose of fostering the students' learning. Maintaining the importance of both the subject matter and the learner has the potential for educators to overcome some common challenges confronting the conception and practice of 'student-centred' education. The two common challenges identified by researchers are a lack of or inadequate structure, guidance and support; and a failure to provide a sufficiently strong foundational knowledge and deep thinking for students.

On the first challenge, Lea, Stephenson, and Troy (2003) report that students in an empirical study they have conducted expressed anxiety about 'student-centred' approaches that lack structure, guidance and support; while

students were prepared to accept greater responsibility for their own learning, they still preferred ‘bi-directional feedback and guidance as essential elements of what student-centred learning should be’ (332). Such a concern may be influenced by a ‘progressive education’ or a ‘learner school’ perspective that cautions against any form of teacher direction and intervention. The needed feedback and guidance for students are adequately provided for in the educational thought of Dewey and Confucius as they both stress the continual need for the teacher to direct the learners’ activities and determine the learning environment and content. Dewey opines that ‘guidance given by the teacher to the exercise of the pupils’ intelligence is an aid to freedom, not a restriction upon it’ (*EE*, 71). In the same vein, a protégé of Confucius testifies that Confucius directs his learning by ‘leading me on step by step’ (循循然善誘人) (9.11).

The second challenge is that ‘student-centred learning’, as conceived by some educators, may not provide a sufficiently strong foundational knowledge or deep thinking for the students. Parsons and Beauchamp (2012), citing Hargreaves and Shirley (2009), assert that student-centred learning (what they call ‘personalisation’ in their paper) may ‘provide short bursts of instant gratification’ but ‘few opportunities for deeper understanding or critical thinking’ (223). This is a challenge that some educators in China are already facing. As mentioned, China has embarked on a series of education reforms aiming to shift the pedagogy from the traditional ‘teacher-centred’ learning to ‘student-centred’ learning. However, some educators have charged that the implementation of student-centred learning has resulted in a drop in the standard and rigour of academic subjects (Wang 2007). Interestingly, a concurrent development that heads towards a different direction is occurring in the United States where the emphasis is on mastering the content knowledge and meeting academic standards. A case in point is the ‘Common Core State Standards’ (CCSS) that aims to ‘establish clear, consistent guidelines for what every student should know and be able to do in math and English language arts from kindergarten through 12th grade’ (CCSS 2014).

A danger of such movements – whether towards ‘student-centredness’ or ‘content-centredness’ – is to adopt an ‘either-or’ thinking that Dewey warns against. We have seen how Dewey and Confucius advance a form of teaching and learning that require neither a de-emphasis on the subject matter nor a rejection of the teacher’s role as content expert and transmitter of knowledge. Rather, the educator should direct the learning indirectly and ensure that whatever subject matter is taught is appropriate for the learner’s lived experience and meet his or her developmental needs. Doing so would help educators to avoid the criticisms of inertness and routine, and suppression of individuality through tyrannical despotism that are levelled against the ‘subject matter school’, as well as the criticisms of chaos, anarchism and neglect of the sacred authority of duty that the ‘learner school’ proponents may be guilty of.

Returning to the question posed at the start of this essay: What should be the relationship between the past (as contained in subject matter) and the living present (as experienced by the learner)? Both Dewey and Confucius would respond that the relationship should be one of symbiosis where the learner not only experiences the past in the present, but also extends the past into the future through inquiry and self-cultivation.

## Notes

1. It should be added that Radcliffe (1989), elsewhere in his article, acknowledges that Confucius uses a variety of teaching methods to engage his students. But Radcliffe claims that Confucius' ultimate aim is not so much to encourage inquiry in his followers but to transmit 'traditional truth', 'authoritative statements' and 'social norms' to them. He asserts, 'There was a right way for Confucius to do everything; Dewey would want to create a new and creative way to resolve student inquiry' (228). *Pace* Radcliffe, I think that Confucius believes in balancing the transmission of selective traditional norms and values and the nurture of his followers' inquiry spirit.
2. As the *Analects* was compiled a few centuries after the death of Confucius, some scholars have raised questions regarding its authenticity. This is an important debate that is unfortunately beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say that my focus is not so much on Confucius as a historical figure but as a philosophical figure, whose sayings attributed to him were passed down to us in the *Analects*. This means that I am primarily interested in the educational thought of Confucius as interpreted and transmitted by Confucian scholars and supporters.
3. To be sure, Jacobs and Toh-Heng qualify that the difference between teacher- and student-centred learning is one of continuum: 'The differences explained above, however, do not represent two polar ends of a continuum. Rather, the focus of learning in these two types of classrooms can move to and fro within different lessons, enabling teachers and students to draw the best outcomes from their strengths. Indeed, teacher-centred learning and student-centred learning are best understood as a single continuum.' (57). However, it is important to note that the continuum they have in mind refers to the difference *across lessons* rather than to the difference in the *conceptions* of teacher-centredness and student-centredness. My view is that the conceptions of teacher-centredness and student-centredness are not mutually exclusive: there exists a variety of classroom practices that may fall under 'teacher-centredness' or 'student-centredness', depending on one's definitions and assumptions of the terms, as well as the specific historical, cultural and philosophical contexts in question.

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