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| EDUC 800 Ways of knowing |
| Confucianism: |
| A Way of Knowing |
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| Looking at the relationship of the philosophy of Confucianism as a way of knowing and an understanding of culture as related to the writings of Rene Descartes, Thomas Kuhn, and Jerome Bruner. |

“Learning without thought is a snare; thought without learning is a danger” (Confucius, 2004, p. 49). This quote exemplifies the underpinnings of this paper and will present an explanation of Confucius and his teachings, and Confucianism as a way of knowing with respect to the teachings of Rene Descartes, Thomas Kuhn and Jerome Bruner. In comparing these authors to Confucianism, this paper will look for the similarities in their search for truth and will also seek to relate a way of knowing as a concept which is embedded in culture.

The first impediment to understanding Confucianism is to note, Confucianism is not a religion, it is a philosophy. A religion has a specific creed as designated by its founders. A philosophy is a doctrine or system of beliefs and these beliefs are primarily adopted by groups in authority. In Chinese culture the dominate religion is Taoism, which emphasizes a “oneness” with nature. Confucian philosophy accentuates participation in culture and society, which accepts people are responsible for doing their part to maintain a flow and ceremony in their daily lives. This concept is denoted as *Li.*  The author, K’ung-fu-tzu Anglicized to Confucius, was born in China in 551BC. This scholar used his teachings to help educate men to positions in government to aid the lives of the Chinese people. Through their work, in a ruler based kingdom, students of Confucius would help create and enforce laws which follow a moral and political idea centered on the proper governing of its people. Confucius teaches *Li* as a notion of ceremony and courtesy applied to ones daily workings and normal interactions of the governing body. By following this doctrine accordingly, the theory implies people make less trouble for themselves and for their neighbors and thus a government less dependent on police enforcement. Confucius taught: if people commonly understand what is important to accomplish for society, but individually could tell for them how best to accomplish the task society and its people would be better for it (Ross, 2008). The Chinese valued skill but hold higher the art of making it possible for human beings to live together in harmony and happiness (Creel, 1953). Creel continues that pre-Confucianism is dominated by bureaucratic inherited aristocracy and warring factions. The resulting Confucian objectives were to establish the principle that the rules existed for the sake of the people rather than the rulers (1953). Confucius concludes, “That the leaders held their powers only in trust, as a kind of stewardship, subject to revocation if they did not rule well” (Creel, 1953, p. 18). The family unit in this culture is the structure which others are based upon. It is through these relationships that order is maintained out of respect and ceremony. Respect begins in the family unit but moves throughout members of the society directly to the Chinese emperors. While not in line with the Chinese culture, Confucius continues to promote the doctrine “any man could be a gentleman, if his conduct was noble, unselfish, just and kind” and birth right, gave no pretense one was a gentleman (Creel, 1953, p. 27).

Confucianism, as a way of knowing, must be found in the understanding that the knowing of an individual benefits the others within society. In relating this idea to the writing of Rene Descartes, Confucianism parallels Descartes search for truth. Descartes states, “do not come as close to the truth as the simple reasoning that a person with common sense can perform naturally about things they observe” (1637/2003, p. 12). Descartes values common sense and the actions of the common people. In his early years of school, Descartes absorbs every ounce of knowledge his teachers can provide but his search for truth takes him to other realms where he quickly learns the best way to acquire knowledge is to assume the culture. With this truth Descartes becomes an accepted and trusted member of the new society and his learning accelerates. His Confucian ideal, learning by experience, gives Descartes the title of the first modern philosopher (Smith, 2007). Through his continued work he gains an in-depth understanding of culture and its effect on society. Descartes is born of a privileged class but does not rely on his privileges alone. In many of his writings he tries to speak to the common man in an explanation of surrounding life, specifically the inner workings of nature. He tries to help others see differently by creating rules for observations and the search for truth. Throughout these writings Descartes tries to improve society with explanations of nature, mathematics and a variety of other topics. With his 17th century version of *Li*, Descartes promotes his individualism for the betterment of humanity (Descartes, 1637/2003). “Hold aloof from those that are risky …. [and] you will seldom have occasion for regret” (Confucius, 2004, p. 49). Translated to the cautious seldom err, this Confucianism sets our transition to the work of Thomas Kuhn, as related to paradigms and scientific revolutions. Kuhn seeks to help the reader understand the leaps in knowledge which are made during scientific discovery. It is this pragmatic look at the steps which focus on specific conditions which need to exist in order for a change in theory, or paradigm shift, to occur (Kuhn, 1996). Through this dissection of a learning process, Kuhn exposes a truth for paradigms to flourish. “Through science in a state of crisis, one must come to resolve a fundamental understanding which can be achieved no other way” (1996, p. 121). It is through this Confucian based process of the betterment of society, which Kuhn is able to demonstrate, individually, an explanation of new theory in scientific revelations. Crossing over to the works of Jerome Bruner we embark on a learning expedition. Confucius believed anyone of moral character could be a gentleman and in education there should be no class distinction (Confucius, 2004). In contemplating this remark we look to Jerome Bruner and his understanding of cultural psychology especially in situated cognition (Bruner, 1996). In this contextual learning environment Bruner seeks to find truth in education that what teaching is fundamentally related to ones culture. As Confucius looks to break cultural barriers by separating what it means to be a gentleman and of the privileged class, he is quoted; “a virtuous plebeian who cultivates his qualities can be a gentleman, while a shameless son of the king is only a small man” (Confucius, 2004, p. 62). This comment embeds itself in the understanding that through experience and understanding of culture, morality and justice one can rise to a gentry-like state equal to that of persons in the ruling class. Bruner also emulates Confucian ideals through the statement, “I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, I do and I understand” (Confucius, 2004, p. 120). Bruner’s exploration into educational research for best teaching practices parallels this thinking and cements it as an educational truth.

Culture is defined as a set of shared beliefs, attitudes and influences on our daily life which focus and direct our actions set upon the masses from a ruling group. There are many layers and facets of culture we experience throughout our day and the stages of our life. As we age, these stages become more apparent and even dominate our careers, family arrangements and intrinsically our thinking. In comparing the teachings of Confucius to our esteemed thinkers, we start with Rene Descartes. Culture as it pertains to the late 1600’s will be rooted with the teachings of the church. This therefore is the driving force behind many laws and customs from that time period. As the son of a prominent magistrate, Descartes is raised by grandparents, a devout Catholic and is educated at a Jesuit college (Smith, 2007). As Descartes is expanding his world and penning his thoughts, it is this culture and the presence of the church dominating the culture, which molds the publishing of his works. Because of his devotion to Catholicism and the church’s view he is apprehensive in publishing. During this time period Galileo is facing persecution from the church for publishing his findings in astronomy. In his Discourse on Method, Descartes talks of three rules for observations. “Rule one states: never accept anything as true if I did not know clearly that it was so. Rule two states: subdivide each of the problems to examine its parts. And Rule three states: guide ones thoughts in the simplest way to rise gradually to the more complex” (1637/2003, p. 16). It is with these rules in mind that the concept of culture, related to the church’s teachings, influences many of the observations he makes. Like Confucius wanting to better government with the masses in mind, Descartes looks to the masses for understanding how to fit into a society. Being an observant and contributing member of the new establishment, to which Descartes moved, allowed for a smooth transition into that new society. Descartes does not immediately act to better society with his observations, but begins to understand the inner workings of the society and thus its culture. These internal societal operations become exposed when we look at culture with respect to Thomas Kuhn and The Structure of Scientific Revolutions. Kuhn reviews many scientific discoveries and searchers for the pattern involved in paradigm shifts. These shifts had a direct effect upon the culture of each existing time period. Throughout Kuhn’s research into the history of scientific discovery, he notes certain patterns. Kuhn notes science is not linear as the texts seem to imply. Scientific discoveries and their related theories are being altered when camps of ostracized believers in those theories, are abandoned or converted to the new accepted theories (Kuhn, 1996). This slow process of assimilation acts as water in the crack of a boulder, freezing and thawing until the boulder, or the theory in question, cracks and is no longer supported. As Kuhn’s research into the significant paradigms of science is enlightened, we see the culture of normal science react to the paradigm structure. “Normal science, the cultural norm, dictates experiments have little aim to produce major novelties, conceptual or phenomenal” (Kuhn, 1996, p. 35). Any experiments in the realm of normal science should support an already established theory. It is in these novelties and against the normal scientific culture, which paradigms are born and the cultural norms are nullified. This Confucian concept of striking down an establishment which does not support progress for the people brings Kuhn aligned with the Confucian way of knowing. In reviewing history, Kuhn looks to better support the scientific community in learning how they, as a micro-society and subculture, are able to exist and flourish. It is through these micro-societies and subcultures we look to education for guidance in the teaching of our children. Confucius was the first in Chinese history to establish a college of higher learning (Creel, 1953). This school emphasized learning as a key element in moral self-cultivation (Lai, 2008). These teachings were supported by the gathering of information and knowledge especially related to human conduct and behavior. There is one distinguishing feature of Confucian philosophy which states both in terms of how we conceptualize the self, and of life in its concrete, lived realities, there is no dichotomy between “inner” moral commitment and “outer” expression (Lai, 2008). Here lays the connection to author Jerome Bruner and his work, The Culture of Education. Bruner states; “…a system of education must help those growing up in a culture find and identity within that culture” (1996, p. 42). This “inner” moral which Confucius speaks of is the essence of the foundations of his teachings. These teachings reflect on the self as to project your inner beliefs toward your outer personality. Bruner looks to education as teaching core curriculum with a touch of cultural norms. These norms are established early in life and schools expand and integrate many aspects in the students’ lives. Some of these norms are subliminal from the instructor, or folk pedagogies, others are more apparent from society. We now see schools listing mission statements to further define the roles they play in educating children. Many of these statements include phrases, as Bruner claims is to “…enable people, to operate at their fullest potential” (1996, p. 67). Within many mission statements, sentences like creating global thinkers and fostering lifelong learners are commonplace. Bruner is a strong proponent of teaching as a way of doing. Confucius spoke of transforming a common man to a gentleman to function and be a productive member of society through education. Bruner exemplifies this point through the discussion of the Head Start program and children of poverty. Bruner concluded; “it is through this process of becoming aware of practice that the good school and a healthy classroom can provide even a child of poverty, even the outsider immigrant child, some working vision of how society can operate” (1996, p. 79). Bruner continues with relating collaboration and skill as the best way to learn. Immersion into an activity which is beneficial outside the classroom had better learning outcomes than those of a static classroom based nature. The learning was deepened and students were able to transfer the new skill to other unrelated topics. Similarly, Confucius taught his pupils to be dynamic in their positions of employment and encourage and supported others to be active in their jobs as well (Creel, 1953)

Creel (1953) states that Confucius was not only willing men think for themselves he insisted upon it. Confucius was willing to teach men how to question but the answers they must find out for themselves and when asked what truth is, Confucius replies he does not know the truth only the way to look for it (Creel, 1953). Confucianism is a way of knowing. This way of knowing is based on education and the betterment of the society through politeness and ceremony to the culture in which you function. In understanding the nuances of culture one has the opportunity to be a prominent and respected member of society. Through these reflections and the relationships, Descartes’ observations and search for truth, Kuhn’s paradigm structures for the scientific community and Bruner’s situated cognition and the culture of education, link to support Confucianism as a way of knowing.

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