

12 Critical Thinking, Writing, and Language Learning: A Report from Northwest China

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Abstract: This chapter details an effort to enhance critical thinking instruction in the language department of a Chinese university. Drawing on core writing across the curriculum (WAC) principles, I argue that critical thinking, in the language-learning classroom, should denote an intersubjective process of reflecting upon and reworking ideas. Language teachers can promote this practice by asking learners to make claims and elaborate upon those claims. After sketching the theoretical justification for such a pedagogy, I discuss potential challenges to this and other pedagogical reform efforts in the Chinese university. Drawing on personal experience, informal interviews, and survey data, I argue that, while enthusiasm for pedagogical innovation is high, significant structural and cultural barriers hinder widespread implementation of progressive, inquiry-based teaching practices.

Keywords: critical thinking, China, active learning, faculty development, writing across the curriculum

For the past two summers, I have been fortunate enough to be a guest of the School of Foreign Languages and Literatures at Lanzhou University, in Gansu province in Northwest China. I was originally asked to use my knowledge of Western (particularly American) college writing practices to help improve the quality of instruction in the department. Once on the ground, this general goal evolved into a more specific one: to provide advice as to how language teachers can help their students “think critically.” Among members of the department, I found, critical thinking was almost universally valued. At the same time, teachers had only a vague idea of what it might look like or how to teach it. There was also concern that students might lack critical thinking ability. Indeed, similar concerns about Chinese students are raised in the educational literature. A Chinese student, now studying in the UK, sums up

prevailing sentiment when they claim that Chinese students “have no idea how to be critical.” They further state,

Apart from reading the materials, [in the UK] you need to argue for or against the existing literature and establish your own argument. Here you need to present evidence and references to support your views and we did not have to do that in China (as cited in Zhang, 2016, p. 10).

For this student, critical thinking is associated with interpretation and assertion, with being able to analyze what others have said and to present evidence-supported claims in response. They clearly feel that their undergraduate education in China left them unprepared for such work. In this chapter, I will discuss my efforts to help remedy this situation. Though I do not claim to dispense any panaceas, I believe my experience can act as a useful point of reference for others interested in using writing to promote critical thought, especially in language-learning courses. I also hope to shed light on the unique challenges educational reform efforts face in the Chinese university.

What is Critical Thinking?

“Critical thinking” is a common term in educational discourse. It is also a notoriously ambiguous one. Across disciplines, “critical thinking” is defined and understood to manifest in a variety of ways. This conceptual indeterminacy might help account for the term’s popularity as an educational buzzword. Unfortunately, in my experience, it also hinders efforts to promote critical thought. Without being sure what exactly critical thinking is, how can we promote it? As such, in Lanzhou, my first goal was to better understand the term.

Critical Thinking & WAC

Critical thinking (CT), however it is defined, is near the core of the writing across the curriculum (WAC) project. An influential WAC anthology, for example, notes that WAC aims to help students become better “critical thinkers and problem solvers, as well as better communicators” (McLeod et al., 2001, p. 5). Another articulation holds that WAC ultimately seeks to “promote active learning” and thus “engage students as critical thinkers” (Ochsner & Fowler, 2004, p. 117). In these texts, and throughout the WAC literature, we see a connection between CT and “active learning.” CT entails not passive memorization, but doing something with knowledge, putting it

to work. Writing, especially in the writing-to-learn context, is seen as a way to make students engage in doing. It provides a space in which to put content knowledge to work.

So writing, active learning, and CT are intimately connected. What might CT look like in practice? Justin Rademaekers (2018) tries to answer this question in his recent article, “Getting Specific About Critical Thinking: Implications for Writing Across the Curriculum.” Rademaekers starts from the premise that a general tendency towards critical thought manifests differently in each academic discipline. He then proceeds, via a survey of faculty members, to examine disciplinary differences in thought patterns across several “dimensions” (e.g., whether critical thought is understood to be primarily text-focused or world-focused, objective or subjective). The overall goal is to discover exactly the type of thought each discipline values. Rademaekers believes that this sort of project can help WAC scholars better understand (and thus explain to colleagues and students) differences in disciplinary writing conventions.

Though I see the value in Rademaekers’ project, I found his study to be of little use in the situation I faced in Lanzhou. I was working with teachers of English and German. Unlike biologists or economists, they did not see themselves as operating within a well-defined discipline. Also, unlike the scholars Rademaekers surveyed, I found that these teachers often did not have a clear sense of how CT might manifest in their classrooms. Certainly, they could recognize CT “when they saw it,” but apart from vague notions such as “logical organization,” they had neither the language nor theoretical grounding to describe what they were seeing. As such, I felt I had to step beyond merely describing what they were already doing (which I see as Rademaekers’ primary move), and instead provide a pedagogically workable definition of CT, one specifically formulated for their role as language teachers.

Mike Palmquist, in his chapter in this collection and his keynote speech at the 2018 English Across the Curriculum conference in Hong Kong, helps explain why a better understanding of CT could be of great use to language teachers. Drawing on the work of John Bean (2011), Palmquist notes that writing and CT are both transformative acts; they both involve creation and alteration. To better understand their relationship, he discusses CT in regard to Bloom’s taxonomy: a model of learning objectives often depicted as a pyramid, with basic cognitive tasks (remembering, understanding) at the bottom and more demanding tasks (analysis, evaluation, creation) at the top. CT entails the activities at the top of the pyramid, i.e., analysis, evaluation and creation. Integrally, though, higher cognitive tasks always implicate lower ones: a student cannot create without remembering, for example. This means that the

different levels of the pyramid are mutually sustaining. Thus, it is not that one teaches critical thinking OR helps students memorize content knowledge. Instead, when students engage in CT, they put content knowledge to work. This “putting to work” helps them internalize and remember. When language learners analyze, evaluate, or create texts, for example, it helps them memorize vocabulary and sentence forms. An understanding of CT—and how to promote it—is thus essential to efficient language learning.

Critical Thinking Beyond WAC

To better understand CT, it is useful to examine how the term is defined outside of the WAC literature. The most extensive examination of the topic has been by scholars working in the tradition of informal logic. Speaking broadly, within this tradition, “critical thinking” represents the application of logical rules to everyday claims. Robert Ennis was an early and influential voice. Writing in 1964, Ennis defines critical thinking as “the correct assessing of statements” (p. 599). To help thinkers assess statements correctly, he presents a series of steps they can follow—twelve in total. These include things like identifying and evaluating assumptions and checking to make sure that a statement follows from its premises. According to Ennis, teaching students these competencies will help them avoid common “pitfalls in assessment” (p. 599).

We can call the conception of CT inaugurated by Ennis the procedural approach. As noted, Ennis lays out a series of steps—a procedure—that thinkers can or should follow. For many, the procedural approach defines critical thinking. Tellingly, when the teachers in Lanzhou were asked to identify what CT might entail, their definitions were largely informed by this tradition. Critical thinking involves “using a series of procedures to solve a problem,” one teacher wrote in response to a survey I conducted. Another wrote that it demands “judging things logically.”

I can see the value of the procedural approach. That said, I doubt its usefulness in a language-learning context. First off, a system like that proposed by Ennis entails memorizing content (logical rules, potential fallacies, etc.). In a standalone logic course this would not be a problem. In a college course built around another set of learning outcomes (such as a language course), this added content becomes an unwanted imposition. More importantly, misapplication of the procedural approach can result in decidedly *non-critical* teaching and learning. Sure enough, Chinese scholar Yu Dong (2015) notes that this is a problem in China. He describes Chinese teachers, driven by top-down demands that they teach critical thought, demanding rote memoriza-

tion of “thinking rules” and giving multiple-choice tests to ensure adherence. Clearly, this sort of approach does little to trigger higher-order cognitive function and the benefits therein.

Rethinking Critical Thinking

After considering the critical thinking scholarship, I decided that any definition of CT for use in the language-learning classroom should draw not on informal logic, but on the ideas about writing and thinking which underlie the WAC project. As discussed above, when we promote writing across the curriculum, and thus active learning, we are certain we are promoting critical thinking. Why? To answer this question, I turned to one of the first scholars of critical thought—John Dewey, the esteemed American philosopher and progressive educator. For Dewey, thinking always occurs in response to a problem. We are going along, everything is going smoothly, and suddenly a roadblock or incongruity appears. So, we need to identify the problem, identify possible solutions, and select the best solution. This process of identification and selection is thinking. When we do it willfully and self-consciously, we engage in what Dewey (1910) calls “reflective thinking” (his version of critical thinking).

The work of Richard Paul, a contemporary CT scholar, complements the above definition. Writing with Linda Elder (Paul & Elder, 2002), he defines critical thinking, in part, as “the art of thinking about your thinking while you are thinking in order to make your thinking better: more clear, more accurate, more defensible” (p. 316). Here we see an emphasis on thinking about your own thought: what is often called metacognition. To identify and challenge your own conceptions, to rework them into more accurate and defensible forms, Paul calls this critical thinking in the “strong” sense.

For Paul, the reworking of thought is intimately tied to the recognition that a) we always think in systems, and b) that we continually need to strive to transcend any given system, so as to get a better (i.e., more accurate and defensible) view of the world. To this end, he greatly values interaction between different systems. Instead of critiquing “atomic arguments,” he believes that critical thinking instruction should work to highlight “argument networks” and provide a space where these networks can be brought into “rational conflict,” so as to reveal their blind spots and biases (Paul, 1994, p. 182). We can see here a connection with Dewey. Dewey argues, remember, that we are moved to think when we are presented with a problem, a moment of decision or “forked-road situation” (1910, p. 17). The encounter with other argument networks—and their unique set of proposals—often leads to such moments.

Engaging in dialogue with those who think differently, in other words, forces us to think.

Combining the work of Dewey and Paul, a definition of CT in the language-learning classroom starts to emerge. It is centered around problem-posing, dialogue, and reflection. These ideas, of course, have been central to WAC from the very beginning (see Emig, 1977), as has critical thinking. The above analysis helps us see the relationship between these core tenets of our project. Unlike the procedural approach to critical thinking, which posits an individual thinker approaching a static claim, the WAC approach demands reflection and the reworking of thought, spurred by human interaction—the friction between different ways of seeing and asserting. Writing, as a technology, allows for this sort of interaction. Thus writing—and writing across the curriculum—emerge as central to the promotion of critical thought.

Cultivating Critical Thought

In the above section, I referred to the work of John Dewey and Richard Paul to make explicit the definition of critical thinking which, I believe, animates WAC scholarship. I argued that critical thinking, in the WAC context, is an active process that demands reflection on, and the reworking of, ideas. The need to reflect and rework is sparked by human interaction. The question remains, though: how can language teachers create the conditions for productive exchange?

It may seem obvious, but the first step in cultivating critical thought is a simple one: students need to write (or speak). They need to make claims and get feedback. Of course, there are innumerable ways to facilitate communication in the classroom. In Lanzhou, after I presented the above definition of CT to the language teachers, we discussed some possible ways to get students writing and speaking. We considered both writing-to-learn activities and more formal, yet still conversational, “writing-to-engage” activities (see Palmquist, 2018). The teachers seemed to particularly appreciate Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein’s (2017) “They Say / I Say” template. This template, I found, provided them an easy-to-remember, general-purpose way to kick-start the thinking process. The basic premise is simple. Students are asked to summarize a claim—the “They Say”—and respond—the “I Say.”¹ Of course, the result might be underwhelming, but, as I was quick to ensure my colleagues, that is fine. Once a student has stated a claim, a teacher or classmate

1 Note how this template moves the student to engage in all three higher-order tasks (analysis, evaluation, creation).

can engage that student in dialogue and help them achieve a more sophisticated perspective.

What principle should guide this engagement process? As I will discuss in detail in the final section, the proper way to respond to student work was a constant source of worry for our colleagues in Lanzhou. During training activities, they poured over sample essays, trying to formulate the perfect “directed question.” Likewise, they worried that peer feedback would be of little value because students may not be knowledgeable about their partner’s topic. Considered in light of the definition of CT sketched above, these concerns are misplaced. The goal of dialogue in the thinking process is to spur reflection and reworking. To achieve this end, questions do not need to be particularly complex. Instead, they simply need to encourage more thought. The principle which should guide the engagement process, we can say, is *elaboration*. In short, no matter a student’s original position, their dialogue partner needs to encourage them to sustain longer and more detailed—more elaborate—strains of thought. Simple open-ended questions are often a very effective way to achieve this end.

Elaboration spurs reflection because it makes thinking visible. It reveals habits and patterns and assumptions, and very often forces us to rework our ideas. When students engage in revelation, examination, and reworking—when feedback from teachers or peers forces them to do these things—they have, by definition, engaged in critical thought.

There are of course innumerable techniques for making students elaborate. My favorite technique is playing the fool. *Explain. I don’t understand. What does this mean? Give examples. Give more details.* Questions are especially useful. *Why is President Xi the best leader? Why should students study hard?* My goal in such questioning is to get the student to reveal the rules of their argument network, show explicitly how different ideas hang together. Of course, in reality, much of the time, I can guess what a student means. I can fill in the blanks. When I play the fool, though, I take pains not to do this work for the student. In turn, they have to push themselves beyond what comes naturally. They have to think.

An example from my own writing classroom demonstrates how effective simple, open-ended questions can be at encouraging critical thought. In this paragraph (part of a longer piece), one of my students, we can call her Anna, makes an argument that, contrary to conventional wisdom, digital media helps promote empathetic relations. She writes,

Again, I think that Facebook gives people opportunities to share their emotions with others. Moreover, there are a lot of

examples when people saw posts about others people problems in Facebook and offer help, or when they saw a sad message and cheering someone up. Overall, Facebook creates prosocial behavior and due to everyday usage, it becomes more habitual in the real life.

My response to this paragraph was only one word: how? Anna was given time to revise, and when I next saw her paper, the same paragraph read as follows:

In addition, I would like to prove my claim using personal experience. I suppose it is logical that media has a positive effect on children's empathy. They do not have enough emotional experience and digital media proposes them a possibility to share their feelings and understand emotions of others. Also, there are a lot of examples when people saw posts about others people problems in social networks and offer help, or when they saw a sad message and cheering someone up. Overall, social media creates prosocial behavior and due to everyday usage, it becomes more habitual in the real life.

In this revision, we see clear evidence of critical thinking as I have defined it. My simple "how?" functioned as a problem in the Deweyian sense. To solve this problem, Anna had to return to her text. She had to reflect on her claim and the reasoning that sustained it. She then had to elaborate. The result is a substantially more complex piece of writing. She has qualified her claim and, integrally, identified a causal mechanism for the social dynamic she proposes. Digital media "has a positive effect on children's empathy," she now argues, because it allows them "a possibility to share their feelings and understand emotions of others." In essence, digital media allows children to practice being social. This is an interesting, fairly original claim. Even if it were not though, this assignment sequence could still be considered a success. CT, as I have defined it, is not about product. Instead, it is about process. When a student reflects upon and reworks their own ideas, that is critical thinking. That is what we should seek.

Elaboration in the Language-Learning Classroom

As noted, my goal in Lanzhou was to develop a simple, flexible method by which language teachers could promote CT. Drawing on WAC principles, I hit upon the formula expressed above: assert and elaborate. Though elaboration

via questioning can be a means to encourage critical thought in all writers, it is especially useful—necessary even—when teaching language learners. Richard Paul’s (1994) notion of “argument networks” (p. 182) helps explain why.

Consider a Chinese student studying abroad who is asked to analyze the literature in their field and make an argument (a real-life “They Say / I Say” situation). They perform poorly at the task. Perhaps they misread or make irrelevant claims. Why did they perform poorly? In addressing this question, it is useful to remember that every claim, as Paul points out, is in fact part of a network of arguments, an intricate, interconnected web of rules and principles. Some of these principles are stated, but many remain implicit. They exist as tacit knowledge, a sort of operating system for making and judging. Often, in a foreign-language situation, what appears to be a lack of CT is in fact a mismatch between operating systems. Novices are uncertain what principles need to be applied or what applied principles need to be expressly stated. Elaboration helps bring reasoning principles into the open. Once in the open, they can be aligned.

The results of a writing activity I conducted with a group of Chinese graduate students in Lanzhou illustrate this dynamic.² The purpose of this activity was to model the sort of pedagogy proposed above. After learning about the “They Say / I Say” format, these students were presented with a controversial text and asked to analyze it and formulate a response. The text was carefully chosen. As one might expect, research shows that CT is more likely when thinkers are personally familiar with a topic (Stapleton, 2001). I also wanted a text that would pose a true problem—something that would challenge the students and force them to make a judgment. “Fooling the Emperor: How is Creativity Misapplied in China,” by American academic Yong Zhao (2014), satisfies both these criteria. In this piece, Zhao claims that because of the country’s authoritarian system, creativity in China is often misapplied. Instead of engaging in useful innovation, citizens waste their energy trying to “fool the emperor.”

The students wrote, in part,

The essence of Zhao’s argument is that Chinese’s innovations and creatives are all used in the wrong way, with the wrong purpose of cheating the authorities, rather than making real progress towards productivity. As for us, Zhao’s argu-

2 This particular text, as well as the subsequent revision, is a composite of several different student texts from the workshop. The language, argument and overall structure come from the students. I have combined, condensed, and slightly edited their text in order to better illustrate the patterns at play.

ment seems to be overgeneralized. Though we concede that several people completely obey authority even at great cost of resources, it doesn't mean that all the efforts, innovations and substantial progress made by the authorities which actually promote the development of China are all cheating.

For instance, five years ago, Lanzhou was one of the most polluted cities in China Ultimately, a new kind of street sprinkler comes into being which can not only water the street for dust covering, but also spray water vapor for humidity strengthening. Owing to the innovations of the authorities, can pollution in Lanzhou be relieved.

As we see, these students have no problem adopting the formal features of argumentative writing. They also have no problem stating a forceful opinion. On close inspection, though, their argument does not seem to hang together properly. Something is wrong. If we break the text down into parts, we see the problem:

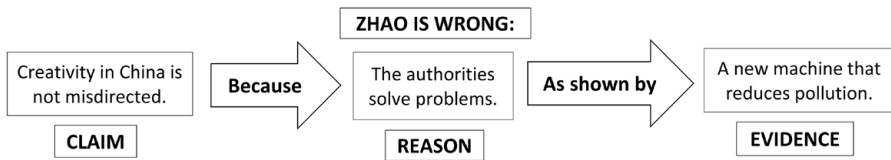


Figure 12.1. Analysis of student text.

Though these students present a claim, a reason for that claim, and supporting evidence, the reason does not necessitate the claim. One could agree that the Chinese authorities are great problem solvers, but also believe that creativity is misdirected. In other words, the text does not accomplish its stated purpose of refuting Zhao's argument. Instead, it refutes an imaginary argument that "efforts, innovations and substantial progress made by the authorities . . . are all cheating." Very likely, this analysis and response, in an American or UK university, would be given a low mark. It would act as further evidence that Chinese students have "no idea how to be critical."

Adopting an elaboration approach to CT instruction, a teacher would move these students to elaborate on their claim. This would be done through questioning. *Where does Zhao say that all progress is cheating? What do you mean by "overgeneralized?"* Given a chance to revise, the students might write something like this:

The essence of Zhao's argument is that Chinese's innova-

tions and creatives are all often used in the wrong way, with the wrong purpose of cheating the authorities, rather than making real progress towards productivity. As for us, Zhao's argument seems to be ~~overgeneralized~~ *overstate the problem*. Though we concede that ~~several~~ *sometimes* people completely obey authority even at great cost of resources, *many problems are being solved*. *Creatives are a necessary driving force in solutions*. ~~it doesn't mean that all the efforts, innovations and substantial progress made by the authorities which actually promote the development of China are all cheating.~~

For instance, five years ago, Lanzhou was one of the most polluted cities in China . . . Ultimately, a new kind of street sprinkler comes into being which can not only water the street for dust covering, but also spray water vapor for humidity strengthening. Owing to the ~~innovations of the authorities~~ *creatives of Chinese*, can pollution in Lanzhou be relieved.

When writing in a new language, novice writers often are not sure what reasoning principles need to be expressly stated; they leave out key information, believing that it is implied. In the above writing sample, and its subsequent revision, we see a classic case of this phenomenon. For these students, the existence of the new street sprayer—and the other changes their rapidly developing city has recently undergone—implies great progress, inevitably fueled by great creativity. It did not occur to them to expressly state this link; perhaps the link itself has never even risen to consciousness. Instead, the connection between the authorities, progress, and creativity is purely tacit: a reasoning principle to think with, not about. The elaboration approach moved the students to make this connection explicit. More broadly, in addressing their teacher's questions, they had to think about their own thinking, and in turn their world, and how it emerges in language. And, after doing so, they were able to reformulate their text into what, by conventional argumentative standards, is a perfectly logical chain of ideas. The text now breaks down as follows:

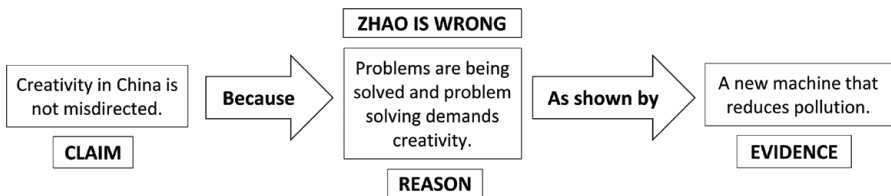


Figure 12.2. Analysis of revised student text.

So, these students are not incapable of argumentation, nor operating from a completely alien script. Instead, they simply needed to slow down and examine their thinking patterns for (cultural) blind spots. Questioning forced them to perform this examination. They then reworked their text.³ The result is a coherent argument with which they can participate in intellectual exchange. That is a fine outcome. More importantly, though, as they rethought and reworked their text, these students engaged in critical thinking. And as we all know, when performed often enough, a practice becomes a habit.

Pedagogical Reform in China: Prospects

In this final section, I would like to present evidence that my work in Lanzhou was successful. Language teachers at Lanzhou University are now utilizing “assert and elaborate” and are seeing marked gains in both their students’ CT abilities and general learning outcomes. Unfortunately, such evidence does not yet exist. After a productive two-week session in the summer of 2019, I left Lanzhou. As such, instead of discussing outcomes, I will close this chapter by discussing the potential challenges pedagogical reform efforts—and WAC efforts in particular—face in the Chinese university. My analysis is informed by my own observations, informal interviews with teachers and students, and an online survey completed by participants ($n = 20$) in the various seminars and workshops I have conducted at Lanzhou over the past two summers.

In her study of the implementation of WAC in China, Dan Wu (2012) notes that within Chinese universities there is “a near-unanimous sense of a need for WAC insights” (xxii). Martha Townsend and Therese Zawacki (2013) echo this claim. My experience indicates that Wu is indeed correct. Throughout my time in Lanzhou, I found both teachers and administrators deeply interested in, and appreciative of, any new insights into pedagogical practices. Core WAC ideas such as writing to learn and the importance of feedback and revision were taken up with great interest. Once introduced to these ideas, Chinese teachers easily adapted them to their particular teaching contexts. I was working with language teachers, remember. They teach large classes (of up to 40 students), typically utilizing a department-issued textbook. In brainstorming sessions, though, they formulated numerous creative ways to introduce writing into their courses. What if students wrote poetry using the vocabulary words from a certain unit, for example? Overall,

3 Note that at no point did I discuss the rules of informal logic with the students. Instead, the more “logical” argument structure seen in the revision is simply a result of questioning and elaboration.

there was general agreement that such WAC-inspired activities could further desired learning outcomes.

Unfortunately, despite enthusiasm for pedagogical reform, there are serious impediments to any sort of alteration to conventional Chinese teaching and learning practices. These impediments were made clear during my efforts to promote my WAC-inspired vision of critical thinking. As noted, there is a widespread (though not unanimous) belief that Chinese students lack CT ability relative to their Western peers. This situation has been attributed to China's political system (Zhang, 2016), the country's Confucian legacy (Lloyd, 1996), and linguistic factors (Yoshino, 2004). Yu Dong (2015), for one, rejects all these explanations. He echoes my personal experience when he argues that Chinese students are perfectly capable of engaging in Western-style CT. The problem, as he sees it, is that they are simply not given the chance. Throughout the Chinese system, he notes the persistent use of a "one-way transmission style of pedagogy" (p. 356). This occurs even when teachers claim to value CT. Obviously, this sort of teaching style contravenes the idea of active learning which is so essential to WAC.

What accounts for the prevalence of the "one-way transmission" method in the Chinese system? When asked, Chinese teachers consistently refer to the large size of classes or the demands imposed by high-stakes testing. As one graduate student told me, active learning is simply "not efficient" when trying to help 40 or 50 students pass a required English test. There is, however, a wealth of WAC scholarship devoted to refuting this very point (e.g., Hobson & Schafermeyer, 1994). If anything, active learning practices aim to make instruction more efficient, in that, by putting more responsibility on students, teachers are able to achieve more with less. Also, as we have seen, there is no necessary tradeoff between higher-order and lower-order outcomes. Actively engaging with learning material can, by all accounts, help students remember material more effectively, and thus perform better on exams. A major component of any pedagogical reform effort in China will involve familiarizing teachers with these basic concepts and working with them to adapt active-learning methods to a world of large classes and high-stakes exams.

Apart from the above structural challenges, there are also deep-seated cultural issues which must be overcome if Chinese teachers are to embrace active-learning methods. Again, I find Yu Dong's (2015) perspective particularly insightful. As noted, he rejects the idea that Confucian notions of decorum or the nature of the Chinese language somehow handicap Chinese CT ability. Students cannot engage in critical thought simply because teachers will not let them. Teachers will not let them, he believes, because of the particular conception of knowledge held by educated Chinese. Due to the country's

Confucian legacy, “the Truth” exists in an ethereal realm, divorced from practice or evidence-based inquiry. Knowledge is gained by “reading the classical books without looking out the window” (Dong, 2015, p. 362). It is then passed down from teacher to student, expert to novice. In other words, knowledge is something that *is*, rather than something that *is made*. According to Dong, this normative paradigm, derived from a belief system to which few people still openly adhere, shapes Chinese education on an almost genetic level.

With his claim to have identified a single, shared philosophical tradition, Dong could be accused of essentializing Chinese thought. That said, his theory has great explanatory power. He notes that, shaped by “traditional ideas and habits,” teachers too often take on the role of “a preacher transmitting infallible knowledge” (Dong, 2015, p. 365). Indeed. Time and time again, I met teachers who felt they had to take on such a role, that it was essential to maintaining authority in the classroom. Any inclination that a teacher might not know the answer to a question—or that a student might be more knowledgeable about a subject than her teacher—was seen as a terrible sin. This strong desire to always know (or be perceived as knowing) deeply informs pedagogical practice.

Earlier I spoke of my difficulties in getting Chinese teachers to respond to student work in a non-directive manner: open-ended questions, or lines of inquiry that might lead to unexpected places, were firmly resisted. I believe that this resistance stems in part from an unwillingness to relinquish the role of knower. From the Chinese perspective, remember, the teacher’s role is to transmit knowledge to the student. It is not to help the student create knowledge (because knowledge is not something that is created). Consider some responses to a survey question I posed asking teachers about problems they face when trying to teach critical thinking. Numerous teachers said that they could not teach CT because of their own lack of knowledge about logical rules or processes: “my own logical thinking is poor,” one teacher wrote. Another noted that there are “[many] factors which limit my ability to teach critical thinking. For example, if I do not have insight into a problem I cannot guide the students in a proper way.” This latter response is telling, in that it posits a single correct answer to whatever problem the student happens to be grappling with. The student can find this answer if guided “in a proper way,” by a suitably knowledgeable expert. The idea that there might be multiple correct answers, or that the process of grappling—of making your own “proper way”—might be more important than the end product is not considered. Nor is the idea that a teacher need not be an expert to be a good learning partner. Overall, I found such basic tenets of progressive pedagogy to be utterly unfamiliar to Chinese educators. Whether or not, as Professor Dong

claims, a certain conception of knowledge is to blame, proponents of active, inquiry-based learning will have to confront this reality.

Conclusion

My efforts in Lanzhou represent only a tiny sliver of the WAC and WAC-inspired efforts currently ongoing within China. That said, I believe my testimony is valuable in that it presents a snapshot of the situation “on the ground” in the world’s biggest university system. All told, I agree with scholars like Dan Wu (2012), who find that Chinese educators are hungry for information about how to improve the learning experience of their students. The rise of high-quality educational scholarship by China mainland authors indicates that the Chinese have much to contribute to the conversation. That said, there are structural and cultural impediments to implementing what we might understand as “best practices” in progressive education. I do not believe that these impediments are impossible to overcome. But it will take continued collaboration. If my own experience is any indication, Chinese teacher-scholars are eager to engage in such efforts.

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