Volume 24 Issue 29
Originally issued as G6



Global Journal of human-social science: G
Linguistics & Education
Volume 24 Issue 6 Version 1.0 Year 2024
Type: Double Blind Peer Reviewed International Research Journal
Publisher: Global Journals
Online ISSN: 2249-460X & Print ISSN: 0975-587X

Bridging Western and Eastern Perspectives on Education: A Comparative Study of Paulo Freire's Critical Pedagogy and Confucianism in the Digital Era

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Introduction- The global spread of digital learning indicates a degradation of the current traditional teacher-centred approach to schooling, replaced by a form of teaching and learning where digital education leads personalised learning (Benade, 2015). As the digital age continues to shape the context of modern education, scholars are exploring new ways of bridging Western and Eastern perspectives on education in order to better understand the role of critical pedagogy today. Freire's (2021) critical pedagogy emphasises that traditional forms of education tend to reinforce educator power structures, which may trigger inequalities. Critical pedagogy can promote the idea that education should be a process that liberates the capacity to learn rather than a merely mechanical means of imparting knowledge or skills. Eastern Confucianism, represented by Confucius (770–481 BCE), pointed to the importance of moral behaviours, such as 'Jen'(Benevolence), 'Li' (Ritual), and 'Zhi'(Wisdom), which emphasised the role of the teacher in society (Tan, 2015). Thus, Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy and Confucianism both offer unique perspectives on ways to re-imagine education in the digital age (Freire, 2015; Tan, 2015). This paper explores how the educational theories of two philosophers from the East and West, Confucius and Paulo Freire, as can offer a critical understanding of digital education.

GJHSS-G Classification: *LCC: LB1025.3*



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Bridging Western and Eastern Perspectives on Education: A Comparative Study of Paulo Freire's Critical Pedagogy and Confucianism in the Digital Era

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Introduction

The global spread of digital learning indicates a degradation of the current traditional teacher-centred approach to schooling, replaced by a form of teaching and learning where digital education leads personalised learning (Benade, 2015). As the digital age continues to shape the context of modern education, scholars are exploring new ways of bridging Western and Eastern perspectives on education in order to better understand the role of critical pedagogy today. Freire's (2021) critical pedagogy emphasises that traditional forms of education tend to reinforce educator power structures, which may trigger inequalities. Critical pedagogy can promote the idea that education should be a process that liberates the capacity to learn rather than a merely mechanical means of imparting knowledge or skills. Eastern Confucianism, represented by Confucius (770–481 BCE), pointed to the importance of moral behaviours, such as 'Jen'(Benevolence), 'Li' (Ritual), and 'Zhi'(Wisdom), which emphasised the role of the teacher in society (Tan, 2015). Thus, Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy and Confucianism both offer unique perspectives on ways to re-imagine education in the digital age (Freire, 2015; Tan, 2015). This paper explores how the educational theories of two philosophers from the East and West, Confucius and Paulo Freire, as can offer a critical understanding of digital education. First, it introduces the digital education landscape; then, it applies the pedagogical theories of the two scholars to the context of digital education, summarises the similarities and differences in their perspectives on this field.

The popularity of digital education has changed the form of pedagogy and raised many social issues, such as the digital divide and ethical privacy. In this section, we examine definitions and key features of digital education and potential challenges to it. According to Beetham and Sharpe (2013), digital education is often defined as the use of digital technologies, including web-based learning resources and software and digital communication tools, to support teaching and learning. Understood this way, one of the key features of digital education is that it presents opportunities. Firstly, the high accessibility of digital education can remove geographical and temporal constraints, thus making education more accessible in areas that lack educational resources (Gu, 2021). In addition, digital education can provide a more personalised learning experience, and big data platforms can help students better grasp the content by monitoring their learning behaviour and providing accurate feedback (Green et al., 2005).

However, in the practice of digital education, we also need to analyse key social, cultural and ethical features in a multi-dimensional way. Firstly, digital education may exacerbate educational inequalities. As the delivery of digital education may require certain requirements of information and communication technologies (ICT) and equipment, some economically disadvantaged students may not be able to access the related benefits, which may lead to a digital divide or even further contribute to a knowledge divide (van Deursen & van Dijk, 2019). More broadly, it may be possible to apply a critical application of decolonising thinking to digital education, as universal access to this form of education does not necessarily mean equal opportunities for everyone (Timmis & Muhuro, 2019). In addition to the digital divide caused by inequalities in economic capital, other inequalities in socio-cultural capital, such as gender, racial imbalance and geographical imbalance, can all contribute to the digital divide (Costa et al., 2019). Moreover, some researchers have expressed concerns about the privacy and security issues that may be raised by digital education. For example, digital tracking of data, although used as predictive analysis of learner performance, plays a key role. However, the lack of transparency and protection of personal data has led to concerns about its misuse, potential security breaches in digital education, and the potential for algorithms and artificial intelligence (AI) to perpetuate previous ethical issues such as data bias (Hakimi et al., 2021; Pangrazio & Selwyn, 2019).

Scholars have not only considered the key positive and negative features of digital education in terms of privacy and reach, but have considered it from the perspective of critical pedagogy with a particular emphasis on how it enables dialogue. This has led to the mergence of the pedagogy of digital education. According to Freire (2011), dialogic education argues that learning should not be a 'bank' from which information is unilaterally drawn and passed from teacher to student, but rather a collaborative process

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involving the use of critical thinking for the construction of knowledge (Shih, 2018). Freire (2015) also argues that social inequality exists in the teacher–student relationship in traditional education, and, as critical pedagogy provides the conditions to encourage students to become citizens who can think critically about power, it aims to achieve educational equality (Giroux, 2010).

Paulo Freire's application of critical pedagogy to digital education, outlined above, may aim to enhance students' knowledge and thinking through a critical consciousness of technology. Firstly, according to Freire and Macedo (2005), critical pedagogy points out that a broad understanding of the living world perspective and broadening of horizons may be the most obvious advantage of digital education. Specifically, through digital technology it is possible to provide more educational opportunities to understand the intersection of information and ideas from different backgrounds around the world. Knowledge in digital education is developed in an egalitarian dialogue based on digital technology; that is, this knowledge is not held by individuals, but collectively by those in the dialogue. Conversely, dialogue cannot happen when educators and other leaders override students (Bontly et al., 2017). However, there is a limitation to applying Freire's ideas to digital education. We need to be cautious in considering that student-centred forms of teaching and learning in digital education may be context-dependent and that student-centred approaches to education may lead to a lack of teacher control over the pace of the curriculum. Thus, in order to realise the full potential of digital technologies through critical pedagogy, it is important to remain alert to potential challenges and to promote social transformation and equity based on adapting digital educational practices.

The inspiration of Confucianism in contemporary digital education may refer to Confucius' philosophy on the object and process of education. On the former, Confucius advocates that 'instruction knows no class distinction', implying the principle that educators should admit students regardless of nationality or ethnicity (Yi & Fu, 2017). Hence, applying this principle can break aristocratic monopolies on education, making it accessible to students who were formerly denied the right to education. Similarly, digital education breaks down the geographical limitations on traditional education, giving students in rural areas help to address educational needs to support synergistic links between digital equity and intercultural education (Resta & Laferrière, 2015). However, as discussed above in relation to issues of privacy and geographical reach, digital education also poses some limitations considered in Confucian terms, particularly in relation to potential conflicts between mainstream cultures and other minority cultures. For example, educational content in mainstream digital education environments may be subject to dominantly accepted cultural, social and political influences, while social groups from minority cultures may react to and understand digital educational content differently (Resta & Laferrière, 2015). Therefore, in applying Confucius' thoughts on education to digital education, there is a need to pay particular attention to and respect learners from different cultural and social backgrounds and to maintain digital equity.

Furthermore, in the educational process Confucianism respects the use of *Yin Chai Shi Jiao* (the concept of teaching according to students' level to fully explore human potential), based on students' individual differences, which is in line with the aim of digital education to track students' personal data to provide more personalised teaching and learning (Green et al., 2005; Ying-Syuan & Asghar. 2018). Additionally, Confucianism views education as the maintenance of moral cultivation and etiquette, with a focus on Jen for the mutual cultivation of respect and self-respect (Wawrytko, 1982). Hence, as outlined above, Confucian education, like Freire's critical pedagogy, is relevant to today's digital challenges and has important implications for the shaping of contemporary digital education ethics through the application of claims about student-centred education.

Confucius' and Freire's views on education and the issue of moral responsibility and balance in digital education can be compared in several ways. Firstly, Confucius' view of education does not involve the blind worship of teachers. Indeed, his words that 'three people must be my teachers', as espoused in the Analects of Confucius (Ames & Jr, 2010), is similar to Paul Freire's (2009) emphasis on the importance of dialogue and co-creation of knowledge between teachers and students in his essay on the pedagogy of the oppressed. Secondly, Freire's critical education promotes 'dialogue education' and the practice that learning is not just a process of transferring information from teacher to student, but of constructing knowledge that involves critical thinking. Similarly, Confucius believed that learning by rote all the time was dangerous (Makeham, 1996). He encouraged students to use Si (thinking) to reflect on, internalise and apply what had been learned (Tan, 2015). Thus, both scholars reject authoritarian forms of education that emphasise rote learning and prioritise dialogic and interactive forms of education that promote critical thinking. Finally, both thinkers considered in this paper affirm the role of the teacher as a facilitator of learning, rather than an authority figure who transmits knowledge to the student. Education is a process in which students and teachers learn from each other. The main area of disagreement between the two thinkers is that Confucius sees a harmonious society as most appropriate for learning, whereas Freire prefers radical criticism to transform society to promote education. At the same time, Freire sees education as a tool for critical

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consciousness and social transformation (Farag et al., 2022), while Confucianism believes that education should emphasise the cultivation of Jen, Li and wisdom in virtue (Tan, 2008).

In summary, it can be said that a critical analysis and comparison of Freire's Critical Pedagogy and Confucian educational perspectives is needed in digital education. Firstly, in the face of ethical and moral challenges such as the misuse of personal data and AI data bias mentioned earlier, educational institutions should consider how to balance economic benefits and ethical responsibilities in digital education to bring technology back to student-centred goals. Secondly, educators should focus on how to balance status inequalities between teachers and students in the digital environment and foster opportunities for students to engage in dialogue and reflection (Funk et al., 2016). Finally, it is recommended that students become co-constructors of knowledge in digital education rather than passive recipients. Furthermore, students may be cautious about teacher-student inequalities and power relations in digital education in order to develop a more holistic digital literacy (Knox, 2019).

This paper has enhanced our critical understanding of digital education by comparing the potential of Freire's Critical Pedagogy and Confucian perspectives on education, having listing issues such as the digital divide and the protection of personal data privacy, introduced critical pedagogy theories that emphasise the importance of dialogue between teachers and students in relation to the co-creation of knowledge and encourage the use of critical awareness in digital education, and analysed how Confucian education is relevant to today's digital education challenges, such as maintaining equality in digital education, respecting individualised education and complementing ethical education with digital technology. Finally, it has identified similarities and differences in the values of critical pedagogy and Confucian education and their potential implications for digital education. The limitations of this paper are that it only narrowly considers the individual and social dimensions of digital education and does not consider the policy implications. Future research could focus on the impact of policy making on digital education.

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