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David C. Lam Institute for East-West Studies (LEWI)

Working Paper Series 研究報告系列

Paper Number: 35
March 2005

Cross-Cultural Education, Open-mindedness, and Time

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Cross-Cultural Education, Open-mindedness, and Time*

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Abstract

Open-mindedness is a goal for a liberal-arts education, falling under the more basic goals of transmitting and developing major areas of knowledge, providing the foundations for a democratic citizenry, and promoting sustained intellectual pursuits. Cross-cultural studies can further these basic goals in subtle, but powerful ways by drawing attention to assumptions about one's own culture normally just taken for granted, by encouraging diversity of ideas, and by helping to improve critical self-understanding (such as an appreciation of one's fallibility and limits). Because these studies can promote open-mindedness as a mere offshoot of evident contrasts with one's own culture, the teaching for open-mindedness is no additional burden on an already crammed curriculum. The teaching is highly motivating because it is filled with surprises about one's culture and one's self, particularly in learning of the narrowness of one's current understanding.

Open-mindedness is a trait that we want to encourage in students. To be open-minded in regard to a belief or set of beliefs is to position those beliefs to be vulnerable to reasons to modify or revise them. However, what belief aims at, and claims, is the truth of what is believed: You want to believe that the earth revolves around the sun only if it is true. So, it violates the demands, as well as the value, of belief to surrender a particular belief that is true. But then the very nature of belief gives rise to a conceptual problem for open-mindedness: How could one ever have a good reason—a reason on behalf of knowledge or truth—to alter what one all-out

*This paper was presented as the Keynote Speech of the International Workshop on Internationalising the Curriculum and Learning Environment, with a Special Focus on East-West Studies, David C. Lam Institute for East-West Studies (LEWI) & Wing Lung Bank International Institute for Business Development (IIBD), Hong Kong Baptist University, 18th November, 2004.

believes, when, of necessity, one must regard one's beliefs as true? If Jane believes that discrimination on the basis of race is wrong, how is Jane to take seriously criticisms against it? And why should she? What would motivate Jane to take those criticisms seriously, because she regards them as wrong? But if she does not take them seriously, isn't she close-minded?

In an article that I recently published on open-mindedness, I addressed this problem of open-mindedness and related puzzles in reflection on an unsatisfactory educational debate on the compatibility of open-mindedness and belief.¹ The critic thought that there is something contradictory about a teacher affirming:

Racism is wrong, but I am open-minded about it.

The defenders of open-mindedness affirmed, in contrast, that all that was necessary is for the teacher to affirm:

Racism is wrong, but it's possible that it isn't.

To my mind, the latter is the really contradictory one. The former, though intended as also contradictory, does not succeed, I think, once open-mindedness is properly understood.

The debate was unsatisfactory, because all parties accepted the assumption that to be open-minded is to be less assured of what one believes, as if maximal open-mindedness would be to believe nothing. My resolution was to reject this assumption. Criticisms or challenges to a belief can be dealt with openly and honestly without the mere admission of those criticisms or challenges as worthy of examination, entailing that one moderates one's conviction or strength of belief.

So, I rejected the terms of that debate and instead proposed that open-mindedness is a *second-order* (or "meta") attitude. It is an attitude toward one's beliefs as believed and not just toward the specific proposition believed, just as fallibilism is a related second-order doubt about

the perfection of one's believing, not the truth of any specific belief. For Jane to recognize her fallibility in coming to believe that, say, global warming is due to normal environmental cycles is not a discovery of a weakness, however slight, in her grounds for believing that very proposition. Rather, it is to allow that her believing it is due to methods or sources or self-understandings that are imperfect and which can be improved.

Under this reconciliation, it makes sense that a teacher can affirm:

Racism is wrong, but this belief is among a set of my beliefs, some members of which are likely to be mistaken, and so I should keep an open-mind about them.

Contrived as this expression is, it is not contradictory. Because it is the expression of a belief about one's belief, it is second-order, implying no weakening or modification of the teacher's all-out or unqualified judgment that racism is wrong.

Given this second-order view of open-mindedness, let us pursue the topic that I touched on only briefly in my article: How can education encourage open-mindedness? The teaching for open-mindedness is necessary for an education that aims at the acquisition, promotion, and pursuit of the fundamental knowledge of the liberal arts, as well as of developing intelligent, well-informed, and active citizens in a democracy. In this talk, I argue that cross-cultural studies can play an important role in furthering open-mindedness, so understood.

The framework for the argument here is odd, but I will try to persuade you that it is central: *limited time and resources*. If students had all the time in the world, there would be little cost in examining criticisms just out of curiosity or boredom. But none of us do. Our need to conserve on time is a cornerstone of findings in cognitive science. If asked whether more words in English start with "r" or have "r" in the third position, the majority of subjects will say that it

occurs in the first position, which is not true. What is true is that words with “r” in the first position are easier to recall or produce. This ease of availability quickly ends the search with the wrong answer.² The explanation is that availability is a generally useful shortcut, and so a device of economy. A recent, officially sponsored study of education concludes:

Most important is how people use their time while learning. Concepts such as “deliberate practice” emphasize the importance of helping students monitor their learning so that they seek feedback and actively evaluate their strategies and current levels of understanding.³

Like many other educational concerns, the problem of teaching for open-mindedness is only challenging and practically relevant to pedagogical policies under assumptions of time constraints: If a school in Ohio decides to teach more on Asian culture, something else must give, as the curriculum is packed. They must teach less, say, American history. Such trade-offs are at the heart of real decision-making about the curriculum. Even within subject matter teaching, the trade-off between depth and coverage is unavoidable. In a book to which I am indebted,⁴ the author, Martha Nussbaum, complains about the simplistic ways East-West differences are explained in textbooks, in particular, that Western thought is more analytic and logical and Eastern thought is more contextual and experiential, a stereotype to which we will return. But her decrying the simplifications of that stereotype lacks force unless she factors in the essential simplifications necessary to present substantial ideas and histories in very limited time.

For these reasons, a constraint on any effort to teach open-mindedness is that the teaching should be minimally obtrusive on the curriculum and that students’ learning be useable without great effort or study on their part. The constraint applies to open-mindedness itself. Because open-mindedness demands our time to weigh alternatives and criticisms, we must be highly

selective about what to be open-minded about. The selectivity is along at least two dimensions: significance and vulnerability to modification. It is not worth the effort to be open-minded about beliefs that hardly matter to us or that are certain beyond reasonable doubt, e.g., the earth revolves around the sun. (But in selecting what to be open-minded about, there is a danger of being over-protective to certain beliefs, deeming them beyond reasonable doubt. Thus, even when one judges that it is not worth being open-minded about a certain belief, it is often valuable to be open-minded about that very judgment.)

The time constraints on individual thought to which any account of open-mindedness must be in harmony are not merely a compromise with the facts of life. Open-mindedness is not something one acquires by lecturing, and it is not something typically engaged, subsequent to heavy reflection and decision. Open-mindedness functions best when it works imperceptibly but habitually. It facilitates attention to worthy critical challenges and it filters out others, while knowing the dangers of so doing (again, because the filtering can be a device of over-protection.)

My main point is that open-mindedness can be optimally promoted in undemanding and indirect ways—largely as a by-product or side effect of other carefully designed teaching and curriculum—and my main illustration is cross-cultural studies. (Only “largely” because faculty must on occasion point students toward lessons for open-mindedness and reinforce these pointers with appropriate practices.)

Assuming good instruction, cross-cultural studies provide an excellent way to promote open-mindedness well within the bounds of practical constraints. The studies are defensible primarily as meeting the ideals of the liberal-arts curriculum, and only secondarily for the instrumental value to promote open-mindedness. It is of intrinsic educational value to understand other cultures and ideas. Still, its most distinctive value is an indirect one, stated clearly by

Searle: You understand your own culture better by contrast.⁵ In their preface to the proceedings of LEWI's International Workshop on East-West Studies in 2002, Chan and Yeh enter a related observation:

Comparisons enable one to discover and be fascinated by the richness of the variability of the human experience (p. 2).

If we explore this great value of cross-cultural studies, it will yield lessons for open-mindedness that are not a burden on our limits, and of these lessons I highlight three. First, cross-cultural studies lead to an improved self-understanding. Second, one way they succeed at improving critical self-understanding is that they lead students to become aware of beliefs and values that have guided them without notice. Third, these studies bring attention to aspects of one's own cultural beliefs and values that are taken for granted, and it positions them to enter claims, so that they invite critical scrutiny.

On the first, a book that introduces Buddhism immediately tells us that in learning about different cultures:

We can then begin to see some of the limitation or one-sidedness of our own view.⁶

In appreciating the richness of the variability of human experience, students do not learn just incrementally, as when learning a new theorem of geometry. Students learn as well about limits of their own knowledge, in accord with the second lesson for open-mindedness. It is easy to overlook what is right before you. In this way, there is also an extension of critical self-understanding. Finally, it fosters the third lesson. Only if rendered explicit can one's cultural beliefs, values, practices, or commitments be positioned to enter claims or at least to invite notice, which is a pre-condition for open-mindedness to operate.

A simplified contemporary example will help to clarify these claims. Recently, the French government banned the display of starkly religious garments in public schools and defended it on grounds of preserving the secular state. For US citizens, whom I will refer to, for brevity, as Americans, besides the direct learning about the French government's action, they cannot help but be stimulated to recognize a sharp contrast with how their own democratic, secular state operates, mainly by a hands-off policy. This indirect learning focuses us on differences with our own related practices and assumption that we have been taking for granted—that the way to preserve a separation of Church and state is for the government to ignore religious displays in public places as a private matter, not subject to government coercion. Previously, we did not even recognize it as an assumption.

The new critical understanding we come to is that democratic values do not automatically imply that any such ban is an assault on freedom. Something we had treated as a political necessity now appears as optional or contingent. The connection among democracy, religious tolerance, and public displays moves from the periphery to the center of attention. In having this assumption or belief articulated, Americans are compelled to reflect on whether it is correct as a democratic value or just parochial to our constitutional, historical, or cultural settings. What is now noticed, and explicit, is in a position to be stated and so subject to critical examination from others and ourselves.

In sum, much of the learning from this episode follows merely from the highlighting of cultural contrasts. The learning provides for the very motivation to open-mindedness: a sharp, though unintended, demonstration that one is viewing certain important matters from a point of view, and that this point of view calls for defense.

These benefits, especially the second, depend on the narrowness of focal attention, but it also fits with common experience. One can be conscious of a scene without recognition of objects in the scene that nevertheless register to consciousness. I had lunch at a restaurant, and afterwards went for a hike. Suddenly, it occurred at me that I had left without giving a tip, paying the bill, or taking my credit card. Immediately, I returned to the restaurant to discover the situation there, just as I had recalled it. I must have comprehended the information of having left my credit card and not paying the bill. But the information was lodged at the periphery of consciousness, so that it became available (in short-term memory) only with a turn of attention.

Because our attention has limited focus, we can come to be *surprised* not only in learning something new but in discovering something about ourselves. Surprise is, in itself, a delight. Learning of other cultures is filled with surprises, and, as a by-product of some of these surprises, we can come to be surprised about ourselves, prominently, to realize that we have been taking for granted a questionable assumption or one that does not hold in other cultures. If it does not hold in other cultures, it cannot be a necessity.

Socrates surprises and perplexes those he questions by leading them into inconsistencies in their own beliefs. Meletus, Socrates' chief accuser at the trial recorded in the *Apology*, is led into a contradiction with his declaration that Socrates is an atheist. Socrates reminds Meletus of his legal accusation that Socrates believes in divine-activities. Meletus is then brought to appreciate that, if someone believes in horse-activities, he must believe in horses, and so the accusation that Socrates believes in god-activities commits Meletus to maintaining that Socrates believes in gods, which is incompatible with his current charge of atheism. Now that the conflictual beliefs are evident or manifest, Meletus can dodge neither recognition of them nor intellectual blame.

One source of surprise to Meletus, as to us, is that one can overlook what one already knows (as one can overlook obvious implications of what one believes, as between god-activities and gods.) In his essay, “In Praise of the Cognitive Emotions”,⁷ Israel Scheffler writes:

Surprise is a cognitive emotion, resting on the...supposition that what happened conflicts with prior expectation.⁸

Surprise is not just discovering the unexpected or unusual. Surprise arises from a conflict with what one expects. One would be surprised to win the lottery. But it is not the kind of surprise as when Americans learn that it is arguable whether the democratic state should be neutral on public dress or, for a trite example of cultural variation, that it is not necessary to regularly have dinner between 6 and 7:30 pm.

Scheffler observes the obstacles dogmatists place in the way of their own surprise, in which dogmatism is a prime enemy of open-mindedness:

The dogmatist is perfectly firm about the beliefs he espouses and the beliefs he rejects. He blocks surprise...by denying all experience that purports to contradict them. He not only avoids the systematic testing of his beliefs; he closes off the very possibility of recognizing negative evidence, by early and stout denial of its existence.⁹

Scheffler appreciates the educational value of surprise but also the reason to resist it:

Receptivity to surprise involves, however, a certain vulnerability; it means accepting the risk of a possibly painful unsettling of one's beliefs, with the attendant need to rework one's expectations and redirect one's conduct.¹⁰

But working powerfully against this kind of resistance to encourage open-mindedness is our pervasive concern for the truth of our beliefs. We care to be correct for its own sake, but also

because only with true beliefs are the actions that they guide likely to succeed. If you want to get to Times Square by subway, you will succeed if you believe correctly that the #2 stops there. You will go wrong if you believe that the #5 does. By reference to such everyday examples, a gripping (positive) answer can be given to the student's question: "Why should I care to be open-minded?" The answer is simply that it is in the student's interest. For open-mindedness improves one's beliefs, so that more of his or her actions or goals are likely to succeed.¹¹

Fitting well with our main themes, there is the possibility to be surprised about what one believes, and to be surprised in this way is a gain in self-knowledge. It is to be surprised that one is surprised, because discovering that what one believes or takes for granted is either not true or does not hold universally. In this way, salience is brought to one's limits and fallibility, crucial spurs to be open-minded.

Belief is both the object of open-mindedness and a major motivator to it because, as just observed, of its aim of truth or knowledge. But it is also a source of a difficulty for open-mindedness, and the difficulty it raises is the flip side of one of its great values to thought. Belief functions as a device of mental economy by guiding us not to attend to many possibilities before us as untrue or irrelevant. Although usually the guidance is excellent, it is not always so, as we all know to our regret. If you believe that the express train you are on stops at 86th St., where you want to get off, you won't even attend to the subway stops that are being passed, even if one of them is 86th St. Obviously, it is necessary for us not to attend to much that is going on around us; otherwise, we will be overwhelmed by information and lose focus on what is important to us at the moment. But, however much we gain from this belief-based "blinding" in generally good guidance and in economizing on mental efforts, it can turn us away from noticing useful information, especially when the relevant beliefs are not true. These yield unwelcome

surprises, as when one misses one's stop on the train.

The surprise that arises from Socratic inquiry and cross-cultural studies that I have highlighted depend on conflict or inconsistency among one's beliefs. In two of his books, the distinguished educational and developmental psychologist Howard Gardner¹² advocates confrontation with one's inconsistencies as a way to address the common experience of teachers whose students do well in physics courses but then cannot solve everyday problems, or who continue to read biology from a teleological rather than an evolutionary perspectives, or who study human behavior in literature and social studies yet continue to read in search of good guy-bad guy scenarios.

The diagnosis is that students bring basic *misconceptions* to school, which they apply rigidly. So, for example, a student, and many adults, if asked what trajectory a rock tied at the end of a twirling rope will take upon release, respond that it continues in a spiral, gradually losing energy until it drops. One reason that this Aristotelian view is difficult to unlearn must be that it is not noticed, because we have all had experiences which, regarded rightly, sharply falsify it. Part of the teaching that Gardner proposes as a way to disabuse students of these misconceptions is to give students what he calls "Christopherian encounters":

Situations where students' earlier models or misconceptions are brought into sharp focus because of an experience that directly challenges the viability of the model they have been favoring.¹³

So, for example, you may have students perform correlative experiments on a computer, where it becomes striking that their Aristotelian-based predictions fail. Gardner mentions, in particular, application of these encounters to simplistic stereotypes about other cultures and ethnic groups.¹⁴ These confrontations with their own misconceptions surprises students. They are compelled to

notice their errors and to try to bring the underlying misconceptions to the surface and so to gain in their understanding of the world and of themselves.

The focus on conflicts or inconsistencies is one way to approach what I'll call "*contrastive thinking*", which, I think, is particularly valuable for promoting open-mindedness unobtrusively. Contrastive thinking is the natural way of thinking cross-culturally, as we have already noted. Contrasts focus us on differences, thus helping to clarify one's own values or culture. Yet, they do not thereby imply opposition or disagreement. In the case of the French government and overt religious symbolism, Americans are not compelled to decide that one position is superior, once the presentation causes them to attend to the contrast. They may decide that the shared ideals of democracy and liberty do not demand any firm judgment between these models, especially as the bans in France are largely restricted to younger citizens in public schools. The resolution of contrasts may not be victory or defeat but modification of one's views. Whatever the resolution, there is clarification of one's own views. This is a contribution of cross-cultural studies to open-mindedness, not because a belief is given up but, because in learning about others, we are pressured to better formulate, and so better understand, our own position. (Why contrasts rather than analogies? I think contrasts have an advantage because we have a natural expectation of similarity, so analogies do not inspire as much notice or surprise.)

Contrastive thinking in cross-cultural studies can be presented at the level of thinking or reasoning itself. Recent psychological studies suggest that the proposed teaching by awareness of inconsistencies will work less well for those brought up in Eastern than in Western cultures. The research claims to confirm the earlier noted stereotypes of Western thought as more analytic, abstract, and object-oriented and Eastern thought as more holistic, contextual, and field-oriented.¹⁵ Here is a comment on a study of (alleged) differences in formal logic and

response to inconsistency:

Peng and Nisbett...presented Chinese and American students with contradictions drawn from everyday life. For example, they were asked to analyze a conflict between mothers and their daughters and between having fun and going to school. American responses tended to come down in favor of one side or the other (“mothers should respect daughters’ independence”). Chinese responses were more likely to find a “Middle Way,” which found merit and fault on both sides and attempted to reconcile the contradiction (“both the mothers and the daughters have failed to understand each other”).¹⁶

I’m not really confident of these contrasts. The differences seem to me less over the truth of the law of non-contradiction, which no one can sensibly deny, than with how one resolves contrary or conflictual judgments. The judgments that “mothers should respect daughters’ independence” and “daughters should be respectful to their mothers’ authority” are in a *prima facie* conflict. But they allow for multiple resolutions, including that they are perfectly compatible. But there is no latitude with an outright contradiction “mothers should respect daughter’s independence” and “it is not true that mothers should respect daughter’s independence”.

Still, the conflict or tension is genuine, even if not over the non-contradictable law of non-contradiction, and it is enough to pose a problem for the use of inconsistencies in teaching for better understanding and open-mindedness. But the conflict also offers an opportunity. The problem, recall, is that confronting students with vivid inconsistencies within their own views will be less effective for Easterners than for Westerners.

The opportunity afforded by these East-West cultural differences in reasoning is that they lend themselves to a way to explore contrasts even at the level of inquiry and methodology.

Presented clearly to a class, students discover that the very same situation or claim or problem can be analyzed coherently in contrasting ways. Methods, and not just values, belief, and practices, allow for contrasts across cultures. Open-mindedness is enhanced in settings of diversity of views, as with inquiry generally, which is why many philosophers are now fruitfully exploring knowledge as a social enterprise. As Mill spoke about in his famous defense of freedom of speech in *On Liberty*: Confrontation with, and tolerance toward, conflicting views can improve one's understanding of one's own position, even if those conflicting views are wrong and one's own is correct.

The presentation of contrasts, and thereby a stimulant to open-mindedness, as an effortless by-product of cross-cultural studies confronts a multifaceted, and easily exaggerated, problem of both a conceptual and practical nature. How does one teach for understanding of other cultures in a way that does not undermine or dull the contrasts? The problem I am alluding to is familiar, and it is an analogue of the fundamental conflict of open-mindedness and belief with which we started. Initially, the problem is how I can show tolerance and respect toward other cultures when my values, practices, and beliefs sharply differ from theirs. (For a good discussion of this problem in the educational context see Nussbaum's *Cultivating Humanity*.) The more basic problem is that, in order for the student to understand the other culture, he or she must do so with the available tools—his or her own current, culturally bound beliefs and values. But then the understanding of the other culture seems to require assimilation into the student's own beliefs. In short, assimilation (or worse, homogenization) is required for understanding, but assimilation, rather than diversity, is precisely what we want to use cross-cultural studies to oppose. The problem, briefly, is that to encourage cross-cultural studies for its presentation of diversity is to threaten that diversity.

I offer a small suggestion for mitigating this problem, which also indicates that to take seriously the goal of promoting open-mindedness in education within practical constraints will have substantial implications for teaching. One way to avoid this threat is for teachers to favor *original texts* over textbooks. But to give a preference on this count to original texts is not sufficient to settle the matter of what texts should actually be used or how much. In the use of original texts, there is sacrifice in scope of coverage and comprehension. The relevant benefit is that they immerse students in the time, period, and ideas of the other culture. But they also undermine the expectation of complete comprehension, even in translation. This is an advantage for promoting open-mindedness. Students recognize a distance in thought between themselves and the writer of the text. The ideas and texts will remain somewhat alien. Yet, these ideas must be respected in their own right. Although one's critical perspective is not renounced, the recognized distance in thought should lead to hesitancy among students in thrusting sharp criticisms until they do understand the other culture better. Correlatively, it should dispose them toward greater open-mindedness about their own contrary views and values.

Endnotes

- ¹. “Reconciling Open-Mindedness and Belief,” *Theory and Research in Education* 2 2004: 127–42.
- ². Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, “Judgment Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases,” in Kahneman, D. P. Slovic, and A. Tversky, eds. *Judgment under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982): 3–20.
- ³. J.D. Bransford, A.L. Brown, and R.R. Cocking, eds. *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School*. Expanded edition. (Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 2000): 235–6.
- ⁴. Martha C. Nussbaum *Cultivating Humanity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997): Ch. 4.
- ⁵. John Searle, “The Storm over the University,” *New York Review of Books* 1990.
- ⁶. P.D. Santana, *Fundamentals of Buddhism*. The Institute for Advanced Studies of World Religions (Chuang Yen Monastery Carmel NY 2001): 1.
- ⁷. Israel Scheffler, “In Praise of the Cognitive Emotions” in his *Inquiries: Philosophical Studies of Language, Science and Learning* (Indianapolis, Hackett, 1986): 347–62.
- ⁸. Ibid. p. 356.
- ⁹. Ibid. p. 358.
- ¹⁰. Ibid. p. 356.
- ¹¹. The thoughts in this paragraph are extended in my *Belief’s Own Ethics* (The MIT Press, 2002): Ch. 3 and 11; and “Truth, Knowledge, and Learning,” *A Companion to the Philosophy of Education* R. Curren, ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003): 285–304.
- ¹². Howard Gardner, *The Unschooled Mind* (New York: Basic Books, 1991); *The Disciplined Mind* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999).
- ¹³. *The Unschooled Mind*, 157–8. On the origins of the name:

These pedagogical approaches remind me of the case of Christopher Columbus, the first human being to demonstrate unequivocally to naïve observers that the intuitive impression that the earth

is flat had to yield to the alternative conception of the earth as spherical...(229)

¹⁴. *The Unschooled Mind*, p. 173.

¹⁵. R.E. Nisbett, I. Choi, K. Peng, and A. Norenzayan “Culture and Systems of Thought: Holistic versus Analytic Cognition,” *Psychological Review* 2001 108: 291–310.

¹⁶. “Culture and Systems...” p. 302.

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