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Using the Teachings of Confucius for 21st Century Learning

By William Anderson

May 31, 2017

As this academic year comes to a close, teachers and administrators around the country are finding themselves in end-of-year meetings, discussing how to "finish the year off strong" and starting to plan for the year to come. In these meetings, school leaders often make statements like, "We have to prepare these students for jobs that do not even exist yet," echoing reports like [this one from the World Economic Forum](#).

I agree that it's essential to prepare students for 21st century lives and careers. But to educate well-rounded students who are poised for 21st century success, teachers need to look to the past as well as the future. As one of history's greatest teachers, Confucius gives us insight into how much value the "old school" placed on education. As we begin to plan for the next school year, let's consider how we can retool some of Confucius' "old school" teachings to serve us in the "new school."

Cheng Shude, a 20th century philosopher and author, devoted much of his life to trying to understand the [ancient teachings of Confucius](#).

He wrote: "People today think of 'learning' as the pursuit of knowledge, whereas the ancients thought of 'learning' as cultivating the self."

In an effort to prepare students for "jobs that may not exist yet," have we forgotten to teach students about themselves? Students of the "new school" don't just need academic ability to be successful. They also need self-awareness.

Global citizens of the "new school" will engage in some of the most complex interpersonal interactions in history, from navigating global water crises and internet laws to advocating for our world's most vulnerable populations. As we plan our lessons for the coming year, teachers have a responsibility to make sure our students know who they are and what they stand for. Students will need a strong understanding of who they are as individuals in order to not get lost in the collective. Through knowledge of self, students can begin to understand what they bring to this rapidly connecting world.

Now do not get me wrong—there are glimmers of personal growth connected to results on standardized tests. But do we sacrifice leaps in social and emotional growth for improved data points and percentiles? With student engagement on the decline, [especially in](#)

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urban centers and among students of color, teachers are constantly fielding questions from students like, "When am I going to use this?" and "What does this have to do with my life?" By excluding the study of self from our teaching, we miss an important opportunity for students to connect with their learning through the one thing they know best: themselves.

Old School: "A gentlemen studies for his own sake, not in order to impress others, and seeks for it in himself and not in others." (The Analects of Confucius, 1:16)

New School: A student studies for his or her own sake, not in order to impress peers or the teacher. The student is a self-starter and does not have to wait on instructions from adults.

As we begin to plan next year's curriculum, let us pause and ask whether our lessons will encourage students to study and learn for their own self-improvement. Or are we still treating our students like **empty vessels** to be filled with our wisdom?

Across our nation, schools have created cultures that disengage, disenfranchise, and disproportionately hurt our students in an effort to provide the sense of "calm" that system leaders often assume is best for student learning. But the "old school" saw it a different way.

Old School: "If you guide the common people with coercive regulations and keep them in line with punishments, the common people will become evasive and will have no sense of shame. If, however, you guide them with Virtue, and keep them in line by means of ritual, the people will have a sense of shame and will rectify themselves. Rule through the power of Virtue rather than force." (The Analects of Confucius, 2.3)

New School: If you try to force students to comply by threatening them with negative consequences, they will find ways to bend and avoid the rules without correcting their behavior. However, if you guide students with virtue, and provide rituals and routines that support and uplift students, they will correct themselves. Instill virtue in students rather than a fear of punishment.

Many school systems and structures do not encourage virtue in students, but rather teach them ways to evade punishment. Instead, our lessons should allow students to unpack the idea of virtue together and come to an agreement about the best ways to conduct themselves and hold one another accountable.

When teachers invest in virtue, individual students learn critical life skills like personal responsibility—and school communities thrive. Virtuous students take stances against destructive practices in their schools, like bullying, and act as allies for peers who are struggling. Though virtue, integrity, grit, and other "soft skills" may not align with "new school" data measurements, the "old school" was very concerned with developing students who were socially and emotionally aware of themselves and the people around them.

Old School: "The gentleman is not motivated by the desire for a full belly or a comfortable abode. He is simply scrupulous in behavior and careful in speech, drawing near to those who possess the Way in order to be set straight by them. Surely this and nothing else is what it means to love learning." (The Analects of Confucius, 1.14)

New School: Students are not motivated by the desire for a high-paying job or a nice house. They strive diligently to communicate their understanding and work closely with teachers and peers who model "the Way" in an effort to learn from them. Surely this, and nothing else, is what it means to love learning.

I push us to better understand what is happening in the classrooms where students linger after the bell rings—the classrooms that fill students with ideas they can't help but share

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with a friend or parent after school. In these spaces, students thrive because they feel successful and comfortable in their discomfort.

As much as I admire and wish to learn from the "old school," I know I'm teaching in the age of the "new school." And that means leaders at the school, district, state, and national level want to see numerical data as evidence of student achievement, from the number of students who graduate high school and achieve on standardized tests to the number who are "college and career ready." But as we prepare for the coming school year, I am hopeful that we can strike a balance between old and new school.

As the old school reminds us, "Both keeping past teachings alive and understanding the present—someone able to do this is worthy of being a teacher." (The Analects of Confucius, 2.11).

William Anderson currently works at Manual High school in Denver as an AVID site coordinator, teacher leader, and doctoral student. He is also a member of the [CTQ Collaboratory](#). A quote by Malcolm X that sums up his teaching philosophy is, "Of all of our studies, history is best qualified to reward our research."

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