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My personal philosophy of education and its practices

Sophal Kao
Paññāsāstra University of Cambodia
Phnom Penh, Cambodia

Abstract

This paper aims to discuss and explore answers to the question of how much teachers in developing countries, where the educational budget and other resources are very limited and management and supervision systems are poor, care about applying their own philosophy and theories they have learned to their real teaching situations. The paper presents my personal philosophy of education, how it has been put into real practice, and what results have been achieved throughout my career. Autoethnography – an approach to research by which my personal philosophy of education was described, and my own educational practice and teaching experience were reflected, analyzed, and discussed – was adopted. It appears that after applying my personal philosophy and theories, I have learned thoroughly about my real teaching situation, and I am proud that I have achieved my own career goal of being an education professional. Consequently, I have enjoyed my career and made hundreds of my students become qualified teachers and improve their lives. Those qualified, well-trained teachers have proven good practice of my personal education philosophy through my strong lifelong commitment, diligence, and wisdom.

Keywords: Educational philosophy; best practices; effective teaching and learning; education quality; Cambodia

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Introduction

The way individuals live, act, socialize, perform at work, or rule a community or organization is driven by their own philosophy. If they believe that only luck makes their lives prosperous, they may not try to work so hard and do good business to become rich, as they depend more on their own luck. In leadership, if a leader of an organization believes that an exemplary model plays the most crucial role in successful leadership, that leader will always act as a role model for their subordinates (Kouzes & Posner, 2007). How does philosophy exist?

I have realized that an individual's philosophy is written by different kinds of historical experiences that he or she has gone through in life. In particular, Cambodia has gone through social and political conflicts including the Khmer Rouge genocide and civil wars. Although the civil war was over a long time ago, Cambodia still has numerous issues to be addressed. Those current issues include unemployment, poverty, limited quality of education, and social and political conflicts. As far as education in Cambodia is concerned, the public is still unlikely to see the good value in education due to various factors such as low salaries of teachers, corruption, an expansion of the gap between the rich and the poor, and inequity between the well-educated and poorly educated workers in both public and private sectors. How should the value of education in Cambodia change in the future?

Due to some weaknesses of leadership from top to bottom, limited quality education in Cambodia, and my historical professional experiences, I have envisioned that *the improvement of education quality and the change of the education value in Cambodia starts with every individual teacher and every individual student who plays a crucial role in building a solid foundation of quality education for the future Cambodian generations*. In order to realize my vision, I myself have started to implement my own philosophy of education that I think works best for me and my students. My educational philosophy lies in different areas of education, and it has been implemented thoroughly throughout my teaching career and life.

Methodology

Due to the fact that one's personal philosophy would very often shape his or her action and behavior in reality, an autoethnography approach was adopted

for this paper. According to Ellis et al. (2011), autoethnography is an approach to research by which the researcher describes and analyzes his or her personal experience in a systematic way in order to understand cultural experience. In this paper, I mainly describe my own educational philosophy in different education-related areas. I then reflect, analyze, and discuss my own professional application and teaching experiences with support from relevant existing theories.

My educational philosophy

Responsible teaching and effective learning

In order to make learners respect and like him or her as a teacher or as their role model, I believe that *a teacher has to respect, love, care about his/her students, and be responsible for their learning achievement*. Regarding this, I have acted and performed my teaching professionally in order to gain respect from the students. I have prepared lesson plans very well before teaching. I am always punctual at work because I want to set a good role model for my students so that they would also come to school on time. In class, I always teach thoroughly and use different, appropriate, and effective teaching strategies, methods, and techniques to encourage and motivate the students to work actively, take part in every practice activity, and enjoy a friendly and fun classroom environment. This practice is much related to Dewey's (1916, 1938, as cited in Westbrook, 1999) theory of learning by doing and to Roger's (1969, as cited in Zimring, 1999) theory of facilitation to enhance learning effectiveness.

I have been very good at classroom management, motivating students, and attracting their attention from the beginning to the end of the lessons. I know precisely how to direct my lessons to meet the lesson objectives. I am always creative to make my lessons most relevant to the students' needs, cultures, ages, and interests. Following Socrates' philosophical theory of teaching by asking questions (Biography, 2017), I have raised a lot of critical thinking questions to develop the students' critical thinking skills, encourage them to use their wisdom to solve problems, and arouse their interests. I have related the content of the lessons to the real-life experiences of the learners and to the historical and current political, social, and economic situations through various classroom activities. In short, I think that as long as a teacher loves, cares, and is responsible for his or her students and their learning, the students will learn

best, and the teacher will gain respect, love, and care from the students in return.

The classroom and professional development

I believe that a classroom is *an interesting place where my teaching career can grow*. From my teaching experience, I have learned a great deal from my classroom environment and students. I have realized that students are sources of a new teaching challenge and a mirror for teachers' reflection. Based on Dewey's (1916, 1938, as cited in Westbrook, 1999) theory of learning, learners always bring their real-life experiences and different knowledge and present different cultures and beliefs of the world to the classroom. Different groups of students at the same grade or level are always different. This is a big challenge for me. I always learn from my students through a lot of observations of their activities, actions, speeches, behaviors, and attitudes by keeping eye contact with them and through class monitoring. Because I have considered my students as a magic mirror for me to look at or to reflect on the quality of learning and teaching, I have understood very well whether they learned my lessons, they enjoyed the lessons, a topic was not relevant to their culture and interests, or whether they got bored with any practice activity. If the students got bored or could not understand, I knew immediately and was often ready for flexibility. I sometimes had to take notes of some reasons and factors that affected my lessons and how to improve the situation or any particular practice activity that did not work well or one that they did not like.

I think that no one knows us better than ourselves. Based on this idea and what happened in class, I have been encouraged to work harder to understand and learn more about the classroom environment. For example, when seeing any student who started to get bored during any practice activity, I looked back and asked myself why that student got bored. This question could help me to reflect and think more deeply about the lesson to find other possible ways that could help make the activity work better in the future if I use it again next time. In summing up, self-reflection is a very effective method of professional development as students are good sources for a new challenge and a mirror for the teachers to reflect on what happens in class. A teacher can learn from many things in class if he or she wishes to grow professionally.

The friendly learning environment and effective learning

Regarding the classroom environment, I also believe that *effective learning takes place when the classroom atmosphere is safe and friendly and when teaching is fun and enjoyable*. It is very important for the teacher to ensure that the classroom atmosphere is safe and friendly for every student. The students can learn most when they feel relaxed and comfortable with their peers and the teacher. All kinds of punishment practiced by the teacher are considered fearful and unsafe for most, if not all, students. Rogers (1969, as cited in Zimring, 1999, p. 5) raised several key principles about learning, and one among those is, "When the threat to the self is low, experience can be perceived in differentiated fashion and learning can proceed." It is quite obvious that when the threat exists in the classroom, the students will definitely feel frightened and nervous, and they may finally drop out of school. The teacher should make sure that the students feel that the classroom is like their home where they want to go to and where they always miss when they are away from it. One of several important points to apply transformational learning in practice that Taylor (2009, as cited in Xu, 2010) raised is that a good learning environment increases a feeling of safety, openness, and trust for the students themselves. As long as the classroom situation is safe and pleasant, the students are brave enough to ask questions, give their opinions, and talk to their teacher openly if they have any particular problems, as they trust their teacher.

Why is the classroom situation unsafe? Punishment may be one of the leading causes of fear in the classroom situation. Furthermore, bad emotion that the teacher brings into the classroom also contributes to the unsafe classroom environment. In my teaching and training experience, I have learned how to control my bad feelings I had from somewhere else well when entering the classroom. Instead of bringing bad feelings into the classroom, I pretended that nothing happened to me before I entered the classroom and started teaching as usual. This is because I understood that all the students who came to school were ready to receive good education, fun, and happiness from their teachers and friends. On the contrary, they did not want to receive blame or bad feelings that their teachers brought to the class.

Using jokes in class is not my favorite thing to do, although jokes create good fun. Moreover, what has made my lessons interesting and challenging for

students was a variety of interesting topics and relevant practice activities that were closely related to real-life situations and the ways they lived by. This is a good way to link education taught in the classroom to real-life practices so that the students can realize the world they live in. That is the real purpose for students to go to school. In short, teaching is always fun if teachers have a good sense of teaching and learning. The more teachers can make the classroom environment friendly, safe, and fun and the more they can make their lessons interesting and valuable to the students, the more the students enjoy learning and the more they learn.

Successful teaching and learning

Regarding teaching and learning, I believe that *successful teaching and learning take place when the three domains such as new knowledge, new skills, and positive attitudes and values are sufficiently and effectively taught and learned*. The new knowledge here refers to what Bloom and Krathwohl (1956) called 'Cognitive Domain.' The learners gain new knowledge, which refers to the understanding and internalizing of new concepts or information taught. The new knowledge can be learned by being told through direct presentation, explanation, and lectures of new concepts or information or by reading or listening to any audio devices in which the new concepts or information is presented. The learning of new knowledge or the understanding of new concepts is not the end product of the learning process. The students need to apply the new knowledge they have just learned in real practice to develop their skills which Harrow (1972) called 'Psychomotor Domain.' They are able to develop their skills through well-structured practice which moves step by step from unproductive or controlled practice to freer or less-productive practice and then to productive or free practice from which they are able to do, demonstrate, or perform their skills by themselves in the end. Rogers (1969, as cited in Zimring, 1999) also suggested some key principles about learning by working on theory, one of which was that successful learning was acquired through sufficient practice.

Unproductive or guided practice is normally set up for the students to internalize the new knowledge received and to build up their better understanding of the new concepts. While less productive or freer practice will gradually develop their new skills of the new concepts they have just learned, productive or free practice will build up their greater competence and

confidence in using the skills and knowledge they have gained from the classroom. At the end of the lesson, the course, or the program, every individual is expected to develop the skills and become competent so that they are able to apply their knowledge and skills in the real world. Effective learning is achieved by doing, and skills can be gained by doing or practicing.

As far as the role of attitudes is concerned, successful education is not confined to the teaching and learning of only new knowledge and skills but also involves the development of positive attitudes and values. Attitude, defined as the way of thinking (Cartey, 2000), refers to what Bloom et al. (1964) called 'Affective Domain.' Based on my personal observation, if each of the three domains can be rated by the number of stars in a similar way to how hotels are rated (e.g., a three-star hotel), knowledge could receive four or even five stars in terms of how it is taught and learned. In other words, knowledge is usually taught very well. Skills, however, may receive three stars, as they are often taught quite well. Unfortunately, attitudes and values would receive only one or two stars, as they are often poorly taught. In theory, the three domains of learning must be combined, taught, and learned well so that students can become good citizens who will be able to effectively and ethically build a wealthy, friendly, and respectful community, nation, or world. However, in practice, a positive attitude is not taught either implicitly or explicitly well inside the classroom despite the fact that some positive attitudes could be built outside of school. As a result, the school leavers might not become good citizens with positive attitudes towards different things for the rest of their lives.

Dewey's (1916, as cited in Westbrook, 1999) education theory also supports the thought of practice and experience of learners, as his philosophy of education emphasizes both theory and practice. To make the student-centered approach work best, Ur (2012) and Dewey (1938) encourage teachers to be well-prepared so that the lesson is conducted effectively, as the learning process is well-structured and learners are well-guided. I strongly agree with the views of these scholars. The Buddhist principles of the right view and the right conduct (Dalai Lama & Muyzenberg, 2009) could also be adopted and applied well in education, especially in lesson planning and teaching. Dalai Lama and Muyzenberg (2009) explain that the right view refers to the right thinking and the right decision that a person makes before the decision is put into action, while the right conduct refers to the right action that a person takes or does after the right decision has been made. In education, an effective lesson plan will

ensure effective teaching and learning (Kao, 2018). In order to plan an excellent and productive lesson, the teacher has to think a lot about what to use in the lesson, including the content of the lesson, relevant materials, teaching methods, approaches and techniques, and so forth (Kao, 2018; Ur, 2012). Then, he or she has to decide what to write in the lesson plan to make it effective so that the students will be able to achieve the lesson's objectives or learning outcomes. This is what the right view is. When the teacher follows what he or she has already planned well from home, the teacher will definitely know what to do very well in the class, and the students will learn best (Kao, 2018). This is what the right conduct is in education.

In short, successful teaching and learning only happen when the three domains – knowledge, skills, and attitude – are integrated, taught, and learned sufficiently and effectively. Providing or receiving only knowledge and skills is never enough. In other words, understanding the new concepts or information of the subjects taught does not mean that the students are able to do, perform, or demonstrate their skills well in reality. Furthermore, the skills the students have developed could not ensure the effectiveness of their employment and daily life unless their positive attitude is developed in a classroom setting under thorough facilitation, monitoring, and evaluation of the teacher or facilitator. The positive attitude that the students have learned and developed from school will enable them to become good citizens who will be able to live and work with people of diverse racial, social, cultural, religious, and political backgrounds effectively and ethically in perfect harmony.

Ongoing learning practice activities and learning assessment

As far as the students' learning assessment is concerned, I strongly believe that *practice activities that a teacher sets up for students to do inside or outside of the class are not only activities that help to promote students' learning of the content of the lessons taught, but also common tools for him or her to monitor and assess students' learning outcomes effectively during and after the lessons*. Most teachers think that the assessment and evaluation of students' learning outcomes are only done through tests, quizzes, exams, and term papers at the end of the month, term, semester, or year. It is not true as those above-mentioned assessment methods usually make students nervous and frightened, and they finally cannot do the tests or exams well enough. When the students cannot do the tests or exams well, it does not mean they do not possess the knowledge, but it is because they

may feel nervous due to time pressure. Some may not have had enough sleep or may not have felt well when they took the test or exam. According to my schooling experience, sitting tests and exams always made me feel nervous, although I did them well. Thus, these assessment methods are not always the good ones for assessing students' learning outcomes. In contrast, they make them nervous and forget what to write during the tests or exams. It is obvious that a few pages of tasks or written work that every student has to complete during the test or exam cannot measure everything they have learned.

Having had the experience of sitting tests and exams during my own schooling, having observed students' practice activities and performance, and having empathized students' feelings, I found out that students' learning outcomes could be monitored and assessed more effectively through a variety of ways which include students' practice activities, projects, and other performance tasks. McMillan (2004) strongly supported that through a student's performance or demonstration, the teacher can assess the student's own skill or ability easily. According to my close observations within various classroom settings, my listening to the students, and my reading of their written work, I was very often certain which student had or had not understood my lesson, which learning outcome was achieved, which activity worked well or poorly, and which student still needed further help, and so on. By the end of every lesson, I knew which learning outcomes or objectives had been achieved and what needed to be improved to make my students learn better in the future.

Learning activities that the teacher sets up for the students to do either inside or outside of the class are good and simple ongoing assessment tools for monitoring and assessing students' learning outcomes. The way and practice activities that the teacher uses to monitor and assess students' learning outcomes, performance, and products do not make the students feel nervous. Instead, they encourage them, make them feel happier and more motivated, and make the classroom environment friendlier and more relaxing. A teacher can still give grades to students by using these continuous assessment activities.

The problem behind the take-home assignment, project, or exam is what I call 'mistrust' between the teachers or schools and the students. Due to the advancement of technology and abundant resources available, the educational authorities and teachers are afraid that the learners may not write their papers

or do the take-home exams by themselves, or they may copy the answers from somewhere else. However, that is not the case, as the teachers are able to monitor those produced papers well, and they also use other mechanisms and regulations to monitor the students' work. In reality, when students write a letter or report at their workplace, they definitely use any relevant sources as their models to help them produce a new letter or report that they think may work. As long as they use the existing materials as their models from which they can adapt to produce an excellent letter or report for their business purpose, it is obviously acceptable. Therefore, excellent learning assessment tools should be used for two main purposes: the learning process and the learning assessment. It does not matter how and where they take place. When some schoolwork is assigned for students to complete outside a classroom setting, the students will be able to do it at their own pace and with various resources they can find to produce an excellent paper. At the same time, they are able to learn something new from the resources they use.

However, a teacher can never ignore the tests and exams either. That means the tests and exams still need to be taken according to the requirements, conditions, time, and regulations of each educational institution. Yet, the summative assessment should not be considered the most significant part of the student's final evaluation. Formative and summative assessments should be balanced.

Intrinsic motivation and effective learning

Of course, no teacher can motivate all students all the time, but there are some effective ways that the teacher can use to help motivate most students most of the time. Although no single teaching approach, method, technique, or strategy is always effective for every student, I absolutely agree with Killen (2003), who explained that learning was not more effective unless the teacher made lessons interesting, enjoyable, and challenging for the students. Most scholars (e.g., Brown, 1994; Kao, 2010; Killen, 2003; Ur, 2012; Wong & Wong, 2009) and classroom practitioners believed that the list of ways below could help teachers motivate students to learn more effectively:

- Take an interest in the students' learning.
- Come to work on time.
- Prepare productive lessons.

- Mark homework and assignments regularly.
- Try to remember and use the students' names.
- Make a classroom a pleasant place to learn or create a friendly environment in class.
- Make lessons interesting.
- Get students to talk about their lives during the lessons.
- Build up students' relationships among themselves and with a teacher.
- Knowledge, skills, attitudes, and experiences that learners bring with them to the classroom should be highly appreciated and strongly encouraged.
- Know how to relate classroom learning activities to the daily life experiences of students.
- Design learning activities that encourage students to develop their critical thinking.
- Create appropriate learning activities and make instructional materials relevant to students' level of both academic and social development.

From my teaching and training experience, I have learned that these strategies absolutely motivate students to a certain level. Moreover, I strongly believe that *when one realizes that he or she is doing things for himself or herself first, he or she will invest his or her time and effort, commit to it, and be responsible for it***.** As far as they know that they are doing things for themselves as well as for others and they enjoy doing them, it means that they are starting to build up their intrinsic motivation which enables them to produce extraordinary results. In education, the students who are motivated can learn things better than those who are not motivated (Killen, 2003). Kouzes and Posner (2007) shared a similar view regarding intrinsic motivation. They pointed out that "people who are self-motivated would keep working toward the result even if there is no reward" (pp. 115-116). Thus, the teacher's job is to make their students understand some key reasons why they need to learn best by raising some relevant examples of successful students and their careers to encourage them to work harder to achieve their learning outcomes and academic goals.

Moreover, I have experienced that by implementing several additional strategies, the students became even more highly motivated. Those additional strategies include:

- Make sure the students know the teacher very well from the first day of the class. Most students want to know well about their teacher's educational background, working experience, interest in education and students, and sometimes even the teacher's personal information.
- Tell students stories and experiences of successful or well-known people who could become their role models.
- Develop trust, show respect, and know each other well between teachers and students (Killen, 2003). Most people, especially adults, do not like being forced to do things, so making them understand the reasons for doing them may be more effective, as they will do those things from the bottom of their hearts and with greater responsibility.
- Always act professionally upon advice that has been given to students (i.e., act as a role model for them). For example, if a teacher tells students to come to class on time, he or she must be punctual, too.
- Have good knowledge about students' strengths and weaknesses (i.e., scratch the place where it is itchy). Encourage them to do their own self-evaluation to see their own strengths and weaknesses. Praise them for their strengths and encourage them to improve those weaknesses with specific workable techniques, approaches, and methods.
- Act actively in class. If the students see the teacher inactive and exhausted, they will be inactive and act tiredly too.
- Discuss the school regulations with the students, and make sure that every student is happy with them and has a sense of ownership for those school rules and regulations that they have agreed to follow.
- Stay in love with the career and students. A teacher who is highly motivated to the teaching career works much harder and performs much better in the classroom than those who are not.

The students will be more responsible and highly motivated to do whatever is assigned to them when they are well aware of their own results from their hard work, trust their teacher, and are on the teacher's side. Based on my teaching experience, in order to make students trust their teacher and be on his/her side, the teacher should:

- Have a broad knowledge of the subject matter.
- Have good personalities and behaviors.
- Purely love and care about students.
- Be hard-working.
- Treat their students fairly and equally.
- Have effective teaching performance.
- Act professionally as a role model for students.
- Be honest and empathetic with students' real situations.
- Build trust and be nice to the students.
- Know each other's course expectations, and make sure that those expectations are agreed to be achieved by both parties at the beginning of the course.
- Apply rules or regulations which have been set and agreed upon with students (This can build up a sense of responsibility and respect for every individual).

Conclusion

Every teacher can do many kinds of work if he or she is willing to do it, has high motivation, and is willing to help students grow. Every individual should think that anything he or she does will benefit himself or herself and others. If he or she works hard, does more self-study and research, and loves his or her career, he or she will benefit a great deal and achieve his or her career goals. Meanwhile, if he or she does his or her job well, his or her clients will also benefit greatly from the good job he or she has done. Then the status and living standards of all Cambodian teachers will be improved. Whether the teachers' future is good or not and whether the teachers will be loved and respected or not depend more on every teacher who will or will not make it happen. It is difficult for the teachers to get help from others rather than the teachers themselves.

I admit that all kinds of experiences I have gone through throughout my life shaped my philosophy of education. To promote the value of education in Cambodia, my philosophy of education has driven and shaped the way I have educated my students, my colleagues, and others I have interacted with. The philosophy I have presented and discussed above has been thoroughly applied and practically realized so far. I have spent my entire life delivering good quality education through the application of my educational philosophy and my vision of educational quality improvement that starts with every individual educator and student. As a result, the majority of my students have highly appreciated my education and taken me as their role model in a very difficult situation like Cambodia, where there are still some social problems, political conflicts, poverty, and some weak leadership in the field of education. As far as a top-down approach to improving the quality of education does not work satisfactorily, every individual teacher and student should use a bottom-up approach (which refers to the start from any individual or oneself) to improving the quality of education so that the value of education in Cambodia will be better recognized in the future.

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The author

Sophal Kao is a Dean and Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education at Paññāsāstra University of Cambodia (PUC). Dr. Kao earned his PhD in Education majoring in Educational Planning, Policy and Management in 2018 and his master's degree in TESOL in 2008 from PUC. He also studied at the University of Reading, UK, in 1995, and at the University of Illinois, USA, in 2000. Dr. Kao specializes in school supervision, curriculum and materials development, teacher professional development, English language teacher training, and English language teaching.
Email: kaosophal@puc.edu.kh

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