



Knowledge Construction in Thich Nhat Hanh's Philosophy: An Insight in Curriculum Inquiry

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Abstract

This paper explores the ideology of knowledge construction in Thich Nhat Hanh's, a Vietnamese Zen Buddhist monk, philosophy. From the theory of interbeing conformity and mindful actions, he conducts his Zen teaching through many retreats that help people to build their full cognition and peaceful lives. The first part is an analysis of learner and experience as key factors of educational purposes. Next, there is also a comparison between Thich Nhat Hanh's ideas and some Western theorists such as John Dewey, Maxine Greene, Elliot Eisner. Finally, the paper advocates the art of Mindfulness and Enlightenment as an implication for the development of curriculum and education.

Keywords: knowledge, experience, Engaged Buddhism, mindfulness, curriculum

INTRODUCTION

Knowledge has always been an integral part of human development. After the moment of being born, every child grows up and tries to know about the world around him as much as possible. Thus, knowledge is also the main content of teaching and learning as well as the target of educational missions at schools or any other academic institutions. There is a myriad of definitions of the term "knowledge" as people get different understandings of what constitutes all the things they remember or understand and how knowledge is valuable for human beings. The paper is not going to give a new connotation, but to focus on the epistemology of how every people learn, especially by accumulating personal experiences. In other words, knowledge is constructed, or sometimes reconstructed, through one's own learning experience.

Understanding philosophical theories of knowledge construction will be very beneficial to curriculum development because students will really satisfy with what they want to know and develop necessary lifelong skills. It also offers educators, curriculum leaders and teachers an insight into educational strategies in this century and calls for innovative movement at a wider range.

LEARNER AND EXPERIENCE

One of the cognitive stages, according to the study of Jean Piaget, a Swiss psychologist, is "the concrete operational stage" (as cited in Cherry, n.d., para.9). During this period from seven to twelve years old, children start learning by interacting with the world outside. It is the time when they discover new things and make comparisons with what they have already known. Experience is the first item that increases in both quantity and quality with children's growth. Though Piaget studied cognitive development of schoolchildren, his analysis can also be applied for interpreting adults' intellectual activities.

In general, learners are motivated to study a subject matter when they can connect it to their own experience. In the classroom, teachers will be able to get all students involved in the lesson if the content is not much different from students' own knowledge. As regards pedagogical methods, inquiry-based learning approach mainly stimulates students' questions as they find out the similarities, relationships or sometimes disparities between their understanding and the topics. This is, in some ways, opposite to the temporary memorization for short-term purposes, for example, to do well on the tests. As Dewey (1938) argued that "there is no intellectual growth without some reconstruction, some remarking of impulses and desires in the form they first show themselves" (p.64).

In other words, learners do not get any achievement that may be useful to their lives without examining or exploring the meaning of experience. This is also suggested in the theory of constructivism. Montessori (1946) claimed her ideas that "Scientific observation then has established that education is not what the teacher gives; education is a natural process spontaneously carried out by the human individual, and is acquired not by listening to words but by experiences upon the environment" (p.3). The more teachers make the learning concepts relevant to real life context, the more students enjoy the classes.

Armstrong (2009) pointed out in his theory of multiple intelligences that every child has eight intelligences functioning differently in certain subjects (p.32). This means that no one is evaluated as a retarded or slower person than the others. What the teacher should do is not to assign numerous tasks that are appropriate for each student's better types of intelligence, but to create activities that involve students in a variety of cognitive development. Such learning is, therefore, not limited to any verbal or written form. Instead of the indoor classroom setting, modern pedagogical strategies are open to hands on, outdoor activities that help students to experience themselves in a more authentic environment other than the issues from textbooks.

Hence, there have been various ways to interpret the concepts of knowledge according to each person's understanding. Particularly, what is attached more closely to the student's life is likely to be utilized for a long time when students have their own personal reflections and conceptualization. This is the reason why educators and researchers now advocate experiential learning as a medium to reach educational objectives.

THICH NHAT HANH' S PHILOSOPHY AND APPLIED PRACTICE

As a Zen teacher, writer, poet, peace activist, Thich Nhat Hanh has devoted his life to Buddhism and peace movements not only in his fatherland but also in the world. Founded during wartime in Vietnam, Engaged Buddhism has been his philosophy that mainly incorporates meditation practice and Dharma teaching into the struggle against social injustice and environmental damages. He has conducted his teaching in Asia, America, Europe and attracted a lot of people with plain, realistic words and humanistic ideologies.

His theory of knowledge supports a way of construing facts from experience and offering a new insight to prior presumptions. From a vantage point of Buddhism philosophy, he describes, "Mind is field in which every kind of seed is sown" (Hanh, 2006, p.9). The seeds of our happiness, compassion, anger and suffering in life may grow well or not depends on how we become conscious of the world around. Our conceptions are formed through the transmission of seeds from families, society and education. This idea is similar to Adorjan & Kelly's remark when they connect Engaged Buddhism to Western pragmatists' views that "concerned with developing a non-dualist approach to understanding the relationship between nature, self, mind and society" (Adorjan & Kelly, 2008, p.39).

Thich Nhat Hanh's work encompasses the fourteen precepts of "The order of Interbeing" (or "the Tiep Hien order") and five mindfulness trainings. Thus, when explaining theoretical ideas to his followers, Thich Nhat Hanh especially pays attention to the natural features of body, mind, and environment. Likewise, Dewey (2013) states "The child's own instincts and powers furnish the material and give the starting-point for all education" (p.33), so knowledge also serves to help the child develop his strength (p.34).

The monk always tries to stimulate individual attempts to lead a happy life. In his French monastery, Plum village, he talks to people about ethical ideas every day in order to arouse positive thoughts pertaining to harmony and solidarity. His teaching is strongly influential because of his practical behaviors as well as deep belief of a person's intrinsic power.

In terms of educational objectives, Eisner supports an artistic learning approach that gives students opportunities to get valuable experiences and recheck their own conceptions (March & Willis, 2007, p.83). Similarly, Thich Nhat Hanh instructs in his second precept, "Do not think the knowledge you presently possess is changeless, absolutely truth." (as cited in Brown, 2004). He challenges all common ways of understanding and suggests us to be "ready to abandon our views" (Hanh, 1987, p.49) about the things we will learn.

This moment when we understand others' ideas is also the moment of cognitive formation. Greene (2013) states that it is time when the child "moves outward into diverse realms of experience in his search for meaning" (p.130). Greene's theory also reveals that learning is "a mode of orientation" (p.132). The way a person gets knowledge is somehow pertinent to the solution for location. By vouching from vicarious experiences, he or she will be able to reach the expected destination. This idea urges me to rethink about my teaching career.

An English teacher, who has never thought that his/her students, actually, are strangers in the classroom. The teacher herself/himself does not enjoy being in a new place when he/she has to get accustomed to a new living condition. Sometimes, the teacher is also afraid of getting lost. This personal conception affects his/her pedagogical strategies. To avoid any case of getting lost in the class, he/she prefers to control the class. Teaching is just like giving new concepts to students. It is, unexpectedly, counterproductive, because the students, the strangers, did not know which type of language skills and practices they should use to improve their competence. Thus, an arising question for the teacher is how to help students with diverse background of knowledge, interests, and desire to retain an appropriate map for their way of study.

Besides, Engaged Buddhism has challenged orthodox teaching principles when it refers to phenomenology. As Adorjan & Kelly (2008) states, "Hanh's Engaged Buddhism suggests the importance of action, that certainty comes, not through faith alone, but through the phenomenological experience of what works in a moral capacity" (p.47). He emphasizes the connection from the past, to the present and the future that forms our characteristics of present interbeings.

In this way, Thich Nhat Hanh and Maxine Greene share the same preference of phenomenological approach. For curriculum development, Greene (2013) appreciates phenomenological experiences that help teachers to "enable students to be themselves" (p.137). It is also the moment that Karl Rossmann in Kafka's novel, *Amerika*, will have "a conscious appropriation of new perspectives on his experience and a continuing reordering of that experience" (Greene, 2013, p.134). Education is, therefore, grounded on an epistemology of high-quality experiences or it is likely to be improved "positively and constructively" (Dewey, 1938, p.20). There will be little progress if education is comprised of a fixed, out of date series of information. Learners themselves have to construe the meaning of experience and refresh their mind many times during lifetime.

Hence, consciousness is attached with this phenomenology. It helps a learner to be both an "agent" and a "knower" (Greene, 2013, p.131) who possesses a changing subjectivity. To some extent, the learner becomes awake of his true living and working. Theoretically, Thich Nhat Hanh's interbeing also focuses on meditation practice that is "to be aware of what is going on-in our bodies, our feelings, in our minds and in the world..." (Hanh, 1987, p.14). He supports a communication with the body, and then encourages every person to listen to the inner voice. When one is aware of oneself, one will be excited to know about others, to understand others better. Thus, a knowledgeable person not only understands numerous concepts well but also lives in harmony with other people.

However, as our knowledge is affected by social, economic and political discourses, Thich Nhat Hanh is deeply concerned with how knowledge can liberate people from agony. Since traditional Buddhism refers to the fact that "everything is suffering", "everything is impermanent" (Adorjan & Kelly, 2008, p.42), there is an appeal for contemplation.

Unlike John Dewey and Maxine Greene, Thich Nhat Hanh emphasizes mindful actions in daily life as a result of knowledge construction. His teaching is an advocacy for "the idea of changing social and political structures via transformation of our subjectivity" (Noy,

2008, p.71). Engaged Buddhism means to be authenticated by Buddhist practices. Thich Nhat Hanh also claims that individual transformation contributes to collective transformation since “the self and society are indistinguishable” (Adorjan & Kelly, 2008, p.41). The Zen teacher approves of considering things from another stance to understand the reality thoroughly and challenge social norms. In order to achieve the ultimate goals of practices, he connects each individual’s work to Sangha, a community for applied theories.

He himself founded Plum village, a Buddhist community in France where he helps Vietnamese refugees, veterans, and other suffering people with his ethics. With a view to embracing individual experience and power, he teaches people to treat one another with respect and compassion. In retrospect, his philosophy has made a great contribution to alleviate human suffering and offer solutions to global issues.

IMPLICATION OF MINDFULNESS AND ENLIGHTENMENT IN CURRICULUM

As understanding the meaning of experiences leads to consciousness, Greene (2013) contends, “Curriculum, the structures of knowledge, must be presented to such a consciousness as possibility” (p.133). Similarly, Brady (2008) proposes that “True education has its aim to awaken the student to him or herself and to the world” (p.87). Thich Nhat Hanh’s mindfulness practices and Buddhism enlightenment are useful to serve such educational purposes. A teacher can be awakened to the present moment, to realize what he/she has done for the benefits of students.

Hence, some of Thich Nhat Hanh’s mindfulness practices can be applied in education. They include “Beginning Anew, Bell of Mindfulness, The Body as Practice, Dharma Discussion, Gathas, Listening to the Dharma Talk, Living Together, Sangha Body, Sangha Building” (“Art of Mindful Living”, 2009). They are converted into pedagogical meanings as follows:

Beginning Anew

It is time for a learner to change his or her conventional ways of thinking to allege what he or she knows or does not know, and then starts better paradigms of work and relationships.

Bell of Mindfulness

The learner wakes up in the morning by a spiritual bell from his inner ontology and starts a day with a deep breath. He refreshes his mind at the beginning of the day.

The Body as Practice

Listening to the body can induce mindful reflections and respects for others.

Dharma Discussion

The learner listens to different ideas from multiple perspectives and thinks about them critically.

Gathas

This practice is important to challenge all taken-for-granted assumptions. The learner will have an insight into his daily work. After that, he will prepare for actions.

Listening to the Dharma Talk

Thich Nhat Hanh often talks to the children at Plum village, and he asks them to "Please, listen to the talks with an open mind and a receptive heart" ("Art of Mindful Living", 2009).

Living Together

The learner who is ready to enlarge his knowledge will have good relationships with other people in families, classes, offices and society.

Sangha Body and Sangha Building

Each learner is a member of Sangha, a community in the classroom. Everyone has responsibility to contribute to the sustainability of Sangha. Thich Nhat Hanh also compares "building a Sangha is like planting a sunflower" ("Art of Mindful Living", 2009). We have to take care of the flower and learn about what condition can be beneficial or harmful to the flower. A powerful community is the one of awareness, sympathy and love among people.

In addition, the process for a Buddhist follower to practice the theories he studies encompasses seven stages, which are called Enlightenment or Awakening. According to Brady (2008), they are "joy, rest, concentration, curiosity, diligence, equanimity and mindfulness" (p.87). These factors involve the influences of enlightening students during learning process.

This means that curriculum development will deal with how to make subject matters and classroom activities enjoyable in order to spark students' curiosity, to get them work hard, to make them dwell on learning experiences and become awake or mindful in their present duties as well as future lives.

In conclusion, knowledge, in Thich Nhat Hanh's philosophy, is comprised of meaningful experience relating to real life practices. His ideology is not only valuable for religious ethics but also beneficial in other realms, especially in education. It is both useful and essential as it offers an insightful understanding of knowledge construction and stimulates a teacher's transformation in his/her career. Finally, there would be a collective transformation of leaders, educators, teachers and others involved in the field of curriculum studies for the benefits of all students in the world.

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