

Theoretical Overview

THAILAND: WHERE CULTURE AND THE CLASSROOM COLLIDE

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Abstract

This paper synthesizes two widely researched contemporary issues in Thai education through an exploration of the extent to which elements embedded in Thai culture impede a much needed paradigm shift from traditional Thai teaching methodologies to greater student-centeredness on campus and in the classroom.

Drawing on archival research, and twenty years of experience the authors as participants and observers in universities in Thailand and overseas, explore the interface between education and culture in Thailand. The central question is how to preserve the best of Thailand's unique and defining cultural values while overcoming the negative impact of certain *cultural interventions* on pedagogic practice.

The aim of this paper is to encourage dialogue rather than propose any single or simple prescription for change. It argues that teachers themselves, properly prepared, have the ability to facilitate change by making it possible for students to develop initiative and practice self-reliance rather than foster teacher-dependence. It is suggested that this may be achieved, in part, by raising awareness of those cultural paradigms which on closer analysis will be seen to conceal problematic pedagogic flaws.

Key words: Paradigm shift, Thai culture, cultural interventions, student centered learning.

Introduction

For years, many teachers, researchers and administrators in Thailand have recognized the need for change within Thailand's education system. Numerous academic articles have explored the factors underlying Thailand's comparatively low ranking on the global academic stage and changes have been made at legislative and administrative levels to initiate reforms in education. At the same time, academics have discussed curriculum design, content and several other factors pertaining to the education system (Phungphol, 2005, Suwanarak, 2010, Brahmakasikara, 2013). However, despite the rhetoric and the energy expended by legions of well-intentioned individuals, discernible and effective change remains absent from too many classrooms.

This paper seeks to connect and correlate two critical issues: the impact of Thai culture on education generally; and the barriers to achieving that vital paradigm shift from the traditional teacher-content approach to a more interactive student-centered pedagogy. These topics have been explored by a number of writers in particular Covey (2007) and Yokfar Phunphol (2005). According to Phungphol, if teacher-centeredness "the mindless educational practice that has been damaging Thai education for decades" (2005:5.), is to be displaced, it is the teachers who must be empowered.

This discussion goes beyond the prescient observations and the familiar rhetoric of many other commentators, by venturing to explore the accepted beliefs that define Thai culture which it is suggested are instrumental in inhibiting effective pedagogic change. In this respect, the stakes are high for as Prawase has observed, "the existing Thai education system is pushing the country to disaster and urgent reform is needed" (cited in Phungphol, 2005:9).

This enquiry seeks to discern whether resistance to change is conscious or whether it stems from an invisible or embedded ethnocentrism. In its broadest dimensions, ethnocentrism is the belief that one's own culture is superior to others and is therefore effectively determinative of personal and public behavior.¹ As a form of reductionism, ethnocentrism reduces the 'other way' to a distorted version of one's own. In other words, different behaviors tend to register as unacceptable or just plain wrong. Relating this to the current discussion is the teacher-content-centred approach, which has ruled the Thai classroom for decades, simply reflective of embedded cultural

¹ <http://www.tamu.edu/classes/cosc/choudhury/culture.html> (Accessed 6th April 2007)

norms in Thai society?

As active participants in, and keen observers of the higher education sector in Thailand over many years, the authors have no difficulty in agreeing that effecting change from a traditional teacher-content educational model to a student centered approach, is best initiated from the front of the classroom, rather than being mandated by legislators and administrators. The question remains however, 'How can this be achieved if current practices are deeply embedded in centuries old cultural practices?' From an academic perspective it is hoped that a pathway to change is to raise awareness and to initiate a fresh dialogue, leading to an exchange of ideas and in turn creative responses for the benefit of both teachers and students, and ultimately the country as a whole.

What is, and what is not, 'Student-Centered Teaching'?

Student-centered teaching is a pedagogical technique which shifts the focus of the teaching activity from the instructor to the learner. Is it an idea whose time has come or is this a concept which is as old as the proverbial hills? Fifty or more years ago, the practice of university teaching throughout the western world was more or less settled and was, for the part, the polar opposite of what we think of today as student-centered learning. Back then, typically, students sat in a kind of educational amphitheater, a tiered theatre populated by a hundred or more students. A lecturer, known to students only by name, would enter more or less at the appointed time but often late and either stand magisterially on his (not her) podium or pace up and down in front of the assembled masses casting out knowledge. After about fifty minutes, the academic apparition would leave the stage.

Stage and Theatre are apposite words because lecturers at their 'best' were effectively performers and students were simply members of the audience who were not expected to participate beyond paying attention and taking copious notes. Applause might be permitted but questions were not encouraged. In effect, students became numbers on exam papers and failure rates were high. Those who survived is being risked on short creative understanding but strong on regurgitating the ideas of others. Predictably this outcome runs the risk of being self-replicating if the student then becomes the teacher.

It is now generally accepted in most educational circles that the

teacher-centered approach to learning limits outcomes by promoting the kind of uncritical rote learning that carries with it a failure to encourage the analysis, evaluation or synthesis of data essential to the development of the higher or meta-cognitive skills (Kompa 2012). In practice, reliance on the teacher removes any need for students to think for themselves. In contrast, student-centered teaching is about teacher-student engagement. In its contemporary mode it may take several forms depending on the context of the class, the class size and the topic being taught; and draws on extensively discussed pedagogic principles including elements of “motivational learning” (Pintrich, 2004), “cooperative learning” and “collaborative learning” (Panitz 1999, and Cardinelli & Felder 2004).

The concept of student-centeredness in the context of a learning environment is hardly new (Nanny 2004:1). We can look back more than 2000 years and see that it incorporates elements of what we now call the Socratic Method which involves “giving students questions, not answers”, a strategy which is aimed at developing “an inquiring mind by continually probing into the subject with questions”² Student centered teaching involves high levels of interaction between students and instructors resulting, more often than not, in a noisy or ‘busy’ classroom atmosphere. The teacher must be prepared to relinquish a degree of control as students interact with one another as well as with the instructor, who plays the role of an information resource, monitoring discussion, making corrections and providing feedback.

As discussed by McKeachie, (cited in Cardinelli and Felder, 1999.), “The best answer to the question ‘What is the most effective method of teaching?’ is that it depends on *the goal, the student, the content, and the teacher*. But the next best answer is, “Students teaching other students“ and that implies an interactive and engaged model, the very concept which lies at the heart of student-centered teaching. In a nutshell then, student-centered learning encapsulates student directed interactional learning, collaborative activities, non-routine and production-centered activities where students are no longer seen as passive observers (Ang, R. et al. 2002), or sponges absorbing information, but rather highly active participants in the learning process.

² <http://www.criticalthinking.org/pages/socratic-teaching/606> [Accessed 6th August 2014]

The Thai Classroom

At the risk of over-generalization but to contextualize the discussion that follows, once the teacher or *ajarn* enters a classroom in Thailand and the students have put away their mobile phones and their iPads, a mind-numbing silence often ensues. Most students attend class submissively as passive observers rather than active participants, trusting that communication will be a one-way affair, moderated solely by the knowledge and skills of the instructor, and hoping they will not be called on to contribute.

As discussed by Thanasankit and Corbitt, (1999) and Covey (2007), Thai students tend to be in every sense “instructor dependent”³ and generally appear to have no wish to be other than docile spectators. The contrast in teaching students overseas, or even teaching an international program in Thailand (where students might be from China, France, America, Iran or elsewhere), could not be starker. In such environments it is not unusual to be challenged to explain a particular statement or to be asked relatively complex questions. For example, in a discussion of financial management: “What is the difference between fiscal policy and monetary policy?” This is a good question and is easily answered by the teacher but one of the benefits of the student-centered approach is to throw such questions back onto the class either then (if there is time to discuss the issue) or later – as a question on notice - for the next class and to be discussed by the students themselves.

Towards a Paradigm Shift

Paradigms are accepted modes of thinking and conduct, “the structuring assumptions we use to order the world into fundamental categories” (Brookfield, 1995). Paradigms become points of reference on our personal compasses and are often linked to religious or cultural beliefs – beliefs which tell us what we can and can’t do or what we should or shouldn’t do. It therefore follows that a paradigm shift constitutes a shift in some well-accepted belief system or practice.

Paradigms, as assumptions which guide behavior, may be characterized as pragmatic, prescriptive or causal. Pragmatic paradigms

⁴ <http://joanakompa.com/2012/06/25/the-key-disadvantages-of-teacher-centered-learning/> [Accessed 15th August 2014]

underpin our belief systems. They constitute the foundation of what can become an individual's immovable reality that predetermines responses in a given situation. Prescriptive and causal paradigms, as presumptions, relate to what we think should be happening in a particular situation, how we perceive the world to be ordered, and how change can and should be effected (Brookfield 1995).

The significance of paradigms and specifically pragmatic paradigms in the cultural context, is that they are quite often the sub-conscious determinants that define the bounds of an individual's understanding and hence behavior. Pragmatic paradigms merge with prescriptive paradigms in defining what is considered acceptable, wrong, or even offensive. This means that behavior which seems quite normal to a person from one culture may be seen as problematic, offensive or even taboo, to someone operating within another cultural paradigm.

The Effects of Thai Culture on Pedagogic Practice

Culture is generally considered to be the “cumulative deposit of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes, and meanings, acquired by a group of people in the course of generations through individual and group striving”, and to comprise “systems of knowledge”, that is belief systems, “shared by a relatively large group of people”⁴. Clearly, to understand whether or to what extent Thai culture interfaces with or may moderate pedagogic practice, it is necessary to make a brief inquiry into the nature of Thai culture.

Foreigners generally find Thai culture to be captivating, complex and occasionally even anomalous - the role of the *katoey* in Thai society being often cited as an obvious example⁵. Thai people are generally perceived by Westerners as patient, kind, indulgent, accommodating, willing to please and radiating the kind of acceptance, respect and tolerance rarely found in other cultures. These characteristics permeate, and have a profound influence on, every aspect of life in the Kingdom, including life on a university campus. On campus, an “ajarn” can bask in the flattery of endless smiles and “wais”, (Thai formal greeting) being treated by students as part of a highly respected

⁴ <http://www.tamu.edu/classes/cosc/choudhury/culture.html> [Accessed 6th April 2007]

⁵ Transgendered individuals; กะเทย

elite, and not simply as “another person”. In practice, and in theory, this reflects “respect” in the context of Thai culture and accords with the expectation, as explained by Fieg (1980), that the good Thai is one who is “modest, non-assertive, obedient, polite, (and) subdued ... not challenging, frank or aggressive” - especially in the presence of persons of superior status.

Thai culture has been exhaustively explored by numerous Thai and Western scholars including: Fieg (1980), Hofstede (2001), Komin (1990), Klausner (1997) and Young (2013). Together, these writers describe a culture which tolerates some degree of corruption, promotes power-distance, discourages risk, and places enormous weight on hierarchy and respect. The cultural markers identified by Hofstede and expanded upon by Komin, have a particular relevance to this discussion in so far as they inform what was referred to earlier as the invisible embedded ethnocentrism which too often impedes cultural change.

Komin (1990) provides an insightful discussion of Thai culture. Building upon Hofstede’s work, Komin identifies ‘value clusters’ to describe nine ‘markers’ within Thai culture which collectively define its key elements: *ego orientation, grateful relationship orientation, smooth interpersonal relationship orientation, flexibility and adjustment orientation, education and competence orientation, religio-psychical orientation, interdependence orientation, fun-pleasure orientation, and achievement-task orientation*. Of these, the first five are of particular relevance to this discussion.

Ego orientation can be understood in terms of ‘face’, self-esteem, and pride. Thais are highly sensitive to any form of criticism and have a strong but often suppressed response to perceived insults – a response which can either be magnified or diminished by the relativities of hierarchy. For this reason, a person lower in the social hierarchy will generally remain silent rather than make a suggestion which could be interpreted as critical. Of course, this characteristic is not unique to Thai society. Airline crash investigators have pointed to occasions where Asian air crew, lower in the power-hierarchy, have avoided questioning or correcting senior officers even though the results of remaining silent have been truly disastrous (Gladwell,

2008)⁶. Nevertheless, ego orientation is a prominent feature of Thai culture.

This cultural norm can often lead to “truth avoidance” (Covey 2007:13.). In other words, not addressing reality when to do so may cause offence is not only tolerated, but may be considered appropriate behavior in some contexts. Too often, this leads to avoiding problems rather than addressing and solving them. In contrast, the Western socio-cultural tradition encourages participants to *put their cards on the table; speak up; seize the bull by the horns; say what they mean; and call a spade a spade.*

Grateful relationship orientation, in its broadest sense, might be understood as “gratitude”, but it is more than that. Too often, it carries with it a deep-rooted psychological dimension that may be linked to the Anglo-centric concept that “one good turn deserves another”. Komin (1990) explains that a “person should be grateful to those who render *bunkhun*: goodness, help or favours”. This trait is reflected in inter-personal relationships in many Thai organizations, including universities, and it is easy to see where that kind of gratitude can lead.

Indeed, as a manifestation of loyalty it is often the unspoken rationale that lies behind promotion, recognition and preferment – meaning that relationships often over-ride merit. This suggests that many Thai institutions are not meritocracies in the Western sense. There was an occasion when a former Dean from a Department of Chemistry indicated that for him to employ a more highly qualified academic from outside his own university, especially a foreigner rather than an “insider”, would be “frowned upon”. This may be characterized as an example of “cultural intervention” which acts to the detriment of promoting educational excellence.

Smooth interpersonal relationship orientation occurs when no action or decision is taken that could potentially *rock the boat*. This marker is related to ego orientation and also the power distance construct promoted by hierarchy. On the surface at least this appears to create a smooth, albeit superficial, veneer of tranquillity within organizations and across society generally. The avoidance of uncertainty or ambiguity, or even questioning, is

⁶ Can cultural issues cause plane crashes? Discussed; <http://blogs.wsj.com/middleseat/2008/12/04/malcolm-gladwell-on-culture-cockpit-communication-and-plane-crashes/> [Accessed August 18, 2014]

important. As reported in the Bangkok Post on the 16th of August 2014, a Thai teacher on being politely requested to reconsider a student's homework grade by a parent, in this case a foreigner, chose to stop giving homework and prevented students from taking class books home in order to forestall future criticism (Brown, 2014).

The avoidance of criticism, and the hypersensitivity to criticism, is a factor that many foreigners find difficult to endure, as any suggestion that something should be changed, however beneficial, may cause a ripple of silent resentment which will more than likely be amplified if the suggestion comes from an "outsider". In ten years of teaching experience in Thai universities, we can draw on numerous examples. Suffice to say, that a polite suggestion that an English Course Outline - written in poor English - could be improved, was recently met with astonishment in the first instance and oblique social ostracism thereafter.

Flexibility and adjustment orientation may sound innocuous, even desirable, but in practice this relates more to uncritical compliance, the preservation of harmony, non-confrontation, and the avoidance of giving displeasure, than anything else. As Komin explains, "... there is nothing so serious as to be unbendable or unchangeable. ... Don't be too strict or rigid ... 'it's a small matter'.... not a matter of life-and-death'... 'everything can be adjusted'... 'do whatever is called for at the moment' to survive'(1990). This has many and far reaching implications, not the least of which is that students are rarely failed. A way can always be found to make sure no one is disappointed. In a recent paper entitled "Perspectives on Cheating in a Thai University", Young (2013), explores the reasons behind tolerance of various forms of cheating which he links to embedded cultural norms.

Fear of failure does not just relate to students, but also to teachers who may be seen by parents, and possibly administrators, as under-performing if students are not given passing grades. This fear encourages the proliferation of campuses populated by 'kind teachers', where 're-tests' and 'grade-change forms' promote 100% pass rates. Needless to say this level of *tolerance* erodes academic rigor, devalues degrees, and produces students ill-prepared for the global realities of competition. Young (2013) identifies what he terms a "no-fail" policy which ensures that a student progresses to the next grade which has the effect of transferring the burden of managing

an underachiever to another teacher (Young 2013:8).

Finally, *education and competence orientation* relates to the importance Thais place on education as an individual's level of education is generally determinative of social status and respect. Not surprisingly when this is linked to *ego orientation* the predictable outcomes begin with the *outsourcing* of homework by school children, through to plagiarism at all levels of education, and the ghost-writing of dissertations and theses at tertiary levels; "We are teaching our children to cheat and at an early age" (Intathep 2014 :4).

Getting Socrates into the Classroom

Reflecting upon the range of issues discussed, it can be concluded that there is no single or simple solution to what is in many respects an entrenched ethnocentric problem. However, a critical first step must be to create awareness. In its broadest evaluation this involves recognizing the extent to which *cultural interventions* simultaneously reinforce the traditional pedagogical paradigm and constitute a formidable barrier to progressive and productive change.

Student-centered teaching requires that ajarns descend from their "cultural pedestal" if they are to reduce – if not eliminate - those cultural barriers which impede cooperative learning. Student docility in the classroom should not be perceived or tolerated as an expression of respect. Teaching needs to be evocative, descriptive and engaging - not didactic. Covey (2007) and Phungphol (2005) have proposed a range of prescriptions.

Covey (2007) suggests a number of useful classroom-centered strategies: from rearranging the furniture to addressing power-distance issues, praising in public and criticizing in private. Ajarns who are often directed on some campuses to wear ties could "dress-down" to give the appearance of being less formal or authoritarian. Addressing students by name; and replacing (F), Fail Grades with a (U) for "Unsatisfactory", may be appropriate where *loss of face* has such a high degree of cultural significance.

Across the campus reducing class sizes is another imperative as classes of sixty or more students make meaningful teacher-to-student interactions difficult if not impossible. Hence administrative interventions, which

include staff training and increasing the number of classes and teachers, needs to be an aspect of a broader strategy to achieve a pedagogic shift (Phungphol 2005).

Conclusion

The task is Herculean, yet not Sisyphean, as it poses a significant challenge to the way in which many teachers in Thailand have been conditioned since childhood. Inevitably any individual who seeks to modify long standing practices may face the criticism of rejecting or challenging Thai cultural values, or at the very least, not understanding Thai culture. This of course makes the task of implementing change an exercise in cultural diplomacy of a very high order.

The avoidance of critical evaluation, the absence of academic rigor, student dependence on teachers, and teacher dependence on hierarchy all contribute to the silence that impedes change to a system that needs reform. While the avoidance of unpleasantness and the cultivation of docile, passive and obedient students may ensure predicable, comfortable, unchallenging classrooms and campuses, the end product will be graduates ill-prepared to face the challenges of the global workplace - challenges which, to reiterate Prawase's evocative phrase, are "pushing the country to disaster".

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