Chapter 19

# Reflective Learning in the Digital Age:
## Insights from Confucius and Mezirow

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## ABSTRACT

*Despite being separated by time span, Confucian learning and Meizirow's ideas are not so divergent as one may initially think. In this paper it is argued that the two perspectives intersect and can thus be used, in a complimentary manner, to formulate a model of learning through critical reflection. It is proposed that the model developed in the present paper offers a valuable framework for helping learners in digital environments become reflective, critical thinkers – an attribute that the authors believe is of paramount importance for a more positive future.*

## INTRODUCTION

*Study without thought is labor lost; thought without study is perilous.*

*By nature men are nearly alike, but through experience they grow wide apart.*

*Those who are born wise are the highest type of men; those who become wise through learning come next; those who are dull-witted and yet strive to learn come after that. Those who are dull-witted and yet make no effort to learn are the lowest type of men (as cited in Chai & Chai, 1965, pp. 44-45). – Confucius or Kong Fuzi (551-479 BC)*

The introductory quotations illustrate how Confucius' thought has long been valued and aspired to in the pursuit of reflection and wisdom. Rather than the routine or inattentive action that tends to dominate our lives in the 21st century, this widespread 2000 year-old Eastern philosophy and tradition has been synonymous with questioning

the meanings and assumptions of one's surroundings and values.

It is unfortunate that amid the flurry of excitement over new technologies, reflection and wisdom may be being left behind. Some such as Greenfield (2009), Greengard(2009), and others, express concern that with the rapid-fire of real-time media and multi-tasking, which technology encourages, there is little time left over for quiet reflection and thought – possibly contributing to a 'decline in critical thinking'. (Greengard, 2009, p. 18). Such decline in critical thinking is undesirable on two planes – for individuals, the ability to think critically is fundamental to success in a rapidly changing technological society. On a more global perspective and from a critical theory standpoint, a deficit in critical thinking is to the detriment of challenging the status quo of systems that impede the realization of human potential.

The present paper emerges largely from the above-described context. The primary aim is to place emphasis on the importance of inner reflection and provide a useful framework for guiding the design of online activities such that they promote learner reflection. In effort to address the primary aim, the authors bring together Confucian learning and Mezirow's ideas to propose a model of learning that emphasizes critical thinking and reflection. The authors argue that although Confucian humanism and Mezirow's theory are separated in time and have emerged from different cultures, the two theories intersect in relation to the importance of self-reflection as a mechanism for transformation of thought and action.

As a secondary aim, the literature reviewed in the present paper advances our understanding of transformative learning towards an integrated model of reflective thought. We hope this article will stir further international research in reflective learning and the intersections of Eastern philosophies with Western traditions and philosophies. Worldwide there are many rich traditions; if our understanding of teaching and learning can build

upon our understanding with one another, we can open new doors for appreciation, insight, and inquiry. Towards this end, we examine in some detail Confucian perspective, reflectivity and the ideas of Mezirow, and discuss the complimentary nature of the perspectives. This then leads to proposing a model of learning through critical reflection. We then turn our attention to the nature of the digital age and argue that critical reflection is of fundamental importance within the digital context. Subsequently, the model of learning through critical reflection is then discussed as a framework for learning activities in the digital age.

The model that is proposed is founded on the interaction of the core tenets of Mezirow's critical reflection and Confucius' ideas about silent reflection, and includes three types of critical reflection relating to what, how and why questions. If the framework of the model is adopted then online activities such as online discussions and engagement with social media tools, as well as searching for information, can be viewed as methods to engage students in reflective and critical thinking. In turn this places emphasis on the need for the teacher to create conditions such as a trusting and safe environment and posing real world problems.

It should be noted from the outset that the purpose of this paper is somewhat multi-layered. One intent of the paper is to draw attention to the importance of critical reflection in the digital age. The authors also seek to provide a framework that fosters approaches targeted to supporting critical reflection as a goal in online learning contexts. Finally, it is with a greater sense of our global connections and community, the need and urgency for multicultural perspectives, the venue of different academic disciplines, and varied philosophical foundations in our social radical pedagogies that we seek to direct attention to the similarities and differences among and between the Mezirow's original theory of transformative learning and the long-standing philosophy of Confucius.

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