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The Best Education Lies in the Middle

By Chuandi Zhao

Large and small, good and bad, black and white: it seems everything in the world is composed by many forms and therefore extremes exist in every case, and so it is with education. There are different types of education systems such as the western style and the Asian style. As Paulo Freire said in his literature *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, “Education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction” (30), so he introduced to us two extreme ways of education systems in terms of the teacher-student relationship: the “banking” concept of education; and the problem-posing education. As for me, I do not think either of these two are perfectly right and should be followed completely. This is the same with our daily life in which we would prefer things in the middle (such as average instead of small and large), we do not want extreme things. When considering an education system, it may be better to use a combination of banking education and problem-posing education rather than just choosing either one of them at all in terms of teacher-student relationship.

In Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, the most important difference between these two education systems is the relationship between teacher and student. In banking education, a teacher is the “depositor”, and the student is more like a “container”. The teacher’s task is to “‘fill’ the students with the contents of his narration” (29). Whether a teacher or a student is good or bad is judged in this way, “the more completely she fills the receptacles, the better teacher she is. The more meekly the receptacles permit themselves to be filled, the better students they are” (29). In this system, the student is just a student. He or she must follow what the teacher said without questioning. The teacher is superior to the student.

In contrast, the problem-posing education shows a different teacher-student relationship. The teacher here is more like a partner of the student. The task of a teacher is to “create, together with the students, the conditions under which knowledge at the level of the doxa is superseded by true knowledge, at the level of the logos” (33). The student can teach something to his/her teacher, while at the same time he/she is taught by the teacher. Their relationship is mutual. As Friere implies, “The teacher is no longer merely the one who teaches, but one who is himself taught in
dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach” (33).

From my perspective, the ideal teacher-student relationship is the one which combines the relationships in these two systems. A teacher should not be the oppressor who controls everything, as in Freire’s banking system of education. Teachers and students should be equal and communicate like friends. For example, the teachers should not feel superior to the students because they are older or they have more life experiences. He/she should listen to what the students say. But the teacher should also have authority among students so that the students would actually listen to what he/she says. A teacher should be able to regulate his/her class. He/she should be strict with his/her rules. A good teacher is judged not by how good or understanding he/she treats the students, it is judged by whether the students are really learning something through the class.

Back in China, the education I received was much like the banking system of education. We considered all the knowledge the teacher gave us as right. We were required to stand up before and after class to show our respect for the teachers. If we had doubts about what the teacher taught to us, it would be better to talk to him/her after class in order to not embarrass him/her in class.

Here, in the US, the education I received is much like the problem-posing education. I can always see that the teacher listens carefully to the students’ ideas in class and makes adjustment to his/her class schedule to meet the needs of most students. What impressed me most is at the beginning of every fall semester, all the faculty at this university will stand in line to greet the new students walking into the chapel. This leaves me with a strong feeling about the equal and friendly relationship between teachers and students in the U.S.

I agree with the problem-posing education in regards to the teacher-student contradiction, but every coin has two sides. There are also some good points in the banking education. I still think the relationship between teachers and students cannot be completely equal. The teachers should have some authority on the students so that the students listen to the teacher. If a student can do whatever he/she wants in class, it would be impossible for him/her to argue with his teachers, or what’s more, in turn teach the teacher something new. So, the combination of these two systems, which allows students an equal status with the teachers and at the same time respect for the teachers, would be the best choice.

Freire’s problem-posing education also puts great emphasis on the role of communication. In his mind, “authentic thinking, thinking that is concerned about reality, does not take place in
ivory tower isolation, but only in communication” (32). He thinks that only through communication can a student get a right view about what the world really looks like. On the contrary, the banking education “proscribes communication.” They just need the students to “patiently receive, memorize, and repeat” the knowledge the educator gave. They just swallow it without digesting, and memorize it without understanding.

Take my last year in high school for example. At that time, all my life experience was surrounded by the college entrance examination. As a student of arts, all I needed to do was memorize facts in order to get a higher score. The teacher stood in front of the classroom to talk about the key points and we just took notes and tried to memorize: this was what a normal class looked like. Teachers seldom used stories or experiments to introduce the knowledge. For example, we needed to memorize what Stalin did to reform the Soviet Union without truly understanding what the effects of these measures caused. Education experts in China would always criticize this kind of education, claiming that it bound the creativity of the students, and many reformers in China attribute Chinese’s deficiency in Nobel Prize winners to this poor education system. This might be true but we cannot deny Chinese students’ intelligence in math and science around the world. If we look deep into the advanced math and science classes in the top universities, we would always find Chinese study-abroad students and Asian Americans play a large part in these classes. Therefore, we should keep some aspects of the banking system of education, which encourages the ability of memorizing.

Although I choose to receive the problem-posing education in the US, I do not think I am a victim of the banking concept of education in China. For example, if we are not told by our parents or our teachers about the basic physics formula or principles, how could we solve or discuss more complex problems with others? If a teacher wants to discuss an economic policy with his students, how could he really get something from his students without telling them the backgrounds or some basic knowledge on economics?

Seeing both the pros and cons of the banking and problem-posing education system, it is really a hard decision to make about which system is better without considering the other system’s benefits. Overall, the best way lies in the middle. We can choose to blend these two education systems. We can choose neither of them and create a new one in the middle: for students, they should respect teachers and participate actively in discussion with teachers; for teachers, they should listen to students’ ideas, and they should teach knowledge orally while at the same time allowing creativity.