Bridging Adult Education between East and West: Critical Reflection and Examination of Western Perspectives on Eastern Reality

Introduction

This paper, applying an international and comparative perspective, examines issues and challenges in learning between Eastern and Western adult education teaching and research endeavors. Questions and thoughts are scrutinized to help create a different mindset as alternatives for learning from the “Other” in the globalized world equally, accurately, and more effectively. First, it introduces a context followed by a brief review of relevant literature illuminating the obstacles and barriers for an equal exchange—that is an exchange through which the West might endeavor to listen to and learn from intelligent life beyond its own borders (Milligan, Stanfill, Widyanto, & Zhang 2011). Second, it shares authors’ personal narratives that illustrate lived issues and challenges that invite us to critically ponder and understand. Finally, it concludes with suggestions that may facilitate further deliberations—philosophically, theoretically, and practically. The paper calls for a different mindset for effectively bridging educational understandings between East and West.

Contexts

In the globalized world, the need for learning from one another about the strengths and limitations of different theoretical and methodological approaches to the study of education, and adult education in particular, has become greater than ever. Many countries have encountered similar changes and challenges brought by globalization. Education has been seen as an effective instrument and given the responsibility by many countries for training people to meet the needs and demands of globalization in various arenas. Education leaders and policy makers of numerous countries realize that they must quickly acclimatize to such changes in order to maintain their competitive capability, with increasing alignment with the interests of the global market (OECD, 1996).

Seemingly, globalization has created a “world policy or world culture” (Tröhler, 2009), or has transformed the world’s culture into an increasingly standardized phenomenon. Studies show that countries tend not to respond to globalization or meet the needs of the competitive economy in the process (Cheung & Chan, 2010).

Culture is all the knowledge, skills, attitudes, beliefs, values and emotions
that we, as human beings, have added to our biological base. Culture is a social phenomenon; it is what we as a society, or a people, share and which enables us to live as society. (Jarvis, 2006. P. 55)

Confucian culture, which emanates from Confucian philosophy, has evolved the core of traditional Chinese cultural values. It has become the most enduring influence on China and other parts of East Asia, such as South Korea, Japan, Vietnam, Singapore, and Taiwan. These societies, despite having their own unique identities, share common Confucian cultural values: social emphases of harmony and filial piety, respect for the elderly, moderation, collectivism, hierarchical social structures, and family-centeredness (Sun, 2012a). For people who have grown up from in Confucian culture, although they may have moved and resided in western countries, Confucianism still remains a strong guiding influence, such as socialization, development of gender roles, parental control, and many other aspects originated from Confucian cultural values (Cheung & Chan, 2010).

Due to shared cultural values, countries like China, South Korea, Japan, and Singapore have taken a similar direction when “facing a turning point in the progress of globalization and are urged to adapt to a knowledge-based society,” and that is “China focuses on ‘character education’ which emphasizes the potential ability to learn; South Korea promotes life-learning ability; Singapore encourages self-learning; and Japan values self-motivated learners and thinkers” (Shimbo, 2009, p. 118).

Cheung and Chan (2010) summarized fours aspects that Sanchez (2003) suggested regarding how education should help learners to become so they would be more competent working in a competitive global world: To successfully enter a knowledge-based environment (i.e. knowledge society), learners need to (a). become information literate and able to make good use of knowledge; (b). Be multilingual so that they can interact more effectively in global communications; (c). Be trained and equipped with high skills in the area of new technologies that keep coming into workplaces; and (d). As the world has become smaller and contact among people around the world has increased, learners must ably work with others both inside and outside the workplace.

These suggestions clearly call for an amplification of the demands from adult education within one’s own educational system, but they also call for conscious and active learning from different paradigms, such as an Eastern perspective where knowledge (what is knowledge and how is knowledge formed) may be perceived differently (Sun, 2008, 2012a), and from different languages where thinking styles and expressions differ from Westerners (Sofó, 2005). Hence the need, as addressed by Duszak (2002), for “communicative competence,” or the mutual negotiation of meaning become essential.

Contrarily, our educational reality presents us with another picture, where Western theories and models have disproportionately been promoted and advocated as the template for understanding and developing education globally (Nguyen, Elliott, Terlouw & Pilot, 2009). This echoes what Fox (2007) observed that “the complex process of intercultural interactions has been analyzed by Western educators as a one-way adaptation and integration of the Other into the dominant educational norm” (p. 118).

### Issues and Challenges

Comparative and international education has historically performed significant roles that may be considered to be “the first global academic and practitioner-oriented field” (Wilson, 2003, p. 15). It enabled people to learn and borrow from others to help improve one’s education system and practice or avoid making similar mistakes. Evidently, from the travelers’ tales that described aspects of education from other countries people had visited to the more evolved comparative education methods that facilitated the borrowing and adaptation of education practices and structure, we have witnessed the development of national education policies and practices worldwide (Hayhoe & Mundy, 2008; Kubow & Fossum, 2007).

Hiethero, Tröhler (2009) contends, “there is a history of globalization leading to a more or less homogenous world of education” (p. 41). Globalization currently presents its relationship to education in a new model called “sociological new-institutionalism” and through its concept of “world policy” or “world culture” (Tröhler, 2009). They form another type of educational hegemony, as educational neocolonialism, where Western paradigms tend to shape and influence educational systems and thinking elsewhere (Nguyen, et al., 2009). Milligan et al., (2011) point out homogenizing forces like the international agencies of the World Back and UNESCO too facilitate “the dissemination of Western educational ideals and organizational frameworks through educational development projects.” In fact, “for a long time the concept of ‘development’ was applied primarily to the so-called Third World states in order to outline their duties toward the First World” (Tröhler, 2009, p. 33). As depicted by Fox (2007), “Educational research, as well as educational planning, in ‘developing world’ settings tended to be dictated by European (Western) perceptions of what was good for the Other” (p. 118). Unfortunately, the important aspect of culture, which refers to all aspects of life, including the mental, social, linguistic, and physical forms of culture, has often been overlooked (Masemann, 2007).

As a result, “by adopting western theories and practice wholesale, and applying these in the classroom without rigorous research and consideration, the potential contribution of Asian education researchers has been largely bypassed or discounted” (Nguyen, et al. 2009, p. 110). Consequently, western models have strongly influenced education in terms of what to teach, why to teach it, and even how to teach it at local and international levels, all of which contribute
to the increasing issues and challenges when learning from the Other (Kubow & Fossum, 2007). The field of adult education is no exception, where:

Learning and adult learning has been shaped by what counts as knowledge in a Western paradigm. Embedded in this perspective are the cultural values of privileging the individual learner over the collective, and promoting autonomy and independence of thought and action over community and interdependence. In adult learning theory, andragogy, self-directed learning and much of the literature on transformational learning position self-direction, independence, rational discourse, and reflective thought as pinnacles of adult learning. (Merriam & Associates, 2007, pp. 1-2)

“Independence, separation, and hierarchies characterize a Western perspective, a view in direct contrast to most non-Western worldviews” (Merriam & Associates, 2007, p. 3). In Confucian perspective, for example, human beings are social beings and thus human relatedness is the primary given. People learn from one another as they interact with each other. Confucian values view harmony among human beings as necessary to achieve a harmonious society” (Sun, 2012a). Differences are obvious.

The following examples are personal narratives that present some lived issues and challenges in cultural differences between East and West and the unequal flow of learning from the “west to the rest.” We hope they help deepen understanding and broaden visions for our roles as international educators. Questions we raise and discuss call for collaborative efforts toward alternative ways of bridging learning between East and West.

**Experience from being a Person of No Culture to a Person of More Cultures**

Qi: I am Chinese. Sixteen years ago, I came to the US to pursue my doctorate degree in adult and continuing education. I earned my Master’s degree in Comparative and International Education from China and worked as an administrator of the Adult Education Department of the Ministry of Education of China. This position provided me opportunities for working with Chinese policy makers, researchers and practitioners in the field of adult education, and with experts and scholars from UNESCO, UNFPA, ICAE, DVV etc. I thought I was well prepared to live and study in a western culture. I was not much better off than most East Asian students, sharing similar experiences and treatment (Sun, 2012b). The language issue was not huge for me, as I could understand most of what was said. Sometimes I did not fully understand the meaning due to my lack of background or contexts. At times, I was not understood correctly by others from my cultural perspective. The Chinese way of thinking, which is more circular and indirect as compared to westerner’s linear and direct thinking, clearly contributed to these misunderstandings in addition to language proficiency.

In classroom learning, the Confucian culture that values harmony and emphasizes social hierarchy has shaped me to accept, rather than question, knowledge, especially where such challenges might cause loss of face. Further, it is shameful for students to say in front of the class that they do not understand the teachers’ instructions and assignments (Sun, 2012b). Like most East Asian students, I was quiet and attentively listening to my instructors and peers most of the time. Another reason I kept quiet was that I did not feel my perspective was valued. When there was time when I could contribute I offered my opinion, but instead of receiving some feedback or appreciation like my American peers received, my ways of seeing things seemed uncounted or ignored. Confucian culture, which looks inward and seeks self-reflection for what one’s person is lacking and for self-improvement, led me to always believe these misunderstandings or overlooked matters must be my own incapability in not meeting the criteria or showing the value of my message. I would not ask for an explanation, but internalized the experiences. These experiences led to other issues to deal with as an international student.

In the “rest learning from the west” mode (Nguyen, et al., 2009), I felt my culture/country was less developed especially economically. Western ways led everything, thus everything here in the US was good. (In many ways, this is true, and I have really enjoyed living here). I naïvely believed that I was in an inferior position and consistently advanced my knowledge and skills hoping I could think and act like an American. I studied western philosophies, educational theories and practices, and cultural aspects too. Occasionally, with people who happened to be interested in my culture, language, or even food, I would be overjoyed and tried to exchange ideas and cultural learning, only to find an unequal reciprocity. Presumptions play a great role in inaccurate learning and understanding. Subconsciously, westerners living in a “superior” position influence what is valued and or how they even want to pay attention to the “rest” perspectives. The attitude that “you came here to learn from us” consciously (for some) and unconsciously (for others) reminded me that I have no alternative but to learn to think and act like Americans. As years went by, my experience remained as stated in the literature, that it is impossible for me to be an American.

I am not American because no Americans ever considered me one of them—“oh you are from China!” But am I still Chinese? I went back to visit my relatives in China, they felt that I was no longer Chinese. They called me “American Chinese.” I felt lost. I did not know who I was: I had no identity. I started to question myself and suffered the pain inside. What was the value of me? Who have I become--a person of no culture?

Many years passed by with constant critical reflecting and seeking, I started to realize my own culture’s merits—that is over 5,000 years of historical traditions, which have shaped who I have been and who I am. However, for years I looked only toward the western ways and ignored the East, which is of
equal value and has valid knowledge to offer. I did not pay attention to studying, particularly the Confucian culture, the culture that has influenced my ways of thinking, living and socializing. This realization profoundly inspired me. I began to learn and compare China/East with America/West. Eventually I conducted my doctoral dissertation research on Confucianism for modern theories and practices in adult and continuing education. I continue to learn from the West and introduce the West to my colleagues in the East, but then consciously to use my specialty and expertise to introduce the East to my western colleagues via publications, teaching, and speech. I became an ambassador. I am no longer in an inferior position, and I do not think the West should feel their position is superior either, as both East and West have a great deal to offer to the world. I found a new dimension of my identity - I am a scholar of more cultures! I see my value of being able to help bridge East with West with two cultures.

As I began to teach and research as a faculty member in an adult and continuing education program at an American university, I started to offer courses that deliberately introduced Eastern perspectives and shared my Eastern research with western learners and colleagues. Yet I see the melee continues. I am still often misunderstood due to the eagerness of some to use westerners’ presumptions and/or lenses to interpret or change my perspectives or descriptions. They may not be solely responsible for these situations because that was what they have been introduced to from the majority of our courses offered, texts used and literature valued. My deep concern is that we are lacking a place, “the third place” (Liddicoat & Crozet, 2000), for both sides to maintain identities and a sense of belonging while negotiating meaning during the cultural conversation. I long for “authentic communication” (Fox, 2007) that helps create our own intercultural space that facilitates bridge deep chasm of discursive difference. Further, I found that most westerns have limited knowledge, interest, patience, maybe time too, to want to engage learning from the “rest.” It is within such a context that I see my roles as an international educator and comparative education researcher to be crucial, and I know only when we all start from ourselves working toward bridging West with East/Rest, things will eventually change. Who better than us, if we do not?

**Personal Experiences in Confronting Western Privilege**

Liz: I was hired as a new faculty member because of my “international” and “diverse” perspectives. I have facilitated international and comparative education courses and courses on globalization and international social relations and movements etc. (95% of my student populations are White like me). When I think about the challenges I have experienced in teaching and research on learning between the “East” and “West,” I can sum up in one word: *privilege*.

I will refer to “Western” thought and research as privileged, specifically as *intellectual privilege*. According to Brookfield and Holst (2011), *privilege* is “a system of beliefs and practices (i.e., an ideology) embedded in institutions and conventions of everyday lives that legitimizes the power of one racial group and justifies its viewing all others as inherently inferior” (p. 206). It is fair to say that *intellectual privilege* is exercised globally within academe: Western and “scientific” thought is privileged over the thought and scholarship of Other cultures. This intellectual privilege is the *ideological effect* (Balkin, 1998) of systemic racism, sexism, classism, (post/neo) colonialism, and the whole host of other –isms that accompany these. An *ideological effect* is when cultural institutions and conventions help create and sustain unjust social conditions, where ideology is an effect produced by cultural and social scripts when they are placed in particular contexts and situations. Thus, ideological effects are the products of symbolic forms and systems that create and sustain relations of domination and injustice within different social contexts. To wit, when we think of ideology in terms of its effects, it is no longer about the content of the ideology itself and its original intentions, but rather about the results of injustice and domination that are (re)produced. Such an understanding limits us in a normative sense, and we can no longer claim one ideology as superior to another, especially if its effects are social injustice (Balkin, 1998).

This intellectual privilege becomes quite evident when we look at whom we cite and reference from “the literature” in our fields when conducting research, as well as in what we consider to be “legitimate” knowledge for our classrooms (even when it comes to critical and emancipatory education). I struggle with this in developing curriculum. The process of publication dictates how knowledge should be structured, articulated, (re/pre)packaged for distribution, and disseminated, and said knowledge is guarded by the gatekeepers of intellectual privilege. I struggle with this in publishing my research. Quantitative research based on the “gold standards” of experimental design and “proven” best practices are also consistently privileged over perennial wisdoms and the lived experiences within local and indigenous communities the globe over. I struggle with this as a qualitative researcher. Intellectual privilege is manifest in the fact that the (neo) colonial language of English is the predominant language used for research and discourse in academe. I mourn the fact that our thinking is limited to one language. Ideas, philosophies, and indigenous knowledges are taken, reconceptualized, and recast into Western language and terms for further consumption, instead of being acknowledged and honored in their own right. I wonder what we are missing. For anyone who does not belong to the intellectually privileged elite, and for those who reside somewhere in the borderlands of this academic “community” of privilege, it is unmistakably obvious that ideas and “findings” need to be (re)packaged to the expectations and guidelines established by the intellectual privileged few. I see my non-western students and colleagues being actively marginalized. These are merely a few examples of how Western academic conventions, that are put into place for...
a variety of purposes, become the mechanisms and the systems that reproduce Western intellectual privilege and its ideological effects continuously.

What is more, our conventional approaches to addressing diversity issues within research and curriculum also become mechanisms of intellectual privilege that produce unacceptable ideological effects. But such a position requires a great deal of explanation, and I will attempt here to summarize what Brookfield and Holst (2011) have addressed as repressive tolerance (Marcuse, 1965) very well in their recent book *Radicalizing Learning*. As they explain, providing diverse perspectives in curriculum and research in celebration of all views as equal creates the illusion of inclusion and diversity, allowing us to think that we are moving away from White, male, Eurocentric views. However, in creating this illusion of diversity, we unwittingly reinforce dominant ideology and intellectual privilege. The problem is, when we line up all of the different views next to the dominant ideology, it remains the center and seems even more natural and inevitable than before, as all of the Other views are diluted and continue to be seen as alternative views of the “weird minorities.” Brookfield and Holst (2011) further explicate:

Adult educators can soothe their consciences by believing progress is being made toward radical inclusivity and cultural equity and can feel they played their small but important part in the struggle. But as long as these subjugated traditions are considered alongside the dominant ideology, repressive tolerance ensures they will always be subtly marginalized as exotic, quaint, and other than the natural center. (p. 195)

I realize and see how I have participated in this repressive tolerance, and I am stumped. As long as the gamut of perspectives is displayed as a menu of items from which each person “rationally” chooses, the dominant ideology will continue to prevail. Merely presenting different perspectives will not do, as people are predisposed to select the socially sanctioned ideologies, and in presenting diverse perspectives in this way, one is really reinforcing the dominant ideology and its ideological effects. That is not to say that we should not be researching the worlds beyond our limited view, or that we should not continue to be seen as alternative views of the “weird minorities.” Brookfield and Holst (2011) further explicate:

Adult educators can soothe their consciences by believing progress is being made toward radical inclusivity and cultural equity and can feel they played their small but important part in the struggle. But as long as these subjugated traditions are considered alongside the dominant ideology, repressive tolerance ensures they will always be subtly marginalized as exotic, quaint, and other than the natural center. (p. 195)

We have briefly reviewed literature, described and discussed our individual experiences and observations of teaching and researching. Despite the fact that we differ culturally, linguistically, and philosophically and more, we find we ask similar questions: how do we as educators in international and comparative adult education, see our roles in changing “West learning from the East/rest? What should we keep in mind while introducing our western learners to realities of the East? What mindset and approaches would help reduce the dangers: that is, the West applying its own philosophical/theoretical orientations; solely using its own language (English); accepting only its own ways of thinking; and believing in its own emphasis on technology use when western learners are introduced to Eastern reality.

We have encountered similar challenges when endeavoring to bridge East with West. The first challenge rests upon the mindset that is shaped by one’s own cultural values and educational traditions. Change is difficult. Fully changing one’s mindset is impossible. However, becoming open, non-judgmental and appreciative of other ways of seeing the world is doable and is a necessity for all learners in the globalized world. Sun (2012b) and Erichsen (2011) have studied transformative learning within the context of international students’ experiences, which all illustrate that “international students must establish what Mezirow (2000) termed a new ‘frame of reference’ and experience changes related to ‘meaning schemes’ (points of view) and ‘meaning perspective’ (habit of mind) in order to renegotiate their identities and roles within the new lifeworld for success” (Sun, 2012b, p. 204). In a similar approach, we hope westerners can pursue parallel learning for transformation, like international students, they will need to develop courage to experience the challenge and alter their previous “frame of reference”.

**Building Bridges: Understanding Challenges**

We have briefly reviewed literature, described and discussed our individual experiences and observations of teaching and researching. Despite the fact that we differ culturally, linguistically, and philosophically and more, we find we ask similar questions: how do we as educators in international and comparative adult education, see our roles in changing “West learning from the East/rest? What should we keep in mind while introducing our western learners to realities of the East? What mindset and approaches would help reduce the dangers: that is, the West applying its own philosophical/theoretical orientations; solely using its own language (English); accepting only its own ways of thinking; and believing in its own emphasis on technology use when western learners are introduced to Eastern reality.

We have encountered similar challenges when endeavoring to bridge East with West. The first challenge rests upon the mindset that is shaped by one’s own cultural values and educational traditions. Change is difficult. Fully changing one’s mindset is impossible. However, becoming open, non-judgmental and appreciative of other ways of seeing the world is doable and is a necessity for all learners in the globalized world. Sun (2012b) and Erichsen (2011) have studied transformative learning within the context of international students’ experiences, which all illustrate that “international students must establish what Mezirow (2000) termed a new ‘frame of reference’ and experience changes related to ‘meaning schemes’ (points of view) and ‘meaning perspective’ (habit of mind) in order to renegotiate their identities and roles within the new lifeworld for success” (Sun, 2012b, p. 204). In a similar approach, we hope westerners can pursue parallel learning for transformation, like international students, they will need to develop courage to experience the challenge and alter their previous “frame of reference”.

**Building Bridges: Understanding Challenges**

We have briefly reviewed literature, described and discussed our individual experiences and observations of teaching and researching. Despite the fact that we differ culturally, linguistically, and philosophically and more, we find we ask similar questions: how do we as educators in international and comparative adult education, see our roles in changing “West learning from the East/rest? What should we keep in mind while introducing our western learners to realities of the East? What mindset and approaches would help reduce the dangers: that is, the West applying its own philosophical/theoretical orientations; solely using its own language (English); accepting only its own ways of thinking; and believing in its own emphasis on technology use when western learners are introduced to Eastern reality.

We have encountered similar challenges when endeavoring to bridge East with West. The first challenge rests upon the mindset that is shaped by one’s own cultural values and educational traditions. Change is difficult. Fully changing one’s mindset is impossible. However, becoming open, non-judgmental and appreciative of other ways of seeing the world is doable and is a necessity for all learners in the globalized world. Sun (2012b) and Erichsen (2011) have studied transformative learning within the context of international students’ experiences, which all illustrate that “international students must establish what Mezirow (2000) termed a new ‘frame of reference’ and experience changes related to ‘meaning schemes’ (points of view) and ‘meaning perspective’ (habit of mind) in order to renegotiate their identities and roles within the new lifeworld for success” (Sun, 2012b, p. 204). In a similar approach, we hope westerners can pursue parallel learning for transformation, like international students, they will need to develop courage to experience the challenge and alter their previous “frame of reference”.
The second challenge relates to what counts as knowledge in Western mind and academic literature. Who else should be contributors to the literature? Should literature use multiple languages? Should research methods from different paradigms be counted as equally valid for publication? We should also critically interrogate the criteria and norms to be accepted by these western journals, and how these influence the generation of knowledge. How can we shift from a privileged “western knowledge production line” for the rest, to a process that privileges inclusion? We need to think about what is considered as knowledge, from whose perspectives, and for what purposes? Questions along these lines should consistently be asked and revisited so that they continue to challenge our present mindset and change the current circumstances in which the “Western” model presides as the gold standard and is used to measure non-western realities and views that have emerged autonomously from Western norms (Merriam and Associates, 2007). Larson (1988) also acknowledged the dilemma of traditional comparative philosophy in its tendency to view the non-western Other through Western philosophical lenses (as cited in Milligan et al., 2011, p. 51). Particularly when we introduce the East to the West, there is dearth of available literature for references.

The third challenge touches on different ways of “knowing and learning.” People from other parts of the world have different ways of perceiving the world, ways that are equally valid, invaluable, and reflective of their life circumstance (Armove, 2007), their learning and education should also be understood within their own cultural models. More importantly, as indicated by Krishna (1988), “no culture or tradition can be assigned a privileged place in this game of observing the other” and that the search for solutions to problems, philosophical or otherwise, requires us “to look at it from both sides” (as cited in Milligan et al., 2011, p. 52). But how many texts/books or journal articles published in the West can you think of that have not applied western theories, norms, conceptions, models, mythologies? We wonder even those that introduce non-western culture and education to certain degree may miss real meaning if from the Other’s perspective, for “the subtleties of linguistic and philosophical dilemmas of translation are often confused with a binary process of substituting one set of meaning for another” (Fox, 2007, p. 118).

The fourth challenge relates to language and communicative competence (Duszak, 2002), and cultural incompatibilities, “a logocentric view that stereotypes the Other and marginalizes those who identify with nondominant cultures” (Fox, 2007, p. 118). Language competence obviously necessitates the need for global learners to become multilingual for effective communication, especially the social part of language and the genuine interaction between people in social context is crucial. People whose native language is English may have advantages for teaching, learning, and researching with partners from the East, but they still need to be conscious from an intercultural “communicative competence” and learn to communicate with non-English native people for “negotiation of meaning.” Lo Bianco et al. (1999) suggests that a new space be created “to negotiate comfortable ‘third places’ between the self and the other/the foreign” (as cited in East, 2008, p. 158). “The ‘third place’ refers to ‘a comfortable unbounded and dynamic space that intercultural communicators create as they interact with each other and in their attempt to bridge the gap between cultural differences’ (Liddicoat & Crozet, 2000, p. 1, as cited in East, 2008, p. 158). Similarly, Fox (2007) suggests to create situations in which two people (or two groups) from very different cultures, based on mutual trust and a respectful sharing of intended meanings, can get together and achieve real understanding, which he terms “authentic communicative situation.” Applying these approaches, we potentially equip adult learners with vital skills to engage with the East in a more effective way.

Conclusion and Suggestions

There is a clarion call for bridging learning between East and West in the theory and practice of adult education. To look at both sides means “we must hear both sides, we must be able to listen to the experience of intelligent life expressed in discourses” (Milligan et al., 2011, p. 52) or we may not otherwise recognize when we are carelessly over-applying Western norms and values. Panikker’s dialogical philosophy (1988) is meaningful to this paper:

[W]e forge a common langue, we reach a mutual comprehension, we cross the boundaries. That is what I called dialogical philosophy. It is not the imposition of one philosophy or one mode of understanding, but the forging of a common universe of discourse in the very encounter. (As cited in Milligan et al., 2011, p. 52)

In order to listen and learn from the reality of the East, we believe one’s mindset must be altered so openness and appreciativeness will come into play so we can recognize values we may otherwise miss. Understanding that the East has different philosophical systems, cultural traditions and educational goals also helps us to think from different paradigms and not so eager to mis-apply Western thought to Eastern realities, though ironically in many ways, the reality of the East mirrors the perspectives of the West, which is really unfortunate as presented earlier in the paper.

Improving language and communicative competency of western learners may help create “the third places” where both Easterners and Westerners’ identification with another and sense of belonging may be increased, and feelings of superiority and privilege or of inferiority and disadvantage may be reduced so that intercultural communication may become more effective.

Dismantling privilege and transforming our mindset lie central in the purposes of adult education and international and comparative research. The strength of research and learning work in the areas of international and
comparative education is that it “challenges us to think broadly about the link between local practices and global issues and to explore the overlapping values and social systems that underpin the educational enterprise itself” (Hayhoe & Mundy, 2008, p. 1).

Creating a third place and situations for authentic communication significantly offer implications to bridge learning equally between East and West as they powerfully help “opening oneself to the full power of what the other is saying”, and “such opening does not entail agreement but rather the to-and-fro play of dialogues” (Fox, 2007, p. 119).

In closing, we want to thoughtfully remind ourselves by sharing a picture of a scholar with an international dimension that Confucius presented to us: Confucius highly respected receiving foreign visitors and visiting other states. Confucius himself visited many states during 14 years of travel (Sun, 2011). Confucius believed that these occasions presented momentous opportunities for exchanging ideas, improvement, and transformation. “Is it not delightful to have friends coming from distance to share and exchange with?” (The Analects of Confucius, 1, 1) (As cited in Sun, 2012b, p. 214)

References


Qi Sun, Elizabeth Erichsen: Bridging Adult Education between East and West