

The Rush for Knowledge  
Ann Alexander  
University of Texas – Permian Basin  
Learning and Cognition/Advanced Educational Psychology  
EDUC 6304 - Summer 2006  
Dr. Clemmer

## The Rush for Knowledge

Time is but the stream I go a-fishin in. I drink at it, but while I drink I see the sandy bottom and detect how shallow it is. It's thin current slides away, but eternity remains.

**Henry David Thoreau**

Summertime as a child: spent walking, running, and climbing barefoot through the smallest creek of water to the tallest willow. Water rushes around the toes of the greatest explorer and branches bend to give way as another horizon is exclaimed. Summertime for a child is adventure, leading to discovery and wisdom. A relationship with nature is found, simply, mysteriously, and peacefully. While the child is allowed time to learn through experience, upon returning to the classroom in the fall, he is rushed towards the goal of attaining knowledge, breaking instead of parting the branches of discovery, making natural connections with wisdom prohibitive through our educational system.

What type of learning lends itself to adapting its course without resistance? Experiential, or knowledge “constructed by the individual through his interactions with his environment” (Murphy, 1997). The earliest and purest beliefs of this theory relate to the Chinese folk religion, Taoism, originating in the 3<sup>rd</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE (Desmond, 2001). Education developed similar ideas known as constructivism, which collectively embrace theories from Socrates to Von Glasersfeld, Wertheimer, and the ideas of Gestalt theory. While Taoism believes not to “force or interfere with things, but let them work in their own way, to produce things naturally” (Hoff, 1983, p. 70), Gestalt theory is more of a device:

There are wholes, the behavior of which is not determined by that of their individual elements, but where the part-processes are themselves determined by the intrinsic nature

of the whole. It is the hope of Gestalt theory to determine the nature of such wholes.  
(Wertheimer, 1924)

There are school marms in the U.S., deeply rooted in curriculum developed over the course of 15 or more years, who are content to while out their remaining time in daily structure, teaching the same lessons in the same way to sibling after sibling. Concurrently educators exist who by nature see the benefit of bending course content to suit the individual student, time, or need. Thoreau's quiet thoughts of Walden instead of being memorized, can be glorified in a constructivist lesson by being sketched on a handmade kite whose tail might get caught in a limb, flexing later to let go its prize for some other student to be surprised by what the willow releases: "The birds I heard today, which, fortunately, did not come within the scope of my science, sang as freshly as if it had been the first morning of creation" (Anyara, 2005). Interestingly enough, instructors will choose to be rigid and follow published curriculum instead of acknowledging that learning cannot be gained from what someone constructs, but must be derived from "'things in their natural state' [or] what is generally represented in English versions of Taoist writing as the 'uncarved block'" (Hoff, 1983, p. 11). Allowing children to experience and construct knowledge and make sense of their own world emphasizes the development of meaning and understanding (Murphy, 1997).

Unfortunately, children in this day and age have a hard time staying naïve, allowing themselves to reach to the sky. Instead they reach for the almighty dollar as they have grown up in a bubble of wanting things now and wanting everything. They "are afraid of Emptiness ... because it reminds them of Loneliness" (Hoff, 1983, p. 147). This overwhelming emptiness exhibits itself through people trying to fill in the lonely feeling with activities, television, and things. Unfortunately, the prescription is not satisfying and "Nothing" is discovered (Hoff, 1983,

p. 148). Hoff pointed out that computers have been brought in by our educational system in response to failing test scores and seem to have succeeded not only in bankrupting our students' minds with more instant information, but also in bankrupting the schools themselves through their exorbitant costs (1993, p. 72). He stated: "If something can't be immediately grasped, they won't understand it. And if it can be immediately grasped, they won't understand it, either – because Instant Information Accumulation is not understanding" (Hoff, 1993, p. 94). While constructivism is open to the same chance for students to scale the trunk on their own, Murphy (1997) sees "Technology increasingly being touted as an optimal medium for the application of constructivist principles to learning. Numerous online environments and technology-based projects are showing that theory can effectively guide educational practice." Murphy illustrates technology having a place in schools and opening student minds, and even though Hoff does not agree with this use, he does note the current problem of funding for this technology.

The wish to have something now instead of waiting for something strong through its own fortitude, yet gentle and giving through experience, carries on the patterns of behavior that society has instilled. In America there is the hurry up and satisfy yourself immediately fast food restaurant, whereas in China there is the Teahouse where "families, neighbors and friends drop in for tea and light food. They stay as long as they like" (Hoff, 1983, p. 107). Our society caters to rushing, while China's Teahouse and France's similar sidewalk café seem to say, "You're important. Relax and enjoy yourself" (Hoff, 1983, p. 107). American students are educated in the same way. Hoff (1993) responded to this trend of trying to cover as much as possible in a year by stating:

the worthwhile and important things in life – wisdom and happiness in particular – are simply not the sorts of things one can Chase After and Grab. They are instead the sorts

of things that come to us where we are, if we let them – if we stop trying too hard and just let things happen as they need to. (pp. 98-99)

Taoism theorizes that to produce results, things cannot be interfered with; they just must be allowed to work themselves out naturally. If, however, a teacher allows time for unstructured learning and looks for topics that lend themselves to the spreading of the branches of the mind, it would be possible to give learning and a student just what is needed: time.

Besides being free, creative, and innovative with tasks that can run beyond the task itself, teachers can use the ideas of Taoism in the course of dealing with discipline problems. Actually, if the Taoist theories are used consistently, there would be no problems since “problems ... are caused by a failure to see What’s There” (Hoff, 1993, p. 108). In most cases, teachers can agree that misbehavior occurs because of something completely disconnected to the situation at hand. Teachers then are responding to the current situation which has nothing to do with the underlying problem. Students may feel inadequate or nervous, so they call attention to themselves by acting out. In cases such as these, the teacher is always right on top of things as we “fail to notice anything but the unusual” (Hoff, 1993, p. 120). Imagine if the student was noticed for anything positive at that moment, instead of the negative. Hoff (1983) relates a story of Chuang-tse, the Taoist writer, of a carpenter complaining about a tree being too crooked to be used for lumber:

Chuang-tse tells the carpenter that [his] tree is not valuable as lumber. But you could make use of the shade it provides, rest under its sheltering branches, and stroll beneath it, admiring its character and appearance ... It is useless to you only because you want to make it into something else and do not use it in its proper way. (p. 40)

Students are treated the same way and educators make a point of pointing out behavior out of the norm is wrong. By not following Taoist teachings, it would seem that appreciation is not given

to something because it does not fit the desired way. The real goal should be to “Turn the Negative into Positive ... [and] attract Positive with Positive” (Hoff, 1993, p. 234). Taoism generally is aligned with being the Way of the Dragon (Hoff, 1993). The Dragon is a Chinese symbol of transformation, so Taoism is really the way of transformation (Hoff, 1993). Finding the natural fit for students as a calming influence that sees the best in them or directs them to the way that naturally can be a positive transformation should be an educator’s mission. The teachings of Taoism also lead to the obvious truth that the problem is not really with the student all the time, but with the educator.

Taoism could have a place in the public schools, but there are many who would not accept it, being stubborn and programmed themselves by society and culture. America is a nation of “Bisy Backsons” who are always looking for the “Great Reward,” whatever it may be, and whole lives are spent working like lunatics to try and find it (Hoff, 1993, pp. 97-98). China is a land that takes its time, be it telling a story or eating a meal. There is no rush to grow up, or change. Wisdom is found in things that take time or have a special place in time like Chuang-tse’s crooked tree, or perhaps for youth, the willow tree, flexible, reaching as far as the oaks, and resilient. Western education is based around rushing for results, while children need a slower pace to establish their roots of knowledge, sway with evolving revelations, and have the freedom to sprout their own ideas. The two theories conflict with each other and reaching a consensus would take up too much time and effort for Taoist theories to be used consistently. Taoism is consistency since it is a natural approach to calmly and peacefully wait for the “natural, simple, plain, honest ... things in their natural state” (Hoff, 1993, p. 11).

## References

- Anyara. (2005). Anyara-Aphorisms (Thoreau). Retrieved June 19, 2006 from  
<http://koti.mbnet.fi/neptunia/nature/birdsng1.htm>
- Desmond, Lindsey. (2001). New Religious Movements – Taoism. Retrieved June 21, 2006 from  
<http://religiousmovements.lib.virginia.edu/nrms/taoism.html>
- Hoff, Benjamin. (1983). *The Tao of Pooh*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Hoff, Benjamin. (1993). *The Te of Piglet*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Murphy, Elizabeth. (1997). Constructivism: From Philosophy to Practice. Retrieved June 20,  
2006 from <http://www.cdli.ca/~emurphy/cle.html>
- Wertheimer, Max. (1924). Gestalt Theory [Electronic version]. Retrieved June 20, 2006 from  
<http://gestalttheory.net/archive/wert1.html>