

On Teaching and Learning

(*Xueji* 學記)

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INTRODUCTION

On Teaching and Learning (*xueji* 學記) is considered to be the earliest Chinese text on pedagogy.¹ It was canonized as a chapter in *On Rites* (*lijì* 禮記), one of the *Five Classics* that constituted the core of early Confucian learning.² Scholarly opinion differs regarding its authorship, and there is some uncertainty about the date that it was written. Some scholars believe that it was written by a student of Mencius (孟子) named Le Zhengke (樂正克) during the latter years of the Warring States period (戰國 475–221 BCE).³ Others scholars believe that it may have been compiled by a Confucian scholar several centuries later during the Han dynasty (漢 202 BCE–220 CE). It does appear that the ideas presented in *On Teaching and Learning* (*xueji* 學記) describe the practices of the Imperial Academy (*taixue* 太學). Historically, the Imperial Academy can be traced back to the times of Yu (虞氏, 舜) and the earliest dynasties—Xia (夏, 2070–1600 BCE), Shang (商, 1600–1046 BCE), and Zhou (周, approximately 1046–256 BCE). Scholars have discussed and speculated on the exact schooling system described in the essay. However, the content of *Xueji* presents a summative synthesis of the ancient systems instead of a specific description of a particular time or dynasty, especially in its account of the schooling system, the principles of pedagogy, and the methods of instruction.⁴

TEXT

1. 發慮憲, 求善良, 足以誨聞, 不足以動眾; 就賢體遠, 足以動眾, 未足以化民。君子如欲化民成俗, 其必由學乎!

When a ruler issues imperial edicts to seek out the most able and worthy among the people, he may gain attention and some reputation in doing so, but it is not enough to arouse, move, and cultivate the people. When he confers with the wise and esteems the most learned, he might improve the people, but it is still not enough to truly change and transform them. If the exemplary ruler really wants to transform the people to refine their way of life and make cultivation a standard daily practice, then the only path is through education.

2. 玉不琢，不成器；人不學，不知道。是故古之王者建國君民，教學為先。《兌命》曰：「念終始典于學。」其此之謂乎！

A piece of jade that remains uncut will never become a sacred vessel, and a person that does not learn will never realize the proper way (*dao* 道).⁵ Thus it is that the ancient kings in establishing their kingdoms and governing their people took teaching and learning as the first and foremost measure and their prime directive.⁶ This is what the “Command to Yue” (*yueming* 兌命) means when it says: “Your desired outcome should always start with learning.”⁷

3. 雖有嘉肴，弗食，不知其旨也；雖有至道，弗學，不知其善也。是故學然後知不足，教然後知困。知不足，然後能自反也；知困，然後能自強也，故曰：教學相長也。《兌命》曰：「學學半。」其此之謂乎！

Even though a banquet is laid out before you, if you do not partake of it, you will not know and enjoy its delights. Even though the ultimate way (*dao* 道) lies before you, if you do not learn from it, you will not realize its efficacy. Thus it is only in learning that we realize our inadequacies, and it is only in teaching that we realize our limitations and perplexity. It is only in realizing our inadequacies that we are able to become self-critical, and only in realizing our limitations that we are able to improve ourselves. Teaching and learning complement each other. This is what the “Command to Yue” (*yueming* 兌命) means when it says: “Teaching and learning are two halves of a whole that inform each other.”

4. 古之教者，家有塾，黨有庠，術有序，國有學。

In the ancient system of education, a family would have their own private school (*shu* 塾); a town would have its village school (*xiang* 庠); the district level would have its county school (*xu* 序); and the capital would have its imperial academy (*xue* 學).⁸

5. 比年入學，中年考校。一年視離經辨志，三年視敬業樂群，五年視博習親師，七年視論學取友，謂之小成；九年知類通達，強立而不反，謂之

大成。夫然後足以化民易俗，近者說服，而遠者懷之，此大學之道也。《記》曰：「蛾子時術之。」其此之謂乎！

Each year the Imperial Academy (*xue* 學) enrolls new students, and in alternate years students would sit for examination. First-year students are observed to determine their ability to analyze classical texts, and how they might demonstrate their interests and aspirations in learning. Third-year students are evaluated on their commitment to learning and on their ability to get on well within the scholarly community. Fifth-year students are examined on the breadth of their learning and on their devotion to and respect for their teachers. Seventh-year students are judged on the quality of their scholarly debate and on their choice of friends. Students who had arrived at this level are recognized as having reached a basic level of achievement. By their ninth year of study, having mastered their subjects and applied their knowledge broadly and having established themselves and their goals firmly, then it can be said that students have become greatly accomplished. It is only then that they are able to cultivate and transform the people, and change old human habits and shape new enlightened ways of living. They will be able to bring those close by into harmonious accord and gain the respect of those at a distance. This, then, is the exemplary way of teaching and learning. Is this not what it means when the ancient text says: “Little ants who persist in carrying tiny grains of sand build vast anthills.”

6. 大學始教，皮弁祭菜，示敬道也；《宵雅》肄三，官其始也；入學鼓篋，孫其業也；夏楚二物，收其威也；未卜禘不視學，游其志也；時觀而弗語，存其心也；幼者聽而弗問，學不躐等也。此七者，教之大倫也。《記》曰：「凡學官先事，士先志。」其此之謂乎！

The students and faculty of the academy at the commencement of term dress in official regalia and make offerings in honor of the ancient teachers and sages, and thus they express their reverence for the proper way (*dao* 道). The first three verses of *The Minor Odes of the Kingdom* (*xiaoya* 小雅) are sung as an inspiring ceremony for students as they begin to take their first steps to officialdom.⁹ As they enter the academy, the students open their boxes of books to the beat of the drums, showing reverence and commitment for their chosen profession.¹⁰ The cane and switch are openly displayed for the maintenance of proper discipline and decorum.¹¹ Students are given free rein to follow their own interests and aspirations, before their destinations are predicted through divination and the performance of the great *di* (禘), an imperial ancestral sacrifice ritual.¹² The teachers observe them with great intent, but without intervention, to respect the personal choices, intentions, and purposes of the students. To maintain the appropriate distinctions and order of their social status, younger students are required to listen but not to question their seniors. These seven guidelines are

the general principles and essential mandates of instruction. Is this not what it means when the ancient text *Ji* (記) says: “In their learning, the officials must give priority to the affairs of their office, and the aspiring scholars must give priority to their commitment.”

7. 大學之教也時，教必有正業，退息必有居學。不學操縵，不能安弦；不學博依，不能安《詩》；不學雜服，不能安禮；不興其藝，不能樂學。

Timing is essential in the advanced teaching at the academy. Instruction focuses strictly on classical studies. Students have a proper place to which they may retire when taking respite from their studies. As they study, if students do not regularly practice the various stringed instruments, they cannot gain mastery in their performance of music. If students do not gain the knowledge of the broad use of metaphors, they cannot master the writing of poetry. If students do not learn about the variety of costumes and dress codes, they cannot gain mastery over formal ceremony and rituals. If students do not develop knowledge and appreciation of the arts, they cannot discover the real joy of learning.

8. 故君子之於學也，藏焉，修焉，息焉，遊焉。夫然，故安其學而親其師，樂其友而信其道。是以雖離師輔而不反也。《兌命》曰：「敬孫務時敏，厥修乃來。」其此之謂乎！

Therefore, as exemplary persons (*junzi* 君子) study, they gather knowledge from all sources, cultivate themselves with it, immerse themselves in it even during their leisure and respite, and roam freely within it. As such, they find satisfaction in their learning, grow closer to their teachers, enjoy their relationship with friends and peers, and are ever more committed to the proper way (*dao* 道). Thus, even when separated from teachers and companions, they remain steadfast in the way of learning without faltering. This is what the “Command to Yue” (*yueming* 兌命) means when it says: “Be respectful, humble, and earnest, and always work hard, and success will be yours.”

9. 今之教者，呻其占畢，多其訊，言及于數，進而不顧其安，使人不由其誠，教人不盡其材；其施之也悖，其求之也佛。夫然，故隱其學而疾其師，苦其難而不知其益也，雖終其業，其去之必速。教之不刑，其此之由乎！

Nowadays, teachers drone on as they read through their texts, making them ever more opaque. They continue to convey information, but as they move forward, they pay no heed to conveying what is meant or whether it is understood. They are unable to help students develop into virtuous and honest persons. In their teaching, they fail to guide their students to grow to their full potential. What they provide is perverse, and what they demand is absurd. Such being the case, this is why students learn to detest their studies and come to resent

their teachers. They have suffered the pains of trying without realizing the benefits of learning. The moment that students complete their course of study they abandon any further interest in learning. Is this not why such ineffective teaching is a waste of time?

10. 大學之法，禁於未發之謂豫，當其可之謂時，不陵節而施之謂孫，相觀而善之謂摩。此四者，教之所由興也。

The first precept of the academy is precaution (*yu* 豫): Guard against bad habits before they become ingrained. The second is readiness and timing (*shi* 時): Choose the most efficacious time for teaching. The third is felicity and flexibility (*xun* 孫): Adjust the structure and sequence of your teaching to suit subject and student. The fourth is observation and discussion (*mo* 摩): Let students improve each other through interaction. These four precepts are the way to ensure effective instruction.

11. 發然後禁，則扞格而不勝；時過然後學，則勤苦而難成；雜施而不孫，則壞亂而不修；獨學而無友，則孤陋而寡聞；燕朋逆其師；燕辟廢其學。此六者，教之所由廢也。

If you try to prohibit bad habits after they have formed, no matter how hard you struggle with them, you will fail. If students miss the right moment to learn, it will be difficult for them to succeed regardless of how assiduously they apply themselves. If the teacher lacks structure and fails to make the necessary connections, there will not be much that learners can make of the fragments and confusion they receive. If students study alone without the company of peers and friends, they become idiosyncratic in their manner and limited in their learning. Students who always party with friends tend to turn against their teachers, and those who engage in too many frivolous activities and distractions tend to neglect their studies. These six failings will lead to ineffective teaching and learning.

12. 君子既知教之所由興，又知教之所由廢，然後可以為人師也。故君子之教喻也，道而弗牽，強而弗抑，開而弗達。道而弗牽則和，強而弗抑則易，開而弗達則思；和易以思，可謂善喻矣。

Only exemplary persons (*junzi* 君子) who already understand how everything can be created or destroyed through teaching and learning are capable of becoming teachers. The role of exemplary persons as teachers is to enlighten: to lead students forward through reasoning and inspiration rather than to drag them, to offer them encouragement rather than to hold them back, to open their minds rather than to provide them with fixed answers. If teachers serve as guides, they promote harmony; if teachers encourage students, they facilitate the growth of students; if teachers open the minds of their students, they promote thoughtful

inquiry. Teachers who can promote harmony, facility, and independent thinking can be said to be truly enlightening educators.

13. 學者有四失, 教者必知之。人之學也, 或失則多, 或失則寡, 或失則易, 或失則止。此四者, 心之莫同也。知其心, 然後能救其失也。教也者, 長善而救其失者也。

Teachers must understand the four errors that students make. In their attitude to their studies, some err on the side of overextending themselves, and some in focusing too narrowly; some err on the side of thinking it is too easy, and some in giving up. These four errors arise from differences in the temperament of the learners. It is only when teachers understand the temperaments of their students that they can save them from error. Teaching is nothing more than promoting excellence in students and rescuing them from error.

14. 善歌者, 使人繼其聲; 善教者, 使人繼其志。其言也約而達, 微而臧, 罕譬而喻, 可謂繼志矣。

Virtuosic singers inspire others to follow them in song; excellent teachers inspire learners to follow them in their dedication to learning. For the words of instruction to be concise and yet penetrating, to be oblique and yet profound, to be sparse in metaphor and yet enlightening is what it means to inspire learners to follow their teachers in their aspiration for learning.

15. 君子知至學之難易, 而知其美惡, 然後能博喻; 能博喻然後能為師; 能為師然後能為長; 能為長然後能為君。故師也者, 所以學為君也。是故擇師不可不慎也。《記》曰: 「三王四代唯其師。」此之謂乎!

Exemplary persons (*junzi* 君子) who can understand the challenges of true scholarship, and who can differentiate virtue from vice, are able to develop broad knowledge and be comprehensive in their teaching. And only by being broad in their knowledge and comprehensive in their instruction can they be true teachers. Only after serving as an experienced teacher can one become a true leader, and only after succeeding as a leader can one become a true ruler. Thus, what it takes to become a true teacher is the same path as that needed to become a true ruler. It is for this reason that we must be circumspect in the selection of our teachers. This is what the ancient text means when it says: "It was only because of their teachers that there were the three great kings and the four dynasties."

16. 凡學之道, 嚴師為難。師嚴然後道尊, 道尊然後民知敬學。是故君之所不臣於其臣者二: 當其為尸則弗臣也, 當其為師則弗臣也。大學之禮, 雖詔於天子, 無北面; 所以尊師也。

What is most challenging in the proper way of learning (*dao* 道) is that teachers must be strict and exacting. It is only when teachers are strict and exacting that the proper way of learning will be revered. It is only when the proper way of learning is revered that the people will realize that learning must be respected. This is the reason why there are two occasions on which the ruler will not treat his ministers as his subordinates: When a minister officiates at a ceremony honoring the ruler's ancestors and when a minister serves as the ruler's teacher. According to the proprieties of the academy, the fact that when a teacher is summoned to instruct the emperor he need not face north in bowing to the ruler in the customary way is how the ruler shows his respect for the authority and status of his teacher.

17. 善學者，師逸而功倍，又從而庸之；不善學者，師勤而功半，又從而怨之。善問者，如攻堅木，先其易者，後其節目，及其久也，相說以解；不善問者反此。善待問者，如撞鐘，叩之以小者則小鳴，叩之以大者則大鳴，待其從容，然後盡其聲；不善答問者反此。此皆進學之道也。

Those who are good at learning do not require much effort from their teacher yet make twofold return, and then they credit their teacher for their success. Those who are not good at learning require real effort from their teacher yet offer poor return, and then they blame their teacher for their failure. Those who are good at asking questions approach their task as if carving hard wood. First, they chip away at the soft parts and then set to work on the knots. If they keep at it, the difficulties are gradually resolved. Those who are poor at asking questions do just the opposite. Those who are good at answering questions approach their task as if ringing a bell. When the bell is struck gently, it responds with a soft sound. When the bell is struck decisively, it responds with a loud ring. The bell sounds in the same measure as the bell is struck. And those who are poor at answering questions do just the opposite. This all conduces to progress in the proper way of learning.

18. 記問之學，不足以為人師。必也其聽語乎，力不能問，然後語之；語之而不知，雖舍之可也。

Those who would respond to questions by the mindless recitation of memorized texts are not worthy of becoming teachers. It is essential that teachers listen and respond to the questions that students have, and it is only when students are unable to formulate their own questions that teachers offer them instruction. When students after having been instructed still do not understand, teachers may dismiss them and wait for a more opportune time.

19. 良冶之子，必學為裘；良弓之子，必學為箕；始駕馬者反之，車在馬前。君子察於此三者，可以有志於學矣。

The son of the master blacksmith must learn how to make his leather apron. The son of the master bow-maker must learn the craft of weaving baskets. The colt learning to draw a carriage first runs behind the carriage that is drawn by a horse in front. Exemplary persons (*junzi* 君子) in surveying such phenomena are able to gain insight into how best to teach and learn.

20. 古之學者：比物醜類。鼓無當於五聲，五聲弗得不和。水無當於五色，五色弗得不章。學無當於五官。五官弗得不治。師無當於五服，五服弗得不親。

The ancient scholars gain insight into learning and teaching through association, connection, and comparison. The drumbeat is not the same kind of thing as the five tones on the musical scale, but the five tones could not produce a harmonious melody without the cadence of the drum. Water is not the same kind of thing as the five colors, but the palette of colors could not be brilliantly displayed without water. The academy is not the same kind of thing as the five institutions of government, but these institutions of government could not bring about proper order without the academy. Teachers are not the same kind of thing as the five kinship groups, but these kinship groups could not be close and cordial without the lessons of the teacher.

21. 君子曰：大德不官，大道不器，大信不約，大時不齊。察於此四者，可以有志於學矣。三王之祭川也，皆先河而後海；或源也，或委也。此之謂務本。

Exemplary persons (*junzi* 君子) have said that the highest virtue is not manifested through any official position or authority, that the greatest *dao* in the world is not a matter of mastering any particular skill or occupation, that real trust and credibility among people transcends any particular agreement, and that the great rhythm of nature is not limited to any particular season. Scrutiny into these four phenomena will provide insight into both teaching and learning. When the three great kings¹³ held their ceremonies in veneration of water, they paid their respects first to the rivers and then to the ocean. The rivers are the source of water and the ocean is where it collects. This is what is meant by devotion to the root of things.

NOTES

1. The character *xue* 學 in modern Chinese means “to study, to learn” only, but in ancient Chinese it referred to both learning and teaching.

2. *On Rites* (*liji* 禮記) is a compendium of classical Confucian texts dealing with a broad range of topics that develop a conception of a refined social order through the use of ritual and ceremony. The received version contains forty-nine essays that are considered to be the work of the students of Confucius and then of their students. This

classic contains some of the most revered texts in the Confucian corpus, such as *On Great Learning* (*daxue* 大學), *On Focusing the Familiar* (*zhongyong* 中庸), *On Teaching and Learning* (*xueji* 學記), *On Music* (*yueji* 樂記), and *On the Evolution of Rites* (*liyun* 禮運). These essays deal with a rich variety of subjects in classical Confucianism, such as politics, law, morality, philosophy, history, religion, art, calendrics, geography, and so on.

3. Mencius 孟子 (Meng Ke 孟軻) is generally regarded as the second sage of Confucianism. Gao's study of *Xueji* mentioned the possibility of Le Zhengke as the author, but this has not been historically confirmed nor widely accepted. The translators and authors of this book have not found solid proof to verify such claim.

4. The Imperial Academy (*taixue* 太學) is the name of the highest state educational institution in ancient China in a tradition of “academies” (*xue* 學) that dates back to the times of Yu (虞氏, 舜) and the following three dynasties—Xia (夏, 2070–1600 BCE), Shang (商, 1600–1046 BCE), and Zhou (周, approximately 1046–256 BCE). The first imperial academy was built by Emperor Wu 漢武帝 during the Western Han dynasty (西漢, 206 BCE–9 CE). *Li Ji* (禮記·明堂位) indicates that the highest learning institute for the Yu was *xiang* (庠), during the Xia it was *xiu* (序), for the Yin it was *gu zong* (瞽宗), and for the Zhou it was *pan gong* (泮宮).

5. *Dao* 道, conventionally translated “the Way,” is probably the most pervasive and widely recognized idea in Chinese philosophy. The specific character of Chinese philosophy arises because a dominant cultural factor in the tradition, now and then, has been the priority of process and change over form and stasis, and thus a privileging of cosmology over metaphysics. In this process cosmology, *dao* speaks to the wholeness of experience—including the heavens, earth, and the human being—as it unfolds. In the human world, this process cosmology becomes evident in the centrality of self-cultivation and education as a way of producing meaningful relations. The contrast with classical metaphysics lies in forging one's way rather than seeking the truth, becoming a co-creator with the heavens and the earth rather than discovering what is objectively real.

6. The title “king” 王 is a form of address for the highest rulers of the Xia dynasty 夏 (2070 BCE–1600 BCE), Shang dynasty 商 (1600 BC–1046 BC), and the Zhou dynasty 周 (1046 BC–256 BC). The king was also called “The Son of ‘Heaven’” (*tianzi* 天子).

7. The “Command to Yue” (*yueming* 兪命) is the title of an essay contained in another of the *Five Classics* called the *Shangshu* 尚書 or the *Shujing* 書經.

8. According to the *Zhouli* 周禮, 500 families constituted a “village,” and 12,500 families constituted a “district” or “county.” This system of education dates back to the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties 夏、商、周 (2070 BCE–256 BCE). During the Zhou dynasty the school system was divided into two levels: state schools and county schools. The state schools (*daxue* 大學) were located in the capital cities of the different kingdoms. County schools were located in rural communities with some in small villages and some in larger towns and were named accordingly.

9. *The Minor Odes of the Kingdom* (*xiaoya* 小雅) is a collection of verses in another of the *Five Classics*, the *Book of Songs* (*shijing* 詩經). These three particular verses—“Deer Songs” (*luming* 鹿鳴), “The Four Stallions” (*simu* 四牡), and “Brilliant Are the Flowers” (*huanghuangzhehua* 皇皇者華)—are songs that allude to rulers and ministers sharing joys and travails together, promoting a bond between them. See Legge, *The Chinese Classics*, 245–250. And Karlgren, *The Book of Odes*, 104–106.

10. Before the invention of paper and the beginning of book culture during the Eastern Han dynasty, ancient books were written on silk or strips of bamboo tied together with leather thongs. The boxes or containers for these books were also made of bamboo or sometimes wood.

11. The *xia* 夏 and the *chu* 楚 are a wooden cane and a switch or rod cut from the chaste tree, respectively. Both were symbols of discipline and order.

12. The *di* 禘 sacrifice was an ancient imperial event for reverencing ancestors that was held in the high summer on a five-year cycle. In the *Analects* 3.11, Confucius is asked for an explanation of the *di* sacrifice and replies: "I don't have one. Anyone who did know how to explain it could rule the empire as easily as having it here." And he pointed to the palm of his hand.

13. Three Kings and Four Dynasties refer to the greatest sage rulers and early Chinese kingdoms. According to *Xun Zi* (荀子), the three sage kings were Yao (尧), Shun (舜), and Yu (禹). The Four Dynasties were Yu (虞), Xia (夏), Shang (商), and Zhou (周).

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