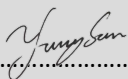


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Module tutor: Dr Kelly Ngo, Dr Katherine Ngo Assignment due date: 04/08/2025		
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How to enjoy learning according to the Confucian classics.

I. Introduction

Respected teacher, good morning. The topic of my presentation today is “How to enjoy learning according to the Confucian classics.” There is a Chinese saying: “Being a teacher is hard, and being a student is not easy.” It is difficult to be a teacher, but being a student is also not easy. From the student’s perspective, they not only have to complete a large amount of schoolwork, but also read many books. Moreover, during the learning process, they often face knowledge that is very difficult and hard to grasp. All of this causes them significant trouble with learning. Furthermore, besides learning itself, external environmental factors also affect them. These factors make it impossible for them to focus and learn efficiently, or even to achieve the process of enjoying learning. Faced with this situation, what should we do? How should we act? What changes can we make to improve this situation? In fact, in ancient China, Confucius (551 BCE–479 BCE) already provided many relevant discussions on “How to enjoy learning.” This oral presentation mainly selects relevant content from *the Analects*. It summarizes the experience of the ancients to help us understand how to enjoy learning and solve the learning difficulties we face.

II. The Meaning and Importance of Learning

To understand how to enjoy learning is, for most people, a misleading concept. For the ordinary person, learning is not enjoyable; it may even be a source of pain due to significant pressure. Therefore, for ordinary people, enjoying

learning is itself an outcome, not a process, nor even an initial stage. In my view, enjoying learning should be a manifestation of a result. It is built upon focused learning and even begins with a good motivation to study. Therefore, we must first understand that a person needs good motivation to start learning willingly. Only through prolonged focus and depth can they gradually find joy and ultimately enjoy learning—this is the correct process. So, if we want to understand how to enjoy learning, we must first grasp the meaning and importance of learning itself. Only by understanding this can we truly develop a good motivation to begin. Regarding motivation, Confucius once said: “In ancient times, men learned with a view to their own improvement. Nowadays, men learn with a view to the approbation of others.”¹ (James Legge translation). In Confucius’ view, learning should be an inner spiritual pursuit, not an external display for others. Learning itself is meant to enhance our morality and self-cultivation. Facing the social environment of his time, Confucius lamented: “You, those who know virtue are few.”² He worried deeply that the decay of moral standards and people’s mind would lead to societal collapse and even the extinction of humanity. Therefore, he strongly advocated for education through rituals and music to achieve the goal of a Great Harmony world. Confucius hoped to influence everyone, so that all could possess sufficient morality and wisdom—this was also one of the reasons he continuously sought to learn and improve himself. Thus, a good aspiration often becomes a pivotal moment or powerful driving force for self-improvement.

However, even if someone has the motivation to advance, if they do not actively pursue learning, they may still fail to reach their goals. Confucius once said: “In a hamlet of ten families, there may be found one honorable and sincere as I am,

¹ Original text: 「古之學者為己，今之學者為人。」 14.24

² Original text: 「由！知德者鮮矣。」 15.4

but not so fond of learning.”³ This indicates that many people possess good morals or kind hearts, but due to a lack of focus or depth in learning, they fail to achieve significant accomplishments—a great pity indeed. For example, Confucius began dedicating himself to learning at the age of 15. He himself faced difficulties and challenges in the process, stating: “I have been the whole day without eating, and the whole night without sleeping; occupied with thinking. It was of no use. The better plan is to learn.”⁴ While reflection can deepen learning, pure thought without further study still leads to little progress. Additionally, Confucius said: “If some years were added to my life, I would give fifty to the study of the *Yi*, and then I might come to be without great faults.”⁵ This shows Confucius’ deep yearning for learning. He expressed that if he could have started earlier, he might have corrected more of his own mistakes and, through enhanced moral wisdom, avoided greater errors. All of this reveals Confucius’ recognition of the importance and necessity of learning.

III. Methods to Enjoy Learning

Once a person has the motivation to learn and understands the importance of learning, they can formally enter the state of learning. During this process, Confucius proposed various methods to help us immerse ourselves in learning. These can be broadly divided into four parts: good attitude, sage teacher, helpful friends, and suitable environment.

First, a good attitude: For beginners, learning a new field or subject inherently involves significant challenges. Confucius encouraged his students by stating: “I

³ Original text: 「十室之邑，必有忠信如丘者焉，不如丘之好學也。」 5.28

⁴ Original text: 「吾嘗終日不食，終夜不寢，以思，無益，不如學也。」 15.31

⁵ Original text: 「加我數年，五十以學易，可以無大過矣。」 7.17

am not one who was born in the possession of knowledge; I am one who is fond of antiquity, and earnest in seeking it there.”⁶ He openly admitted that he was not born knowledgeable but achieved his level through a love for learning, continuous self-improvement, and diligent pursuit of knowledge. Thus, for beginners, as long as they persevere, maintain a calm mindset, and progress step by step, they will eventually succeed (as exemplified by the “persistent spirit of the little tortoise” mentioned by Prof. Chia-Ning Chu). However, when students reach a certain level of knowledge and absorb sufficient information, they often develop arrogance. Confucius skillfully reminded his students to avoid this pitfall. For example, in the Analects, Confucius once discussed with Zigong:

The Master said to Zi Gong, “Which do you consider superior, yourself or Hui?” Zi Gong replied, “How dare I compare myself with Hui? Hui hears one point and knows all about a subject; I hear one point, and know a second.” The Master said, “You are not equal to him. I grant you, you are not equal to him.”⁷

Here, Confucius—already a teacher of profound wisdom—humbly acknowledged his own limitations. His attitude of humility and virtue inspired his students to learn earnestly and modestly, steering clear of arrogance. Confucius also emphasized: “He was of an active nature and yet fond of learning, and he was not ashamed to ask and learn of his inferiors!”⁸ This signifies that approaching learning with seriousness, equality, and focus is the foundation of all good beginnings.

Next, the sage teacher: In ancient times, excellent teachers and friends were considered indispensable to the learning process, as they could help one

⁶ Original text: 「我非生而知之者，好古，敏以求之者也。」 7.20

⁷ Original text: 子謂子貢曰：「女與回也孰愈？」對曰：「賜也何敢望回。回也聞一以知十，賜也聞一以知二。」子曰：「弗如也！吾與女弗如也。」 5.9

⁸ Original text: 「敏而好學，不恥下問。」 5.15

improve in knowledge, morality, and self-cultivation. Here, we first focus on the role of a sage teacher. It is important to clarify that a “teacher” here is not limited to those with a formal title. In Confucius’ view, anyone could serve as a teacher. *The Analects* records:

Gong Sun Zhao of Wei asked Zi Gong, saying. “From whom did Zhong Ni get his learning?” Zi Gong replied, “The doctrines of Wen and Wu have not yet fallen to the ground. They are to be found among men. Men of talents and virtue remember the greater principles of them, and others, not possessing such talents and virtue, remember the smaller. Thus, all possess the doctrines of Wen and Wu. Where could our Master go that he should not have an opportunity of learning them? And yet what necessity was there for his having a regular master?”⁹

This passage explains that when someone questioned the source of Confucius’ wisdom, his student Zigong clarified that Confucius had no fixed teacher. He learned anytime, anywhere, continuously improving himself. Confucius further stated: “If a man keeps cherishing his old knowledge, so as continually to be acquiring new, he may be a teacher of others.”¹⁰ To him, anyone with strengths could be a teacher worthy of emulation. For instance, when discussing *the Book of Songs* with his disciples, Confucius would praise their insightful answers.¹¹ He himself said: “A youth is to be regarded with respect. How do we know that his future will not be equal to our present?”¹² This shows Confucius never concerned himself with a person’s age or status; if they had valuable qualities,

⁹ Original text: 衛公孫朝問於子貢曰：「仲尼焉學？」子貢曰：「文武之道，未墜於地，在人。賢者識其大者，不賢者識其小者，莫不有文武之道焉。夫子焉不學？而亦何常師之有？」 19.22

¹⁰ Original text: 「溫故而知新，可以為師矣。」 2.11

¹¹ Original text: 子夏問曰：「『巧笑倩兮，美目盼兮，素以爲絢兮。』何謂也？」子曰：「繪事後素。」曰：「禮後乎？」子曰：「起予者商也！始可與言詩已矣。」 3.8

Zi Xia asked, saying, “What is the meaning of the passage – ‘The pretty dimples of her artful smile! The well-defined black and white of her eye! The plain ground for the colors?’” The Master said, “The business of laying on the colors follows (the preparation of) the plain ground.” “Ceremonies then are a subsequent thing?” The Master said, “It is Shang who can bring out my meaning. Now I can begin to talk about the odes with him.” —translated by James Legge

¹² Original text: 「後生可畏，焉知來者之不如今也？」 9.23

he humbly sought to learn from them. He even believed: “When I walk along with two others, they may serve me as my teachers. I will select their good qualities and follow them, their bad qualities and avoid them.”¹³ Even if others had significant flaws or moral shortcomings, they could serve as warnings or opportunities for self-correction—acting as “negative examples” to further refine one’s own virtue and wisdom.

Third, helpful friends: Having good friends who support each other during the learning process is immensely beneficial. As recorded in *the Analects*, The philosopher Zeng said, “The superior man on grounds of culture meets with his friends, and by friendship helps his virtue.”¹⁴ By forming friendships with virtuous individuals through learning and engaging in mutual encouragement and constructive criticism, learners can profoundly enhance both their moral character and knowledge. For instance, Confucius emphasized: “among his friends, earnest and urgent.”¹⁵ This highlights the need for friends to both encourage and challenge one another—only through such dynamics can one sustain the motivation to keep learning. Mutual encouragement helps avoid negative mindsets (such as sadness, disappointment, or self-doubt), while honest criticism corrects moral shortcomings and fills gaps in knowledge, thereby deepening one’s wisdom. Confucius believed that friends—whether beneficial or harmful—exert the most direct influence on us. He stated:

“There are three friendships which are advantageous, and three which are injurious. Friendship with the upright; friendship with the sincere; and friendship with the man of much observation - these are advantageous. Friendship with the man of specious airs; friendship with the insinuatingly

¹³ Original text: 「三人行，必有我師焉。擇其善者而從之，其不善者而改之。」 7.22

¹⁴ Original text: 曾子曰：「君子以文會友，以友輔仁。」 14.24

¹⁵ Original text: 「朋友切切偲偲」 13.28

soft; and friendship with the glib-tongued - these are injurious.”¹⁶

He argued that good friends positively shape our virtue and intellect, while falling under the influence of unworthy companions can not only ruin one’s prospects but also lead to moral downfall. Thus, Confucius asserted: “to find enjoyment in having many worthy friends - these are advantageous.”¹⁷ This underscores his encouragement to cultivate relationships with virtuous individuals. By surrounding oneself with such friends, one can continually draw strength to refine their character and moral integrity.

A suitable environment: Before discussing this issue, we must first clarify what constitutes a suitable environment. A dedicated classroom, a quiet study space, or adequate facilities—these might be considered ideal teaching or learning environments. However, in Confucius’ view, environments change with time and space, and any setting can serve as an excellent place for teaching.

Confucius educated his students in diverse contexts: beneath a ginkgo tree, during travels, on excursions, and even when trapped between country Chen and Cai for several days without food¹⁸. He had never interrupt his teaching due to circumstances. Not only was Confucius unaffected by his surroundings, but he also actively drew lessons from them. As he stated: “When the year becomes cold, then we know how the pine and the cypress are the last to lose their leaves.”¹⁹ This shows he could find inspiration and learning even in nature. Thus, a suitable environment can help people focus on learning and further

¹⁶ Original text: 「益者三友，損者三友。友直，友諒，友多聞，益矣。友便辟，友善柔，友便佞，損矣。」 16.4

¹⁷ Original text: 「樂多賢友，益矣。」 16.5

¹⁸ Chen-Cai Famine (陳蔡絕糧) : During Confucius’ travels between the states of Chen and Cai (circa 489 BCE), he and his disciples were besieged by hostile forces for seven days with no food supplies. Despite starvation and danger, Confucius continued teaching his students, demonstrating unwavering commitment to education and moral integrity. This incident became a symbol of persevering in learning amid adversity. (Sources: *Analects* 15.2, *Shiji* 47)

¹⁹ Original text: 「歲寒，然後知松柏之後彫也。」 9.28

guide them toward enjoying the process.

In summary, when a person maintains a good attitude, recognizes that anyone can be their teacher, benefits from supportive friendships, and cultivates the ability to learn anytime—transcending spatial constraints—they can deeply engage in learning, elevate their moral level, and gradually begin to enjoy learning.

IV. The State of Immersive Learning

When a person progresses from having the motivation to learn to deep engagement, they gradually reach the point of enjoying learning. Confucius said: “Is it not pleasant to learn with a constant perseverance and application?”²⁰ This captures Confucius’ core belief that joy in learning comes from applying knowledge to life. To him, studying (學) and practicing (習) were inseparable. He stated plainly: “If you do not learn *the Odes*, you will not be fit to converse with.” and “If you do not learn the rules of Propriety, your character cannot be established.”²¹ Knowledge must be genuinely applied to solve real-life problems. When learning enables someone to address life’s challenges, the positive feedback brings happiness and a sense of accomplishment.

Beyond practical application, learning must also elevate moral and wisdom growth while fulfilling spiritual needs. Confucius praised his finest student, Yan Hui((521 BCE–481 BCE)): “There was Yan Hui; He loved to learn. He did not transfer his anger; he did not repeat a fault.”²² Yan Hui’s example shows that

²⁰ 「學而時習之，不亦說乎？」 1.1

²¹ Original text: 『不學詩，無以言。』『不學禮，無以立。』 16.13

²² Original text: 「有顏回者好學，不遷怒，不貳過。」 6.3

moral and wisdom refinement embodies true dedication to learning. As one's wisdom improves, they become happier, fueling a virtuous cycle of self-improvement. Confucius observed: "They who know the truth are not equal to those who love it, and they who love it are not equal to those who delight in it."²³

The motivation born from learning → growth → achievement → further learning far surpasses forced study, yielding profoundly greater results.

The clearest sign of enjoying learning is an unquenchable thirst for knowledge (or truth). Confucius said: "Learn as if you could not reach your object, and were always fearing also lest you should lose it."²⁴ Such a person possesses intense desire, never abandoning the pursuit of truth or the effort to attain sagehood. Confucius described himself: "He is simply a man, who in his eager pursuit of knowledge forgets his food, who in the joy of its attainment forgets his sorrows, and who does not perceive that old age is coming on?"²⁵ Which means that he found profound joy in learning and self-cultivation. He even declared: "If a man in the morning hear the right way, he may die in the evening without regret."²⁶ This reveals he valued learning and growth above life itself—and unquestionably experienced joy beyond ordinary measure. This is the true state of enjoying learning.

V. Conclusion

²³ Original text: 「知之者不如好之者，好之者不如樂之者。」 6.20

²⁴ Original text: 「學如不及，猶恐失之。」 8.17

²⁵ Original text: 「發憤忘食，樂以忘憂，不知老之將至云爾。」 7.19

²⁶ Original text: 「朝聞道，夕死可矣。」 4.8

To reach the state of “enjoying learning”, one must follow several steps:

Cultivate lofty life ideals and understanding the importance of learning

Maintain a positive attitude

Recognize that anyone can be one’s teacher

Build supportive friendships

Develop the ability to learn anytime, anywhere

On this foundation, one must also apply learned knowledge to daily life, continuously elevating morality and wisdom. Through such positive reinforcement, the goal of enjoying learning is achieved. In closing, as expressed by the Venerable Master Chin Kung:

“The greatest happiness in life is to read what you enjoy and do what you love.”²⁷ May we all enjoy learning while living a fulfilling life. That is all for my presentation today. Any feedback and suggestions will be appreciated. Thank you for your listening.

²⁷ 這一生讀自己喜歡讀的書，幹自己喜歡幹的事，這就是人生最大的幸福。 <https://ft.amtb.tw/dv.php?sn=02-037-0134&lang=zh_TW> [accessed 3 August 2025].