

Confucius
Excerpts from the *Analects*

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Grades 11 – 12
Philosophy
Time Requirement: four 40-minute class periods

Context

This lesson plan will be featured in a semester-long philosophy course offered by the history department at Columbus School for Girls (CSG) in Columbus, Ohio. Founded in 1898, CSG is an independent, all-girls' school offering a rigorous college-preparatory education. More than 650 girls, from preschool through Form XII, attend the school. The philosophy course is open to juniors and seniors. Class size averages ten to eighteen students, and the class meets each day for 40 minutes.

The philosophy course provides an overview of the history of philosophy and emphasizes major Western philosophers, including Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Saint Thomas Aquinas, Niccolo Macchiavelli, Voltaire, Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, and Jean-Paul Sartre. This lesson plan, designed to cover four 40-minute class periods, will be incorporated into a unit on "Chinese Philosophical Traditions," which introduces students to the ideas of Confucius, Mencius, Hsun Tzu (Xunzi), and Mo Tzu.

Summary

The *Analects*, known as the *Lunyu* in China, is a collection of the teachings and conversations of Confucius, the most well-known and most influential Chinese philosopher. Like Socrates, Confucius did not write down his thoughts. Rather, his students or disciples recorded his sayings and activities after his death (Xu). The book consists of twenty chapters and presents Confucius's views on "man's proper relationship to himself, his community, the state and the natural world" (Martin).

The Big Picture

Confucius (a transliteration of K'ung Fu-tze) lived from approximately 551 to 479 BCE. He was born in the province of Lu to a family that became impoverished. Although Confucius was educated, he never held a high government post. Instead, he spent much of his life traveling from one feudal state to another, spreading his ideas and gathering followers. Before his death, he worked on editing and providing commentary for *The Book of Songs*, *The Book of Documents*, and other ancient classics (Riegel).

Confucian thought greatly influenced Chinese society, education, and government. The fundamental Confucian principles of *ren* ("humanness"), *yi* ("righteousness"), *li* ("ritual" or "institutions"), *zhi* ("wisdom"), *xin* ("trust"), and *xiao* ("filial piety") formed the basis of moral conduct and individual responsibility for the cultivated individual (Xu). Living in a time when the feudal system was disintegrating, Confucius advocated a meritocratic government, in which ability and talent would supersede blood ties and kinship as the basis for advancement (Chow). Beginning in the twelfth century, the *Analects* served as one of four classical texts used as the basic curriculum for the rigorous civil service examination in China, Vietnam, and Korea (Shirokauer 12). Confucian doctrine stressed that good government could only be achieved by good officials. The emphasis on Confucianism in Chinese government and society would continue well into the twentieth century, when it fell into disfavor during Mao's Cultural Revolution (Shirokauer 343).

Discussion Questions and Answers

His Love of Learning / Confucius as a Teacher

1. What sources does Confucius value most when it comes to learning and knowledge? In other words, from which people and from what experiences do people learn most and best? Which do you find most valuable?
 - a. Life experiences: Quotation #16 implies that although young people may have the desire to learn, true knowledge—“the will of Heaven”—comes only after decades of living. By age thirty, one can become “firmly established,” perhaps in knowledge gained from books and research, or skills refined by practice and habit. By age forty, one will have mastered this content, beset no longer by “doubts.” By age fifty, one begins to see “the will of Heaven,” or that which is “right,” but one is not yet ready to surrender to its dictates. Ten more years are required to open more fully to it. Only after having lived a lifetime (age 70) does one’s “heart’s desire” merge with a universal, the “will of Heaven.”
 - b. Art: Quotation #18 shows that intense aesthetic experiences can help an individual transcend the mundaneness of daily life.
 - c. All people: Confucianism emphasizes the relational (Xu). Among three people, one can always find a teacher: someone whose virtues can be emulated and someone whose mistakes and shortcomings can serve as a warning to others.
 - d. Active engagement: Quotation #15 indicates that withdrawal from the world and isolation are useless: “Sometimes I have gone a whole day without food and a whole night without sleep, giving myself to thought. It was no use. It is better to learn.” Unlike Buddhism, which stresses that enlightenment can be achieved through isolated meditation, Confucianism advocates active engagement with the world.

2. Discuss what Confucius meant when he said, “Those who know the truth are not up to those who love it; those who love the truth are not up to those who delight in it.” Quotation #20 reinforces the idea of active engagement. Confucius indicates that there are three levels of engagement when it comes to knowledge or truth: “Those who know the truth are not up to those who *love* it; those who love the truth are not up to those who *delight* in it [my emphases].” From one verb to the next—“know” to “love” to “delight”—there is a stronger emphasis on active engagement, on seeking truth, on partaking in it. Those who delight in something lose themselves in it, at once mentally focused, productive, creative, and existing “outside of time.”

3. In two of the sayings, #16 and #24, Confucius explicitly refers to a person’s age as an important guidepost in one’s quest for knowledge. Describe the relationship between age and learning in these two quotations. Quotation #16 implies that although young people may have the desire to learn, true knowledge—“the will of Heaven”—comes only after going through decades of life experiences. (See answer to #1 above.) Quotation #24, however, reminds

us that at no age should we waste time. Confucius says that “if a man has reached forty or fifty and nothing has been heard of him, then [. . .] he is not worthy of respect.” Youth should be spent actively seeking truth through knowledge and skills, even though it is not possible yet to attain truth fully. Although this statement hints at material gain or advancement in status, when paired with quotation #16, it seems clear that Confucius views youth as an important stage, an opportunity not to be squandered, in an individual’s quest for truth.

4. Explain what you think Confucius meant by “[l]earning without thinking is labor lost; thinking without learning is perilous.”
 - a. The first part is easier to grasp, I think. “Learning” likely means merely memorizing information or becoming proficient in a skill, without understanding how the information or the skill is part of a larger picture, connected to other things in myriad ways. “Learning,” in this sense, is knowledge that allows an individual just to get by. It lacks the sense of active engagement with the world that “thinking” implies. It is acquiring knowledge without truly making sense of it or use of it.
 - b. In the second part, the meaning of “learning” is subtly different. The word “thinking” retains its sense of active engagement, as when a person makes a decision that has ramifications for her or his community. “Learning,” however, now takes on a much broader connotation than mere memorization or proficiency. “Learning” implies that an individual has seen much, observed much in the world (again, the emphasis on life experiences), and can bring these observations to bear on her or his thinking and decisions. To fail to do so is “perilous.”

5. Explain what you think Confucius meant by “It is man that can make the Way great, not the Way that can make the man great.”

It’s easier to begin with the second half. By stating that it is “not the Way that can make the man great,” Confucius seems to indicate once again that there is nothing rote about leading a good life. Achieving truth is not formulaic: do this, and you will automatically get to and stay on the right path. Rather, when people follow “the Way”—creating and remaking it as they go along—a kind of collective synergy takes place: “It is man that can make the Way great.” “The Way” is essentially a human activity that does not and cannot exist separately from humanity. It *is* humanity, perhaps at its best and most perfect form.

Humanity (jen)

6. Referring to at least three quotations, discuss what Confucius’s concept of “the right way” entails.

Answers will vary. I will be examining quotations #48, #49, and #53 for this particular response.

 - a. Quotation #48 states that “[o]nly the humane man can love men and can hate men.” With this statement, Confucius acknowledges the full breadth of human emotion—from love to hate—as an undeniable part of what it means to

- be human. To deny that people are capable of hatred is to begin with a dishonest, incomplete picture of the human experience. One cannot seek “the right way” without knowing right from wrong, love from hate. Remember that Confucius said that “[w]hen walking in a party of three, I always have teachers. I can select the good qualities of the one for imitation, and the bad ones of the other and correct them in myself.” Knowing what to love and what to hate helps one to choose the right path to “the right way.”
- b. Quotation #49 would perhaps strike someone raised in Christian tradition as being harsh. After all, Jesus taught that when struck, one should turn the other cheek. However, when Confucius says that one should “[r]equite injury with justice, and kindness with kindness,” he is reaffirming the principle underlying quotation #48. That is, we must not blind ourselves to the ugly parts of the world. Hate exists. People do terrible things. When we acknowledge that there is and always will be evil in the world, we can begin to deal with it as Confucius felt best: respond by seeking justice. What justice entails, Confucius does not elaborate on. However, we should keep in mind that Confucius lived during a time of great social turmoil, when the feudal system was disintegrating. There were numerous rebellions, plots to usurp the ruling orders, and there was a “total crisis of authority” (Chow). Hence, Confucius’s unwillingness to “requite injury with kindness” becomes understandable.
- c. In quotation #29, Confucius equates “transgressing the right way” with “depart[ing] from humanity.” Although it is human to desire riches and honors, “if they can be obtained only by transgressing the right way, they must not be held.” Although it is human to shun poverty and lowliness, “if they can be avoided only by transgressing the right way, they must not be evaded.” Confucius clearly indicates that there is a line that should not be crossed when pursuing those understandably human desires. Once a person crosses that line, he or she can no longer claim humanity (*jen*): “If a gentleman departs from humanity, how can he bear the name?” Like Socrates, Confucius deems that corruption of the soul is the most grievous damage one can suffer.

Activities

This lesson plan has three parts, covering four 40-minute class periods: (1) a pre-reading activity which gets students to think about, from their own perspectives, the major issues addressed by Confucius, (2) a two-day discussion activity that asks students first to consider the range of Confucius’s teachings, then to select the single quotation which they find most compelling and useful *as a class* (i.e., as representatives of their generation), and (3) a closing, reflective writing activity in which students will put one of Confucius’s principles into action, that of learning as relational (one can learn something from anyone, as indicated in quotation #14). Activity #2 requires blank poster-sized paper and dark markers.

Day 1 / Pre-Reading Activity:Goal

This pre-reading activity asks students to think about the major issues addressed by Confucius: the goals and the scope of education, the best ways to teach, and the personal virtues one should cultivate. The goal of the activity is to get students to form and record their own ideas about education, particularly moral education, so that they can compare their thoughts and beliefs to those of Confucius.

Agenda

- (15 min.) As students enter the classroom, distribute the pre-reading activity handout with the scenario and questions listed below (**Appendix A**). Allow up to 15 minutes for students to jot down their answers.
- (15 min.) Next, ask students to share their responses (15 minutes). You can call on your more reticent students because they will have something written down. Students should note what they believe to be the best responses.
- (10 min.) Provide background information on Confucius and the historical period. Refer to the “Summary” and “The Big Picture Sections.” Assign Confucius reading for the following day. Students need to pick out the one quotation that they find most compelling and useful.

Handout (Appendix A)

You are interviewing for the position of Director of the Upper School at Columbus School for Girls. During the interview, the Head of School will ask you the following questions about your educational philosophy. How will you respond? It’s OK to use bullet points, but be as specific as possible.

1. What specifically do you think schools should teach teenagers? (You may list specific subjects, but try to go beyond just listing English, history, math, etc. Are there specific skills that students need to learn? What should teenagers leave high school knowing?)
2. What is the purpose of education? Or put in another way, why is it important to educate young people?
3. What are the five most important virtues that a person should have? Should schools be in the business of expecting and promoting these virtues? Why or why not?

Days 2 and 3 / Discussion Activity:Goal

This discussion activity will result in full-class participation as each student will be asked to identify the quotation he or she found most compelling and explain its appeal. Students need not actually like the quotation. They may choose one that they find particularly puzzling or one with which they disagree. The goal is to see which sayings prove to be most provocative for the students.

Agenda

Day 2: (8 min.) Students will come to class having already picked the quotation they find to be most compelling. On 3 x 5 index cards or slips of paper, have students write their name and the quotation number. Collect the index cards, sort them, then have students move to sit with others who chose the same quotation. Put together in one group those who were the only ones to pick a particular quotation.

(12 min.) Each group will come up with a list of bullet points explaining their reasons for choosing a particular quotation. For each group, appoint one secretary who will write down the bullet points. For each group, appoint a second secretary to write out the quotation on a sheet of poster board. Members of the mixed-quotation group should each give their reasons for choosing their particular quotation. Encourage students to connect to the responses they gave on the pre-reading activity.

(20 min.) Have students share their reasons for choosing a particular quotation. Guide the discussion, and as appropriate, extend their thinking by referring to the questions in the section “Discussion Questions and Answers.”

Day 3: (30 min.) Continue with the full-class discussion activity until each group’s quotation has been addressed.

(10 min.) End with a class vote on the top three most compelling teachings by Confucius. Display the posters of the top three quotations.

Day 4 / Closing Writing Activity:

Students will choose on a central teaching figure in their lives—a parent, grandparent, teacher, older friend, neighbor, etc.—and write out a list of analects that reflects the lessons that person passed on. Students can consider the following questions when formulating their analects: What did this person consider to be most important in life? What sorts of learning experiences are most valuable? How does a person live a useful and worthy life?

Connections to Other Literary Works

Students can compare and connect Confucius’s views on...

- the ideal form and role of government to Plato’s “The Freedom of Democracy” and Machiavelli’s *The Prince*;
- education to Aristotle’s “On Education”;
- the unitary principle of humanity (*jen*) to Aristotle’s “Virtue and Moderation: The Doctrine of the Mean” and Epicurus’s “Golden Maxims.”

Resources

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Shirokauer, Conrad, and Donald N. Clark. *Modern East Asia: A Brief History*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2004.

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