**Learning Styles – East Meets West**

John is a lifelong educator and a certified teacher from the United States with over 30 years of teaching experience in the U.S.A., South Korea, China and now Taiwan. He has taught elementary, middle school, and high school students in the areas of science, social studies, reading, grammar and writing. John has served as the chairman of the Sycamore School District's curriculum committee in the state of Illinois as well as worked on the writing of the curriculum standards in the states of Illinois and South Carolina. John has also served the community of Sycamore, Illinois as an appointed Economic Development Commission member for 18 years and as an elected park district commissioner of 5 years. While in China, John has done volunteer work for a poor rural school and has also participated in the Red Cross in Qingdao, China. Presently John is teaching in the New Taipei City Wonderland Program.

I have been fortunate to have experienced the teaching of students in the United States, South Korea, China, and Taiwan. The positive experiences continue. I’m often asked of my opinion of the differences of the education systems in each of the countries. There always seems to be great anticipation that my answer will reflect positively of the country of the person asking. While there are problems in all of the countries with their systems, I will speak generally about the positives.

I have listed and will comment of the countries educational systems in the order of my experiences. Firstly, in the United States, the students are given many opportunities to explore and ask questions. This develops the student’s skills to think critically and logically while also giving them the skills to learn through collaboration with others. This style of education enables the students to analysis, conceptualize, and synthesis their prior knowledge to create new knowledge. It is the highest order of learning; problem solving, metacognitive knowledge, creativity and originality.

Teaching in Korea was a shock at first. It was all about the students’ test scores. Nothing else seemed to matter. The main educational system did not seem as important as the after school academies. Korean parents spend much money for their children to attend these academies from as early as five years old. The goal is simple, it is to produce the best TOEIC and or TOEFL scores. Students would attend these academies for up to four and five hours after school. The Korean government occasionally would enforce rules of the academies, one of which made them close at 10 p.m. However, I know of some academies that would stay open until midnight.

While teaching in China, I worked mostly with Korean students. However I have had many discussions with colleagues on the Chinese students. It seems that there are not a lot of differences with the Korean and Chinese students when it comes to attaining test scores as the most important part of their educational desires. There does seem to be a difference, however in the amount of money spent to accomplish this task. Korea parents spend more money on their children’s education however that gap is closing fast. There is now a more competition to attract the best teachers in China. There are more and more western high schools / programs popping up within the regular Chinese public schools. These are separate western programs managed by western administrators for the Chinese students wishing to go to western universities. These programs are only for the wealthy Chinese.

With my limited time in Taiwan, I see a serious commitment to the education of their children’s with the New Taipei City’s Wonderland Program. This program gives the students a blend of both intensive and creative experiences. It offers a very unique way to get students interested in learning English. The program is a two and a half day intensive program that delivers intensive English in an action camp like setting with the use of only certified western teachers. While it is impossible to teach English in two and a half days, this program gives students a unique way to experience English. It motivates students to learn English. It encourages them to seek future opportunities to learn English. This program gives a good blend of eastern and western education philosophies with an emphasis on the western part.

For a general comparison of eastern and western educational styles, think of these styles of education on a continuum line. On the extreme left would be the students that learn by using his or her experiences in thinking, doing, and collaborating with other; on the extreme right would be the students that learn by only memory in that their goal is only to memorize vocabulary, formulas and facts in order to get a perfect score on the SAT or TOEFL tests. I would guess that all cultures are represented on all parts of this continuum line. However Asian students are mostly bunched on the right and western students are mostly bunched on the left.

I am aware that there are great efforts by both Asian and western educators to move toward the middle of this continuum. I have visited Korean universities and discussed educational strategies with the admission’s directors on their efforts to presenting more classes in English. The point that stuck out in our conversations was that admission’s staffs are now looking for students with a more diverse life experience. The shift is already taking place where they are no longer putting all of their emphasis of admissions to their universities on the SAT or TOEFL scores. However there are growing pains in this transition.

Recently in Taiwan, I met a very bright Taiwanese young man in his late twenties. His English is very good. I later found out that his father was Canadian and that the later part of his education was in Canada. I was very interested in his viewpoint on his educational experiences. He said that his elementary education in Taiwan was very good. He said that the strict memorization of facts and formulas gave him a solid base for his secondary education in Canada. He also noted that his high school education in Canada allowed him to be a more creative thinker that added to his success. While his story is an example of using both ends of the continuum, I believe that a more of a blending or moving to the middle throughout one’s educational experience is better.

Lastly, there are success stories in both educational styles. In any educational system east or west, it takes a team approach. Parents should be involved. They must communicate with both their children and their children’s teachers in positive meaningful ways (TEAM – together everyone achieves more).