Rebuilding the Concept of Teacher: Error-Sharing Teachers

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Integrating the Confucian perspective on error with the modern scientific "trial-and-error" approach, this study proposes the concept of "Error-sharing Teachers". This framework encourages teachers to systematically identify domain-specific misconceptions and intentionally share their own pedagogical trial-and-error experiences, thereby transforming private failures into dynamic curricular resources. Consequently, a teacher's professional authority no longer rests on infallibility, but on an expert understanding of the epistemic pathways of error and the demonstrated ability to guide learners through error-tolerant inquiry. The study redefines the pedagogical relationship, presenting education as a guided, collaborative trial-and-error process built on mutual empowerment, thereby facilitating a meaningful epistemic integration of traditional cultural insights with contemporary educational paradigms.

Keywords: Confucian, trial and error, sharing errors teacher, Chinese pedagogy

Introduction

The practice in which teachers occasionally share justifiable errors with students during instruction has existed since ancient times. Yet, it has never fundamentally shaken the institutionalized teacher identity centered on knowledge authority and moral exemplar, and consequently has never evolved into a widely accepted, systematic pedagogical principle (Zhou et al., 2020). In contexts deeply influenced by Confucian tradition or modern statist perspectives on education, such as China and many others, this practice encounters not only cultural and conceptual resistance but also structural obstacles at the level of institutional design (Xiao, 2013). At its root, this dilemma stems from the profound tension between the political function intrinsic to institutionalized education—to transmit certain knowledge and uphold social norms (Dewey, 1916)—and a pedagogy that deliberately presents cognitive uncertainty.

Looking back historically, even a teaching method like the disputation practiced in medieval universities was essentially aimed at advancing scholarship through open questioning and refutation (which contained the possibility of revealing errors) (Rashdall, 1895). Similarly, certain graduate training models or laboratory cultures emphasize collaborative trial-and-error exploration between mentors and students in unknown domains (Zhou et al., 2024). However, such models have largely remained confined to the pinnacle of higher education or to non-mainstream educational forms, never expanding to become an institutionalized, universal dominant model at the undergraduate and basic education stages. Furthermore, even in the writings of a thinker like Rousseau, who

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advocated for natural education, the image of the perfect tutor constructed in Émile was a strategic design serving specific educational goals (Rousseau, 1762/1979). It did not systematically integrate into its educational theoretical framework the spirit of self-revelation contained in Confessions—namely, the concept of the teacher proactively demonstrating his/her own errors to students (Rousseau, 1782/1953).

Since the disestablishment of church and state, the spirit of religious confession has gradually receded from the realm of public political practice (Zhou, 2019), and pedagogy has likewise failed to incorporate this ethos of confession into educational practice in a timely manner. In this context, teachers' reluctance to share their own errors is essentially a defensive response to the ontological dilemma of teacher identity: once the teacher is constructed as the authoritative or complete holder of knowledge (Freire, 1972), any admission of error may undermine the legitimacy of their existence. Only by redefining the teacher as a fallible participant within an epistemic community can the sharing of errors become a sustainable pedagogical practice. This paper attempts to propose the concept of the "Error-sharing Teacher".

Literature Review

Western mainstream theorizations of the teacher role traverse intersecting planes of philosophy, sociology, and education, yet none has accorded systematic status to the educator as a candid co-constructor of fallible knowledge. In classical philosophy, Socrates—through his practice of maieutics—disclosed the teacher as a guide to truth, contending that the educator's role is not to instill knowledge but, like a midwife, to elicit self-discovery through interrogation (Burnyeat, 1990). Aristotle (1998), in turn, maintained that the teacher should employ phronesis to direct students toward activities that harmonize soul and virtue. In early-modern pedagogy, Comenius's The Great Didactic insists that "the teacher should be a man of exemplary character, fitted to exercise the most perfect control over his pupils by the very force of his uprightness and self-control" (Comenius, 1896, p. 213), whereas Rousseau's programme of "negative education" demands that the tutor shield the child from social prejudice (Rousseau, 1979, p. 93). Modern educational philosophy further ramifies: Dewey (1916) positions the teacher as a mediator of "shared social experience," cultivating the critical intellect and cooperative dispositions requisite for democratic life; Freire (1972) denounces the "banking model" of oppression and summons educators to elicit critical consciousness through dialogic encounter rather than to "deposit" knowledge; Foucault (1975), conversely, unmasks the teacher as an agent of disciplinary power whose gaze normalizes and regulates. From a sociological vantage-point, Bourdieu and Passeron (1970) argue that teachers, by imposing a cultural arbitrary, reproduce social inequality, whereas Bernstein (1990) foregrounds their function as codifiers of pedagogic discourse; in psychology, Vygotsky (1978) casts the teacher as a provider of scaffolding within the "Zone of Proximal Development," and Bruner (1996) stresses the facilitation of meaning negotiation through social interaction.

Chinese scholars' definitions of the teacher's role have evolved incrementally with historical development. In the pre-Qin period, Confucius (551–479 BCE) states in The Analects: "If a man keeps cherishing his old knowledge, so as continually to be acquiring new, he may be a teacher of others" (Watson, 2007, p. 21), casting the teacher as an innovator of knowledge. Mencius (372–289 BCE) contends that the teacher should embody the haoran zhi qi and serve as a moral exemplar (Lau, 1970/2004). From the Han to the Sui-Tang period, Dong Zhongshu (179–104 BCE) insists that the teacher illuminate human relationships and rectify the constant norms (Su, 1992, p. 286), while Han Yu (768–824 CE) formulates the classic definition: "A teacher is one who transmits the Way, imparts professional knowledge, and resolves perplexity" (Ma, 1958, p. 72). During the Song–Ming

Neo-Confucian period, Zhu Xi (1130–1200) maintains that the teacher must lead pupils to "investigate things and extend knowledge" so as to cultivate their moral nature (Zhu, 1983, p. 6). Wang Yangming (1472–1529) argues that the educator should assist learners to "extend innate knowledge," thereby unlocking their intrinsic moral potential (Wu, 1992). In the contemporary era, Gu Mingyuan defines the teacher as the leading actor in educational activity (Gu, 1998, p. 742), while Ye Lan insists that the teacher must be both a life-long learner and a practitioner of educational reform (Ye, 2001, p. 156).

When evaluated through the lens of the "Error-sharing Teacher," Western theories remain pluralistic yet anchored to an epistemic-authority premise: from Socrates to critical pedagogy, error is predominantly framed as a cognitive deviation to be corrected. In the Chinese tradition, the Confucian injunctions of "reverence for the teacher and the Way" and "transmitting the Way and imparting knowledge" (Gao, 1986; Gu, 1998) have forged an image of the teacher as infallible. Functionally, the teacher has been coupled to order-maintenance and instrumental mandates, rendering any personal error a potential threat to authority. While contemporary theories reposition the teacher as a reflective practitioner (Ye, 2001) or qualitative inquirer (Chen, 2020), they still omit the deliberate exposure of the educator's own cognitive limitations. A shared cult of correctness, reinforced by institutional accountability systems in both cultural contexts, has systematically suppressed the theorization of "error-sharing" as a legitimate educational resource. This underscores the imperative to reconstruct the teacher's role with greater ethical elasticity and epistemic openness.

Reconceptualizing the Teacher From the Perspective of Error-Sharing

Viewed against this genealogy of the teacher concept, scholars have characteristically assigned the profession an elevated social status and endowed it with lofty moral missions. Yet, on the one hand, Western educators from the Greeks onward have seldom considered the pedagogical value of the teacher's own errors for students, let alone redefined the role from the vantage point of error; this holds true as much for the proponents of "teacher-centred theory" such as Herbart (1806) as for the champions of "student-centred theory" such as Dewey (2016). On the other hand, within the Chinese tradition, apart from Confucius' willingness to share errors with his disciples (Zhou, 2020), the image of the teacher remains overwhelmingly unblemished. Even the maxim "The gentleman's errors are like eclipses of the sun or moon. His errors can be seen by all, and when he corrects them, all look up in admiration." (Watson, 2007, p. 136) is invoked to praise rectification rather than to normalise the exposure of error. Consequently, few teachers have actively allowed students to learn from their own errors, let alone institutionalized such learning systematically. What, then, accounts for this long-standing omission?

While early behaviorist Edward L. Thorndike (1898) elucidated the trial-and-error learning process in animals, subsequent systematic Western learning theories addressing higher human cognition—including Robert M. Gagné's (1970) cumulative learning theory and Carl R. Rogers' (1961) humanist approach—have not placed "learning from errors" at the core of their frameworks, despite sporadic attention to errors in other educational traditions. Paradoxically, although Confucius, as a central figure of Confucian thought (Zhou, 2020), exhibited a profound, systematic concern for the pedagogical value of errors as both diagnostic tools and moral catalysts, this distinctive dimension has long received limited focused attention in mainstream educational scholarship. Conversely, within the history of modern science, the trial-and-error method has long been recognized as essential for uncovering nature's mysteries, with scholars across both scientific and humanistic disciplines underscoring the vital role of learning through errors. Thus, a fundamental pedagogical principle emerges: both teachers and students must engage in learning from errors. What distinguishes a teacher in part is that they have typically

encountered and, crucially, constructed a structured understanding from these errors before their students do. The discussion below clarifies the crucial importance of learning from errors by examining the Confucian perspective on learning alongside the foundational methods of modern science. In doing so, it establishes the need to reconceptualize the teacher from the standpoint of fallibility.

Problem-Centred Learning and the Necessity of Error in Confucian Thought

Confucius was the first to articulate that the teacher is also a learner: "When I walk with two others, I'm bound to find my teacher there." (Watson, 2007, p. 50). He disliked being called a sage: "The title of sage or humane man—how could I dare lay claim to such?" (Watson, 2007, p. 52) and accepted only the description of being 'fond of learning': "To be silent and understand, to learn without tiring, never to weary of teaching others— this much I can do." (Watson, 2007, p. 48). Thus, for Confucius, being 'fond of learning' was a primary trait as a teacher that distinguished him from others. How, then, did Confucius—who noted, "When I was young, I was in humble circumstances and hence became capable in many menial undertakings." (Watson, 2007, p. 61)— actually learn? The Ba Yi chapter records: "When the Master entered the Grand Temple, he asked questions about everything." (Watson, 2007, p. 28). For Confucius, learning began with questioning; to be "fond of learning" was synonymous with being "fond of asking," and he was willing to pose questions to anyone, regardless of their status. His disposition is especially revealing: "Clear-sighted and a lover of learning, he was not ashamed to ask questions of his inferiors" (Watson, 2007, p. 38), an act that required moral courage. Questioning constituted the essential path to learning; for one genuinely devoted to learning, this manifested as inquiring into everything and persistently asking "why".

We know that Confucius acknowledged, "I was not born understanding anything" (Watson, 2007, p. 50) and was equally unwilling to lay claim to knowing what one does not, in fact, know. Instead, he rigidly observed the principle: "When you know, to know you know. When you don't know, to know you don't know. That's what knowing is." (Watson, 2007, p. 22). What predicaments, then, confronted a teacher so devoted to learning, one who adhered lifelong to the principles outlined above? Confucius himself was acutely aware of them. "A lover of antiquity, I have diligently worked to acquire understanding." (Watson, 2007, p. 50): since every piece of ancient knowledge had to be pursued through laborious effort, error was a constant companion throughout his life. He offered a sober estimate of his own fallibility: "Give me a few more years—if I have fifty years to study, then perhaps I, too, can avoid any great errors." (Watson, 2007, p. 50). Thus, even with additional years devoted to mastering the Changes (Yi Jing), the most he could hope for was to reduce major errors; he dared not claim that all errors might be avoided.

Since error is an inescapable companion of learning—especially for one devoted to it—Confucius does not seek to evade it, but rather confronts it directly: "if you make mistakes, don't be afraid to correct them" (Watson, 2007, p. 17); "what is important is that they bring about a change in you" (Watson, 2007, p. 63). Reform is what makes error valuable. Appearing as frequently as "ask about everything," the admonition "Put prime value on loyalty and trustworthiness, have no friends who are not your equal, and, if you make mistakes, don't be afraid to correct them." is recorded twice—once in Xue Er and again in Zi Han (Watson, 2007, p. 17). It is this act of correction that renders error valuable.

The admonition to "Put prime value on loyalty and trustworthiness, do not befriend those who lack parity with you in moral commitment and shared aspiration for cultivation, and, if you make mistakes, don't be afraid to correct them" appears as frequently as the instruction to "ask about everything"—and is recorded in both the

Xue Er and Zi Han chapters (Watson, 2007, p. 17). Qian Mu explains: "The Sage tailored his teaching to the readiness of his listeners; on occasion he would repeat a single point. His disciples, revering their master's words, copied it down again and preserved it" (Qian, 2002, p. 191). The recurrence of this theme underscores that error is a normal condition of learning; precisely because it is recurrent, Confucius tailored his teaching to the learner's readiness. Deeply impressed, his disciples preserved the maxim as an aphorism, thereby emphasizing its significance. Confucius further elaborates: "To make a mistake and not correct it is to make a mistake indeed" (Watson, 2007, p. 109). Thus, error is understood dynamically: it truly becomes error only when left uncorrected.

Many of the Confucian maxims originate directly from re-interpreting personal error—what we now term "learning from errors." For example, the Master said: "Once I went all day without eating and all night without sleeping in order to think. It was no use—better to study." (Watson, 2007, p. 110). Having tested the method, Confucius realized that isolated reflection—while neglecting the book-based knowledge that constitutes indirect experience—proves inadequate; conversely, learning without reflection is equally flawed (Zhou, 2020). He eventually summarized the insight in the aphorism: "Learning without thought is pointless. Thought without learning is dangerous." (Watson, 2007, p. 21). Skillful in detecting his own errors through self-examination, he advocated "having errors and reforming them," aiming at "fewer errors"—a core objective of Confucian self-cultivation. Likewise, in tailoring instruction to individual differences, Confucius first observed that "People's errors vary with the category they belong to. Look at the errors, and you know the degree of humaneness." (Watson, 2007, p. 33); that is, he identified the kinds of errors pupils habitually committed before offering differentiated guidance. This analysis reveals that for Confucius, learning is intrinsically problem-centered. Error, as an inherent feature of the learning process, thereby renders learning itself a process of continual error correction. Moreover, the principle of individualized instruction acquires a fresh and practical dimension when viewed through the lens of error.

Trial-and-Error as a Fundamental Scientific Approach

In On Liberty, John Stuart Mill (1859/2004) articulated how human progress is achieved through learning from errors, arguing that humanity "exchanges error for truth" and that from the "clash between truth and error" emerges a clearer, more vivid perception of truth. Karl Popper (1963), as the British philosopher of science, systematically expounds the relationship between the growth of knowledge and the method of trial and error. He proposes a simplified problem-solving schema to illustrate the development of knowledge: $P_1 \rightarrow TT \rightarrow EE \rightarrow P_2$, where P_1 represents a shared problem-situation; TT, a tentative and imaginative solution; EE, error-elimination; and P_2, the resulting problem-situation. Popper further suggests that animals and even plants solve problems through trial and error. Hayek (1960) closely links human progress to errors, arguing that humanity can neither predict nor deliberately shape its future. Progress, in his view, consists in discovering past errors. American physicist John Wheeler (1994) contends that trial and error should be regarded as the fundamental method, calling it "the first universal concept". He advocates the belief that the most effective way to make progress is to make errors rapidly and learn from them. Nobel laureate Hideki Yukawa (1973) observes that looking back on the history of theoretical physics, we might almost call it a history of errors.

In sum, a broad consensus exists among philosophers of science, physicists, and humanistic thinkers that the trial-and-error method constitutes a fundamental approach to human cognition and learning. It is crucial to note that in traditional Chinese discourse, "error" was often closely tied to moral failing. In scientific inquiry,

however, the right of scientists to propose erroneous hypotheses must be respected, for it is through such errors that humanity discovers new laws. Moreover, heuristically fruitful errors that arise in the course of research are frequently regarded as significant achievements—demonstrating that scientific error is not equivalent to moral transgression. Thus, while the Confucian view of learning reveals error as a fundamental characteristic of the learning process—with individualized instruction essentially meaning "teaching based on observed errors"—the history of science further demonstrates that errors are not only inevitable but foundational for achieving correctness. In student learning, frequent errors necessitate teacher encouragement to confront and learn from them. While students currently learn from both personal and peer errors, systematic learning from teacher own errors remains rare; likewise, teachers themselves develop expertise through learning from errors, both during their own education and throughout their teaching practice.

How, then, can teachers achieve continuous growth? How can students systematically learn from their teachers' own errors? The key lies in how teachers conceptualize their role, which fundamentally shapes their instructional practices and interactions with students. This leads to a crucial conceptual issue: the definition of "teacher" itself. This paper therefore proposes a reconceptualization from the perspective of error—the "Error-sharing Teacher"—defined as a reflective practitioner who, having encountered most plausible errors in a domain before their students and through constant self-examination, appropriately shares his/her own reasonable errors with them to foster their intellectual and ethical development.

Explanatory Notes on the New Concept of the "Error-Sharing Teacher"

The Error-Sharing Teacher: An Expert Who Commands Nearly All Typical Errors in a Discipline

While teachers are commonly regarded as repositories of knowledge, Liang Shuming (2005, p. 52) observes that "the most learned person is the one who best understands the sources of errors." This view finds a striking parallel in the reflections of physicist John A. Wheeler (1994), who suggests that an expert is one who makes errors as quickly as possible and thereby comes to master all possible errors in a field. Thus, rather than embodying infallible knowledge, a teacher serves above all as an expert integrator of and guide through errors. This role unfolds in several dimensions. First, teachers develop through a process of continual error-making and critical reflection, building a deep understanding of errors; their professional growth can thus be understood as the accumulation of a structured repertoire of errors. Second, a competent teacher must systematically study the history of their field to fully comprehend the errors of predecessors. As physicist Hideki Yukawa (1973) notes, "the history of theoretical physics might almost be called a history of errors"—a perspective that is, in essence, applicable to all empirical disciplines. Such historical knowledge enables teachers to situate both student errors and their own within a broader developmental trajectory, even identifying parallels with the errors of specific historical figures. Third, teachers inevitably make errors in the course of lesson preparation, classroom instruction, and professional dialogue; this necessitates strong reflective competence to systematically document, analyze, and organize these experiences into purposeful pedagogical resources.

Error-Sharing Teacher: An Educator Who Strategically Discloses Reasonable Personal Errors to Students

Whether teachers proactively share reasonable errors with students depends not only on their subjective awareness but also on evaluation mechanisms within the educational system. Current teaching practice often involves eliminating potential errors during lesson preparation to present flawless knowledge—an approach that satisfies prevailing assessment criteria while preserving the teacher's image of perfection in students' eyes. This

pedagogical approach is premised on the traditional conception of the teacher as truth incarnate: the transmitter of the Way, the imparter of knowledge, and the resolver of doubts. Within this framework, errors become inconceivable. When errors do occur, admitting them remains merely an isolated act of acknowledgment; few teachers systematically document and analyze these errors to facilitate sharing with students. For the Error-sharing Teacher, this entails not only verbal cues such as "Let's begin today with an error I made," but also a pedagogical commitment to creating opportunities for students to learn through the teacher's own reasonable errors (Zhou et al., 2020). Accordingly, the evaluation system must be reformed to encourage teachers to open their lesson-preparation process and to share errors from past learning and teaching experiences, treating these as valuable instructional resources.

Error-Sharing Teacher: An Educator Who Cultivates Students' Intellectual Development Through the Strategic Sharing of Errors

In knowledge acquisition, trial and error serves as a fundamental scientific method, wherein mastering a sufficient range of errors precedes substantive intellectual growth. For university instructors, enabling students to grasp cutting-edge disciplinary errors accelerates their entry into advanced research frontiers (Zhou et al., 2024). For schoolteachers, this means guiding students—through appropriate scaffolding—to systematically reconstruct the erroneous thought processes of predecessors and teachers, thereby achieving a more comprehensive command of knowledge.

In humanistic learning theory, Carl Rogers (1961) emphasizes the importance of a supportive learning climate, arguing that students can more readily perceive and assimilate self-threatening content when external threats are minimized. Rogers therefore stressed the creation of an environment of mutual understanding and support (Rogers, 1961). What he did not fully address, however, is that teachers' proactive sharing of their own errors constitutes a powerful means to reduce external threat, foster identification between teacher and student, and thus effectively lower students' perceived anxiety. The "Error-sharing Teacher" thus poses a moral challenge to traditional teacher identity: "When a teacher recognizes that sharing personal errors could alleviate student anxiety, reduce learning pressures, and even enhance confidence, yet withholds such sharing to preserve authority, can this action be considered ethical?" (Zhou, 2020). Moreover, compared with the traditional conception of the teacher, educators who practice error-sharing demonstrate greater authenticity, engage with students on a more equal footing, and thereby nurture a culture of tolerance both inside and beyond the classroom. This approach not only enhances teacher-student rapport but also mitigates potential pedagogical harm. These implications, however, warrant deeper empirical investigation.

Conclusion

The concept of the "Error-sharing Teacher" not only captures the authentic developmental journey of educators but also posits a core competency for professional teaching: the systematic study of their discipline's history of errors, thereby aligning pedagogical practice with the trial-and-error method as a foundational scientific approach. The implementation of this concept would contribute to the reconstruction of learning theory while significantly enriching classroom practice. Viewed from the perspective of fallibility, the "Error-sharing Teacher" thus bridges the traditional Confucian emphasis on learning from errors and the modern scientific ethos of trial and error, offering a pathway to integrate Confucian educational traditions with contemporary pedagogical demands.

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