

UbD Framework in Teaching Confucian Filial Piety and Its Relevance in Modern Society*

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This study explores the lasting relevance of Confucian filial piety in Chinese culture that promotes individual self-cultivation, family harmony, and social stability. The Understanding by Design (UbD) framework is proposed as an effective approach for teaching Confucius' wisdom and the reinforcement of the cognitive, affective and psychomotor learning outcomes. This approach emphasizes "backward design" which prioritizes meaningful understanding over memorization. Integrating filial piety into the UbD framework enhances students' understanding of its philosophical foundations and modern significance, while also strengthening their intercultural communication skills. The study concludes that UbD approach develops language skills and cultural sensitivity, encouraging insights into the dynamic nature of cultural values. The meaningful outcomes through integrating the approach into filial piety curriculum design can support students' development of self-awareness, empathy, and ethical maturity, which foster values essential for ethical leadership and community-oriented responsibilities.

Keywords: Confucian filial piety, self-cultivation, Understanding by Design (UbD) framework, backward design, intercultural communication

Introduction

Confucius' thoughts have a profound impact on China, the entire East Asian society and overseas Chinese circle. *Ren* (benevolence), the core concept of Confucian philosophy, is regarded as the way to fulfill Confucius' pursuit of perfect personal cultivation, ideal human relationships and harmonious social order. In Confucianism, home is the smallest unit as well as the foundation of a nation, home plays an important role ensuing social stability and the progress of the nation. The parent-child relationship is the most fundamental part of the family. Confucian *Xiao* (filial piety) means the proper behaviors toward parents and siblings. Filial piety is viewed as the foundation of benevolence, and accordingly cultivating intimacy among family members can a nation demonstrate love and mutual respect. If a person who respects and cares about his parents, he will also be responsible for society. Consequently, filial piety is the starting point for an individual to cultivate virtues.

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In ancient Chinese society, filial piety functions in maintaining family structure and social harmony. With the rapid modernization of society, social values are increasingly becoming diverse, but the values of respect, responsibility and care for one's elders remain its importance in the parent-child relationship. The young Chinese generations are influenced by both Western culture and traditional Chinese culture. The traditional concepts of filial piety meet challenges about how the Chinese parent-child relationship is able to adapt to the thoughts and living habits of modern life in terms of filial piety, while also following the values, attitudes and behavior patterns of traditional culture.

The study explores how to assist teachers in curriculum design in teaching Confucian filial piety and its relevance in modern society through the Understanding by Design (UbD) approach. Understanding by Design is an educational theory for curriculum design of a school subject. It offers a planning framework to guide curriculum, assessment and instruction with a focus on teaching and assessing for understanding and transfer. Through the 3-stage backward design, teachers are guided to rethink their unit course design and change their teaching methods to deepen students' understanding of target units and to reach meaningful learning outcomes.

II. Understanding Confucian “Xiao” (Filial Piety)

2.1 Filial Piety in Confucian Thought

Filial piety is the foundational virtue to fulfill Confucius' benevolence (Ren). In ancient feudal Chinese society, the family was viewed as a smallest unit of the state, and the hierarchical relationships within it were considered essential for societal stability. Filial piety means the respect for one's parents, care for their well-being, obedience to their wishes, and the loyalty to the family. Confucius regards filial piety as the basis of an individual to develop moral virtues. Accordingly, filial piety not only influences individual behavior but also shapes family dynamic and the social structures.

Wm. Theodore de Bary's "Confucian Education in Premodern East Asia" rethinks moral education and the characteristic of Confucian learning and teaching. It discusses the complex relationship between Confucianism and modernization in East Asia and indicates the humanistic concern for self-cultivation and social responsibility (Tu, 1998, pp. 21-37). Filial piety in Chinese society is an important family value concept which dominates family interactions and social interpersonal interactions. Confucius suggests that the family is the first place where an individual learns intimate relationships and moral values, including reverence, true feeling of love, loyalty and duty. From the true feelings for parents an individual extends it to other intimate people, then the community and finally the state. A love starting from the family spreads over all human beings as universal love that is the route of benevolence. In Confucian thought, filial piety helps build a well-ordered society which would contribute to a well-governed state.

The Analects records Confucius' philosophy about the relationships among filial piety, virtues and the social stability. In Confucianism, "Filial piety and fraternal submission!—are they not the root of all benevolent actions?" (*Analects*, Book 1: 2). Practicing filial piety is the first step towards becoming a morally upright person. It helps shape one's character and personality, and nurtures a sense of empathy and moral obligation within the family. From an individual's relationship with their parents, he/she extends to a broader understanding of family loyalty, social propriety, and the cultivation of virtues. Respect for parents is central to the practice of filial piety, which is demonstrated not only in words but also in actions. Confucius talks about the manner to serve

parents, “Nowadays to provide parents with enough food is considered being filial. But dogs and horses are also provided to that extent. Without respect, what is the difference?” (Wang & Lu, 2017, p. 13). The sincere feelings and respectful manner are what filial piety highlights in familial devotion which even extends to the afterlife. The veneration of ancestors is regarded as an extension of filial duties. Confucius said, “That parents, when alive, be served according to propriety; that, when dead, they should be buried according to propriety; and that they should be sacrificed to according to propriety” (*Analects*, Book 2: 5). By honoring one’s deceased parents and the ancestors, an individual maintains a spiritual connection with them. This continuous cycle of moral obligation demonstrates the virtue to the living as well as the ways to preserve the cultural and familial continuity.

2.2 Filial Piety as Self-cultivation

Confucian filial piety is not an isolated virtue but a foundation of the cultivation of benevolence. The ethical implications of filial piety influence an individual beyond family life. The cultivation of a virtuous person begins with filial piety because family is the first place an individual learns to practice moral behavior. Filial piety nurtures virtues such as humility, discipline, sincerity, and lifelong learning, which are essential for self-improvement. An individual’s moral development starts with attending to one’s duty at home and then extends to one’s responsibility in society.

Filial piety is the first step to one’s journey toward moral and ethical excellence. Confucius said that, “A young man should be a good son at home and an obedient young man abroad, sparing of speech but trustworthy in what he says, and should love the multitude at large but cultivate the friendship of his fellowmen. If, after all these activities, he has any energy to spare, let him use it to making himself cultivated” (Wang & Lu, 2017, p. 6). Through fostering a sense of reverence and gratitude towards one’s parents, an individual cultivates humility. Understanding the sacrifices made by the older generation helps individuals to acknowledge their limitations and the importance of learning from others. The respect for the wisdom of elders develops an individual’s humility which is essential in the cultivation of other virtues. In addition, the regular practice of filial obligations requires consistent effort, patient and restraint; consequently, from the caring for parents and observing familial duties, one cultivates a sense of self-discipline and responsibility.

Confucius thinks individuals can only fulfill themselves by beginning with family reverence which is the basis of developing a well-rounded moral person. By practicing filial piety, individuals not only do their familial duties but also engage in the process of self-cultivation. Therefore, integrating Confucian filial piety into teaching will help the development of moral education for college students.

III. Understanding by Design (UbD) in Teaching Confucian Xiao

3.1 The Understanding by Design Approach

Developed by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, Understanding by Design (UbD) approach is a “construction-oriented” teaching design. The primary goal of UbD focuses on promoting deeper understanding and meaning learning, namely, equipping students with enduring understandings and transferable skills that go beyond the classroom. Wiggins and McTighe (2005, p. 13) suggest that the essential act of teachers’ profession is “the crafting of curriculum and learning experiences to meet specified purposes” and also can design “assessments to diagnose student needs” to guide the teaching”. Teachers are designers and teaching activities are

viewed as a process of helping students grasp core concepts and apply their knowledge in various contexts, leading to authentic learning experiences.

Unlike the general teaching design in which teachers would focus more on how they teach rather than “what the learner will need to accomplish the learning goals” (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005, p. 15), the UbD approach proposes a 3-stage “backward design” process for curriculum planning: The first stage is defining the desired learning outcomes or “enduring understanding” which include the essential concepts, skills, or attitudes that students should retain long after the learning experience. The second stage is determining the acceptable evidence for learning through assessments that demonstrate whether students have achieved the desired results. The final stage is planning the instructional strategies and learning activities that will help students reach these outcomes. The use of backward design for planning curriculum units and courses results in more clearly defined goals, more appropriate assessments, more tightly aligned lessons, and more purposeful teaching.

The focus of the first stage is to design high-quality “Big ideas” and essential questions related to subject knowledge which closely connect the entire course. At this stage, teachers should clearly understand the unit objectives, generate “Big ideas”, key knowledge and skills of target units, and develop main issues to guide students to learn actively. The multiple assessment methods both enable students to express their own understanding to the core concepts and increase students’ opportunities for inquiry and reflection to the course. It also provides teachers with flexibility in designing the most appropriate lessons and learning activities.

UbD framework allows teachers to select the learning content they want students to understand deeply, to design guiding questions, and at the same time to take into account the differences of students. It also increases the interactions between teachers and students in class and motivates students to discuss, explore and discover the meaning of the content and then achieve specific learning outcomes. Instead of only memorizing definitions or historical details, students are guided to examine and connect to real-life situations, thus making the learning experience more meaningful and impactful.

3.2 The UbD Course Design of Confucian Filial Piety

The goal of teaching Confucian filial piety through the UbD framework in a college-level course is to help students achieve a deeper understanding of Confucian philosophy and its broader implications for ethics, personal development, and society. The 3-stage backward design of Confucian filial piety is as follows:

Stage 1 – Identify Desired Results (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005, pp. 17-19)

According to McTighe and Reese (2013, p. 4), the first stage “asks teachers to identify the ‘big ideas’ that students should come to understand, and then to identify or craft companion essential questions. Big ideas reflect transferable concepts, principles and processes that are key to understanding the topic or subject.” The desired enduring understandings should center around the continuous influence of Confucius’ wisdom in fostering self-cultivation, personal responsibility, ethical living, and social harmony. Students should recognize that filial piety is not only a cultural and moral value in Confucian thought but also serves as a foundation for cultivating personal virtues that contribute to societal well-being.

Stage 2 – Determine Acceptable Assessment Evidence

To determine whether students have achieved the desired understandings, assessments should be designed to evaluate their ability to explain, interpret, and apply the concept of filial piety. The evidence of understanding

includes class discussions in which students articulate their thoughts on filial piety mentioned in *The Analects* and analyze its significance in various contexts. Group presentations involve case studies where students apply filial piety to analyze family dynamics in the light of current events. A quiz is conducted after the lecture to confirm that students have indeed learned the English expressions of Confucian filial piety. Assessments also consider students' ability to connect filial piety with other Confucian concepts like Ren (benevolence) and Li (propriety), demonstrating a holistic grasp of Confucian ethics.

Stage 3 – Plan Learning Experiences and Instruction

The teaching plan involves a sequence of learning activities to progressively build students' understanding of filial piety. The lessons initially focus on how filial piety functions as the basis for other virtues and then move towards the discussions on Confucian ethics. Class activities involve analyzing primary texts about filial piety from *The Analects*, followed by class discussions on the application of filial piety in different cultural contexts. The discussion extends to the exploration of modern-day scenarios requiring the practice of filial piety that can make the concept of Confucian filial piety more relatable and reasonable. Self-reflection tasks encourage students to connect the philosophy to their personal values, thereby deepening their appreciation and internalization of the teachings. The analysis of Yeh (2009, pp. 101-149) on reciprocal filial piety and authoritarian filial piety provides different perspectives for students to rethink the establishment of intimacy in parent-child relationship in modern-day scenarios. Such learning experiences in class improves students' deeper understanding of "individual autonomy" and "quality of interpersonal relationships." Through UbD framework in filial piety teaching, teachers provide a comprehensive understanding of Confucian ethics, helping students recognize its lasting impact on personal growth and social relationships.

VI. UbD Approach and the Improvement of Cognitive, Affective, and Psychomotor Domains

In Bloom's Taxonomy, the domain of learning can be divided into three aspects, namely, cognitive domain (knowledge), affective domain (attitudes) and psychomotor domain (skills). The UbD curriculum design in teaching filial piety contains the three aspects of learning to improve students' ethical and civic education as well as their cross-cultural communication skills. When teaching filial piety through the lens of intercultural communication, the UbD framework emphasizes not only understanding and internalizing Confucian ethics but also developing practical skills and emotional engagement.

According to Hoque (2016, p. 47), "The cognitive domain involves the development of our mental skills and the acquisition of knowledge." Therefore, the cognitive aspect in UbD framework centers on deepening students' understanding of the historical and philosophical foundations of filial piety within Confucianism. Teachers deal with essential questions by actively "interrogating the content using provocative questions that students strengthen and deepen their understanding" (Wiggins & McTighe, 2013, p. 5). This design helps develop sensitivity and cognitive abilities to multiculturalism, and thus students are able to discover similarities and differences in Western and Eastern cultures and societies. Through the class discussions on key excerpts from *The Analects* and personal experiences, teachers guiding students to explore the concept of filial piety as an essential element of Confucian thought, which not only shaped ancient Chinese social structures but continues to influence contemporary moral education in East Asia.

The affective domain involves attitudes, values, interests, and appreciation of learners. In the filial piety course design, the affective aspect highlights the nurture of students' active attitude in inquiry, proactive exploration of extracurricular information related to the field of study, and the development of independent learning. It also encourages students to reflect on their personal attitudes towards filial piety and its relevance in modern life. This domain is crucial because filial piety is not a theoretical and obsolete concept but the values deeply embedded in one's emotional and moral life. The development of the affective aspect involves teachers' creation of opportunities for students to engage in self-reflection and discussions, exploring their own beliefs, emotions, and values concerning filial piety. Reflection activities benefit students in connecting abstract philosophical ideas with their lived experiences. Class discussions expose the potential conflicts between individual aspirations and familial obligations. By considering various viewpoints, students can deepen their understanding of the emotional challenges involved in practicing filial piety, especially in a society increasingly developing towards the individualistic culture.

The psychomotor domain, which involves the ability of learners to physically accomplish tasks and perform movement and skills, targets students' acquisition of English expression skills on important Chinese cultural themes as well as the ability to use various learning resources to improve English literacy in all aspects of listening, speaking, reading and writing. The targets in Confucian filial piety course focus on students' development of intercultural communication abilities. By engaging them in practical exercises, students foster a deeper appreciation of filial piety as a culturally rooted value. This involves class discussions and case studies of current events that simulate real-life scenarios where the principles of filial piety might come into play. By sharing students' opinions in class, it not only enhances their communication skills but also helps them to appreciate the dynamic and evolving nature of cultural values in a modern society.

The UbD framework in teaching filial piety in intercultural contexts helps students achieve a comprehensive understanding that spans cognitive, affective and psychomotor domains. Students not just acquire knowledge about Confucian philosophy but also develop practical communication skills and reflect on personal values and emotions. By integrating the three domains into the teaching of filial piety which connects to real-world applications, students are prepared to navigate cultural differences with empathy and moral awareness.

V. Conclusion

In an age where ethical dilemmas and social challenges are becoming more complex, filial piety remains a relevant and powerful ethical principle in modern society. Though rooted in ancient times, Confucian filial piety continues to guide modern ethical practices, offering a framework for personal growth and social responsibility. Filial piety serves as a cornerstone for self-cultivation which shapes individual behavior, familial relationships, and societal structures, promoting harmony and ethical conduct. In an increasingly individualistic modern society, the integration of filial piety into ethical curriculum design helps college students reach moral maturity and develop a sense of shared social responsibility.

Moral education, lifelong learning, and character development are emphasized in contemporary educational goals. The application of Understanding by Design (UbD) approach in teaching Confucian filial piety helps to foster students' virtuous character. Through backward design, teachers focus on the ultimate learning outcomes and thus effectively organizes teaching content and learning activities to promote students' deeper understanding

rather than rote memorization. Confucian filial piety provides a direction for the youth to critically reflect the broader implications of their values, actions and decisions. Through the UbD framework, filial piety course design integrates three domains of learning which improve students' personal development and ethical growth, helping them navigate the complexities of modern life with a strong moral foundation. As society continues to change, Confucius' wisdom equips students with ethical perspectives that are applicable in various aspects of life and thus prepare them for both personal success and civic responsibility.

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