Erikson, Vygotsky, and Illeris: Implications/Challenges of Hong Kong’s University Reforms

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Theme: Students and General Education in the 21st Century Economy

Introduction

With the first batch of four year bachelor students under Hong Kong’s 3-3-4 education reform starting in September 2012, it is important to remember that these students are also the first batch under the new senior secondary (NSS) academic structure and curriculum and the first to take the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE). How the NSS and the changes Hong Kong’s higher education gate-keeping examinations prepare, influence and affect the incoming (and subsequent) four year bachelor students needs to be studied and addressed. Furthermore, what will general education do to enhance the students’ learning and personal development within the newly expanded undergraduate education programs in Hong Kong?

Although there are broader implications to Hong Kong’s university reforms, this paper looks at the micro-level learning processes through the lens of education psychology. Education psychology helps us understand psycho-social development related to learning and the influence of external factors, which includes the learning environment, in the learning processes. The different sections of this paper will introduce Erikson’s psycho-social developmental stages, Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development and Illeris comprehensive theory of learning and the conceptual framework of this paper. Recent education reforms in Hong Kong is then presented and analyzed using the paper’s conceptual framework, leading to the conclusions and recommendations which concludes this paper.

Conceptual Framework

Understanding Hong Kong’s recent education reforms implications to the students’ learning requires a broader perspective which considers the learners, the facilitators of learning and their roles within society. As such, the combination of Erikson, Vygotsky and Illeris’ concepts constructs a conceptual framework that incorporates identity formation, the internal and external dimensions of learning, and the role of the social and learning environment.

Erikson (1980 cited in Craig-Bray, Adams & Dobson, 1988) considers interactions between psychology and social, historical and developmental factors in his ego development theory. Erikson’s psycho-social developmental stages are based on the individual’s readiness and
society’s pressures, which tend to be most severe near the end of adolescence (Erikson, 1980: 130 cited by Côté & Levine, 1989: 389). In fact, Côté & Levine (1989) stressed the importance of the core concepts of identity crisis, the institutionalized moratoria, and the struggle between the ego and the superego for personality dominance, in Erikson’s concepts and theories.

Identity formation is developed within an institutionalized moratorium, a period of delay granted and institutionalized by society granting the individual time to develop a viable adult identity. Individuals struggle between the practical/technological ego and the moral/humanist superego and develop their identity through three value oriented stages: the moral, ideological and the ethical stages. Focusing on the undergraduate age group, this article will only focus on Erikson (1963) identity formation and social relation stages and their corresponding identity crises: identity formation vs. role confusion, and intimacy vs. isolation.

Vygotsky (1978, 2004:14-18) believes that an individual’s experience and their linkages to another’s experience (social experience) plays an important role in the individual’s learning process, imagination and creativity. His social development theory uses the concepts of active internalization (proactive imitation of others), dialogic selves (self-authoring in relation to others), and the semiotics of behavior (the transitivity of the signs between self and the other) (Holland & Lachicotte, 2007). Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development defines the gap between a learner’s ability to perform a task independently and with the guidance of a more knowledgeable other (e.g. adult guidance or peer collaboration). This, however, should be seen in terms of the learner’s maturing functions (readiness) in relation to their next age period (adulthood in this paper’s case) (Chaiklin, 2003).

Illeris (2003) comprehensive learning theory considers both internal and external learning processes and sees the learning processes to involve all 3 dimensions: cognitive, emotive and environment in the development of the learner’s functionality, sensibility and sociality. The cognitive dimension focuses on content learning, enhancing the learner’s functionality to deal with the challenges of practical life, while the emotive dimension is engaged psychodynamic processes to secure the learner’s mental balance and develop a personal sensibility. The environment dimension focuses on the interaction between the environment and the individual learners (sociality) leading to the personal integration in society and community.

Based on the three above-mentioned concepts, Hong Kong’s 3-3-4 reforms and the introduction of the general education courses should be seen in terms of the learners’ cognitive and emotive readiness, the identity formation process, and the supporting environment.

**Recent Hong Kong Education Reforms**
Recent Hong Kong education reforms could be seen in terms of structure, curriculum and assessments. Education structural reforms is primarily based on Hong Kong’s 3-3-4 education reform, which changed the previous 7 year secondary and a 3 year bachelor structure to a 3 year junior secondary, 3 year senior secondary, and a 4 year bachelor structure. The implementation
of the NSS structure and curriculum started in 2009, while the new four year bachelors will have its first intake this coming September 2012.

Curriculum reforms should be seen not only in terms of the introduction of general education to the new four year undergraduate curriculum, but also in the NSS curriculum, which introduced liberal studies focused on: self and personal development, society and culture, and science, technology and environment. This is supposed to facilitate a broadening of knowledge, facilitates self reflection in terms of their identity formation, and helps ignite the passion for learning and knowledge. The introduction of general education at the undergraduate level further enhances identity formation, understanding their multiple roles as individuals, and citizens of a nation and of the world. Furthermore, it is supposed to equip the students with a culture of lifelong learning, and a broad range of competencies necessary in a world characterized by change and uncertainty.

The new general education courses, however, have been developed at the institutional level and differ between institutions and even between intra-institutional departments. To fill the extra year of undergraduate education, 6-12 credits of Chinese and English are made part of the 30 credit general education requirements. Furthermore, increased internship, service learning and expanded foreign exchange studies are also contemplated by the various universities in Hong Kong. The focus, however, remains the same: whole person development, equip students with skills, competencies to face the ever changing global environment, embody a culture of lifelong learning, and to help them grow into responsible citizens of the world.

Lastly, the introduction and use of the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE) in lieu of the former Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE) and the Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination (HKALE) as the gate-keeping mechanism allocating students to multiple post secondary programs (e.g. university, vocational and sub-degree programs). HKCEE and HKALE used to be administered at form (grade) 5 and 7, while the HKDSE is administered at the end of the NSS structure. Furthermore, the HKDSE assess 4 core subjects: Chinese, English, mathematics and liberal studies, and/or a selection of 1 or 2 elective subjects covering a range of topics from applied learning subjects to foreign languages (HKEAA, n.d.). This represents a shift from assessing content related subjects in the previous examinations (HKCEE and HKALE) to subjects introduced in the NSS curriculum including mathematics and liberal studies, which were formerly not assessed.

**Implications/Challenges to Hong Kong University Reforms**

Implications/Challenges to Hong Kong university reforms can be seen in terms of cognitive and emotive readiness, identity formation, and the supporting environment. In terms of cognitive and emotive readiness, Hong Kong’s new undergraduate students under 3-3-4 will be cognitively and emotionally less mature and ready for undergraduate education. The fact remains that the new entrants will start a year earlier than the previous cohorts, and their senior secondary curriculum actually only focus on 4 core subjects (including mathematics and liberal studies). The use and
introduction of the HKDSE simply reduces exam related stress by reducing the number of exams taken from 2 to 1, and shifted the core subjects assessed to be in line with the new senior secondary curriculum. Furthermore, Hong Kong universities general education courses are designed based on the need to fill an extra year of the new undergraduate curriculum. Given the lack of expertise and resources, they are unlikely able to offer a wide range of general education courses, which can provide whole person development and a broad set of competencies for lifelong learning in the near term. Lastly, the effectiveness of the NSS curriculum, the HKDSE and the introduction of general education into an expanded undergraduate education still needs to be assessed and eventually fine-tuned.

In terms of identity formation, the extra year of the new 4 year undergraduate program does not actually add a year in terms of identity formation as it was taken from the old secondary structure. The NSS curriculum and the use of HKDSE in assessments, however, facilitated a broader experience and knowledge base and delayed the planning of future post secondary pathways for at least a year. Furthermore, the year shifted from secondary to undergraduate education, coupled with the introduction of general education courses, does help facilitate identity formation. The institutional moratorium granted within the Hong Kong university sector provides a better environment to acquire a variety of experience, knowledge and interest, than in secondary education where they are still concerned with the HKDSE or the previous gate-keeping examinations.

In terms of supporting environment, Hong Kong universities and their academic staff may not be ready to facilitate the learning and offer a variety of general education courses to a cohort of less mature students. Their ability to support student choices (and even offering) of general education courses is limited by the lack of experience, expertise and even resources, at least in the first few years. As such, the notion of a knowledgeable other may not even be present to support student learning, interest, and experience. Peer group support may provide the necessary support in terms of student choice, and broadening individual experiences, however, it remains to be empirically assessed in the near future.

**Conclusion and Recommendations**

The Hong Kong government’s education reform to prepare their future citizens for an ever changing world, and the responsibilities of global citizenship is commendable. These reforms not only involve changing education structures, but a total change of the entire education system, from the introduction of general studies and liberal studies in primary and secondary education, to general education in higher education.

Hong Kong university reforms are challenged at least in 3 core aspects: cognitive and emotive readiness, the identity formation of the students, and the ability of the city state’s universities to provide the supporting environment necessary. Even with the earlier implementation of the NSS
structure and curriculum in 2009 and the use of the HKDSE, its effectiveness is still not assessed and empirically proven. The universities' ability to provide a supporting environment to the identity formation of the students is challenged by the lack of expertise, experience, and resources in designing and providing general education courses and dealing with less mature students.

In spite of the ambiguity of the earlier initiatives' effectiveness to promote a broader knowledge base, this is easily rectified by assessing the cognitive and emotive maturity of the new cohort and following their development in their undergraduate education. Given enough space and experience, space to develop expertise and recruit the right talents, Hong Kong universities can be the knowledgeable other to aid their students move within their zone of proximal development. With sustained political will, stakeholder support and sustained effort by Hong Kong universities, the city state will have their global citizens, equipped with the right competencies to be lifelong learners in an ever-changing world.

References