

# Implementing a Student-Centered Learning Approach at Vietnamese Higher Education Institutions: Barriers under Layers of Casual Layered Analysis (CLA)

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## Abstract

*This article applies Casual Layered Analysis (CLA) (Inayatullah, 2004) as a framework to examine factors that affect applying a student-centered learning approach in Vietnam. The Four layers of CLA help disclose weaknesses in the current traditional learning approach, causes that create the problems and hidden beliefs that keep traditional perceptions about learning permanent. The results reveal that changing the students' present learning approach to student-centeredness does not need a new collection of principles to be imposed on learners. Rather, there need to be changes in both school infrastructures and people's perceptions. Further studies need to be conducted to determine how to implement these changes so that the new approach can be implanted successfully in the local context.*

**Keywords:** casual layered analysis, student-centered, teacher-centered, litany, social causes, worldview, myth

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## Introduction

Today's employers expect employees to have varied skills to be able to adapt to different situations and to communicate with different people from different cultural backgrounds. Therefore, teaching students how to communicate effectively, cooperate with others and learn independently has become the basics of education (Cheng, 2003b). Newly-required skills are beyond the focus of traditional ways of teaching and learning (e.g., teacher-centered and passive learning approaches) because they emphasize individual achievement and the transmission of information. Therefore, it appears that there need to be reforms to change the traditional teaching approach and provide students with new knowledge and skills.

During the last decades, Vietnam has implemented rapid reforms in its educational system. Vietnamese educators are dedicated to importing various Western teaching and learning approaches, especially a student-centered approach and see these approaches as 'standards' for local education reforms. This happened because they believe that a student-centered learning approach promises to provide local students with new skills required by the labor market like independence, creativeness, activeness and cooperativeness. In many ways, such advanced approaches can be considered a fashion. The idea of students learning together, teaching and sharing with one another is attractive, not only because of the potential for higher achievement proved in prior research from the West (Johnson, Johnson & Stanne, 2000), but also because it has a connotation of cultural appropriateness, taking into account that Vietnam is a society that is culturally oriented towards collectivism rather than individualism (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005).

However, a student-centered approach is new. This method radically changes the structure of the teaching environment in terms of methodology and physical characteristics. Many reforms have failed because the approach was introduced very impressively at the beginning but was quickly rejected because a student-centered learning approach is hindered by various local infrastructure conditions and cultural barriers. For such a Western learning method to be accepted and implemented successfully in Vietnam there need to be thorough understandings about the suitability of the new approach in the local context. For instance, educators need to learn what factors support and what factors hinder the implanting of the new approach. Then, supporting factors can be maximized while hindering factors can be avoided. No study has yet been done to investigate this concern. The present study applies CLA as a theoretical framework to answer the following questions:

1. How effectively is the traditional learning approach of teacher-centeredness at Vietnamese education institutions working?
2. How could the implementation of a student-centered approach be done in Vietnam?

This study is part of a three-year project that the researcher is conducting under the auspices of the University of Queensland, Australia. It aims to determine effective strategies to make a student-centered learning approach more adaptive in non-Western countries [Vietnam included].

### What Is Causal Layered Analysis (CLA)?

Causal layered analysis (CLA) is a futures theory and methodology developed by Sohail Inayatullah (1998 & 2004), and inspired by the works of Sarkar (1978) and Galtung (1981a & b). CLA has become a method to conduct inquiry into the nature of past, present and future. However, CLA is not a tool to predict the future. Rather, it is a logical analysis to open up the problem and its causes in the present and the past. Then, alternative futures can be developed. CLA has four main components each of which investigates a level of the problem from the surface to the deepest. Such a step-by-step examination allows researchers to learn deep meanings embedded in the texts and acknowledge other ways of knowing (Anthony, 2004).

Functions of each component of CLA are briefly summarized below:

- (1) The first component examines the litany level. This is the most superficial layer. Therefore, it is very "visible and obvious, requiring little analytic capacity" (Inayatullah, 2004, p.12). At this level, problems are most commonly oversimplified and exaggerated, most commonly in purely quantitative terms. This often gives people a "feeling of helplessness (what can I do?), or apathy (nothing can be done), or projected action (why don't they do something about it?)" (Inayatullah, 2004, p.12).
- (2) The second component is concerned with causes. These include "social, technological, economic and environmental political and historical factors" (Inayatullah, 2004, p.12). This level is beneath the surface and considered "proof" of the problem. Here, problems are explained and analyzed by exploring the engagement of the state and of other factors and interests.
- (3) The third component is the worldview level. At this level, underlying belief systems and deeper assumptions are revealed and unpacked. The worldview is different for different people. Therefore, it is not limited to a single entity with a unique solution; rather different worldviews are often discovered. And, of course, different worldviews are to propose different solutions to the problem, different understandings of the issues. When the worldview changes so does the history.
- (4) The last component is the myth or metaphor level which deals with "deep stories, the collective archetypes - the unconscious and often emotive dimensions of the problem or the paradox" (Inayatullah, 2004, p.13). At this level, analysis attempts to "uncover hidden and explicit mythologies, narratives, symbols and metaphors within the text" (Anthony, 2004, p.454). This is the deepest, most emotive, and most creative of all the levels.

## **Tensions, Contradictions and Invisible Drivers of the Learning Approach Reform in Vietnam under the Framework of CLA**

### **Litany level**

At this level, I discuss the identified weaknesses of the teacher-centered learning approach and criticisms of this approach. These discussions show that the dominant approach to learning at Vietnamese education institutions has become inadequate in providing students with newly-required thinking and learning skills. Therefore, it needs to be replaced by more effective methods.

For Vietnamese, due to more than a thousand years of Chinese influence (from 111 BC to AD 1858), the Confucian philosophy is very much alive and sets a powerful interpersonal norm for daily behaviors, attitudes, and practices demanding reflection, modernization, persistence, humility, obedience to superiors, and stoic response to pain (Park, 2000). Consequently, Vietnamese students share a common Confucian heritage and are referred to as Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC) students (Le, 1999). Therefore, when phases like CHC, Southeast-Asian and Asian students are mentioned in the following sections, they also imply Vietnamese students.

CHC

Asian students' approaches to learning started to attract the attention of researchers in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In general, there are pro and con points of view about learning approach of Asian students. On one side, various researchers in the field (e.g., Gow & Kember, 1990; Samuelowicz, 1987) argue that Asian students place much emphasis on the lecturer and/or text as the definitive source of knowledge; they accept the authority of the teacher or material studied without questioning because they believe that this authority always gives the 'correct' answer. Therefore, Asian students are very reluctant to participate in discussions and giving opinions and almost never volunteer to answer or make public criticisms. As a result, Asian learners are deemed to be passive recipients of knowledge and, consequently, have had little experience in studying independently (Go & Mok, 1995). This habit prevents these students from exploring extra knowledge beyond textbooks. When coping with tasks requiring deep understandings, Asian students are claimed to have distinct disadvantages as many of them encounter great difficulty in isolating and interpreting information. For example, many Hong Kong students practice a "scatter-gun" approach when faced with an exam question requiring an essay style, meaning they tend to write everything they know about a subject rather than answering the specific question (Go & Mok, 1995, p.49).

In general, the overall picture of Asian students' approaches to learning tends to be categorized by various researchers as:

- Learning by 'rote' rather than by understanding (Ballard & Clanchy, 1994; Burns, 1991; Gow & Kember, 1990; Robertson, Line, Jones & Thomas, 2000).
- Surface learners rather than deep learners (Ballard & Clanchy, 1994; Burns, 1991; Gow & Kember, 1990; Robertson, Line, Jones & Thomas, 2000).
- Viewing the teacher and/or text as the definitive source of knowledge (Ballard & Clanchy, 1994; Burns, 1991; Gow & Kember, 1990; Robertson, Line, Jones & Thomas, 2000).
- Unwittingly guilty of plagiarism (Robertson, Line, Jones & Thomas, 2000; Watson, 1999).
- Passive, quiet and non participative in class (Adam & Many, 1999; Ballard & Clanchy, 1994; Gow & Kember, 1990; Mullins, Quintrell & Hancock, 1995; Ramsay, Barker & Jones, 1999; Yanhong & Kaye, 1998).

However, many cases have shown a contrasting fact that a lot of Asian students are very successful at western institutions. In fact, they consistently outperform their western counterparts in their home country and in overseas universities (Biggs, 1998). Therefore, Biggs (1996) and Marton and Saljo (1996) have the same question that if CHC students only learn by rote (as a mindless machine), they cannot certainly succeed in exams at western universities as research has shown that students who rote learn do not demonstrate achievement (Biggs, 1979). Thus, it is hard to conclude if CHC/Vietnamese students are rote learners.

In fact, some researchers have tried to clarify this issue. For instance, in 1999, Pratt et al. (1999) conducted a study to investigate the nature of CHC and western students' learning approach with an aim to explain why CHC students were thought to be surface learners. They found that the process of absorbing knowledge of CHC and western students was different. Specifically, they found that while western students

viewed learning as a need to understand immediately, CHC students and faculty members viewed learning as a stage by stage process. According to CHC people, the act of memorizing or mastering the basics as a first step within the overall process of learning was considered essential because memorized knowledge builds a foundation which would provide the basic understanding for further study in the area.

While arguments about the true nature of Asian students are still inclusive, in general researchers have agreed with each other at a point that the only difference between Western learners and Asian learners is that while western students attempt to relate the new information to previous or other knowledge or to make sense of the new information in the light of personal or real life experiences, Asian learners seem to understand information only contained within the text, or supplied by the lecturer (Gow & Kember, 1990; Tang, 1991). Therefore, Asian learners may not involve elaborative processes such as critically analyzing the new information or relating it to other subject matter. Unfortunately, it is these skills that make CHC/Vietnamese students limited in today's global economy. Therefore, they are being pressured to change the traditional learning approach to both maintain their high academic achievement as well as master these extra skills

Therefore, after conducting a yearly examination and evaluation of Vietnamese education, UNESCO (2000) suggested that Vietnamese students need to be trained with new methods so that they can be provided with the new working skills such as activeness, cooperativeness, creativeness and argumentativeness (Tran, 2000). Facing a lot of pressures, finally at the outset of implementing student-centered learning, the education minister asserted that:

*Learning by rote needs to be eliminated from all school levels and replaced with student-centered learning...Any teachers found failing to change their teaching style would be listed and provided with video-tapes showing new teaching techniques. If they still failed to improve, they would be sent for intensive training (Tran, 2000, p.14).*

To fulfill these new tasks, the state has announced that new curricula must aim to elevate people's knowledge, training human resources, fostering talent, and producing workers with cultural and scientific knowledge, with professional skills, creativity, and discipline at work; therefore, teaching and learning approaches must, accordingly, change as the teacher-centered teaching approach seems unable to provide learners with such skills (Pham-Minh, 1995). In details, the State claims that:

*There must be radical changes in training methods: to change from passive knowledge transmission in which teachers are talking and learners are taking notes; to advise learners on the ways of active thinking and receiving knowledge, to teach students the methods of self-learning; to teach students the methods of self-learning, systematic collection of information and of analytic and synthetic thinking; to increase the active, independent attitude of students in learning process and self-management activities in schools and social work. [In sum, students need to be provided with new skills so that they are capable of undertaking leadership tasks and preparing the country and a new generation of workers and citizens for the twenty-first century (Pham-Minh, 1995, p.59).]*

In order to deal with rapid changes of economic globalization, the present education system of Vietnam is being required to carry out both "restructuring" (i.e., expanding and verifying training forms, renovating governing mechanism and redesigning curricula) and "reculturing" (i.e., changing the way teachers teach and the way students learn) (Christie, 2005).

As such, there need to be renovation in teaching and learning at Vietnamese education institutions. Such a reform should be initiated by the state and the Ministry of Education via new policies to encourage teachers and students to change their traditional teaching and learning methods.

### Systematic causes

Discussions above reveal that there has been much criticism about the current learning and teaching approach at Vietnamese education institutions. However, it is not easy to implement any change because new approaches face various barriers in terms of both infrastructures and resources in the local context. At this level, issues of big class size, material limitations and curriculum coverage are discussed as systematic causes that hinder the introduction of student-centered methods.

#### *Class size*

Big classes are one of the principal reasons which maintain the traditional teacher-centered approach to learning and prevent the implementation of any teamwork approach in Vietnamese classrooms. Kirkpatrick (1998) claims that on average, classes in Vietnam contain 50-70 students (in China 50-60, in Japan 45 and in Korea 43). In Western classes this number is much smaller. In such big classes, if students are divided in groups of no more than four (an effective size according to Johnson et al., 1994), there would be 13-14 groups working simultaneously and teachers would not have enough time to exam/monitor each group. This places Vietnamese teachers in a circumstance in which they have no choice, but have to adopt low level teaching strategies such as lecturing. This is the only method which makes them feel that they distribute knowledge to all students fairly. As a result, teachers become the only ones talking and instructing. And Vietnamese students are generally claimed to be brought up in a very restrictive and highly regimented learning environment where they are always instructed what to do, thus they become passive, uncritical and reproductive (Gow & Kember, 1990).

*limit  
class  
size - if  
possible*

#### *Material resources*

Reading limitation is another factor keeping Vietnamese students away from independent learning. Materials are generally in short supply at all Vietnamese education institutions. Almost all Vietnamese universities have so far used text books as the unique information resource. Therefore, students perceive that the required text for a particular subject by the lecturer is the definitive written resource for that subject, and they do not need to consult any other information resource. Material limitations create two chances for students to become rote and surface learners. First, as the readings are very limited (one or two textbooks for a subject), teachers usually tell students exactly what to read and what needs to be paid more attention, if not memorized carefully, as these sections are likely to be questioned in the exams.

*community  
elaborate - politics  
- street people*

*community also  
politics  
street people*

Second, limited readings turn CHC classes into places where usually only one point of view is presented. There are no other perspectives for comparison. This implicitly tells students that there is only one right answer, so they do not have to question and discuss any point of view presented by the teacher or written in the textbook. In other words, teachers and institutions here do not respect casual and analytic skills (Nisbett, 2003). This leads to a problem that Asian students often persist with intensive study and memorization of texts and lecture notes rather than trying to question, discuss and develop viewpoints. That is why CHC students are claimed to rely much on books, not taking responsibility for their own learning and not understanding the concept of plagiarism (Robertson et al., 2000).

#### Curricula

Last but not least, Biggs (1995, p.41) claims that curricula in Asian [Vietnamese included] schools are designed in a particular quantitative format which sees "any topic as important as every other topic, so that everything is taught and the student is grossly overloaded". Due to such coverage, in class Vietnamese teachers just have enough time to go through all materials but not investigate students' deep understanding or touch any topics outside the curricula. As a result, what students can do at the end of each semester is to try to memorize what is covered in the curricula or what teachers say in the class so that they can pass the exams. The consequence of such quantitative curricula and "didactic spoon-feeding" approach is that students are limited in developing their deep approach or thinking critically as they proceed through the program (Kember, 2000, p.108). This situation is obviously ineffective for learning because a deep approach should be "a systematic goal for all students, not the fortuitous happenstance for a lucky few" (Biggs, 1995, p.41).

At this level, to improve these weaknesses the ideal solution would be to reduce class size, upgrade the library system, develop e-libraries and redesign curricula. It may take years but it seems completely feasible to do these changes if the Ministry of Education and colleges have policies to invest more in these areas.

#### Discourse/worldview

This level is seen as a deeper level which underpins the belief system and hidden assumptions. At this level, particular cultural perceptions of Vietnamese teachers and students about teaching and learning are brought into discussions. This deeper analysis helps explain why Vietnamese students are so familiar with accepting knowledge from the teacher without questioning. These perceptions are a big challenge for any reform.

#### Teacher's perceptions about teaching and learning

According to the Confucian philosophy, teachers should always know better than students. They are considered the main sources enriching people's knowledge. Once teachers obtain enough knowledge from books, they only need to interpret, analyze and elaborate on these points for students. As a result, Confucian students only need to receive knowledge from teachers as a truth rather than try to think independently, contradict teachers' knowledge and draw their own conclusions (Ruby & Ladd, 1999). Because individuality and uniqueness are relatively unimportant, individual interpretations of content are relatively unimportant and, as such, discouraged (Pratt, 1992), stu-

Don't believe me!

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Critical theory

focus on specific and important themes!

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dents find it unnecessary to source alternative knowledge regarding a particular topic. In essence, the focus of teaching is not on how students can create and construct knowledge, but on how extant authoritative knowledge can be transmitted and internalized in a most effective and efficient way (Brick, 1991; Jin & Cortazzi, 1995). These perceptions challenge the principle of the student-centered approach to learning because it only allows the teachers to intervene when students need clarification in instructions, or when the teacher thinks that students have not understood.

Also, according to Hofstede and Hofstede (2005), Vietnam is one of the CHC nations scoring high on the Power Distance Index (Malaysia scores highest with 104; China: 80; Singapore: 74; Vietnam: 70; Hong Kong: 68; Korea: 60; Taiwan: 58 and Japan: 54). It is generally asserted that nations with such high score on power distance place greater emphasis on hierarchical relationships. Different from teacher-equal-student teachings of Socrates, who is thought to be the father of Western philosophy, Confucius's teachings teach learners to respect and obey authority figures (Confucius, 1947) – in the educational realm it means that students should obey and listen to teachers. Teachers in CHC nations are not only teachers but also models of correct behaviors. The Teacher is ranked just below the King and above the father: the King-the Teacher-the Father (McSwinnery, 1995). Teachers should be respected not only when they are at school, but in their whole life (Kennedy, 2002; Scollon & Scollon, 1995).

Such respect makes it difficult for Vietnamese teachers and students to accept any pedagogical practice that tends to put teachers on a par with their students and detracts from teacher authority. In particular, it is against Vietnamese expectations to adopt a pedagogy that may put teachers at the risk of losing face. As such, the principles of student-centered approach that allow students to begin developing their knowledge with the students themselves, then exchange information within the group to get collective knowledge which may exceed the knowledge of their teacher, and finally can be able to bring the teacher's knowledge into question seem unrealistic. It seems really hard for Vietnamese teachers to lower their role from a 'king' to a facilitator who moves from group to group to observe and motivate learning.

#### *Culture as 'face' saving*

An important aspect, particular to Asian cultures, is the preservation of 'face' as Asians consider 'face' as "a person's social and professional position, reputation and self-image" (Go & Mok, 1995). Losing face inflicts extremely serious personal damage (Hofstede, 2003). Therefore, they try to avoid the loss of face at all costs (Ferraro, 1994). Loss of face can be brought on in various circumstances. For instance, in schools, one is seen as losing his/her face when he is unable to answer teacher's or friends' questions or even when he is just challenged on a point to confirm his knowledge (Burns, 1991). This builds up an option in CHC students' mind that they would rather not express personal ideas or answer a question in the formal class than do it but eradicating the opportunity of being questioned and look silly if their points of view are incorrect (California Department of Education, 1994; Vang, 1999). That is why CHC students do not usually initiate class discussions until they are called on to do so (Park, 2000). Protecting face also has an impact on a student's willingness to ask for

*Teacher Day Holiday - VN*

*send students to the West?*



clarification during formal class time (Meggitt, Turkey & Singh, 1995). Watson (1999) observed that after being asked a question, CHC students often turn to their friends for clarification even if they understand the point - a face saving strategy.

Researchers (Jehn & Weldon, 1992; Kirkbride, Tang & Westwood, 1991; Tse, Francis & Walls, 1994) have shown that CHC learners who are more concerned about the issue of face saving tend to use more indirect styles such as avoidance. More specifically, they also dislike public touching and overt displays of opinions or emotions. This means that Vietnamese students are not so supportive of practices such as answering questions in front of the class or participation in debates in person (as they may feel shameful if their answers are incorrect).

In sum, these beliefs underpin the way teachers teach and the way students learn. They have become standard values at Vietnamese schools. They appear hard to remove because they have become cultural characteristics. However, since the country opened its doors to welcome Western thoughts of teaching and learning in the 1990s, to some extent these values are being challenged to change by the new emerging view 'constructivism'. Since the 20<sup>th</sup> century, constructivism with its views of learning being mediated by the individual's active involvement and participation in situated social practices and not as the result of knowledge transmission, has become a popular theoretical perspective underpinning various recent educational studies. As a result, interest in the sociocultural views of Vygotsky (1978) has brought the issue of social-interaction to the centre of recent educational reforms. From this perspective, teaching and learning are socially negotiated and constructed through interaction, modifying the roles of the teacher and students as communicators and learners. Social learning contexts promote explanations to others and self-explanations that lead to cognitive gains (Schwartz, 1995), and social modes of working create effective learning environments for students to express, discover and construct knowledge (Kumpulainen & Wray, 2002). As such, the sociocultural points of view imply that today an effective teaching and learning approach should be the one which can create a context in which students have opportunities to exchange information and, in so doing, develop new understandings and learning.

Since the late 1980s and early 1990s, under the impact of this perspective several educational reforms have been carried out in Vietnam such as:

- (1) *The reform of establishing a new globalized and knowledge-based economy in the early 1990s.* This reform has a slogan as:  
Students must be Learners, Creators and Communicators to meet the demands of the next century-Learners in the sense that they must view education as a life-long process and develop a passion for continuous learning; Creators who not only have the measure of discipline found in our current workforce but display independent and innovative thinking; and Communicators who are effective team players, able to articulate their ideas confidently (Tan et al., 2007).
- (2) *The announcement of establishing constructivist-oriented schools in early the 21<sup>st</sup> century.* Through this project, Vietnam intends to introduce a new approach to teaching and learning known as learner-centered. This approach requires: students to work cooperatively and collaboratively with each other

on their classroom tasks and assignments with some guidance from the teachers, and teachers to use techniques of cooperative learning such as preparing group activities, playing the role of "guide by the side" rather than a "sage on the stage", and giving up the sole knowledge provider, but taking the role of a coach and facilitator (Tran, 2000).

- (3) The establishment of the Centre for Learning Enhancement and Research in 2000. Since its establishment, the Centre has hosted several professional development programs on how to use cooperative learning in the classroom (Tran, 2000).

There are also many other reforms in different parts of the country. This implies that the traditional worldview about learning in Vietnam is being challenged by new thoughts. It is expected that when the implementation of the student-center learning approach succeeds, there would be changes in both teaching and learning as clarified in Table 1 below:

Table 1.

*Differences between a teacher-centered learning approach and a student-centered learning approach*

Teacher-centered learning	Student-centered learning
<i>Learning</i>	
No individual accountability	Individual accountability
Responsible only for self	Responsible for each other
Only task emphasized	Task and maintenance emphasized
Passively receive information and instruction from the teacher	Actively involved in one's own learning and in learning processes of peers
<i>Teaching</i>	
Follow the course profile	Select and divide the lesson for group work
Try to keep students in their own seats	Arrange the classroom and assigning roles
Provide detailed instruction	Facilitator of learning

### Myth/metaphor

Constraints arising from either the institutional system or the current education reforms may be temporary. The cultural factors are considered permanent because they are norms and values that are deeply embedded in the cultural niche and everyday life of Vietnamese teachers and students. To a great extent, most of the issues raised in the cultural factors are common characteristics of Confucianism—a philosophy that has been prevailing in Vietnam since the year 1000 (Phuong-Mai, Terlouw & Pilot, 2006).

According to Confucius, societal stability is based on unequal relationships between people. In the family, the father is always considered as the leader, managing the whole family. Vietnamese people have a saying "Children who do not listen to par-

ents are always spoiled children". In the educational realm, the teacher should be treated with the highest respect because the teacher is always seen as having much better knowledge than students. Confucian philosophy claims that a good sample of teachers must be shaped in the maxim that "to give students a bowl of water, the teacher must have a full bucket of water to dispense" (Hu, 2002, p.98). Therefore, students should not question the teacher but always respect them at all costs.

In Vietnamese literature, there are many proverbs mentioning the role of the teacher in enriching and transferring knowledge to students.

- (1) *One does not dare step on a teacher's shadow.*
- (2) *Without a teacher, you are unable to do anything.*
- (3) *If a child wants to learn how to write, he/she must love the teacher first.*
- (4) *Children are only successful if they are instructed by a teacher.*

In sum, from generation to generation, in Vietnamese people's eyes a teacher is a *guru* who is supposed to satisfy learners in the search for the truth (in knowledge) and virtues (in life) (Phuong-Mai et al., 2006). Such myths have been imbedded in the culture for generations. Therefore, it is easy to understand why Vietnamese students are very familiar with accepting knowledge transmitted from the teacher and feel reluctant to express their own ideas in discussions. To change the traditional worldview, there need to be new thoughts about the role of the teacher in transforming knowledge.

In brief, under the framework of CLA, tensions, contradictions and invisible drivers of the traditional learning approach of teacher-centeredness at Vietnamese education institutions are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2.

*Tensions, contradictions and invisible drivers of the traditional learning approach in Vietnam under the framework of CLA*

Levels of CLA	Layers of the learning approach reform in Vietnam
Litany	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vietnamese learners are claimed to be 'rote', surface, passive, quiet learners who always use text as the definitive source of knowledge and do not participate in class.</li> <li>• Vietnam needs to change its education system</li> <li>• West is best??? What are the headlines of the criticisms and the alternatives?</li> <li>• Various educational reforms have been carried out to change the situation.</li> </ul>
Systematic causes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Big classes: the student-centered learning approach is not supported in crowded classes</li> <li>• Individual and self-learning is limited by limitations of materials and resources</li> <li>• Too much content</li> </ul>
Discourse/Worldview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teacher's perceptions about teaching and learning that Confucian students only need to receive knowledge from teachers.</li> <li>• Culture of Power Distance is predominant. Students should obey and listen to teachers.</li> <li>• Culture as 'face' saving: not express personal ideas or answer a question in the formal class</li> <li>• New worldview: Sociocultural views of Vygotsky (1978)</li> </ul>
Myth/metaphor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Confucius sayings</li> </ul> <p><i>"One word said by the teacher is worth tons of gold"</i>  <i>"If you want to become a teacher, you first need to respect your teachers"</i></p>

If the reform succeeds, the desired future of new teaching and learning approaches at Vietnamese colleges would be seen at four levels as in Table 3.

Table 3.

*The desired future of new teaching and learning approach in Vietnam under the framework of CLA*

Levels of CLA	Layers of new teaching and learning approaches in Vietnam
Litany	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students shift from passive to active learning.</li> <li>• Teachers' instruction would not be the unique and key resource of knowledge.</li> <li>• Assessment criteria shift from measuring knowledge and understandings based on memorized knowledge to assessing students' learning based on analyzing and synthesizing skills.</li> </ul>
Systematic causes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Distance courses are developed so that students can choose to either attend classes physically or take distance courses.</li> <li>• Class size is reduced. Electronic libraries are developed so that students can access to different sources of readings.</li> <li>• Lessons would not be only textbooks but include practical practices in reality so that students can open their mind to diverse perspectives.</li> </ul>
Discourse/Worldview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The teacher's role as the only one who can deliver knowledge would be replaced by peer to peer and independent learning.</li> <li>• Students should be encouraged to have their own stance.</li> <li>• Incorrect points of view should be appreciated as a new perspective but not wrong knowledge.</li> </ul>
Myth/metaphor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• New sayings about the importance of learning from friends and the surrounding environment should be popularized. For instance, some of these following sayings are recently emerging:               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(1) <i>The teacher needs to know how to encourage and motivate students to learn by themselves.</i></li> <li>(2) <i>Learning from friends is easier and more practical than learning from the teacher.</i></li> </ol> <p>Regarding the order in family, people are used to sayings like "If children are better than parents, the family is very fortunate". Also, the culture of distant power and the discourse of over emphasizing the triangle of King-Father-Teacher are challenged to change.</p> </li> </ul>

## Conclusion

After applying CLA as a framework to discuss the situation of the present learning and teaching approach at Vietnamese education institutions and the implant of West-oriented approaches, the findings reveal that the traditional learning method at Vietnamese educational institutions is seen as outdated and inadequate. It needs to be replaced by new ideas. However, the learning approach reform is hindered by infrastructure conditions and resource limitations in the local context.

More importantly, Vietnamese culture of learning and principles of the student-centered learning approach are in potential conflict in several important respects. These two approaches embody different, even opposing, philosophies about the nature

of teaching and learning. For instance, while student-centered learning strongly encourages interactions between students, the Confucius approach does not encourage face-to-face discussions to come up with new ideas. The key values of these two approaches also show contrary assumptions about the respective roles and responsibilities of teachers and students (e.g. learner-centeredness vs. teacher dominance/control). They encourage different learning strategies (e.g. verbal activeness vs. mental activeness). They reward different qualities in students (e.g. independence and individuality in student-centeredness and receptiveness and conformity in the Confucian culture of learning) and value different classroom etiquettes.

Due to these fundamental differences, it appears hard to sweep away traditional practices and implant student-centered approach in their place. Before implementing any change, education policy makers should bear in mind that a methodology is only effective to the extent that teachers and students are willing to accept and implement it with good faith, and whether it is accepted or not is largely determined by the set of values and beliefs that these teachers and students have been socialized into. This problem may have arisen because Vietnamese educators are only concerned about imposing cooperative learning principles on students and expecting them to change their way of learning accordingly rather than providing them with the experiences that will help them to change. A large volume of literature on educational change has demonstrated that such approaches to learning should not be imposed because this situation easily causes rejections (Elmore, 1996).

Instead of imposing a collection of principles of the new approach on students and teachers, researchers need to address possible mismatches between principles of the student-centered approach and the local culture and infrastructure conditions. The suggested theoretical framework would include the upgrading of infrastructure to make the local context more supportive of the new learning approach. Moreover, professional development needs to be provided for the local teachers so that they are aware of disadvantages of the traditional teaching approach and appreciate advantages of the new approach, so that they can then influence students to change their approach to learning. Also, some principles of the new approach need to be modified to become more adaptive to the local context. This modified framework is the ultimate goal of the project that the researcher is conducting at the University of Queensland, Australia.

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