



Introducing Traditional Culture in the Teaching of Document Retrieval in Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract. Many higher education institutions today have introduced Document Retrieval in their curricula. However, students do not tend to take it seriously as it is not one of the core subjects in their studies. We introduced *Dream of the Red Chamber*, a popular classical Chinese novel, in the teaching of Document Retrieval, to improve quality of teaching and boost student interest. The novel is used as a guide and example to help students understand how important it is to master communications skills for studying Document Retrieval.

Keywords: *Dream of the Red Chamber* · Document Retrieval · Traditional culture · Classroom teaching

1 Introduction

Many institutions teach Document Retrieval as a subject, as it is essential for students' academic study, paper writing and research work and serves to provide better recommendations and guidelines for using the literature resources at the library. Beijing University of Civil Engineering and Architecture has taught undergraduate students Document Retrieval for over a decade and postgraduate students for several years. However, textbooks on Document Retrieval are used in classroom teaching, which tend to be highly specialized and tedious. Document Retrieval is often an optional subject and marginalized in most curricula. Students do not regard it as an important subject and fail to see the point of studying the subject. As a result, classroom discipline is often poor, and students tend to get by with only superficial knowledge.

Therefore, boosting student interest and attention is essential for improving teaching quality in classroom. Student perspective should be the starting point. Relevance to the real world should be emphasized and teaching should be approached with a human touch. When empathy is established, students will truly realize the importance of studying Document Retrieval and become more attentive and proactive. After years of exploration, I have chosen *Dream of the Red Chamber*, a classical Chinese literary work, as an entry point. By exploring the cultural and spiritual significance of the novel and combining that with the ethos of our institution, students were able to learn more effectively and gained a deeper understanding of the significance of communication. Quality of classroom teaching was also improved. This is conducted in a number of ways, detailed as follows.

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2 Explaining the Significance of the Subject with Dream of the Red Chamber

The first lecture is critical as it sets the tone for the remainder of the teaching. “It normally involves a general introduction of the subject, including its nature, importance, role and foundation, as well as its content, knowledge structure, learning methodology and prospect for application. The first lecture can effectively reflect the teacher’s expertise and ignite student interest” [1]. The essence of Document Retrieval lies in communication, or *gou tong* in Chinese, where *gou* stands for the water ways in a field of crops and *tong* represents flow and interconnection. Combining the two characters, it means “to make things flow.” Xunzi on Teachings of the Ru: “Circulating goods and money, telling good quality from the bad and debating the valuable and the worthless are where merchants prevail over gentlemen” [2]. Teaching students how to gain access to and make use of library resources, database and other forms of documents enables them to break through the confinement of time and space in their academic communication and acquire information in scientific research with ease. To help students genuinely appreciate the importance of Document Retrieval and communication, *Dream of the Red Chamber* was chosen as an entry point and a fast track to understanding the core idea of the subject and improving learning effectiveness. In the first lecture, Xue Baochai, a character in the novel, was selected for analysis. The character was introduced to explain why it is necessary to study Document Retrieval and hone the skills of academic communication.

From an overview of the 120 chapters of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, one will find that Xue Baochai is one of the most important characters of the book. She is the main participant of its love story, and her character was forged differently from Lin Daiyu and Jia Baoyu. Both Lin and Jia go through maturing process of their thoughts and personality, while the same cannot be said of Xue. The author developed the most spiritually rich and logically complex character in Xue, which validates all her internal conflicts and predicaments. To outsiders, Xue is caring and empathetic towards others, and has a well-rounded way of treating people. She is the perfect example of how women should behave in the Ru perspective. This is reflected in how she collected the cotton coat for Xing Xiuyan and gifted Lin Daiyu an edible bird’s nest. Such specific behaviors have earned her remarks such as this, “in contrast to Daiyu with her air of lofty self-sufficiency and total obliviousness to all who did not move on the same exalted level as herself, Bao-chai had a generous, accommodating disposition which greatly endeared her to subordinates, so that even the tiniest maid looked on Miss Baochai as a familiar friend” [3]. In addition, Xue Baochai tries to persuade Jia Baoyu to adhere to the traditional ideas and perfect herself through reading. However, she may appear warm, caring to all on the outside, her internal longings are a far cry from what she reveals herself to be. She follows the Buddhist philosophy and way of life. She allows the nature to take its course through calmness and inaction. She does not have many materialistic desires. Whatever ups and downs she encounters in life, she always maintains a peaceful heart, as if she is on a path of spiritual cultivation. Her house looks like this, “Indoors, however, it was stark and bare.” (Penguin Books Ltd. Kindle Edition). The only decoration in Bao-chai’s room was a vase of the cheaper kind of Ding ware on the table, with a few chrysanthemums in it. Apart from the flowers there were only a few books and some tea-things on the table. The bed-hangings were of black gauze, and the quilts and covers were of the same

forbidding plainness as the hangings” [4]. From the Clinging Vine Xue Bao-chai reads for Jiao Baoyu, an aria in the style of a Buddhist *gāthā* to her literary works such as “The precious moments I would have you spare: But come fair, foul, or fine, I do not care” and “The filaments whence we are formed remain unchanging, no matter what separates or unifies”, all demonstrate that her body may remain in this world, her soul has transcended the worldliness. Inside her gentle, elegant tranquil self, was her burning love for her family. She would not hesitate to give up the image she has built for herself to protect her family. For example, in the “Raindrop Pavilion” incident, she responds without a shred of hesitation to shift the blame for eavesdropping to Lin Daiyu, leaving her family out of trouble. Although this could also be interpreted as her saving herself out of a predicament, this is vastly different from her typical image. In addition, whenever Xue experiences an emotional turmoil, such as the couple of times when she cries, it is because of her family. She would cry because of what Xue Pan says, or because of Baoyu’s marriage (by this time, Baoyu has already become her family). She is willing to make the greatest sacrifice for her family despite the agony she suffers. For example, on the wedding proposal “Next day, Aunt Xue returned to her apartment and told Bao-chai the details of the proposal, adding: ‘I have already given my consent.’ At first Bao-chai hung her head in silence. Then she began to cry” [5]. All these examples show that Xue Baochai only exhibits her strong emotions when she is faced with her family. However, when it comes to marriage, she chooses to abide by what the society and her family ask of her. She may appear calm and care-free, but deep down inside, she is confused and conflicted and disapproves of many societal behaviors then. This is reflected in her bitter satire on the “subject of crabs” and her conversations with people. Baochai has once said this to Lin Daiyu, “A boy’s proper business is to read books in order to gain an understanding of things, so that when he grows up, he can play his part in governing the country. Not that one hears of that happening much nowadays. Nowadays their reading seems to make them even worse than they were to start with. And unfortunately it isn’t merely a case of their being led astray by what they read. The books, too, are spoiled, by the false interpretations they put upon them. They would do better to leave books alone and take up business or agriculture. At least they wouldn’t do so much damage” [6].

Towards the end of the book, there are even more interactions between Xue Baochai and Jia Baoyu. In Chapter 118, Baochai advises Baoyu to read books, citing the Ru philosophy. In Chapter 119, when Baoyu bids farewell to his family, Baochai realizes, even before his conversation with Baochai, that he is not coming back. Therefore, “Bao-chai had already perceived the strangeness of the conversation. Not only were Bao-yu’s remarks ominous in themselves, but every word uttered by Lady Wang and Li Wan seemed laden with inauspicious meaning as well. Not daring to express this presentiment of hers openly, Bao-chai held back her tears and remained silent. Bao-yu came up to her and made her a deep bow. It seemed to them all such an eccentric way to behave, and no one could imagine what it was supposed to mean; nor did anyone dare to laugh. The general amazement increased when Bao-chai burst into floods of tears” [7]. Baochai notices something out of the ordinary. During Baoyu’s last moments in his earthly existence, although Baochai has a hunch about her inevitable and tragic ending as a widow for life, she still says calmly “It is time for you to go, there is no need to embark on another of your long speeches.” [8], She supports her husband’s choice, and

suggests that Baoyu need not dwell on earthly bonds and should go ahead and do what he is destined to do. Her remarks served as a “blow with a stick on his head,” so he replies ““Strange that you should be urging me on my way, I know it is time to go” [8]. It was Baochai who inspires Baoyu’s Buddhist enlightenment, and it was her again to conclude his earthly life. If Xue Baochai were truly a rule follower as perceived by other people, in the final farewell at the end of the book, Baochai would not make those remarks. This again reflects her conflicted thoughts. Although her and her family’s life will lead into endless troubles and hindrance thanks to Baoyu’s departure, she firmly stands by Baoyu’s choices, which is a stark contrast to her previous advice to Baoyu that he should study and pursue a career in the government. Therefore, Xue Baochai is merely a means by which the author expresses his tendencies in life choices, or lack thereof, which were forced and desperate. From a global perspective, although ancient China had had its fair share of glorious achievements in science, technology and culture, exemplified by the astronomical research by the monks of the Tang Dynasty, or the Horner’s method by Qin Jiushao of the Song Dynasty, or the ‘Jade Mirror of the Four Unknowns’ by Zhu Shijie of the Yuan Dynasty, it was far behind the rest of the world in global academic communication. In Cao Xueqin’s time, the world had gone through tremendous changes. If we consider his years of birth and death to be 1715 and 1763, respectively, Isaac Newton had already published *Philosophiæ Naturalis Principia Mathematica* thirty years before Cao was born, which paved the way for the ensuing revolutions in science and technology. About 10 years after Cao’s death, James Watt’s steam engine led the way for the Industrial Revolution, when many women won their place in the society and gained access to unprecedented dynamic and creative jobs in construction, offices and the cultural realm. “Taking women’s rise in social status and women’s liberation as an example, women of the ordinary class began to appear in factories and participated in industrial production. Thanks to the development and exploitation of capitalism, women began to wake up with much more self-awareness and embarked on a journey of self-liberation. Middle-class women left their homes and stepped into the society. They participated in cultural undertakings, which served as an important opportunity to liberate themselves and showcase their personalities. Women of the upper class took advantage of their privileges in life and organized many cultural campaigns, which aggregated a large number of intellectuals to exchange ideas in academics, philosophy, life and art. These were the hubs for ideological and cultural exchanges, which directly led to the liberation of their mind and their rise in social hierarchy” [9]. These advanced technologies and profound changes in production and lifestyle cannot happen overnight. It takes a long time to brew and develop and requires communication of people from different regions of the world. Due to the restrictions on information dissemination and geographical location, the author of *Dream of the Red Chamber* had no access to the current information despite his profound knowledge of the traditional culture. Otherwise, the characters from his writings would probably have made completely different life choices, and Baochai would probably escape from the tricky situations in the story. Today, we live in a world where information travels at a high pace thanks to computers, information technology and other modern technologies. Anyone can access information on scientific research around the world real-time with the help of databases and digital libraries. These resources serve as an important drive for people’s quest for knowledge and competitive edge. Everyone can

decide on their life's path and change their destiny thanks to technology. Therefore, it is essential to study Document Retrieval in higher education. Every student can take this opportunity to improve their abilities and efficiency in academic communication and lay a solid foundation in their future studies. The skills acquired in this subject are the keys to independent study and self-improvement. In the first lecture, students can gain a deeper appreciation and understanding of Document Retrieval through the introduction and analysis above, and therefore attach greater importance to the subject. This lays a solid foundation for the subsequent teaching and learning.

3 Integrating Dream of the Red Chamber in Other Teaching Content

The modern age is one of information explosion. There is a wide array of sources of information, which comes in different shapes and forms. Social Media and We Media have also become important channels of communication. They can expand people's horizons but are also a crucible for disinformation and misinformation. By introducing the complexity in how Dream of the Red Chamber was written and the common controversy regarding its content and different version and combining the popular misinterpretations of the work seen on social media, students can be guided to perform searches and gain access to specialized and authoritative resources of research. For example, students can gain access to the original Dream of the Red Chamber and publications on its relevant research via various searching methods on the OPAC system for printed books in the library; they can access the latest research outcomes on online databases such as CNKI. While sharing professional journals on the research of Dream of the Red Chamber, the concepts such as of Journal Types, core journals of Peking University, CSSCI and impact factor can be introduced, to perform further screening processes on academic publications. Therefore, studying Document Retrieval can help student avoid the disruption of low-quality information and improve the comprehensiveness, expertise and accuracy of knowledge screening. Students can develop a sound understanding of the sources, categories proper uses of authoritative academic resources and lay a good foundation for their continuous growth in independent studies and scientific research.

While drafting a Document Retrieval report, students can choose a character in Dream of the Red Chamber as their topic, which increases their interest in practicing and data analysis. Furthermore, considering the ethos of our university as an institution specializing in architecture, topics such as "Architecture in Dream of the Red Chamber" can be chosen in student practice. This encourages students to search for relevant literature resources and inspire them to develop a deeper understanding a grasp of traditional Chinese culture and classical architecture. This also nurtures their interest and passion in architecture and enhance the cultural value of the subject.

In the final lecture of Document Retrieval, the following message was delivered to the students to leave a more profound impression and inspire them to keep learning: we once noticed a hot topic on Weibo - "What can the women in Dream of the Red Chamber do in the modern world." Among the many responses, a popular answer was that Baochai could be an entrepreneur or civil servant. Therefore, people today have a broader horizon and perspective thanks to science and technology as well as the extensive

and frequent spread of information. This could provide Baochai with more options for personal development, which was not something the author could offer Baochai in their time. Every student should establish their way of learning from and communicating with the outside world and their own way of continuous growth in the face of competition. Every student should lead a path for progress in their future and unlock more options in life. This is precisely the significance of Document Retrieval.

4 Conclusions

Based on the discussion above, one can see that the tragedy of Xue Baochai in *Dream of the Red Chamber* lies in the blocked channels of communication. To tackle this issue, one should harbor an open mind for communication and interaction. This is the only way one can go far in the race we refer to as life. In the modern age, one critical demand among aspiring students because of fierce competition is the timely access to updated information and intelligence. Through learning Document Retrieval, students can search for and analyze documents more effectively and efficiently, which inspires continuous growth in their academic journey. Introducing *Dream of the Red Chamber* can render teaching more thought-provoking and enhance students' perspective of the importance of communication. It also renders the lecture more informative and interesting. In the classroom surveys, students have also mentioned the introduction of *Dream of the Red Chamber* and find it highly interesting and innovative. They had new expectations for the lectures and some students performed literature search and analysis of *Dream of the Red Chamber* on topics in addition to those introduced in class. In conclusion, integrating *Dream of the Red Chamber* with the Document Retrieval lecture yielded positive results and feedback in the teaching practices.

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