

EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPERS THINKING ALOUD SPEAKEASY 2: *WU WEI* LEARNING AND TEACHING

Thursday, January 21st

CHARLIE REIS, EDUCATIONAL
DEVELOPMENT UNIT, XI'AN
JIAOTONG-LIVERPOOL
UNIVERSITY

charlie.reis@xjtlu.edu.cn

Celia Popovic and Fiona Smart invite you to our 2nd EDTA
Speakeasy

Active Student Centred Learning
through a *Wu Wei Lens

A Critical Perspective

Thursday Jan 21st 2021
10.00 to 11.30 (EST Canada);
15.00 to 16.30 (GMT, UK)

To register: email Fiona at f.smart@napier.ac.uk

Speakeasy – an illicit thinking den!
Where we encourage debate and thinking outside the
rules.

Note: *Wu Wei is informed by Daoist thinking and can be described as active learning inverted, with the focus on teacher passivity for student activity come join the provocation!



EDTA
SPEAKEASY

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WELCOME

Questions we will explore together are:

What is *wu wei*?

Why is *wu wei* worth thinking about for active learning and learning design?

How can we ourselves be more *wu wei*?

How can we help staff implement *wu wei* in their pedagogies?



WHO AM I

I am Charlie Reis, charlie.reis@xjtlu.edu.cn, Director of Educational Development Unit at Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University (XTJLU) in Suzhou.

Charlie Reis FHEA
Director PGCert
Acting Director EDU
SHED/SEDA/HEA
Founder CAPED

More importantly, my students started calling me 'the *wu wei* teacher' because they thought I was so lazy!

My Work:

Classical Chinese
knowledge in HE L&T
Motivation/Engagement
TNE
Sinofuturism/Sci-fi
Expertise

Wu Wei

圣人处无为之事
行不言之教
万物作而弗始
生而弗有
为而弗恃
功成而弗居
夫唯弗居
是以不去

The sage handles affairs by Non-doing (*wu wei*),
And practices teaching by not speaking.
He lets all things happen but does not initiate,
Lets them grow but does not possess,
Gets things done but does not take advantage,
Achieves his goal but claims no credit.
Just because he claims no credit,
His credit does not go away.

Wu, C (2016) THUS SPOKE LAOZI: A
New Translation with Commentaries
of DAODEJING . University of Hawai'i
Press: Honolulu. P.7.

Wu Wei

Wu wei is a Daoist concept translated in many ways, such as:

- doing nothing (Graham, 1989);
- nonaction (Moon 2015);
- non-doing, inaction (Phillips, 2015);
- having no activity (Wang, 1997);
- spontaneity (Keping, 1998);
- non-purposive action (Schwartz, 1985);
- effortless flow (Slingerland, 2017).



I think of it as ‘doing without doing’ from the perspective of students, or ‘purposeful inaction’ in the context of my organising learning. Moeller (2006) writes: *wu wei er wu bu wei* nonaction/but nothing is undone.

Wu Wei



Wu wei is a Daoist concept translated in many ways, such as:

- purposeful inaction (Moon, 2015);
- non-interference (Kirkland, 2001);
- effortless action, perfected action, acting without acting, acting without purpose, no doing/effort/exertion, no-self (Slingerland, 2000);
- non-deliberative doing (Chai, 2014);
- working to align with the Will of the Way (Tadd, 2019).

“[M]ost scholars agree, the maxim of nonaction does not mean that nothing is done or that nothing ever happens in the human realm. It rather expresses the paradoxical idea that greatest efficacy is achieved by non-interference or by allowing all events and all activities to unfold naturally and unimpeded.” (Moeller, 2015)

Doing without doing/purposeful inaction

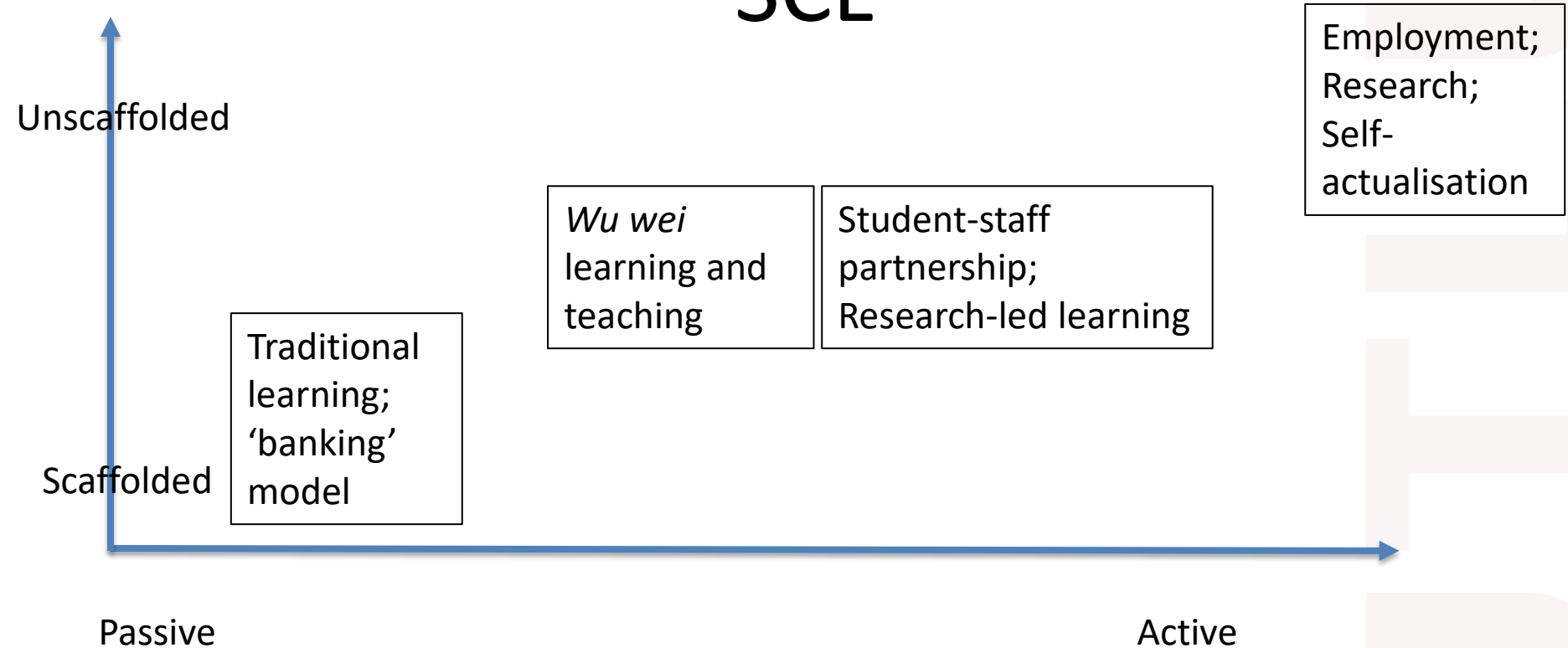
During a unit on Daoism, my students dubbed me the *wu wei* teacher because they couldn't believe I was so lazy.

Faced with students expecting to 'learn' passively, I teach by doing nothing (as little as possible), forcing students into roles of self-actualised, active learners.

Partnership and student self-actualisation are two possible logical conclusions of student-centredness. For student-centred active learning, partnerships, or student learning generally, the implication is the same; the students drive the focus and activity of learning. The argument, then, is what do we need to do to help staff successfully implement these pedagogies.



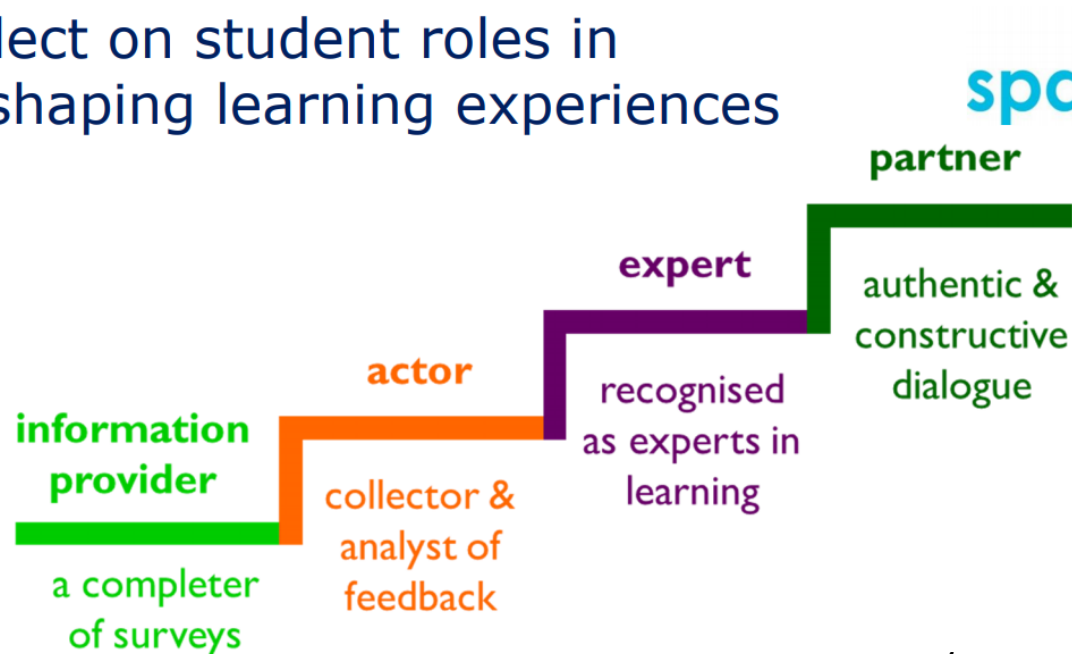
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I conceive of pedagogical ideas like wu wei teaching as being necessary for whatever the logical conclusions of student-centred learning is.

Simon Varwell's sparqs staircase

Reflect on student roles in re-shaping learning experiences



(Varwell, 2020)

To 'ascend' to better pedagogy, how do we reconceive of and explain development and traditional roles in HE?

Wu Wei and Rulers in Daoist Thinking

“In the Daodejing, as well as in texts associated with the Huang-Lao Daoism of late Warring States and early Han times, the notion of wu wei is first and foremost a political maxim that a ruler should adopt when trying to fulfil his primary task, namely bringing “order” (zhi 治) to his state and to the world. Chapter 3 states most succinctly: “Enact non-action, and nothing will not be in order.” (wei wu wei, ze wu bu zhi 為無為,則無不治)”

(Moeller, 2015)

Wu Wei and Rulers

Chapter 64 addresses the correct attitude toward desire: yu bu yu 欲不欲, meaning that we should desire to be without desires – is the ideal state, then, one wholly without desires? In what way does the absence of desire promote the well-being of the people? chapter 57 says that the ruler's being without action and desire causes people to simplify and order themselves: 我無為,而民自化. 我無欲,而民自樸. (Blake, 2015)

To the extent that we can explain the efficacy of non-action, it lies in the comprehension of the Dao that is made possible by the space within which desires are cleared away. For learning and teaching, this means letting go of strong positions of social organisation – 'knowledge' is not 'loose' as such, but roles are.

Ziran

Ziran is the way the world unfolds; it is self-generated or emergent. Ames and Hall (1995) call this an acosmotic beginning, nature just has a nature, a self-so.

- it-self-becoming; it-self growing; it-self-so-ing, nature, spontaneity (Wang, 1997)
- ‘what is so of itself’ or ‘so-in-and-of-itself’ (Coutinho, 2014, p. 74; Liu, 2015, p. 73; Slingerland, 2003, p. 97);

Moeller (2015) points out that chapter 25 of the Daodejing, ends with the line “the dao follows its self-so as a rule” (dao fa ziran 道法自然), implying that this is a larger universal principle of all nature; however, the text beings with beings.

Ziran

Ziran is also the self-so of not just Being, but beings.

- so-of-itself (Slingerland, 2003, p.14), or the nature of something;
- the spontaneous action of a thing that originates from that thing's own nature, not caused by factors external to it/alien to its nature (Coutinho, 2014, p. 74; Slingerland, 2003, p. 97).
- The acting out of the nature of an actor/thing.

“For instance, a butterfly manifesting ziran is simply acting out its being-a-butterfly, and it is in this natural activity that Dao consists” (Maria, 2017).

Ziran and Learning and Teaching

“The spontaneity that ziran connotes though should not be understood as unbridled freedom to act out of whim. Rather, ziran means having sensitivity and responsiveness to others and to one’s environment (Lai, 2007, p. 334).” (Maria, 2017).

Ziran is here about the nature of students. How can we plan adequately for learning if planning gets in the way of learning?

The notion is the nature of the students (*ziran*) needs to be allowed to take its natural course in order for the student to realise her nature.

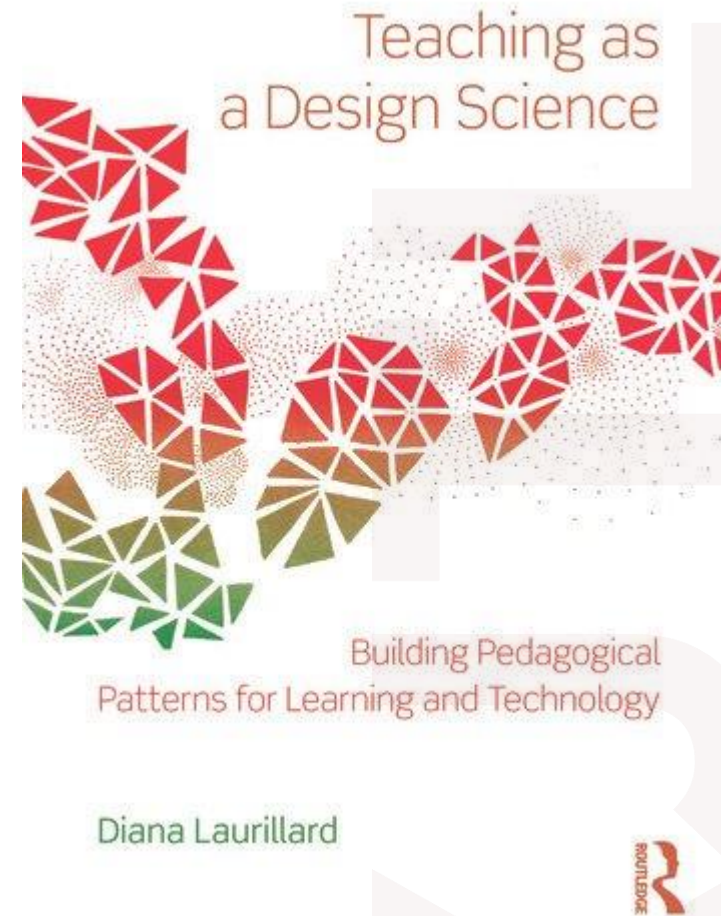
Therefore, the notion also implies agile planning and outcomes to allow the learner to unfold.

Wu Wei, Ziran and Laurillard

The more we think about learning and design, the more we need to think about the limits of design or how not to overdesign. If you want a German alternative to *wu wei*, I offer two:

- *Gelassenheit* or waiting/non-purposive thinking (Heidegger, 1966);
- *Weniger ist Mehr* or less is more (Galloway, 2016 attributed to van de Rohe, 1929).

The general idea is the same. If the teacher takes up all the space, where and how does the student fit in?



Wu Wei and Practical Wisdom in HE

“*Wu wei*’ ... refers not to what is or is not being done but to the phenomenological state of the doer. As Pang Pu notes in his discussion of *wu wei*, the term denotes ‘not a basic form of action, but the mental state of the actor—the spiritual state (*jingshen zhuangtai*) that obtains at the very moment of action’ (1994: 15).”

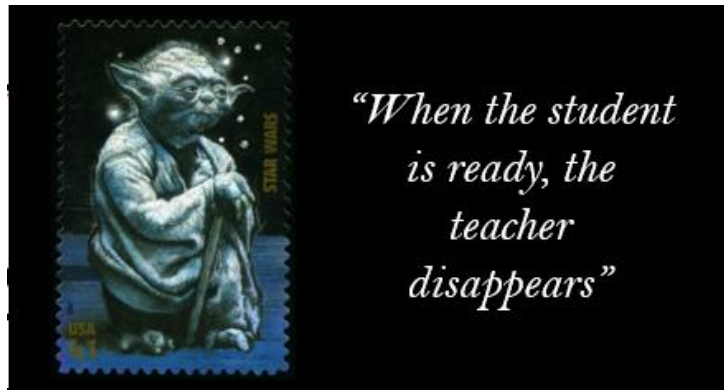
(Slingerland, 2000, p.7)

For our purposes today, *wu wei* can be thought of as the embodiment of practical wisdom for noninterference: knowing when to let things be or when you (staff) need to be still in order to learning to take place.

Getting to Wu Wei in a Chinese Context

From cooperative critical thinking to self-actualisation.

Why did this work?



<http://startoverhere.com/mentors/>

“When the student is ready, the teacher will appear,” is a gnomic quote variously attributed to Asian thinkers.

Why Wu Wei? Tradition, Context and Power

A natural context is developed from the students' experiences that is personalised and relevant to them, both in terms of the model (in my case using classical Chinese knowledge to approach contemporary thinking about learning and teaching) of an educator and, more importantly, all this doing by students results in deeper learning.

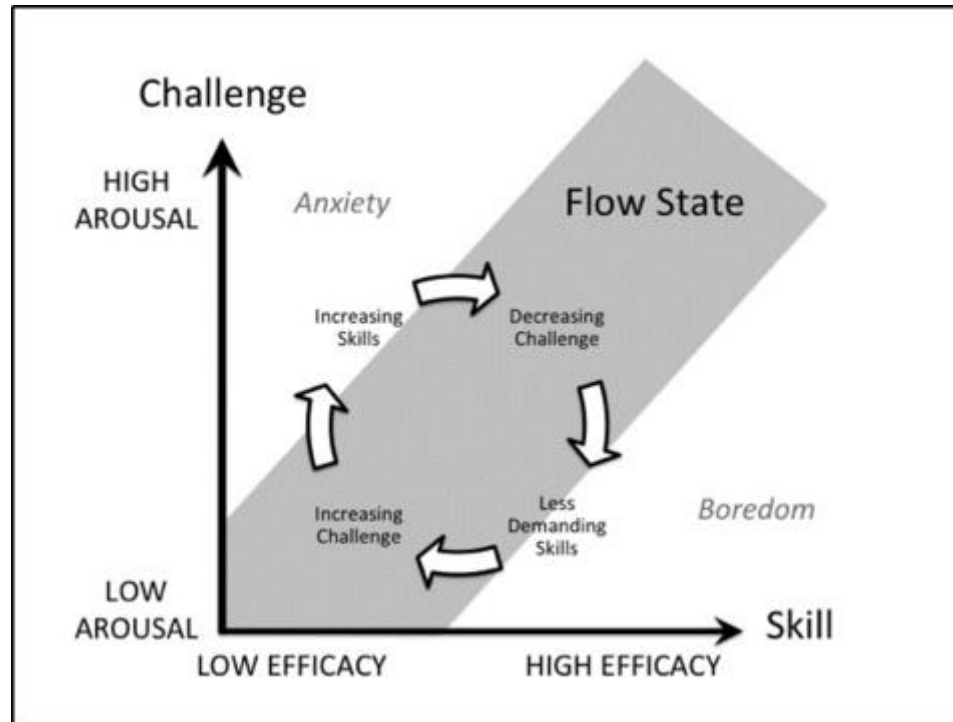
This is a Chinese, but non-Confucian model, opening possibilities to phenomenologically reframe the classroom for students and staff as a place where focus, discursive power and the production of knowledge are consciously left for the student to take more ownership of.

Why Wu Wei? Psychology and Flow

The deeper context gives meaning to experience and learning; although, the level of support must be within the ZPD of your students.

In the context of Csíkszentmihályi's (1996) notion of flow, the interplay between wu wei and ziran opens space for the student to flow into, ideally so that they experience flow themselves, which is the Daoist notion of effortless action.

Why Wu Wei? Psychology and Flow



Oliveira, R. (n.d.) How to Foster the Flow State [online] OptimOZ: Hack Your Life. Available at: <https://www.optimoz.com.au/blogs/news/174434951-how-to-foster-the-flow-state>.

Accessed: 30 November, 2020

According to Csikszentmihalyi (1997) the autotelic person “tends to enjoy life” and “do things for their own sake, rather than in order to achieve some later external goal”. Traits of the autotelic include: a general curiosity and interest in life, persistence, and low self-centeredness.

Why Wu Wei? Student Accomplishment

All courses have assessments and results; something is accomplished. This is not what the teacher has accomplished.

Why not highlight the growth and development of students as it relates to the goals and outcomes of learning, in the narrowest and broadest definitions?

The ruler rules weightlessly, he is not a burden to the ruled. When he is “in front” of the people, he does not stand in their way and does not block or obstruct their actions. (Moller, 2006, p. 59)



We could also call this student self-actualisation.

Why Wu Wei? Student Peak Performance

“But we now understand that there’s no such thing as a predefined ability. The brain is adaptable, and training can create skills—such as perfect pitch—that did not exist before. This is a game changer, because learning now becomes a way of creating abilities rather than of bringing people to the point where they can take advantage of their innate ones. In this new world it no longer makes sense to think of people as born with fixed reserves of potential; instead, potential is an expandable vessel, shaped by the various things we do throughout our lives. Learning isn’t a way of reaching one’s potential but rather a way of developing it. We can create our own potential.”
(Ericson & Pool, 2016. p.12)



We could also call this life-long learning for expertise.

Why Wu Wei? Spontaneity

Students are free of overmuch control. They must use all their resources rather than just practising a pre-selected item or following the path – navigating the obstacles – the teacher has created for them.

This is a more spontaneous use of thought and language which forces students to use their intellectual resources to make meaning by *doing* something that they have *ownership* of.

An aspect of the non-action of the ruler is his “hiddenness.” He is as invisible as the root of a plant. Just as the root is always below the plant, he stays “under the surface” of the people. (Moeller, 2006, p.61)



This is the ‘root’ of entrepreneurialism/ career-readiness.

Why Wu Wei? Authenticity

Authenticity is used differently by different writers; however, teacher inaction resulting in an authentic learning activity generally does three things:



1. Relates directly to the world as the students are figuring things out (knowledge and how to acquire it);
2. Forces students to be communicative and create language/thought/solutions;
3. Has meaning and objectives that are partnership-driven.

Why Wu Wei? Academic identity

As the ziran of students flows into the phenomenal space of learning and teaching, they are increasingly driving the conversation in the classroom and creating knowledge, or participating in academic discourse at the appropriate level.

Conceived of as such, this makes the vision of academic identity, practice, convention and integrity a natural part of learning.



© picture-alliance/KPA/United Archives

Why Wu Wei? Relevant models

Obviously, a model based on Laozi is culturally relevant to our students at XJTLU. What about other models?



1. What 'model' of education do they generally expect?
2. What learning behaviours does this imply?
3. What learning behaviours would you like your students to have?
4. What new or alternate models can you think of to engender those learning behaviours?

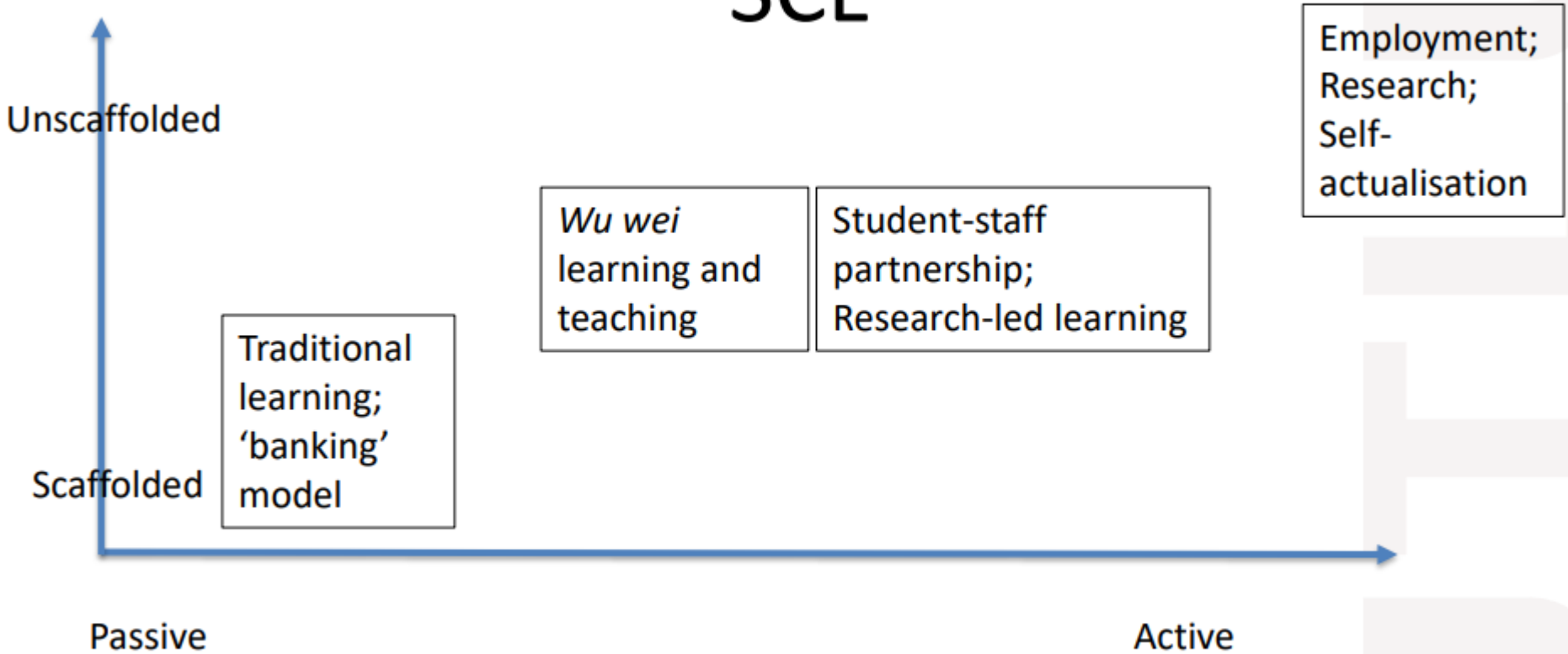
Daodejing Ch. 51

生而不有
为而不恃
长而不宰
是谓玄德

Birthing but not possessing,
Getting things done but not taking advantage,
Leading but not dominating—
This is called the Profound *De* [virtue].

(Trans. Wu, 2016, p. 111-112)

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Does this work for your staff?

What would you include as principles for learning design to help staff actualise student-centred active learning?

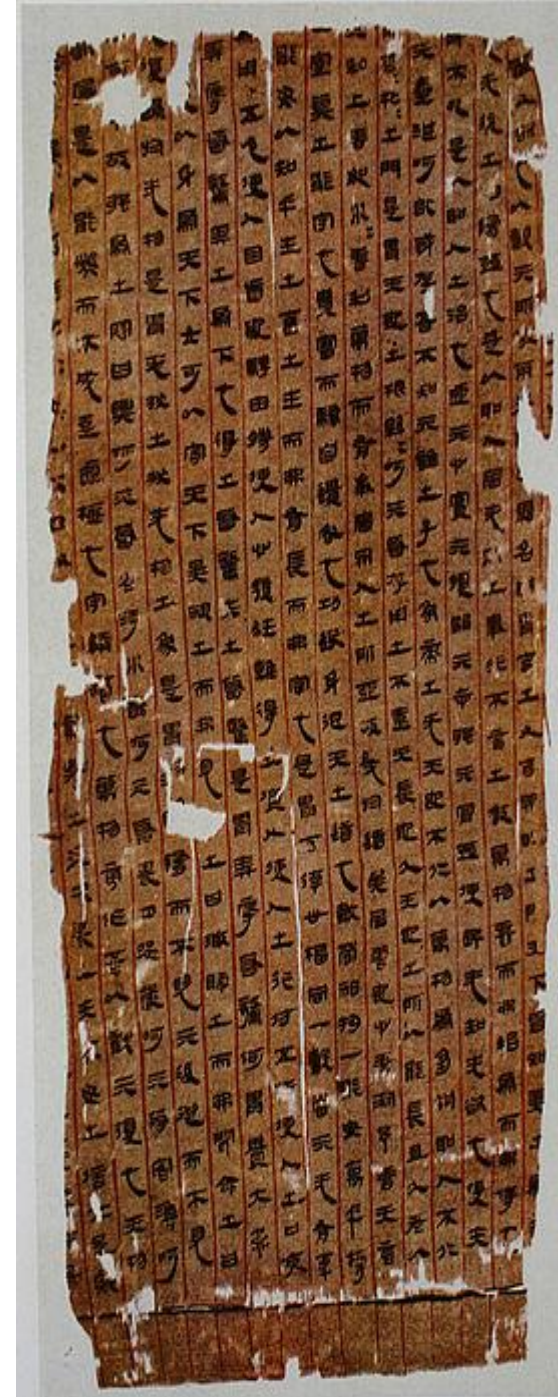
Thank you

多言数穷 不如守中

Too many words lead to quick exhaustion; Better stay centred. Dao ch. 5

charlie.reis@xjtlu.edu.cn

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