

Challenging the Hegemony of Western Views of Learning

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Abstract: *This symposium will challenge the hegemony of Western conceptions of learning through the presentation of conceptions of knowing and learning based in alternative epistemological systems. The following views of knowing and learning will be presented: Confucian, Hindu, Maori, Islamic, and African Indigenous Knowledge.*

Beginning with the 1928 publication of Thorndike et al.'s landmark study of adult learning, the knowledge base that has developed around learning and adult learning has been firmly lodged in Western values and culture. Research and theory in adult learning to a large extent assumes that the mind and body are split, thus leading to an emphasis on cognition, information processing, intelligence measures, cognitive development and so on. Embedded in this focus are the cultural values of privileging the *individual* learner over the collective, and promoting *autonomy and independence* of thought and action over collectivism and interdependence. Andragogy, self-directed learning, and much of the literature on transformational learning position self-direction, independence, rational discourse and reflective thought as pinnacles of adult learning theory.

That Western notions of learning dominate is evidenced by the use of Western textbooks, journals, and conference proceedings in adult education graduate programs in Asia and Africa. In addition, the curriculum that international students study in graduate programs in North America is of course Western. While there is some recent work by Western scholars on spirituality, embodied or somatic knowing, emotions, aesthetics, and the "nonrational," these perspectives are still very much on the margins of the field.

Foucault (1980) and other writers argue that it is possible to unearth other forms of knowledge than the dominant worldview of the West. What he calls "subjugated knowledge" is de-legitimate, local and without authority. But we need only look beyond the borders of North America and Western Europe to find major systems of thought and beliefs embedded in entirely different cultural values that can be drawn upon in this struggle--systems that pre-date Thorndike and that encompass the greater part of the world's peoples. For example, in a study of self-directed learning in the Korean context, most of the Western values were rejected. Rather, "becoming independent without being interdependent passes for immaturity or self-centeredness" and that for a nation that has faced numerous enemies, "collectivism and collaboration are taught from one's childhood as one of the most important survival skills and moral virtues" (Yoon Nah, December 3, 2000, personal communication). As another example, the notion of transformational learning from a Buddhist thought system involves "increased insight into the nature of reality result[ing] in an understanding of the interconnection of all living beings and a decrease in human suffering" (Brooks, 2000, p. 166). Brooks goes on to

point out that “although Buddhism is a part of mainstream institutional culture in many Asian nations, it stands as an alternative to the mainstream in the West” (p. 166).

The purpose of this symposium is to challenge the hegemony of Western conceptions of learning through the presentation of conceptions of knowing and learning based in alternative epistemological systems. In particular, the following systems’ views of knowing and learning will be presented: Confucian, Hindu, Maori, Islamic, and African Indigenous Knowledge.

In direct contrast to Western notions of learning, cutting across these systems are the common themes of (1) an emphasis on interdependence instead of independence in learning, (2) of spiritual, mind, body, and emotional unity in learning, versus a focus on the cognitive, (3) of life experience and wisdom over youth, and (4) informal learning and folklore over schooling and book knowledge. By exposing Western educators to these alternative understandings of learning and adult learning in particular, it is hoped that not only will the domination of Western notions of learning be challenged, but that the physical, spiritual and emotional can be brought alongside the cognitive for a more holistic understanding of adult learning.

Adult Learning from a Confucian Way of Thinking

Youngwha Kee

Confucian notions and perspectives of adult learning are based on four basic books of Confucianism: *Confucian Analects*, *Mencius*, *The Great Learning*, and *The Doctrine of the Mean*. Although *The Great Learning* mainly focuses on the Confucian way of learning, the other three books have established Confucian thought of learning, which were based on Kung-tzu’s philosophy and ideas.

The concept of adult learning is to imitate the virtues of a person in Chu Hsi’s interpretation of Confucian Analects. According to Chu Hsi, a person who does not know how to act in a situation will follow the example of a person to be capable of. Imitation of the conduct of the Sages is true learning. It was also expressed from two characters “Hak(學) and Seb(習)” by Confucius, those can be translated into one word “learning” in English. Kung-tzu taught the principle of learning as Hak-Yi-Shi-Seub (學而時習), which represents the enjoyment of learning through daily experience. Especially, Seub (習) has the literary meaning of a bird which is learning to fly by the continuous practice of flapping her/his wings to imitate an example of flapping. Hak-Yi-Shi-Seub expresses a constant symbolic relationship with the world around us to feed off of, or learn from, the myriad of situations we encounter as we go through our whole life.

The adult learning process based on Confucianism is a highly complex process which involves commitment, continuous effort and a holistic approach according to *The Great Learning*. This learning process is continuous and constructed by learners through the inner self interacting with nature. It is a project that can not be completed in a limited time frame. It emphasizes meditation to control oneself and internal integration between self and nature. And it will be extended through continuous dialogues with others within structures of human relationships. It is a holistic approach of learning to be fully human through self rectification and spiritual study.

The purpose of adult learning is to renovate the people, to love the people, and to rest in the highest excellence. According to *The Great Learning*, there are eight steps that should be followed to reach highest excellence; the investigation of things, extension of knowledge, sincerity of the will, rectification of the mind, cultivation of the personal life, regulation of the

family, national order, and world peace. Adult learning is a guide to become fully human. The adult learning related to Confucianism can not be used as a tool for achieving some goals in a certain situation. So, the contents of learning are not related to vocational or skill acquirement. It is totally focused on spiritual things.

According to *The Great Learning*, the method of adult learning highlights self-directed learning and peer learning. *Confucian Analects* (7:21) mentions that “there is a teacher when we walked together on the road although just three persons walked.” It emphasizes peer learning among adult learners. Moreover, *Confucian Analects* (7:8) says that teachers must wait until adult learners become understood by themselves, and that by this time teachers must again help their understanding through self-directed learning.

The relationship between teacher and students is not equal as compared with the Western society. The teacher is respected by the society members and learners are asked to obey their teachers. This comes from the Confucian idea in ‘gun(君-king) sa(師-teacher) bu(父-parent) ilche(一體-the same body) in Chinese characters. That means “teacher, parent, and king are treated equally and have the same importance in one’s lives.” This idea is still prevalent in Confucian educational systems in Korea, Taiwan, and China.

The Hindu Perspective

Logama Doraisamy and Swathi Nath Thaker

The Goddesses of Knowledge, Wealth, and Bravery fought a long battle to establish which field supersedes the others by portraying a specific scenario in abstract form in supporting their case. Finally, a consensus is reached that all three Goddesses and their values are equally essential for human existence.

The aged old Hindu education system is structured towards the fulfillment of knowledge to seekers of truth, forming the fabric of the Indian Civilization. The Vedic system (*source of Hinduism*) emphasizes experiential learning administered on a very personal basis in the ashram (*spiritual hostel*) environment where seekers become informally associated with their respective masters on the premise that “when the student is ready the teacher shall appear.” The relationship between teacher (known as *guru*) and student is one that is sacred and revered, and is one that can be viewed as an apprenticeship. However, while the Western notion of this concept explores the master teaching the pupil a specific trade, a guru focuses less on mastering tasks and increasingly on aiding the student in individualized development. Herein lies a key distinction in educational objectives between Western thought and Hindu philosophy. Though Hinduism does allow for individuation, its purpose is on spiritual growth rather than on meeting and/or obtaining particular goals.

In order to progress towards this type of enlightenment, all aspirants first learn about *Dharma* (the righteous way of living) which encompasses one’s duties to humankind, animals and the environment. Daily yoga practices are conducted to strengthen their mind through the discipline of the body with exercises and breathing techniques. The principle of *karma* (cause and effect) is clearly demonstrated with stories and epics so that one becomes more responsible. Through these activities, individuals are not only seeking knowledge, but also wisdom. This culture places reverence not only on the wisdom of elders, but also on the spoken word. Hinduism is encompassed by an oral tradition, noting the importance of stories and the knowledge that they provide what cannot be found in texts.

In Hindu myth devotion and prayer are highly symbolic and ritualistic. In order to have effective relationships students are taught that there is only one life, one god, one truth and one

love. The overall mission of a Hindu learner is to discover oneself as it is the only means and path to liberation and wisdom. However, this self-discovery is not the end of the spiritual journey, but rather a stepping stone to gaining a more holistic understanding of the universe. Though Western belief teaches that an individual is empowered through himself or herself, Hinduism argues that true empowerment emerges through an understanding of the sources of knowledge, not just its components, thus leading to unity with the universe and, at times, a renouncing of the self.

This notion of foregoing identity in order to reach a state of higher understanding is powerful, and often neglected in Western thought. There is a strong emphasis on individuation in the West which is not readily apparent in Hinduism. The Hindu learner continually strives to understand the larger picture and his or her connection to the universe as a whole. It can be argued that this mentality allows the learners to open themselves to various sources of knowledge. By allowing a variety of forms of knowledge, such as through meditation and stories, and not relying solely on the printed word, the Hindu learner is able to obtain a level of spiritual being that is often difficult for the Western student. As the Western educational system begins to value other ways of knowing, its learners will have an opportunity to focus less on the self and increasingly on forming a unity with the world at large.

Maori Concepts of Learning and Knowledge

Brian Findsen

He aha te mea nui o te ao? He tangata, he tangata, he tangata.

(What is the most important thing in life? It's people, it's people, it's people.)

The above proverb from Maori traditions stresses the centrality of people to any activity of living. Learning is no exception. Maori learning has always been lifelong and lifewide, long before these concepts became fashionable in adult education circles and beyond. *Ako*, the Maori word for learning, necessarily entails an historical and cultural dimension and is also the word for teaching. Before Freire explained the concepts of teacher-student and student-teacher, the term *ako* did not differentiate between those who dispense knowledge and those who acquire it. Knowledge is always a collective entity.

In this situation I need to state my positionality in relation to the construction of Maori knowledge. As a New Zealander and student of *Maoritanga* (things Maori), I offer an "insider" perspective; as a *Pakeha* (European), I offer an "outsider" viewpoint, unavoidably Eurocentric to a degree. I can never be bi-cultural in the same way as a Maori person who is immersed in the dominant culture and subject to its oppressive power relations; I choose as a member of the dominant colonizing group to better understand Maori concepts and perspectives.

The Treaty of Waitangi provides much of the policy context for Maori self-determination and what counts as knowledge in officially bi-cultural Aotearoa New Zealand today. In this contemporary society, the Treaty, signed in 1840 by 512 chiefs of the Maori people and Governor Hobson, on behalf of the British Crown, functions as a blueprint for relations between *tangata whenua* (people of the land) and *taiwi* (non-Maori), including relationships within the education realm. Importantly, three principles derived from the Treaty are prominent in current Government social policy – protection (of *taonga* or cherished possessions such as language); partnership (moving forward on an equal power basis); participation (the rights of Maori to active citizenry, including equality of educational opportunity and outcomes).

In discussing Maori concepts, traditional tribal structures need to be analyzed to provide the basis for the social construction of knowledge. Maori trace their *whakapapa* (genealogy) back to the Great Migration of the seven *waka* (canoes). Each *waka* claimed geographically

different parts of Aotearoa for *iwi* (tribes). Within each *iwi* are *hapu* (sub-tribes) and within *hapu* are *whanau* (extended families). Hence, the *whanau* serves as a fundamental unit for living and learning. While *iwi* were originally concentrated in particular geographical areas, the reality now, after massive urbanisation, is that Maori people are scattered through the country though usually anchored to their tribal identity. Knowledge is a *taonga*, unevenly distributed, though highly valued; some of it is *tapu* (sacred) and controlled traditionally by *tohunga* (experts). While there is much in common among *iwi*, there are also significant differences, related to *marae* (community sites for *hapu/iwi*) protocol. Much knowledge is constructed and reinforced via *hui* (meetings) held on *marae* where local customs are emphasized and *whanau* socialization occurs. However, especially in urban settings, some of the traditional aspects of learning have been diminished and new social practices established.

One of the prominent features of New Zealand life is the increasing autonomy claimed by Maori in accord with *tino rangatiratanga* (self-determination). This bid by Maori for greater control over their lives is mirrored in other parts of the world where indigenous peoples are making serious efforts to reclaim political, economic and educational sovereignty. As Maori have been disenfranchised from much of government funded education (as in evidence through historical national statistics of under-achievement), their solution has been to rebuild Maori collective consciousness through establishing their own sites of learning where control is in their own hands. Knowledge is defined and constructed by Maori for Maori and learned in culturally appropriate ways. *Kohanga reo* (language nests) began in 1981 where pre-schoolers are taught according to Maori customs in *te reo* (Maori language); currently over 600 exist. Following this initiative are 60 *Kura kaupapa Maori* (Maori elementary/secondary schools) and new *whare wananga* (houses of learning for adults). Hence, a lifelong education system, consisting of *kaupapa* Maori education institutions, has been established by Maori, assisted to a modest extent by the public purse. The struggle has been hard but the rewards great.

In *kaupapa* Maori education institutions, consistent with over-arching principles derived from the Treaty, there are six sub-principles adopted by prominent Maori educators (see Bishop and Glynn, 2003). These principles are:

1. *Tino rangatiratanga* (the principle of relative autonomy). Organizers of the *kura* (schools) make all the required administrative, staffing and pedagogical decisions.
2. *Taonga tuku iho* (cultural aspirations principle). To be Maori is to be normal. Maori language and knowledge are valued and legitimated.
3. *Ako*: principle of reciprocal learning. Teaching and learning are connected to the real lives of Maori, cognizant of their life circumstances.
4. *Kia piki ake I nga raruraru o te kainga* (mediation of socio-economic and home difficulties principle). Participation in *kura* reaches into the homes of Maori and families are expected to participate in *kura* activities.
5. *Whanau*. Used in both a literal and metaphorical sense to encompass collectives of people working towards a common goal.
6. *Kaupapa* (collective vision or philosophy). This relates to a collective vision of what constitutes excellence in Maori education.

The fundamental essence of *kura kaupapa* Maori is to assist Maori families to problem solve in a culturally suitable fashion and to work alongside children in education and enhance their own lifelong learning aspirations.

Adult Learning from an Islamic Perspective

Mazanah Mohamad and Mazalan Kamis

“Islam” which derived from the word “SLM” means peace, purity, submission and obedience. From the religious context it means “total submission to the will of Allah and obedient to His law.” Muslim draws upon the Qur’an as a primary learning source and supplements it with the hadith; the recorded sayings of Prophet Muhamad.

Islam is a comprehensive way of life and it pays special attention to education and knowledge seeking. In some aspects, the Islamic perspective on learning differs from the West. This includes the purpose of knowledge, communal obligation, responsibility to share knowledge, and the teacher-student relationship.

Learning is considered sacred and obligatory for an individual as well as the community. It is a form of “jihad” (struggle). In the very first verse of the Qur’an, the Prophet was instructed to read:

“Read! In the name of your Lord, Who has created (all that exists). Read! And your Lord is the most generous. Who has taught (the writing) by the pen. Has taught man that which he knew not.” [Qur’an 96:1-5].

In Islam, the purpose of education is to bring humankind closer to God and His creation. Since God is “the source of knowledge, by knowing more they felt they were drawing near to God” (Husain & Ashraf, 1979, p.11). The Qur’an guides humans to investigate the phenomena of nature, so that they would recognize, worship and serve Allah. The Islamic notion of education integrates the rational, spiritual and social dimensions of a person (Cook, 1999). This notion is grounded on sincerity where knowledge gained is meant to guide practice and espouse humility. The Prophet said: “Actions are but by intention and every man shall have but that which he intended” (hadith by al Bukhari).

The emphasis on a communal learning obligation is unique as it stresses the believers’ responsibility to society. Education and the acquisition of knowledge are good only if “they serve to engender virtue in the individual and elevate the whole community” (Cook, 1999, p.349). Learners and society benefit from knowledge acquisition, “Are those who know equal to those who do not know?” (Qur’an, 39 : 9).

Islam recognizes that both learning and teaching are equally important. In his last sermon the Prophet said “Let those who are present inform those who are not” (Al-Hadith by Bukhari). In another hadith the Prophet calls for a person to “Be a scholar/teacher ..., or be a student who studies, or be a listener who listens to people who teach. Do not fall into the fourth category, i.e. none of the above.”

A teacher is a learned person who is a keeper of God’s treasure; that is, knowledge. He /she is like the sun, which being itself luminous, sheds light: “The passing away of a whole tribe is more tolerable than the death of one learned man (Faris & Ashraf, 2003).” The student-teacher relationship is thus, sacred. Therefore, “adab” (discipline of body, mind and spirit) must be observed when one interacts with one’s teacher.

Finally, learning is lifelong. The Prophet said, “Seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave.” The Prophet was 40 years old and illiterate when the Qur’an was first revealed to him. A well known Islamic scholar Al-Imam Shaffie described a person who ceased to learn as dead. Like a drop of water in the sea, one can never complete acquiring knowledge, a notion supported by the Qur’an (18:109). It is clear that age, gender or ethnicity should not be a barrier or a prerequisite for learning. Seeking, reflecting, and sharing knowledge is noblest of all in Islam.

Indigenous People and Learning: The Case of African Indigenous Education

Gabo Ntseane

Research on African traditional education (Ocitti, 1994; Morolong, 1996; Mautle, 2001; Magagula and Mazibuko, 2004) reveals that education and learning are not recent interventions in traditional societies. They had specific principles, methods and social institutions. The literature (Gumedi, 1996; Lange, 1997) also shows that a major principle of African indigenous knowledge systems is that to learn is to live usefully and happily with one's family, with one's community, one's society and with the spirits of one's ancestors, hence the importance of the words "*Botho*" in Setswana or "*Ubuntu*" in Zulu whose literal translation is "humanism of human beings collectively." Informality, collective learning, oral mode of instruction and acquisition of revealing knowledge through the processes of dreams and visions are also important. Unfortunately, current adult education practices have overlooked some of these important principles of African pedagogy. It is argued that a creative adult education practice that modernizes tradition but at the same time traditionalizes modernity is required.

In the African context, education is supposed to help groups of people reach the highest level of important societal values such as *botho* or humanism. By being *botho* the individual then becomes part of an empowered group of people who are honest, accommodating, sharing, committed to safe life at all costs and respecting the young and the old. The opposite of *botho* (or humanity) is selfishness, greediness and self-centeredness, virtues not good for humanism because they don't promote cooperation between individuals, cultures and nations.

However, the values of "*ubuntu*" have been marginalized in education because of the historical process of colonialism and a materialistic economy. The result is an education lacking in the ability to respond to the needs and interests of indigenous communities. Adult education has been accused of elevating technical rationality over other forms of knowledge, human thought and discourses.

Locally-based knowledge is generated through a systematic process of observing the local environment, experimenting with solutions and the re-adoption of previously identified solutions to changing environmental factors. It is acquired and shared through empirically based observation, imitation and continuous practice through a phased childhood and adolescence. It encourages *participatory education* through ceremonies and rituals, spiritual work, recreation work, and intellectual training such as story telling and poetry. Knowledge is stored in cultural and religious beliefs, taboos, folklore or myths and individual's practical experience. The lack of hierarchy and theoretical concepts allow easy sharing of knowledge.

In oral societies such as in Africa, every normal person besides being required to be a productive worker also plays the double role of learner and teacher. A unique form of formal instruction is the acquisition of revealed knowledge through the processes of dreams and visions. For example, many herbalists in Botswana claim that the secret of their medicine and how they should be administered were communicated to them mainly through dreams.

In the absence of literacy, Mautle (2001) observed that assessment in Botswana included performing group tasks and judging individual's character in relation to the overall group's performance. Real graduation occurred only after a group had successfully initiated the cohort that followed it. The graduating cohort is given a regiment name strategically picked from the needs of the society, not certificates.

Although this presentation advocates for the recognition of African indigenous knowledge, it by no means advocates for a complete uprooting of the other cultural aspects in the

current adult education curriculum. Only good aspects of African indigenous knowledge systems should be adapted.

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