

## Chapter Nine Learning and Knowing: Non-Western Perspectives

*The newborn infant only hours old is handed to the father who whispers into the newborn's ear, "God is Great. I bear witness there is no God but the one true God." So begins the Muslim's life journey. It is a journey of lifelong learning and discovery, a journey during which every Muslim discovers the greatness of God through the beauties and wonders of His creation.*

—MAZALAN KAMIS

For those of the Islamic faith, learning is indeed lifelong. It is also considered a sacred obligation to learn not for personal benefit, but for sharing with the whole community. Unfortunately, we know little about this perspective and other epistemological systems as we are immersed in our own Western orientation to learning and knowing. Indeed, this edition of *Learning in Adulthood* is primarily lodged in Western values and culture.

Beginning with the 1928 publication of Thorndike et al.'s landmark study of adult learning (Thorndike, Bregman, Tilton, & Woodyard, 1928), the knowledge base that has developed around learning and adult learning has been shaped by what counts as knowledge in a Western paradigm. 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

PRINTED BY: deborah.grant16@gmail.com. Printing is for personal, private use only. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted without publisher's prior permission. Violators will be prosecuted.

217

218

*individual* learner over the collective, and promoting *autonomy and independence* of thought and action over community 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 adult learning dominate is evidenced by the use of Western textbooks, journals, and conference proceedings in academic adult education programs not only in North America but in Asia and Africa. In addition, the curriculum that international students study in graduate programs in North America is, of course, primarily 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 (see **Chapter Eight**).

However, we need only look more closely inside our own borders, to Native Americans, for example, and beyond the borders of North America and Western Europe, to find major systems of thought and beliefs embedded in entirely different cultural values and epistemological systems that can be drawn upon to enlarge our understanding of adult learning. Some of these systems predate Thorndike by thousands of years and 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 (**Nah, 2000**). Rather, “a person becoming independent of his or her parents, teachers or other people, tends to be considered threatening [to] the stability of a community he or she belongs to. ... Becoming independent without being interdependent passes for immaturity or self-centeredness” (p. 18). Moreover, in a country 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” (p. 18).

In yet 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

PRINTED BY: deborah.grant16@gmail.com. Printing is for personal, private use only. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted without publisher's prior permission. Violators will be prosecuted.

Asian nations, it stands as an alternative to the mainstream in the West” (p. 166).

This chapter has a number of purposes. First, we introduce readers to the value of learning about other perspectives. Second, we discuss some key concepts involved in this endeavor, concepts such as the Western/non-Western dichotomy itself, ethnocentrism, culture, and indigenous knowledge. At the center of the chapter are short introductions to five different perspectives on learning and knowing; these five perspectives were first presented as a symposium at the 2005 Adult Education Research Conference and are but examples of how much we have to learn from other systems of learning. Finally, we will close with some commonalities or themes found across non-Western perspectives that stand in contrast to our Western orientation to learning.

## Why Study Other Ways of Learning and Knowing?

Some readers of this book might argue that since a Western perspective dominates what is considered the legitimate knowledge of adult learning, we need not bother ourselves with considering yet other systems of learning. This view is quite ethnocentric; that is, “the tendency to view one’s own cultural group as superior to others” (Reagan, 2005, p. 4), and being ethnocentric, reinforces the marginalization and oppression of other systems of knowing. The purpose of examining other systems is not to replace the Western tradition but rather to *expand* our understanding of learning and knowing.

Such exposure can affect our practice as adult educators in a number of ways. First, we might rethink our purposes as educators from largely transmitters of “validated Western information” to “a more compelling form of analysis ... engaging students in the interpretation of various knowledges and modes of knowledge production” (Semali & Kincheloe, 1999, p. 34). Closely aligned with this purpose is that considering other ways of knowing leads us to examine how knowledge is produced, whose interests are being served by this knowledge, and how knowledge comes to be validated or “official” (see **Chapter Ten**). “Such an awareness is too

PRINTED BY: deborah.grant16@gmail.com. Printing is for personal, private use only. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted without publisher's prior permission. Violators will be prosecuted.

219

220

often absent in Western education. In mainstream pedagogies we are taught to believe that the knowledge we consider official and valid has been produced in a neutral, noble, and altruistic manner. Such a view dismisses the cultural and power-related dimensions of knowledge production” (Semali & Kincheloe, 1999, p. 34).

Yet another purpose in becoming familiar with other knowledge systems is the benefit this knowledge will have in affecting our practice with learners having other than Western worldviews. Antone and Gamlin (2004) for example, argue that to be effective, literacy programs with Aboriginal people (a term they use to refer to First Nations, Inuit, and Métis persons and collectivities) must be more than “reading, numeracy and writing which is typically directed towards gaining access to mainstream employment” (p. 26). Rather, Aboriginal literacy

is about sustaining a particular worldview and about the survival of a distinct and vital culture. Being literate is about resymbolizing and reinterpreting past experience, while at the same time honouring traditional values. Being literate is about *living* these values in contemporary times. Being literate is about *visioning* a future in which an Aboriginal way of *being* will continue to thrive. Meaningful Aboriginal literacy will develop and find expression in everything that is done. Consequently Aboriginal literacy programs must reflect a broad approach that recognizes the unique ways that Aboriginal people represent their experience and knowledge. [p. 26; italics in original]

Another example of how having some familiarity with other worldviews can affect our practice as adult educators is in understanding how many Asian students view aspects of the teaching-learning transaction. Their reticence to question or speak out in our classes is due to years of training that speaking out might cause someone (the teacher in particular) to lose face; the accepted strategy is to personally approach the teacher outside class. Further, “silence is used by east Asian collectivists as an indication of strength, power, and disagreement, whereas individualists see it as an indication of weakness, shyness, or trouble” (Liu, 2001, p. 190). Finally, Wang (2006) points out that for a Chinese student, sharing something personal in our adult education classes is seen as a sign of weakness, a loss of manners, or an attempt to seek help.

PRINTED BY: deborah.grant16@gmail.com. Printing is for personal, private use only. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted without publisher's prior permission. Violators will be prosecuted.

A final value in expanding our understanding of learning to include perspectives outside of our traditional Western views is that we will be personally enriched. Such exposure leads to reflecting on our own ideas in new ways, and hearing others' stories about their learning contributes to our own meaning-making. While we can

acknowledge that no story perfectly evokes all that is true about our lives, ... we must also acknowledge that the more stories we have available to us, the richer are our resources ... the more voices and narratives to which we listen, the more abundantly we experience our lives. In fact, we often find that as different from ourselves as we may imagine the others who create those narratives to be, we can still find that the stories from their lives reflect something true about our own. In that case, for both their differences and their similarities, we can hardly afford to let some voices remain marginal and silenced and other voices dominate. [Brooks, 2000, p. 169]

For example, in one of our adult development classes an adult learner from India shared her story of living with her parents, as is the custom, until she was married at age thirty-two. She saw this as a great advantage in her learning to be a mature adult because she had her parents as constant role models. At the same time, she came to understand what aging meant for older adults and developed both compassion and admiration for the older generation.

## The Western/Non-Western Dichotomy, Culture, and Indigenous Knowledge

There are a number of concepts that are important to consider when stepping out of our Western-only perspective on learning. First to be considered is the dichotomy of Western versus non-Western. Culture and indigenous knowledge are two other concepts that inform this effort.

We have used "non-Western" in the title of this chapter to convey something different from the epistemology that many label "Western" that informs the rest of this book. This notion of dichotomies is itself a very Western concept, a fact not lost on us. Dichotomies such as *mind-body*, *nature-nurture*, *emotion-reason*, and *human-animal* are in fact an "obsession ... that runs through Western intellectual history" (Nisbett, 2003, p. 154). And, of course,

PRINTED BY: deborah.grant16@gmail.om. Printing is for personal, private use only. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted without publisher's prior permission. Violators will be prosecuted.

221

222

there are a number of anomalies in using these terms—for example, many indigenous peoples of North America do not adhere to a “Western” perspective. Also problematic is the suggestion that “Western” is the gold standard against which we measure non-Western, thus depriving non-Westerners of having legitimate knowledge apart from Western norms. So why do we use these categories? As Reagan (2005, p. 11) notes, “The biases inherent in the terms are in fact a significant and telling component of the phenomenon that we are concerned with studying. ... Thus, what begins as a false dichotomy can emerge as an effective way of challenging and reforming racist and ethnocentric assumptions and biases.”

A Western perspective is often traced to classical Greek culture where “personal freedom, individuality, and objective thought” (Nisbett, 2003, p. 30) were developed, brought to Europe, and extended to other parts of the world through European colonization. Still going on today is the intellectual “colonization” of the world, largely through Western science. “A key to comprehending the power of Western science involves its ability to depict its findings as universal knowledge. Modernist science produces universal histories, defines civilization, and determines reality: such capabilities legitimate particular ways of seeing and, concurrently, delegitimize others” (Semali & Kincheloe, 1999, p. 31).

The separation of knowledge from its context and its codification according to Western science has had an impact on educational thought and practice. We collapse education into “schooling,” for example, so that in adult education learners have a difficult time thinking of their learning as anything but participation in formal classes. Informal learning, which adults engage in on a daily basis, hardly counts as “real” learning. “Western epistemological tyranny and the oppressive educational practices that follow it” (Semali & Kincheloe, 1999, p. 31) have resulted in our overlooking rich sources of knowledge. For example,

Western epistemological exports to Africa ... tend to limit reality to appearances with which they [Westerners] seek to justify, mostly without explanation, the so-called absolute and irrefutable truth. For Africans, the search for truth goes beyond appearances into some deep understanding of why the truth is truth. Sometimes the search for truth may be mystified as [when] recourse may be made to traditional religious performances. Among the Yoruba in

PRINTED BY: deborah.grant16@gmail.om. Printing is for personal, private use only. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted without publisher's prior permission. Violators will be prosecuted.

PRINTED BY: deborah.grant16@gmail.com. Printing is for personal, private use only. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted without publisher's prior permission. Violators will be prosecuted.

222

223

Nigeria, the *ifa* oracle of divination may be used to determine what the truth is. Magical understanding and interpretation of the truth is accepted in Africa and this is connected to the way in which people know. [Fasokun, Katahoire, & Oduaran, 2005, pp. 63–64]

The Western/non-Western dichotomy is one means of considering alternative perspectives to our understanding of learning and knowing. *Culture* is another, which is of course part of defining Western and non-Western perspectives. There are as many definitions of culture as there are individuals who write about it. Basically, culture consists of the shared behavior and symbolic meaning systems of a group of people. It is, as Hofstede (1984, p. 51) writes, “the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one category of people from another.” Banks and Banks (1997, p. 8) have more recently defined it as follows:

The essence of a culture is not its artifacts, tools, or other tangible cultural elements but how the members of the group interpret, use, and perceive them. It is the values, symbols, interpretations, and perspectives that distinguish one people from another in modernized societies; it is not material objects and other tangible aspects of human societies.

While we often link “Western” and “culture” together, “there is no single ‘Western’ culture in any really meaningful sense; rather, there are many different and distinct cultures that share certain elements of a common historical background that are manifested in different ways in the present” (Reagan, 2005, p. 37). What linking “Western” and “non-Western” to culture does is to provide a kind of shorthand for comparing two epistemological systems. For example, Jegede (1999) presents a table comparing African and Western systems of thought. In African culture “orality predominates,” whereas in Western thought knowledge is “documented.” Similarly, in Africa, “learning is communal,” but in the West, “learning is an individual enterprise” (p. 125).

Abdullah (1996), a management consultant in Malaysia, compares what she calls “individualistic” or “more Western” with “collectivistic” or “more Eastern” cultural interpretations of values. With regard to group versus individual preference, for example,

PRINTED BY: deborah.grant16@gmail.com. Printing is for personal, private use only. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted without publisher's prior permission. Violators will be prosecuted.

223

224

“Westerners” value freedom and independence whereas “Easterners” value belonging, harmony, family, security, and guidance; success in the West is materialistic but in the East it is relationship- or friendship-based. The communication style in a more Western cultural orientation is direct, to the point, and emphasizes clarity; in a more Eastern culture communication is subtle, indirect, and often employs a third party. Understanding these and other differences in values, Abdullah points out, is crucial to managing a multinational and multicultural workplace.

What are presented as “Western” or “African” or “Eastern” values and systems of thought capture, imperfectly of course, some of the differences that in turn affect not only how we see the world but how learning experiences are interpreted. For example, in a study of the role of cultural values in shaping older adult learning in Malaysia, participants spoke of learning as a spiritual or philosophical quest, and as “a responsibility and a means of giving back to their communities” (Merriam & Muhamad, 2000, p. 60).

A third concept important for understanding learning and knowing from non-Western perspectives is that of *indigenous knowledge*. Like culture, indigenous knowledge has been defined in numerous ways. Most definitions consider it “local or community knowledge that is commonly generated and transmitted over a period of time in geographic and historic space” (Fasokun, Katahoire, & Oduaran, 2005, p. 61). It is knowledge generated to deal with local problems and issues “related to health, farming, warfare, education, culture and the environment” (p. 61). This is knowledge produced by people, who, according to the World Council of Indigenous Peoples, “occupied lands prior to populations who now share or claim such territories”; indigenous peoples may also “possess a distinct language and culture” (Semali & Kincheloe, 1999, p. 40). Dei, Hall, and Rosenberg (2000) point out that many indigenous cultures value the following: “seeing the individual as part of nature; respecting and reviving the wisdom of elders; giving consideration to the living, the dead, and future generations; sharing responsibility, wealth, and resources within the community; and embracing spiritual values, traditions and practices [with] reflection [on] connections to a higher order, to the culture, and to the earth” (p. 6).

PRINTED BY: deborah.grant16@gmail.com. Printing is for personal, private use only. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted without publisher's prior permission. Violators will be prosecuted.

Indigenous knowledge differs from official, academic knowledge in several ways. First, it is organic in the sense that it is generated during the daily lives of people in a local context rather than “by planned procedures and rules” (George, 1999, p. 80). This knowledge is typically passed on from one generation to the next in oral, rather than written form. Finally, “indigenous knowledge is not to be found in the school curriculum” (p. 80). So, too, the “pedagogy” of indigenous knowledge differs from traditional schooling or education. Knowledge is conveyed through “story-telling, poetry, metaphor, myth, ceremony, dreams and art; and honoring indigenous elders as ‘cultural professor’” (Graveline, 2005, p. 308).

As many writers have pointed out, we have much to learn from indigenous knowledge systems throughout the world. What has until recently prevented us from accessing and learning from these systems is

“Western” knowledge production—it is self-contained, self-sustaining, handy, convenient, and even tinged with a sense of righteousness. ... Hermetically sealed, the closed system of “Western” knowledge production has been institutionalized, in a matter of several hundred years, to such a degree as to dismiss indigenous knowledges based on thousands of years of experience, analysis, and reflection as primitive (Allen, 1989; Deloria, 1997; Harjo & Bird, 1997). It is ... intellectual apartheid. [Rains, 1999, p. 317]

By way of summarizing, it is our thinking that non-Western perspectives on learning and knowing include, for example, indigenous knowledge systems such as found in Africa, in Native American and First Nations peoples of North America, and in Maori people of New Zealand and Aboriginal people of Australia. Typically, however, major philosophical or religious systems of thought such as Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, Confucianism, and so on are labeled “non-Western” rather than indigenous. Of course, how we group or label these systems is not what is important. What is important is that by becoming acquainted with other ways of learning and knowing we enrich our understanding of learning, and ultimately our practice with adults.

PRINTED BY: deborah.grant16@gmail.com. Printing is for personal, private use only. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted without publisher's prior permission. Violators will be prosecuted.

## An Introduction to Five Non-Western Perspectives on Learning

Following is a sampling of five non-Western perspectives on learning. There are, of course, book-length descriptions of each of these, and there are many other non-Western and indigenous educational traditions that could be explored; however, it is not the intention of this chapter to be comprehensive with regard to these perspectives. Rather, we wish to introduce readers to the *possibilities* in learning about other ways of knowing. The perspectives included here were presented by their authors in a symposium held at the Forty-Sixth Annual Adult Education Research Conference at the University of Georgia, Athens, on June 4, 2005 (Merriam et al., 2005).

### Adult Learning from a Confucian Way of Thinking: Youngwha Kee

The Confucian notions and perspectives on adult learning that I present here are based on four basic books about Confucianism: *Confucian Analects* (Sung, 1991a), *Mencius* (Sung, 1991d), *The Great Learning* (Sung, 1991c), and *The Doctrine of the Mean* (Sung, 1991b). Although *The Great Learning* focuses mainly on the Confucian way of learning, the other three books based on Confucian philosophy and ideas also contribute to our understanding of learning as proposed by Confucius (551–479 BC), who is also called Kung-tzu.

According to Chu Hsi, a twelfth-century scholar of Confucianism, the philosophy behind this conception of adult learning is to imitate the virtues of another person. According to Chu Hsi, a person who does not know how to act in a situation will follow the example of one who does know. Imitation of the conduct of the sages is true learning.

Confucius also expressed the concept of true learning with two characters *Hak* and *Seb*, which can be translated into the one word learning in English. Kung-tzu taught the principle of learning as *Hak-Yi-Shi-Seub*, which refers to the enjoyment of learning through daily experience. *Seub*, especially, has the literary meaning of a bird that is learning to fly by the continuous practice of flapping its wings in imitation of an example. *Hak-Yi-Shi-Seub* expresses a constant symbolic relationship with the world around us to feed

PRINTED BY: deborah.grant16@gmail.com. Printing is for personal, private use only. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted without publisher's prior permission. Violators will be prosecuted.

226

227

off of—that is, learn from—the myriad situations we encounter as we go through our lives.

According to *The Great Learning*, the adult learning process is a highly complex process, involving commitment, continuous effort, and a holistic approach. This continuous learning process is constructed by learners through the inner self interacting with nature. It is a project that cannot be completed in a limited time frame. It emphasizes meditation to control oneself and internal integration between self and nature. And it is extended through continuous dialogues with others within the parameters of human relationships. It is a holistic approach to learning: to become fully human through self-rectification and spiritual study.

The purpose of adult learning is to enlighten the people, to love the people, and to rest in “the highest excellence.” According to *The Great Learning*, eight steps should be followed to reach the highest excellence: investigation of things, extension of knowledge, sincerity of will, rectification of the mind, cultivation of one's personal life, regulation of the family, national order, and world peace. Adult learning is a guide to becoming fully human. Adult learning, according to Confucianism, cannot be used as a tool for achieving specific goals in a specific situation. For example, the contents of learning are not related to vocational or skill acquirement. Instead, adult learning is focused on spiritual development.

According to *The Great Learning* (Sung 1991c), adult learning highlights both learning on one's own and peer learning. *Confucian Analects* (Sung, 1991a, p. 139) mentions that “there must be a role model even when a few people take off on the road together.” It emphasizes peer learning among adult learners. Moreover, *Confucian Analects* says that teachers must wait until adult learners understand by themselves; then, at this time, teachers must again help learners' understand through individual learning.

Finally, the relationship between teacher and students is not equal as it is in Western society. The teacher is respected by members of society, and learners are asked to obey their teachers. This comes from the Confucian idea expressed as gun (king), sa (teacher), bu (parent), ilche (the same body) in Chinese characters. This 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.

PRINTED BY: deborah.grant16@gmail.com. Printing is for personal, private use only. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted without publisher's prior permission. Violators will be prosecuted.

227

228

## The Hindu Perspective: Swathi Nath Thaker

Imagine, for a moment, that you are interviewing people for a position and your next candidate is Indian. What characteristics come to mind? What types of knowledge do you think this particular individual possesses? Often when one thinks of an individual of Indian origin, one imagines a person with a strong aptitude for math, science, and technology. However, when one visits India, it is not technology that is readily apparent but rather a spiritual atmosphere that emanates from the people of this country. It is not simply religion but rather a holistic view of life. This view of life combines both cognition and spirituality to create individuals who view learning and the development of knowledge not merely as the acquisition of skills and facts but rather as a means to becoming unified beings. As Dr. Merriam has noted, Western notions of learning have dominated, and still dominate, the field of adult education, with issues such as somatic learning and spirituality emerging only recently. While much of the research and theory suggests that the mind and body are split, a number of cultures around the world do not believe in this dichotomy, and Hinduism is no exception.

Hinduism, which is said to be over four thousand years old, defines itself according to the Vedas, the most ancient body of religious literature. Although much of this content has long been unknown to most Hindus, it is still regarded as an absolute authority, revealing the fundamental truth. While the connection between mind and body is evident in these scriptures, the Vedas also chronicle the relationship between guru, or teacher, and student, which is believed to be sacred and revered. This connection between instructor and pupil is prevalent in early writings, such as the Mahabharat, an epic in itself, which contains a code of life, a philosophy of social and ethical relations that offers spiritual strength. The following story, contained within this literature, highlights the sacred relationship of guru and student:

Ekalavya witnesses the archery skill of Drona and wishes him to be his guru. However, Drona refuses, for a number of reasons, chief among them because he already has a pupil, Arjuna, to whom he has promised the title of greatest archer in the world. Disappointed, Ekalavya takes it upon himself to secretly watch Drona

PRINTED BY: deborah.grant16@gmail.om. Printing is for personal, private use only. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted without publisher's prior permission. Violators will be prosecuted.

228

229

during his instruction. Through his absolute devotion to the art and ceaseless practice, Ekalavya's skills surpass those of Arjuna. Arjuna's dream is shattered and Drona inquires how the youth has learned such an art. Though it can be argued that it was Ekalavya's devotion and determination that developed his success, he honors Drona by kneeling before him. Drona becomes upset when he realizes that Ekalavya has been watching him, as he has a loyalty to Arjuna. Thus, Drona asks Ekalavya for his right thumb as payment for this "teaching," which he immediately offers out of gratitude, even though he knows he will no longer be able to practice archery.

This story illustrates both sides of the connection between student and master. Drona felt a strong bond to his disciple, Arjuna, and helping him fulfill his dream of becoming the world's greatest archer. Thus, he asks Ekalavya for his thumb, knowing full well that this will make it impossible for the youth to be an archer. In turn, Ekalavya feels a deep reverence for Drona because he views him as his master and guide. It is because of this respect that Ekalavya freely offers his thumb. While this tale does represent the notion of apprenticeship, because both Arjuna and Ekalavya were seeking to master a specific skill, it also highlights how, in Hindu philosophy, the guru-student relationship extends much further than that. Though Hinduism does allow for individuation, its focus is on spiritual growth, thus helping individuals to connect the mind and body.

The values and beliefs of Hinduism, such as karma (the law of cause and effect), are often learned not through readings but through oratory. While religious scriptures such as the Mahabharat, Ramayana, and the Bhagavad Gita are now in written form, much of their contents are taught through storytelling. Children grow up hearing tales, such as the one told earlier, from their parents and grandparents, that highlight the philosophical values of Hinduism. In this culture, items do not necessarily need to be written down in order to carry significance. Instead, the core underpinnings of Hinduism are passed from generation to generation through an oral tradition. This is especially true in relation to the Vedas, which are considered to be the heart of Hindu culture. Though many can no longer read these scriptures (the language

PRINTED BY: deborah.grant16@gmail.com. Printing is for personal, private use only. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted without publisher's prior permission. Violators will be prosecuted.

229

230

of Sanskrit is a dying art), their message lives on in the stories that families share. It is the recounting of these generational tales, and not the written word, that keeps Hinduism alive. In addition, dance and music are used to share the lessons that are contained in the ancient texts. The use of these various art forms also helps keep Hindu traditions alive.

Throughout life, Hindus strive to become learned in multiple ways. It is not simply about developing cognitive skills, but rather to discover oneself, because this 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. Whereas 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, which at times requires a renouncing of the self and worldly possessions. This is particularly poignant during the last stage of life, when individuals abandon their home and belongings and set forth on a pilgrimage or seek sanctuary in an ashram, which is a spiritual hostel. This type of journey still takes place today, because it is believed that this passage leads to true enlightenment through unification of the mind and body. Thus, life for a Hindu is not about the acquisition of knowledge but rather about developing wisdom through gaining an understanding of oneself in a holistic manner.

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 that 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 learners to open themselves to varying 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, Hindu learners are able to obtain a level of spiritual being that is often difficult for Western students. 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.

PRINTED BY: deborah.grant16@gmail.com. Printing is for personal, private use only. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted without publisher's prior permission. Violators will be prosecuted.

## 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.)*

This 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 historical and cultural dimensions and is also the word for teaching. Before **Freire (1970)** 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 bicultural 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 bicultural *Aotearoa* (the Maori word for 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 *tauiwi* (non-Maori), including relationships in the educational 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), and participation (the rights of Maori to active citizenry, including equality of educational opportunity and outcomes).

When discussing Maori concepts, traditional tribal structures need to be analyzed to provide the basis for the social construction

PRINTED BY: deborah.grant16@gmail.om. Printing is for personal, private use only. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted without publisher's prior permission. Violators will be prosecuted.

231

232

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* (subtribes) and within each *hapu* are *whanau* (extended families). Hence, the *whanau* serves as a fundamental unit for living and learning. Although *iwi* were originally concentrated in particular geographical areas, the reality now, after massive urbanization, is that Maori people are scattered through the country though usually still 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* or *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 evidenced by historical national statistics of underachievement), their solution has been to rebuild Maori collective consciousness by 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; here, preschoolers are taught according to Maori customs in *te reo* (Maori language). Currently, over six hundred *kohanga reo* exist. Following this initiative are sixty *kura kaupapa Maori* (Maori elementary-secondary schools) and new *whare wananga* (houses of learning for adults). Hence, a lifelong education system, consisting of 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 Maori education institutions, consistent with overarching principles derived from the treaty, there are six subprinciples

PRINTED BY: deborah.grant16@gmail.com. Printing is for personal, private use only. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted without publisher's prior permission. Violators will be prosecuted.

adopted by prominent Maori educators (see **Bishop & Glynn, 2003**). They are as follows:

1. *Tino rangatiratanga* (relative autonomy). Organizers of the schools make all the required administrative, staffing, and pedagogical decisions.
2. *Taonga tuku iho* (cultural aspirations). To be Maori is to be normal. Maori language and knowledge are valued and legitimated.
3. *Ako* (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 difficulties). Participation in kura reaches into the homes of Maori, and families are expected to participate in kura activities.
5. *Whanau* (extended families). Collectives of people work toward a common goal.
6. *Kaupapa* (collective vision or philosophy). There is a collective vision of what constitutes excellence in Maori education.

The fundamental essence of the 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 Muhammad and Mazalan Kamis

The word *Islam* originates from three Arabic letters (Sim, Lam, Mim), making the root word which means to be in peaceful submission, to obey, to surrender, and peace. In the religious context it means "total submission to the will of Allah and obedience to His law." Muslims draw upon the Qur'an as a primary learning source and supplement it with the *hadith*, a collection of the recorded sayings of Prophet Muhammad.

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 that of the West. Differences include the purpose of knowledge, communal obligation, responsibility to share knowledge, and the teacher-student relationship.

PRINTED BY: deborah.grant16@gmail.com. Printing is for personal, private use only. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted without publisher's prior permission. Violators will be prosecuted.

233

234

Learning is considered sacred and obligatory for an individual as well as for the community. It is a form of *jihad*, which means *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 also guides humans to investigate the phenomena of nature, so that they will 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 in 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 only which he intended."

The emphasis on a communal learning obligation is unique because 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." 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: hater of the above."

A teacher is a learned person who is a keeper of God's treasure—that is, knowledge. A teacher 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, therefore, sacred. Thus, *adab* (discipline of body, mind, and spirit) must be observed when one interacts with one's teacher.

PRINTED BY: deborah.grant16@gmail.com. Printing is for personal, private use only. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted without publisher's prior permission. Violators will be prosecuted.

234

235

Finally, learning is lifelong. The Prophet said, “Seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave.” The Prophet was forty 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 ceases 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.

## African Indigenous Education: Gabo Ntseane

Research on African traditional education (Morolong, 1996; Mautle, 2001; Magagula & Maziboku, 2004) reveals that education and learning are not recent interventions in traditional societies. They had specific principles, methods, and social institutions to foster learning. The literature 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 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 modes of instruction, and acquisition of revealed knowledge through 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 saving lives at all costs, and respecting of the young and the old. The opposite of *botho* is selfishness, greediness, and self-centeredness—characteristics not good for humanism because they do not promote cooperation between individuals, cultures, and nations.

PRINTED BY: deborah.grant16@gmail.com. Printing is for personal, private use only. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted without publisher's prior permission. Violators will be prosecuted.

235

236

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 discourse.

Locally based knowledge is generated through a systematic process of observing the local environment, experimenting with solutions, and readopting 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 storytelling and poetry. Knowledge is stored in cultural and religious beliefs, taboos, folklore, or myths and an 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 secrets of their medicine and how it 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 an 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. Accreditation was not in the form of a certificate to an individual but rather the graduates were given a name for their cohort and assigned a community-based activity. The activity had to be relevant to the current needs of the society, such as building a corral for stray cattle.

Although I advocate for the recognition of African indigenous knowledge, I by no means advocate for a complete uprooting of the other cultural aspects of the current adult education curriculum. Only good aspects of African indigenous knowledge systems should be adapted.

## Common Themes Across Non-Western and Indigenous Perspectives

From this small sampling of non-Western and indigenous perspectives we can see a number of themes about learning that stand in contrast with Western views. The four themes of interdependent, communal, holistic, and informal learning highlight different *emphases* in learning, rather than suggesting an either/or stance.

First, there is an emphasis on *interdependence* instead of independence in learning. Western models of development and learning promote a movement toward being more independent; to be in control of one's life and learning, to be a productive member of society, is, in fact, what it means to be "mature" in our society (see **Chapter Twelve**). Andragogy, self-directed learning, and Mezirow's theory of transformational learning all focus on the individual becoming an independent learner who relies mostly on himself or herself in the process.

This notion is in stark contrast to non-Western learning traditions as is obvious in all five of the preceding vignettes. Identity, self-concept, and self-esteem are developed and enhanced only in relation to others. Recall **Nah's (2000)** research into self-directed learning in Korea mentioned earlier in this chapter wherein independence is considered immature and self-centered. Commenting on the African context, Fasokun, Katahoire, and Oduaran (2005, p. 10) note that while of course "no one is exclusively independent or interdependent" and some balance "is struck by each society, in most African cultures the individual gains significance from and through relationships with others."

Second, the notion of interdependence is linked to the *communal* nature of learning in non-Western systems, rather than the more isolated Western teaching-learning transaction. It is the responsibility of all in the community to teach and to learn. In commenting on seven traditions (African indigenous, Aztec, Native American, Confucian, Hindu and Buddhist, Rom, and Islamic) presented in his book, **Reagan (2005)** observes:

The concept of some adults being *teachers* and others (presumably) being *non-teachers* is a somewhat alien one to many traditions. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that in none of the cases examined

PRINTED BY: deborah.grant16@gmail.com. Printing is for personal, private use only. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted without publisher's prior permission. Violators will be prosecuted.

237

238

here—even those with the most fully articulated formal educational systems—was there any explicit, formal training for those who would play teaching roles. The idea of teachers engaging in a profession, with specialized knowledge and expertise not held by others, appears to be a Western, and indeed relatively recent, innovation. [p. 249; italics in original]

Third, a *holistic* approach that includes the spirit, mind, body, and emotional components of learning, or some combination of these, is emphasized over the Western focus on the cognitive. In non-Western traditions, education and learning are in the service of developing more than just the mind. They are also to develop a good person, a moral person, a spiritual person, one who not only contributes to but also uplifts the community. **Benally (1997)** speaks of learning in the Navajo tradition: “Western tradition separates secular and sacred knowledge and thus fragments knowledge. Consequently, some learning is forgotten soon after academic program requirements are met because it was never grounded or connected to life processes” (p. 84). In contrast, “for the Navajo, knowledge, learning, and life itself are *sacred, inseparable, and interwoven parts of a whole*. The quality of each determines the quality of the other” (p. 84; italics in original). Because development of the whole person is imperative, instruction can take many forms to access these different dimensions, such as storytelling, poetry, ceremonies, dreams, meditation, and so on.

A fourth theme that cuts across non-Western perspectives is that learning is primarily *informal*, is embedded in everyday life, and is lifelong. While we in adult education might recognize the prevalence and power of learning that is integral to our daily lives, most Westerners think of learning as that which occurs in a formal teacher-led classroom dependent on books and curriculum materials. Formal assessment that often leads to some sort of certification or credit is part of this structure.

In contrast, learning in non-Western settings is structured by the community problem or issue needing attention, by accessing resources, including people and materials that can assist in the problem solving, and by “evaluating” the learning according to the effectiveness of its application to the situation. This is not to say that formal education has no place in non-Western systems; in

PRINTED BY: deborah.grant16@gmail.com. Printing is for personal, private use only. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted without publisher's prior permission. Violators will be prosecuted.

238

239

today's world formal education has become a necessity. Rather, "the common tendency in our own society to conflate and confuse 'formal schooling' with 'education'—a tendency reflected in our concern with formal certification and degrees rather than with competence per se—has been far less common in non-Western traditions" (Reagan, 2005, p. 248). There appears to be more recognition of and value placed on learning that is what we would call informal in these non-Western traditions. In reference to Africa, Fasokun, Katahoire, and Oduaran (2005) sum up this emphasis on informal learning: "As in other parts of the world, informal learning by African adults involves learning through experience under enabling conditions that facilitate the development of knowledge, skills, attitudes, aptitudes, values and interests. This is done to enhance performance, bring about change or solve practical problems" (p. 36).

In summary, we have presented four themes or emphases in non-Western learning systems that contrast with our Western perspective. Non-Western systems appear to place a greater emphasis on interdependence as a value to be developed versus independence; to link communal or community concerns with learning; to see learning as a holistic activity with a spiritual aspect, in contrast to the cognitive emphasis of the West; and finally, to value and recognize informal learning as legitimate.

## Summary

This chapter on non-Western perspectives of learning and knowing has introduced the reader to other ways of thinking about learning than is found in the rest of this book. The value of engaging with other frameworks is that we are challenged to think about the purpose of education and learning as well as question the nature of knowledge production itself. Further, knowing something about other systems of learning can both lead to applications in our practice and contribute to our own personal meaning-making.

As part of this chapter we also briefly discussed some important concepts, including problematizing the Western/non-Western dichotomy itself, defining culture, and considering the nature of indigenous knowledge. These concepts and others frame our brief foray into traditions of learning and knowing unfamiliar to most