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NON-WESTERN PERSPECTIVES ON LEARNING AND KNOWING

Sharan B. Merriam and Associates (Ed.). Krieger Publishing, Malabar, FL, 2007, 188 pages.

The title of the book evokes a seemingly overwhelming endeavour, namely that of distinguishing between what is Western and non-Western, and then distinguishing among the subsets of beliefs and practices represented in eight religions and cultures to determine which ones are similar or different from Western beliefs and practices. If you had asked me to try to pull that off, I would have said, "No way."

Well, we can relax a little—this book does neither. The editor, Sharan Merriam, admits at the outset that distinguishing between what is Western and what is not creates a dichotomy that most cultural traditions in the world would simply find unacceptable—which is what makes them non-Western, I suppose, in a kind of circular reasoning. This business of identity-by-exclusion (or "dichotomy") raises another obvious question: What if I happened to share their view? For example, what if I agreed (along with most non-European cultures, according to the book) that lifelong learning is more than a set of utilitarian measures, or that there is more to education than cognitive instruction? Would that make me a non-Westerner too? As you can see, the conundrum has a tendency to turn around and hit us from behind like a (non-Western?) boomerang.

Another slightly annoying editorial angle is the permeating undertone through which the editors confuse non-Western with non-U.S.A. When we are told that North American natives include a group called Eskimos, we are left wondering whether the authors are referring to some kind of frozen pie. When they muse at the solidarity of Muslims who will send off a community member to study medicine in order to have a doctor in the village, we are reminded of a newspaper item about a small French town that went on strike because they had no baker—not a typical U.S. reaction, but very Western nonetheless. Throughout the editorial text, the terms *Western*, *American*, and *in the United States* are used interchangeably. I cringe at the thought that, perhaps because of the book, this Québécois might one day be mistaken for one such undiscerning Westerner.

Of course we get the point that most North American-trained MDs tend to set up their practices in big cities rather than in their hometowns, and that non-European traditions mostly adhere to collectivist, rather than individualistic, values. We should add that this is probably the only reason for distinguishing between two traditions, and that indeed the dichotomy exists because cultures of European heritage suffer from that particular pathology (individualism), and that the rest of the world does not. Interestingly, this makes American culture the exception rather than the norm—or, should we say, it makes it non-non-Western.

But for now, let us agree with Merriam that the term can be used as "shorthand for 'the unfamiliar'" and leave it at that. (Er . . . unfamiliar to whom? But never mind.) If we suspend our disbelief for a moment longer, we can turn to the chapters themselves, each written by an author who identifies with a particular tradition: Muslim, North American native, Hindu, Maori, Buddhist, African, Liberation Theology, and Confucian.

As we could expect, there is little in common between the chapters, whether their point of view is religious, ethnic, or ideological. Do some succeed better than others in their claim to present a non-Western perspective? That will depend on whether the reader is more interested in the history of religions (the non-secular), in comparative ethnography (the non-ethnocentric), or in social/political struggle (the non-hegemonic). My vote goes to the last, since it includes the other two.

In the religious department, we learn a thing or two about knowing and learning in Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. For example, one central precept passed down by the Prophet is the pursuit of knowledge. Within Hinduism, the purpose of knowledge is enlightenment and rebirth, much the same as in Buddhism. Since all of this is within the religious domain, the focus is largely on learning and knowing about religion and how each religion can make the world a better place. What makes these perspectives non-Western is that they are non-secular. Confusing religious study with education has brought about such things as creationism, and in India, astrology (!) has been included in the curriculum because of "political pressure" (p. 178). This problem is by no means limited to Western cultures. But the question is, do we really want to go there? Insha'Allah . . .

The ethnic ways of learning and knowing are a bit more difficult to follow, which makes them rather interesting. Trying to see the world from the perspective of a North American native or a Maori or a Batswana is not a simple task for me, but the writers do a good job of initiating us into the worlds of colloquial mythology and ancient cosmology.

One chapter about Confucian views of learning and knowing offers some extraordinary parallels between the teachings of Confucius and contemporary adult education theory and practice. Quotes from the master can be juxtaposed quite accurately to concepts such as peer-learning, self-directed learning, competency-based learning, constructivism, mastery learning, etc. I am sure that after reading the quotes, you will come up with a list of your own. Confucius, a contemporary learning theorist? Hmm.

The Liberation Theology movement in Latin America pursues social justice through grassroots education. It is entirely based on Western traditions—how could it possibly be mistaken for anything else?—but we are still very happy to find the chapter in

this book. It provides us with a solid discussion and eye-opening description of an important and much-needed praxis.

Overall, there is much self-congratulatory rhetoric throughout the texts, especially when the authors mix up epistemology with cultural or religious nostalgia. One noted exception is the discussion of the status of women and the absence of critical thinking in Korea's Confucian education. Another is the earnest struggle against oppression by Christian church people in South America.

The book is a welcome addition to the critical literature on learning and epistemology. Much work still needs to be done to acknowledge feminist, anti-racist, non-hegemonic, and inclusive education, and this book contributes to the enterprise. The conceptual basis for collecting the texts under the guise of non-Western knowledge is, of course, flawed from conception. Literature on religious schooling is not difficult to come by, and neither is literature on traditional cultures' world views or on liberation ideology. What this collection does, however, is offer a contribution to each of these areas using the theme of knowing and learning as a common thread.

If I had been asked instead to collect some works under the themes of religion, tradition, and liberation, I would probably have accepted, thus avoiding a trap that I then would have been forced to justify with shaky reasoning, most likely hovering somewhere around stammering—as is sadly the case here.

One last thing: the cover design of this book should be nominated as most distasteful for both its concept and colour scheme. Spirals and rays, sheesh. When will academic publishers start to hire real graphic artists? In a pinch, I can certainly recommend a few.

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RE-THEORISING THE RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING

Per Anderson and Judy Harris (Eds.). National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, Leicester, UK, 2006, 330 pages.

This is a collection of 15 chapters from authors working in a variety of countries and academic locations plus an *Endword* from Michael Young. All authors are Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) advocates, although they approach the topic from different theoretical perspectives and research frameworks; a few are grounded in the practical struggles over RPL, with, perhaps, those based in South Africa being the most rooted. Anyone who approaches RPL as a simple issue will do well to read through these arguments and gain some understanding of the problematic theoretical perspectives and nature of RPL.