Learning and Knowing – Non-Western Perspectives

Chapter 9

Background

- Beginning with the 1928 publication of Thorndike's landmark study of adult learning, 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,

Embedded in Western Thought

- The cultural values of privileging the individual learner over the collective

- 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.
What about other Cultures’ Approach to Learning?

- We need only look more closely inside our own borders, to Native Americans, and beyond the borders of North America and Western Europe, to find entirely different cultural values and epistemological systems that can be drawn upon to enlarge our understanding of adult learning.

Most of the Western values were rejected.

- 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”

Why Study Other Culture’s Learning Ways?

- 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”.

- 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”
• This knowledge may benefit us when we are helping learners having other than Western worldviews.

• 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.

Themes about Learning that Stand in Contrast with Western Views

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.

• This notion is in stark contrast to non-Western learning traditions. Identity, self-concept, and self-esteem are developed and enhanced only in relation to others.
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.
- The concept of some adults being teachers and others being non-teachers is a somewhat alien one to many traditions.

A holistic approach that includes the spirit, mind, body, and emotional components of learning, or some combination of these, is emphasized

- 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.

Learning is primarily informal, is embedded in everyday life, and is lifelong.

- Most Westerners think of learning as that which occurs in a formal teacher-led classroom dependent on books and curriculum materials.
- 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.
In summary

- 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
  - to value and recognize informal learning as legitimate.

Assignment

- Read Chapter 10
- Do Annotation for Chapter 10
- Keep working on Learning Activity 1-4