Chapter 76
Cultures and Self–Directed Learning

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ABSTRACT

Although self-directed learning as a theory has been popularized in Western cultures, especially North America, it is in Confucius-Heritage Societies (CHS) that it has been well implemented. Western scholars who are exploring learning modes in different cultures have become interested in how the Chinese self-practice or self-learning has contributed more to high cognitive skills or higher test scores than other factors such as teaching to tests or teacher-centered instruction as heavily emphasized by educators and parents in CHS countries. Rather than teaching our scholars/readers Chinese characters such as Zi Xi, 自习, these two characters imply a Western learning mode that leads to good learning if used positively and effectively in any culture. As globalization brings different cultures together, there is a great deal that we can learn from other cultures. We should guard against "ethnocentrism" if we are to promote good learning in our schools. This is explored in this chapter.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this conceptual article is to explore cultural differences in how self-directed learning is understood and implemented. Learning is informed and defined by the culture and subculture we live in. There are Western cultures, Eastern cultures, and indigenous cultures in Africa, Australia or the Americas that are neither Eastern or Western, but may be nested in the colonial Western cultures. There are also multiple subcultures that define how learning is approached. Indeed, the ways in which we learn are strongly influenced by social characteristics such as gender and ethnicity. For example, in some Eastern cultures, learners are encouraged to "burn the midnight oil" and even when learners are tired of learning, they are encouraged to stay awake to continue to delve into learning of any kind. In some Western cultures, this kind of learning is frowned upon. Parents oppose this kind of learning, insisting that it will lead to more harm than benefits to learners.

In some cultures, good male learners are seen to be active, adventurous, energetic, curious and inventive. Good female learners are appreciative, considerate, cooperative, poised, sensitive and dependable learners. However, Maslow (1970), among many others, states that all males and females move along a common self-actualizing trajectory. Self-actualization, though, is an ideal, not a reality, and most learners do not achieve self-actualization. The adult education literature indicates that adult learners are self-directed but children may not be self-directed (Knowles, 1980). Fraser criticizes the self-directed adult learning models by stating that they are usually predicated on the assumption that the masculine norm and the adult norm are one and the same (1995, p. 21). What this scholar means is that adult learning models may have been based on sexist assumptions. In the decades since Fraser cautioned us about the gender bias in self-directed learning models, feminist scholars have done much to challenge this perception. A great deal of research and theory has addressed how women learn, even to the point where this theorizing may be further marginalizing women's learning by associating it with a kind of learning that is not valued in general. For example, Gilligan (1982) argues that girls and women develop a morality based on ideas of care and responsibility, which contrasts with that developed by boys and men—based on a rights morality (Kohberg, 1981) A rights morality seeks abstract laws and universal principles, which settle disputes impartially, impersonally and fairly. Women value relationships and mutuality above rights and autonomy, and that this can be seen not as a failing but as an alternative, and in some respects superior, morality. Morality must be learned. Men and women have different moralities. The problem here is that society in general values autonomy and impartiality over care and responsibility, so women's development is automatically seen as inferior to men's morality.

Turning to Chinese learners in one of the earliest civilizations, no one would dispute the fact that the Chinese four inventions (i.e., printing, gun-power, the compass, and papermaking) have had far reaching impact on the development of human societies. Why were the Chinese able to invent these things? Some would argue that the then super power's social conditions encouraged problem solving, innovation, and creativity. Without a doubt, social conditions may affect the nature of learning in a culture. Chinese culture contains different educational conditions. Some commonly accepted notions about modern Chinese learning are such that Chinese educational conditions promote rote learning and memorization. Children at a young age are encouraged to memorize ancient Chinese poems. Chinese educators argue that anything learned at a young age should last one's lifetime. Later in life, these learners can retrieve any skills, knowledge, or attitudes acquired at a young age. Chinese instructors are known as teaching to the tests at all levels. An increased emphasis on measurement, evaluation, and standardized testing has become a global phenomenon.

All these assumptions or perspectives about what constitutes good learning in some cultures may be valid to a certain extent. However, what is inadequately researched is what particular learning or instructional mode leads to good learning or more effective learning. Of concern in the scholarly realm is whether these good learning theories have been applied to practice. Theorists have advanced myriad theories from critical theory (first advanced by Plato, Gutek, 2011) to self-directed learning theory (as popularized by Knowles et al., 1975, 1979, 1984, 1986, 2005, 2011). Theories without application remain powerless until fully implemented in the field.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

There is wide-spread agreement that Eastern Cultures, especially Confucius-heritage societies (CHS) produce tame, and docile learners who perform highly on test scores but less well on

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