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A Bourdieuan Perspective on Differences in Adult Learning Styles: Deconstructing Asian Learners

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In Western educational settings, it is fairly common to hear Asian adult learners characterized by teachers as passive, shy, unwilling to give their opinions in class, group-oriented and reluctant to challenge the authority of the teacher. More negative characteristics also attributed to Asian learners include adjectives like obedient, uncritical, uncreative and even duplicitous. Following from these traits, the preferred learning style of Asians is often seen as rote memorization, attention to detail, and precise, linear and logical analysis without much creative depth (partly for these reasons Asians are thought to be good at science and engineering). Research on Asian adult learners is still quite sparse. In its absence, popular beliefs about Asian learners continue to hold sway without much critical reflection as to their accuracy or epistemological roots. Powerful exceptions to prevailing views of Asian adult learners are Pratt's (1990, 1991, 1992, 1999) and Littlewood's (1999) work on Chinese adult learners.

Our interest in the topic of Asian learning styles emerged as a result of our work first, in teacher development workshops we conducted for Khmer, Vietnamese, Thai and Lao teachers in their respective countries and, second, in our involvement in a graduate Adult Education program we recently established at the Asian Institute of Technology (AIT) for adults working in development contexts in the Asia-Pacific Region. In teaching Asian learners and in designing our Adult Education program, we (a French woman and an American man) have continuously grappled with the issue of Western versus Eastern educational philosophies, learning styles, appropriate roles for teachers and learners, and appropriate teaching-learning approaches and activities. Although AIT (an international post-graduate institution of engineering, applied science and management) is intended to be modeled after an American graduate institution, many of our faculty are from North America and Europe, and our medium of instruction is English, in fact most AIT students and a majority of faculty are from Asian rather than Western countries. This contradiction has led us to

question our own assumptions and practices regarding appropriate adult education: How can we best design and implement educational programs and teach classes for Asian adults? Our approach to teaching adults has been to promote the (Western?) practice of learner autonomy in identifying course objectives, content and activities, and to act as educational resources, non-directive (Western?) facilitators of learning rather than traditional (Asian?) teachers, building on our students' life, professional and academic experience rather than our own professional knowledge as the base for what we do.

As a result of our work with Asian learners, we have begun to explore and critique Western concepts and stereotypes of Asian learners, learning styles and teaching styles together with our (Western and Asian) colleagues and the Asian adult learners in the courses we teach. We have done this most formally in an adult education course the two of us co-teach on Teaching and Learning Practices, where we have posed the open-ended question of what characterizes Asian versus Western teaching and learning styles. Among the Nepali, Lao, Thai, Japanese, Cambodian, Tibetan, Sri Lankan and Mongolian adult learners who have thus far taken the course, we have found a wide range of conceptions of what comprises "Asian" and "Western," and have begun to appreciate the vast diversity and differences among Asian learners and perspectives, to the extent that we no longer find "Asian" to be a particularly useful concept. Instead, we have begun to talk about different nationalities as a unit of differentiation, but again, given the great diversity we encounter *within* nationalities – although we find national conceptions (e.g. Japanese learners, Thai learners, Sri Lankan Learners) to be quite valuable – nationality appears to be still too general a concept to completely describe the diversity of beliefs and experiences narrated by our students. As a result, we have now settled on trying to use the analytical and conceptual tools offered by Pierre Bourdieu in his notion of "habitus" to explain learning styles. Habitus disallows dichotomies such as Western ver-

sus Asian, and instead posits the individual as located within many interlocking and overlapping social, economic, political and cultural systems (including nationality) which would explain differences in learning styles.

In brief, habitus describes the system of durable and transportable dispositions of individuals acting within and being acted upon by particular “fields” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Calhoun, 1993; Carrington & Luke, 1997). Family and school socialization, class, culture, gendered ways of seeing and being; the connection of the biological being with the social world form and reform habitus, as do the fields through which an individual moves. Fields are “semi-autonomous, structured social spaces characterized by discourse and social activity” such as school institutions, family structures, community structures, and academic disciplines (Carrington & Luke, 1997, p. 100).

Borrowing Bourdieu’s theoretical orientation, we conceived of a research project beginning with the assumption that learning style and Asian culture are social constructions that can be explained in terms of individual habitus. Initially, we had intended to undertake a study of Asian learners involving: (a) administering Kolb’s (1984) learning style inventory, first to test our hypothesis that Asian learners do not have a single “Asian” learning style, but a wide range of different styles, and

second, to identify learning styles that could then be explained in terms of different habitus; and (b) a follow-up survey, interviews, case studies and focus groups to determine habitus. However, after reconsidering the concept of learning style, with help from a roundtable of our colleagues here and the comments and work of one of the sources of inspiration for the study, Dan Pratt, we have now decided not only to set aside Kolb’s inventory as a North American instrument which would not likely capture the diversity of learning styles among our students, but also to change the focus of our research from learning styles to conceptions of teacher roles, student roles and the teaching-learning transaction. With this reorientation in mind, we are at this writing designing a survey, and interview and focus group guides to be used with Asian graduate students in their 1st term at AIT. The survey asks for perceptions of (a) teacher roles, student roles and the teaching-learning transaction and (b) information related to individual habitus, including family, educational, professional and institutional background, class, nationality, religion, gender, field of study and international experience. Current plans are to limit, for various theoretical and practical reasons, the nationality of students to Burmese, Cambodian, Chinese, Lao, Thai, Vietnamese and Sri Lankan. As the group completes their studies (1 year and 6 months from now), we will again administer the survey, and conduct interviews and focus groups to determine how learners’ perceptions may have changed over the time spent in the Western-style learning environment of AIT.