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Capturing the Voices of Learners from Non-Western and Indigenous Cultures: Links to Learning in Adulthood

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Abstract: *Reviewed in this roundtable session are different frames of knowing and learning from non-western and indigenous cultures, and how these cultures contrast to those of western societies. A discussion follows of what these differences mean for teaching and organizing programs for adult learners.*

Background

Western ways of viewing the world most likely dominate the thinking of an adult educator raised and educated in a western culture, especially if that educator had had little or no exposure to non-western or indigenous ways of thinking and knowing. By learning about non-western and indigenous ways of thinking and knowing, educators can improve their practice in an increasingly multi-cultural world. These changes in our practice are especially important now as countries develop economically, technology makes it easier for people from different cultures to communicate with each other, and distinctions between cultures continue to evolve. According to Jarvis (2002), culture encompasses nearly everything that makes us social beings.

Adult learners in formal settings around the United States (U.S.) represent an increasingly variety of cultures internal to the U.S. and from around the world. These learners may be physicians from Eastern Europe exploring the latest techniques in neo-natal medicine at a U.S. medical center or refugees from the Pacific Rim learning English as a second language, and the cultures of those learners influence how they see themselves and how they interact with their teachers (or not). In addition, their cultural backgrounds also influence how educators may or may not be able to connect with them as learners. Consequently, it is incumbent upon adult educators to understand how non-western and indigenous cultures influence ways of knowing and learning.

Different Frames of Knowing and Learning

Different cultures have different frames of knowing and learning, and a complex and reciprocal relationship exists between a culture and that culture's frames of knowing and learning. That is, frames of knowing and learning held by cultures supports that culture's history, beliefs, attitudes, values, thought processes, language, and view of the world. For example, a major distinction between most western and non-western cultures is that people from non-western cultures frequently think of themselves as being a part of a larger community. This view is in contrast to the majority of western cultures, which usually places the emphasis on the "individual" and tends to de-emphasize "interdependence."

Furthermore, western cultures generally place a high value on empiricism, that is "scientific proof," and on learners who rigorously examine the concepts and principles that frame the west's view of technological and social problems. In contrast, elders in many non-western and indigenous cultures use their stories and their actions to pass their cultural knowledge and

ways of thinking from one generation to the next, and their wisdom is not subject to question or individual interpretation—at least not publically. Furthermore, these types of cultures offer unique ways of teaching or emphasize methods that we tend to use sparingly in formal settings with adults, such as storytelling and observation. As asserted by Merriam (2007a) western culture, with its strong emphasis on science and on learning via western-type schooling, rarely accommodates non-western ways of knowing, learning, and teaching.

What This Means for Teaching

Indeed, western-based adult educators have much to learn from the ways in which non-western and indigenous cultures view learning and knowing. As implied earlier, two-way communication between educators and students is essential if learning is to happen, and the different cultures of the students and of the educator have the potential to inhibit that communication. In addition, the alternative ways of teaching used by different cultures, some of which have entered the fringes of mainstream western society, include many powerful ways of learning. Examples of these methods include traditional ceremonies, dance, mediation, and drama. Reagan (2005) claims that western cultures have long held an ethnocentric view of non-western cultures and their ways of knowing. This view is despite the fact that other cultures include effective ways of knowing and learning that have been passed down through the ages. Furthermore, Ntseane (2007) argues that westerners have a moral and political responsibility to be culturally competent and respectful when planning, leading, or participating in any educational activities. In addition, Cervero and Wilson (2006) assert that adult educators have a responsibility to incorporate into their program planning and their practice the interests of everyone participating in that learning.

What This Means for Adult Education in the United States

As Merriam (2007b) argues, western-based educators should not seek to replace their western traditions but rather supplement and ultimately improve them by learning about non-western and indigenous cultures and their ways of knowing and learning. An awareness of other ways of knowing and learning can serve to remind educators that knowledge produced in the west is framed by a western viewpoint that most often is not from a neutral place.

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