



# Non-Western Perspectives on Learning and Knowing

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SHARAN B. MERRIAM AND ASSOCIATES' (2007)  
*NON-WESTERN PERSPECTIVES ON  
LEARNING AND KNOWING.*  
MALABAR, FL: KRIEGER PUBLISHING COMPANY.

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University campuses continue to explore the interplay between global and local communities, reaching out beyond national borders while also better understanding the diversity within them. Recently the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, launched its own "Ready for the World" campaign and held a public conversation on Thomas Friedman's *The World is Flat*. In this climate of increased interest in the world around us, a book on multiple ways of knowing is a welcome addition to the literature. In the first chapter, an introduction to *Non-Western Perspectives on Learning and Knowing*, Merriam acknowledges that the notion of a Western/non-Western dichotomy is itself a Western concept and thus somewhat problematic. Nonetheless, she explains, this "false dichotomy" itself provides an accessible starting point for questioning our assumptions about learning and knowing.

This edited volume is a collaborative effort that grew out of a symposium held at the 2005 Adult Education Research Conference. The volume describes eight perspectives on learning and knowing, representing "diverse epistemologies from different parts of the world" and written by "authors indigenous to that perspective" (p. viii). Each author reflects on and explores the nature of knowledge, the role of teachers, the purpose of learning, and the historical context of learning from a particular cultural perspective. Introductory and concluding chapters by Merriam synthesize the concepts explored in the book.

In the first chapter, Merriam defines some foundational concepts, such as "culture" and "indigenous knowledge," and provides a justification for expanding our understanding of learning and knowing. Western knowledge, Merriam argues, has been privileged in our educational systems, and "certainly a more palatable approach would be to uncover and acknowledge what people already know, then see how exposure to another system

can enhance their development and their practice" (p. 12). As Merriam points out, lack of understanding of multiple perspectives can result in marginalization of other ways of knowing. From a practical perspective, educators often have many different cultural groups represented in their classrooms, and a better understanding of these perspectives can result in a more meaningful and relevant teaching and learning experience.

Each chapter has a unique structure and style, which makes for an engaging read. Concepts of learning and knowing are viewed from the perspectives of Islam, American Indian, Hinduism, Maori, Buddhism, African (Botswana), Liberation theology (Latin America), and Confucianism. Most chapters provide a historical context for the perspective on learning and knowing, as well as what makes that perspective unique. For example, Findsen and Tamarua's chapter on "Maori Concepts of Learning and Knowing" begins by describing the history of New Zealand and the power relations between the Pakeha and Maori groups, as well as comparing both groups' educational interests.

Most chapters also describe the place of traditional ways of knowing in the context of modern society. In Kee's chapter on "Adult Learning from a Confucian Way of Thinking," for example, the Korean author closes with a section on "Confucianism Today" and how it continues to permeate all levels of Korean life—including the relationship between student and teacher, the status of female adult learners, and "lifelong learning cities."

Some, but not all, chapters include a critique of the non-Western perspective, such as Malaysian authors Kamis and Muhammad's chapter on "Islam's Lifelong Learning Mandate." They explain that while the Prophet Muhammad called for equal access to education for men and women, "sadly, some so-called Muslim communities have been known to forbid their female populace from schooling or have access to certain fields of knowledge, an injunction that runs counter to the message brought by Islam" (p. 37). The authors acknowledge that this has "demonized" Islam to the outside world. They emphasize that in Malaysia both men and women do have equal access to knowledge and learning. The chapters that critique, as well as explain, the particular perspective lend authenticity to the writing. Any perspective on learning and knowing has its strengths and weaknesses; for example, empowering some groups while disenfranchising others.

A few chapters, such as the one on "African Indigenous Knowledge," include a specific section on practical application, in this case titled "Ideas for the African Indigenization of Adult Education." The author, Ntseane, suggests emphasizing participatory instruction, including student learning

styles, and acknowledging the diversity of African indigenous knowledge. Chapters that include these sections are particularly valuable as readers try to make sense of how understanding these new perspectives can impact the design of learning environments.

In the closing chapter, Merriam identifies three themes to unify the varying perspectives: (1) Learning is a lifelong journey; (2) What counts as knowledge is broadly defined; and (3) Learning and instruction are holistic and informal. She notes that while Western notions of lifelong learning focus on a movement toward becoming more independent and productive, non-Western perspectives view the process as becoming “more fully human.” While knowledge gained by means of the scientific method is privileged in Western cultures, sacred or “revealed” knowledge is highly valued in other perspectives. Rather than separating the mind from the body as Western perspectives tend to do, other perspectives involve mind, body, spirit, and emotions in their views of learning.

These insights, and many more, make this an enlightening volume of well-articulated perspectives on learning and knowing. The volume will be useful for a wide range of teaching and learning contexts, from adult education to educational psychology to instructional design to research methods in education. Not only will it provide for many “ah-ha” moments of recognition as one reflects on previous encounters with students from around the world, but it also will challenge the reader to reflect upon her or his own beliefs—a sure starting point for meaningful change.