

COLUMBIA COLLEGE

Columbia College – A Multicultural Institution

While Columbia College prides itself on the quality and caliber of its faculty and staff, it also prides itself on attracting learners from many cultures. Columbia represents the Canadian mosaic. Its students are like the United Nations. They come from around the world and speak over 57 languages. They bring with them their language, dress, food, music and cultural practices. They enrich our institution and the lives of everyone they touch and contribute to our growth as members of society. They chose Canada and Columbia College and we thank them for this decision. They are here to learn, get an education, and wish to become more effective members within their family and leading members of our society. Our responsibility is to help them strengthen their language skills (reading, writing and speaking) and understanding of Canadian culture (not only dress, music, and language but norms, behaviors, beliefs, practices, and mannerisms). We need to do this in a manner that is informative and beneficial while at the same time we need to honor and respect their cultures. We need to learn about them and where they came from just as we need to help them learn about us and the ways of Canadian society.

So to be an effective facilitator and/or staff member at Columbia College requires that we not only bring a vast array of talents, knowledge, and skills but also means we understand that our role is not simply to complete the roles and responsibilities listed in our position descriptions. Our primary role is to help others we come into contact with to succeed, and one of the best ways to help others succeed is to better understand them.

This section is designed to help us understand how many of our students were indoctrinated in the learning environment. It will help us appreciate, for example, that many Asian students do not speak out or pose questions in class (or at work) because it may cause the teacher (or supervisor at work) to lose face. Instead they have been culturally taught to speak to their teacher (or supervisor) in a more private setting outside class.

The Islamic Perspective on Learning

To begin with the word Islam originally came from three Arabic letters (SIM, LAM, and MIM). The root word for Islam therefore means to be in peaceful submission, to surrender, obey and be at peace. Islam is a way of living which emphasizes education and knowledge seeking. There are some differences between the Islamic perspective on learning and that of western cultures. For example, in the first verse of the Qur'an, states "*Read! In the name of your Lord, Who has created (all that exists). Read! And your Lord is the most generous. Who has taught (the writing) by the pen. Has taught man that which he knew not*" (Qur'an 96:1-5).

For Islamics, learning is considered to be a sacred and obligatory act for all individuals. The purpose of education is to bring men and women closer to God and His creation, and as God is "the source of knowledge, by knowing more they felt they were drawing near to God" (Husain & Ashraf 1979, p. 11). Muslims therefore believe in the lifelong pursuit of knowledge. They believe that people should learn not for themselves but to help other people in their community. To do this one should constantly seek out, reflect on and then share knowledge with others. They also believe that age, gender and ethnic background should not be a barrier to learning.

People who share this faith should show a great deal of respect for the teacher who is the keeper of knowledge. Therefore the student-teacher relationship is sacred to Islamics.

The Confucian Perspective on Learning

According to Confucius (551-479 BC) the purpose of education is to enlighten people and to show love to people (Sung, 1991c). It is also needed to reach “the highest excellence”. According to Sung, in order to reach the highest excellence the following steps are required: to investigate things, to extend knowledge, to demonstrate a sincere will, to correct the mind, to cultivate personal life, to regulate the family, to achieve national order, and to support world peace.

Confucians believe quite simply we need to “learn” in life. We need to learn from others, we need to learn from nature, and we need to enjoy learning from our daily experiences. Like a young bird flapping its wings, we need to learn from practice and learn from our experiences in life.

Sung (1991c) goes on to state that learning is a holistic approach involving self reflection through meditation and spiritual study. It also involves commitment and continuous effort. For Confucians the focus of learning is on spiritual development and not vocational development or skill acquisition. Sung (1991c) also states that learners will learn on their own and with peers. He goes on to state that teachers are highly revered by society and students are to show respect for their teachers. In fact, according to Confucianism education today in China, Korea and Taiwan, teachers are to be held in the same high regard as parents and kings.

These views of Confucianism should help Columbia College faculty and staff better understand the behavior of Asian students in our classrooms and group meetings such as student orientations where they show a reticence to speak out or ask questions. Through years of cultural training they have learned that such behaviors may cause their teacher to lose face. Instead they have been taught that questions should be asked privately before or after class. Where westerners see silence as a sign of weakness, shyness, or trouble, East Asians see it as a sign of strength, power, and disagreement (Liu, 2001, p. 190). Wang (2006) goes on to state that when a Chinese student states something that is private and personal, it is actually a sign of weakness, or it may be an attempt to seek help, or simply poor manners.

African Indigenous Learning

A major tenet in African indigenous knowledge systems is that to learn is the basis of living a useful and happy life with oneself and one's family. It also means living a useful and happy life in one's community and society. Finally, it means living happily with the spirits of one's ancestors (Magagula and Maziboku 2004).

The African indigenous way of learning was informal and consisted of oral methods of instruction. It also consisted of learning as a collective or group. Some learning was achieved as a result of a vision or dream. For example, some Herbalists in Botswana became knowledgeable about certain medicines as a result of a dream.

Maulte (2001) learned that some forms of assessment in Botswana consisted of judging individual characters by watching them perform in groups and that real graduation only occurred when the next group had been successfully initiated. For example a group would graduate when they had successfully taught another group how to properly build a cattle corral. In oral societies like Africa every individual was a teacher, productive worker, and learner.

In the African indigenous society, locally acquired knowledge is learned through observing situations, experimenting with solutions, and modifying previous solutions to adapt to changing environmental forces. Participatory education is achieved as a result of ceremonies, rituals, and spiritual activities. Knowledge is also acquired as a result of storytelling, music, dance, and poetry. It is retained in cultural artifacts, religious beliefs, taboos, myths, and folklore.

The purpose of African indigenous education is to help people achieve the highest societal value they call botho or humanism. People who achieve this are honest and willing to share or help others. They are accommodating to others and committed to saving lives. They also show respect to others including the young and old.

The Hindu Perspective on Learning

Like other non-western religions the Hindu religion is focused on the mind and body becoming united. It is a religion that places great value and respect on the teacher, historically referred to as a guru. This religion began some 4000 years ago and historically had an apprenticeship structure where each teacher had one student. The teacher had a deep devotion to the learner who had utmost respect for his/her teacher. In past days a lot of learning took place through storytelling, music, dance, and meditation. Much cultural learning today still takes place without the use of textbooks but through family members passing on stories.

The purpose of learning for a Hindu is not simply to acquire knowledge and skills but a life-long process of becoming a unified being. This is played out in the last stages of life for many Hindus who give up all their worldly possessions and begin a pilgrimage leading to true enlightenment which is the uniting of mind and body. By following this path one is led to liberation and enlightenment which allows individuals to gain a more holistic view of the universe and their connection with it.

Even today, much of the Hindu religious values and beliefs such as the laws of cause and effect or Karma are taught orally through storytelling by parents and grandparents who pass it on from generation to generation.

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