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Review

Ott, Craig, *Teaching and Learning Across Cultures: A Guide to Theory and Practice*. Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, 2021. ISBN 9781493430895, 366pp.

Review by Dr Ryan Faber¹

A lot has been written about living and serving cross-culturally. Much less has been written specifically about cross-cultural teaching. Craig Ott's *Teaching and Learning Across Cultures: A Guide to Theory and Practice* addresses that gap. Ott, professor of mission and intercultural studies at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in the United States, brings a wealth of cross-cultural teaching experience – twenty years of cross-cultural teaching in central Europe, along with shorter-term teaching assignments in over forty countries – to his task.

Written from a North American perspective, Ott's book focuses on the experience of Western teachers serving in the majority world, though it includes occasional stories of students from the majority world who are studying in Western institutions. Little is said about teachers from the majority world teaching in Western cultures.

Teaching and Learning Across Cultures attempts to examine 'culturally related differences in teaching and learning' – 'Different cultures [...] approach teaching and learning in fundamentally different ways' (p. 12); they answer the questions 'What constitutes knowledge? What does it mean to teach and to learn?' differently (p. 27) – and 'offer guidance [...] and] practical insight' to cross-cultural teachers (p. 12).

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Ott explores five dimensions of how culture influences teaching and learning: the cognitive dimension, which includes ‘the way individuals perceive, organise, and process knowledge’ (p. 80); the worldview dimension, which includes epistemology – acceptable sources of knowledge: science, tradition, and the supernatural (revelation) – and understandings of causality and time; the social dimension, especially expectations for the teacher-student relationship; the media dimension, particularly instructional methods and online learning; and the environmental dimension, including the physical, societal, and institutional environments.

Ott’s treatment of these various dimensions is uneven. His discussion of the cognitive dimension is highly academic. It involves extensive literature reviews. Ott’s interaction with often-dated research is overly nuanced. The section has the density of a doctoral dissertation. It is preceded by a lengthy interaction with learning style theories, the conclusion of which is that these theories are not relevant to teaching and learning cross-culturally.

More important are cognitive styles: abstract and concrete thinking, and holistic and analytical cognitive styles. Western cultures tend toward abstract thinking; non-Western cultures toward concrete thinking. Western cultures tend toward holistic thinking; non-Western cultures toward cognitive styles. Those who teach cross-culturally do well to understand these different cognitive styles. Adapting one’s teaching to the style of one’s learners – rediscovering the power of metaphor and the wisdom of indigenous proverbs – can be advantageous.

But Ott’s preference is for ‘adaptation with gradual introduction of alternative approaches’ (p. 76), that is, introducing Western approaches when teaching in non-Western settings. Here a preference for Western cognitive style and worldview is evident: ‘Mismatching teaching and learning styles [...] can help concrete thinkers expand their cognitive skills and reasoning strategies’ (p. 123). To move from analytical thinking to holistic thinking is ‘developmental’ (p. 134). Thus, teachers are advised to mismatch a holistic (Western) teaching style with analytic (non-Western) learners for the benefit (development) of those thinkers. Ott’s discussion of the worldview includes a chapter on ‘teaching for worldview change’, presumably conforming the host culture’s worldview to that of the cross-cultural (Western) teachers. But Ott

acknowledges that ‘all worldviews have behaviours that can lead to harmful behaviours and injustice’ (p. 177). The goal should not be to Westernise other cultures, but ‘greater conformity of our worldview to a biblical worldview’ (p. 185).

The cognitive and worldview dimensions are important, but perhaps the most important dimension for effective teaching cross-culturally is the social dimension: ‘Navigating relationships between teacher and student is perhaps the most essential skill that cross-cultural teacher needs to be effective’ (p. 195), because – and this seems to be a transcultural truth – ‘the best teachers are ones who really care about the student [...] Good teaching is not just about pedagogy in the narrow sense but also about caring and healthy relationships’ (p. 211). Ott’s discussion of the social dimension includes such important concepts as negotiated social hierarchy, power distance, honour-shame, and the differences between individualistic and communalistic cultures.

Ott’s discussion of the media dimension is much less academic. It reflects his experience as a cross-cultural teacher. Though his evidence is primarily anecdotal, Ott offers a wealth of good advice for cross-cultural teachers teaching in a foreign language, reading and writing assignments – including addressing different cultural understandings of plagiarism – lecturing and student note-taking (or lack thereof), and the use of visual media, song, dance, and drama. He dedicates an entire chapter to online learning. Readers may be surprised to learn that ‘web layouts [are] influenced by the designers’ culturally conditioned cognitive styles’. One study found that Chinese students performed significantly better on websites laid out by Chinese designers; American students performed best on websites laid out by American designers (pp. 284-285). Also in online education, teachers do well to attend to the unique dynamics of teaching and learning across cultures.

The final dimension of how culture affects teaching and learning is the environmental dimension. Here too, Ott’s presentation is more anecdotal than academic. Some of it is highly practical: the physical dimension includes weather, climate, and the physical infrastructure in which one lives and teaches. The societal dimension is larger than the social dimension discussed earlier. It includes the dynamics of wealth and poverty, politics, family expectations, social unrest, and the influence of religion(s). The institutional

dimension is similar to the social dimension, but here Ott focuses on the teacher's place within the educational institution as a whole, not only the relationship between teacher and student.

Teaching and Learning Across Cultures provides valuable information, insights, and orientation for Westerners teaching cross-culturally. The book provides a helpful framework within which to understand the cultural context in which one is teaching. Perhaps the book's best advice, inspired by the example of Anna from *The King and I*, is this:

the ideal attitude of every cross-cultural teacher: willingness to be a learner, striving to like and understand the students, and working toward a relationship that is honest, open, and relaxed. (p. 14)

The most effective cross-cultural teachers are first and foremost students, students of their students and the impact of culture on teaching and learning.

A final note: *Teaching and Learning Across Cultures* is published by Baker Academic. The book is long and, especially in the first sections, often overly academic in tone. A shorter volume that is more anecdotal in nature, conversational in tone, and practical in focus would be a helpful complement to this work.