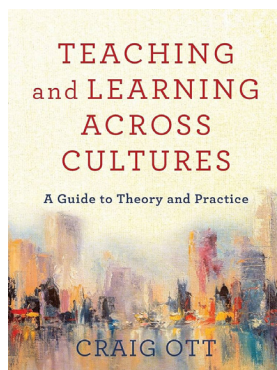


Teaching and Learning Across Cultures: A Guide to Theory and Practice

By Craig Ott. Baker Academics, 2021.
336 pages.

Reviewed by V. Phillips

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How Learners Learn

Teaching, whether professionally or in ministry, plays an important role in many of our lives. That role may be in a formal classroom teaching English for a language school or teaching in an educational institution. Perhaps our teaching role is in the informal context of a development project or vocational training. Many of us, if not all, are involved in teaching spiritual truth to our disciples individually or in a group Bible study. Moving outside of our passport country to teach may seem intimidating because of the need to function in a different language, but that is only the beginning of our cultural challenges!

Craig Ott, in his valuable text, *Teaching and Learning Across Cultures*, reminds us that while our knowledge of the content may be excellent

and our ability to adopt new methods may be helpful, the challenge of cross-cultural teaching is a more complex process.

Understanding this additional level of complexity was significant for me in my own experience with teaching professionally in East and North Africa for different development projects as well as teaching from God's word in my ministry relationships. I gave information that was comprehensive and accurate while using teaching methods that were varied and engaging (I thought), but I often struggled with feeling ineffective and seeing little change in attitudes and behaviors in those I taught.

Later, with exposure to some practical field models grounded in basic adult education principles, I discovered the added level of complexity of needing to understand my learners and how they learn. This discovery eventually led to graduate studies in the field of intercultural education and getting a better grasp on the value of matching my teaching process with the learning process of my "learners." If I want to be an effective teacher and see lives transformed, I need to know how my learners are understanding and processing information—whether that is a topic on health or a lesson presenting biblical truth. Even a well-presented gospel message holds little meaning if the information is not communicated in a way that makes sense to my listener. "Jesus lived and taught in ways that served his objective: to not only impart knowledge but also to transform lives. Teachers today will do well to follow his example" (64).

Over the years, I have discovered and read a variety of literature on adult and cross-cultural theory that has helped me understand my learners. Ott's "guide" is a welcome resource that puts so much of that theoretical and practical insight into teaching across cultures in one book. I wish I had had this book years ago!

Ott, a long-term professor at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School who also has extensive overseas experience, offers a "modest, but comprehensive, survey of the challenges and approaches to teaching

across cultures” (23). Ott calls his book a “dip of the toe” into the essentials gleaned from the vast amounts of resources and literature on teaching cross-culturally (23). I found Ott’s scholarly background in intercultural studies and practical understanding of his students in a range of educational fieldwork an important value of his book. *Teaching and Learning Across Cultures* is an excellent introduction to relevant and insightful principles that can help all of us feel more effective and less frustrated in our teaching roles. Applying these principles can help us see changes in the behaviors, values, and beliefs of our students/disciples.

Learning Styles and the Five Dimensions of Culture’s Influence

As a scholar writing a textbook on teaching cross-culturally, Ott defines and explains his terms as he introduces them. Probably the most interesting definition is that of *learning style*—a term that “generally refers to natural or preferred conditions under which an individual best learns” (47). He acknowledges that learning style is not “fixed or innate” but better seen as a preference or expectation (54). As individuals, we can certainly appreciate that we have our preferred learning styles. However, it is important to see that the discussion is one of cultural preferences more so than specific styles, and this makes our role as cross-cultural teachers more complex as we work to bridge the cultural gap between our teaching and their learning. The task is not only to “expand” our teaching styles but also to help our students “expand” their learning style in order to see transformation happen (53).

Ott identifies five “dimensions” of cultural influence on teaching and learning. He divides and organizes his chapters according to these dimensions, providing theoretical foundations and practical suggestions for each relevant issue. In true textbook fashion, there are sidebars throughout the book to provide examples from different cultures or to add resources for more information. Themes, such as orality, have recurring value in relation to the different dimension topics. The five

dimensions (illustrated by an overlapping flower-like diagram) that Ott identifies are: cognitive, worldview, social relations, media, and environment.

The cognitive dimension receives the most attention, addressed in three chapters covering a range of theory and practice related to how people think and how they process information. Culture affects **what** as well as **how** people think (65). Ott looks at the differences between abstract and concrete thinking and the ways these affect reasoning and critical analysis. The author also recognizes learners with a “holistic orientation” versus those who are oriented toward a more analytic and linear way of perceiving and organizing information (112).

Personally, I found the chapters on the cognition dimension to be particularly helpful in my role of teaching abstract ideas of health (such as germs or immunity) as well as spiritual truths (such as redemption). These abstract concepts were challenging for my concrete thinkers. In my attempts to be creative, I would develop impressive charts and diagrams to represent a topic. However, my scientific orientation hindered my health messages and my Western logical reasoning interfered with my finding good ways to share spiritual truths. African oral learners could not grasp my linear cause-effect presentation of information, leading to frustration for all of us. Even an inductive style Bible study could become a chaotic lesson that was too analytical and confusing for my listeners. My observations align with Ott’s on concrete thinking, and I eventually did learn how to adapt oral methods of teaching for my learners (which I will address below).

In contrast to the cognitive and thinking dimension, the worldview dimension focuses more on how the learner views reality and how things work (137). Ott explains the “how we know what we know” that is significant in understanding a learner’s response to a new source of knowledge. What holds more value—tradition or science, for example? Why do things happen, and will simple cause-effect answers explain everything for a holistic thinker? More importantly, can true change

happen if an individual's worldview is not changed? As Ott says, "Most Christian cross-cultural teachers do not want to just see learners accomplish tasks, develop skills, or master content; they also want to help them see the world more biblically and lead lives more consistent with those teachings" (160).

The third dimension of Ott's teaching and learning paradigm is social relations. There is the significance of the relationship between the teacher and student with the complexity of power distance, different authority structures, and patron-client arrangements. The author also considers how social realities, such as honor-shame and direct-indirect communication values, can impact a learner's motivation to interact and succeed. Ott speaks of the positive results seen with problem-based learning (197). This resonated with me as I thought about teaching settings where I watched a group of illiterate women sit and discuss a problem among themselves. Reflecting and thinking critically together, as a group, helped them to come to a solution for that problem – and that process was more effective in motivating change.

"Media" and "environment" are the last two dimensions. The two chapters on media describe the range of instructional methods learners respond to and why. Ott discourages lecturing in favor of more participatory and creative means of teaching, offering an impressive description of different pedagogical tools. He also includes a chapter about online and technological possibilities of learning for those teaching in this growing field. A final chapter looks at the environmental factors that affect learners. Thinking about practical, but important, realities such as the physical arrangements of a room or scheduling considerations around seasonal time constraints are among the examples of environmental barriers to learning.

The Value of Orality

The number of principles and examples related to orality that Ott scatters throughout his text really stood out to me. The fact that I work with illiterate women makes the draw to oral methods of teaching

a natural assumption, but Ott describes most concrete learners as oral learners whether they are readers or not (90). Stories, parables, metaphors, case studies, songs, drama, puppet shows, and any representation of narrative expression can organize information into meaningful content. These methods “embody and illustrate truth” that can persuade change to happen (93). Oral methods also enhance understanding (99), facilitate critical thinking skills and problem solving (99), and give a sense of meaning and hope (165). Narrative has cultural appeal but can also challenge traditional ways of thinking (91) as Jesus did with his parables. Stories and songs can touch the emotions and create memorable means of passing on or reproducing information (249).

Ott discusses other forms of teaching and learning, but his five dimensions brought out the importance of why a method such as narrative is valuable for teaching cross-culturally. This value applies to theology as well: “Understandings of orality are not important only for evangelism and discipleship; they also hold potential for deeper theological reflection” (132).

Ott introduces us to the new terms (at least to me) of “oral hermeneutics” (90) and “narrative theology” (131). With the increasing availability of how-to trainings in developing and using chronological Bible storytelling, it is helpful to have a discussion on why and how orality is helpful in so many cultural contexts.

Can I Recommend a Textbook?

Ott’s book is a well-written and well-organized resource. *Teaching and Learning Across Cultures* is the type of textbook I would have loved to own years ago when I was desperately trying to be a better teacher. I would have learned the value of spending time watching what helps an illiterate woman to learn, observing how she processes new information presented to her, and considering what helps her in that process. From this, I would learn about her learning process and reorient my thinking

about my teaching process. Wanting her to understand and change her behaviors, such as practicing good nutrition or preventing disease, I would then need to teach in a way that helps her to find meaning in these ideas and not just throw information at her. Wanting her to understand the transforming truth of the good news of Jesus Christ, I would need to share that message in a way that reaches her heart. The content of that message is important—but the way it is presented may make all the difference in her embracing the truth about Him.

I imagine that there are few who will sit and read such a book cover to cover as I did. Ott's book is comprehensive and detailed, but it is also easy to read and accessible. It is not so theory-laden to make it a heavy text. The examples and references are practical and helpful. Perhaps it is not a book to recommend for every team member to buy. On the other hand, I can see the benefit of having access to it; the content it provides would be invaluable as a team resource. I appreciate Ott's stated goal in his preface: "May these pages kindle an appreciation for human diversity, a curiosity to understand learners, and most importantly, the ability to see others not primarily as students, or as citizens of a nation, or as members of an ethnic group. But rather, may we see them first and foremost as persons created in the image of God with amazing potential" (xiv).

Ott's hope is to encourage you as teachers to reach your potential, as much as to help you know how to help your students reach theirs.

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