BERA Book Review

Mirrors of the Mind

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This text creates a case for Western Educationalists to draw on East Asian epistemology , and in particular, Japanese philosophy to inform the way in which we approach our teaching and assessment of learning. The author speaks directly to the reader whom he identified as the ‘main character’ of the book; through its conversational style and questions for reflection, one is encouraged to analyse personalised existing practices and question how these might be developed in response to the recommendations of

The book is divided into chapters that detail Western practices in educational psychology before exploring the nuances and implications of adopting a more East Asian epistemology. Each includes ‘study’ questions that are designed to encourage reflexivity in the reader.

The introduction to this text contextualises the idea of how we might distinguish between ‘thinking’ and ‘mindfulness’ , emphasising the need for educationalists to develop and pursue an awareness of their own mind as well as that of others. This leads into the first chapter which explores critical dimensions of life, dealing with the everyday application of personal and formalised theory. Here, we are introduced to the Japanese concept of ‘jikkan’; the ‘gut feeling’ that individuals feel within a situation that ultimately informs their instinctive response and that of ‘kizuki’; the process of recognising moments of serendipity. The suggestion here is that we should take an ideographic approach to understanding our practice in order that our internalised theoretical perspective accounts for the complexities of individuals we are working with.

The second chapter explores the psychological paradigms of behaviourism, operant conditioning and instrumentalism. The efficacy of such approaches to explaining and controlling learning environments, as favoured by educationalists at various points in recent history, is questioned with respect to how meaningful such a conceptualisations can be. In particular, the author considers that children are not powerless subjects in the interaction that is education and that, especially through the externalisation of rewards and sanctions they can themselves be empowered. Overarching in this is the lack of critical engagement displayed by some educationalists in assuming causal relationships where they may not actually exist, guiding the reader away from assuming a mechanistic assessment of behaviours and mind.

The following section (Chapter 3) explores further how the mind diverges from being a simple mechanism for information procession. Beginning with a representation of cognitive theorists’ work, grounded in traditional Western epistemology, this chapter progresses to identify that integral to ‘memory’ is not a superficial association of content and recollection but that recall is highly dependant upon the context in which learning first took place and the depth at which information is first processed. Through this chapter, however, the author does not suggest the replacement of reductionist approaches to education with a focus on tacit ways of knowing; rather, there is an acknowledgement that there is a need for a synthesis of differing cognitive approaches to create a more holistic educational experience.

Chapter 4 begins to consider the brain and mind in a physiological sense, discussing the neurological basis of learning and the way in which our understanding of this has developed from an assumption of localisation (where each part of the brain is responsible for a sole function) to one of distribution (where learning activities are distributed across different parts of the brain). Here, there is an exploration of the neuroplasticity of the brain and the implications this has for giving meaning to concepts that are new to us; identification is made of the need for us to find an ‘emptiness of self’ in order that learning is not impeded by our pre-existing selves as we meet challenges to our prevailing understanding of the world order.

In this section the place of ‘mirror neurones’ (those that emulate patterns of neural activity as of another carrying out an action) is also discussed highlighting emerging theories regarding the possibility that we have a biological proclivity to internalise the experiences of others as we see them, hence creating the possibility to exploit learning without the use of language.

In chapter 4, constructivist approaches to education are discussed wherein the individual conceptualisation of meaning is paramount to the learning process rather than the educational context per se. The work of Piaget (1952) forms the focus of the initial discussion, addressing the advocation of ‘naturalistic observation’ of children playing and ‘clinical interviewing’ to establish the meaning that is being ascribed to activities. The author relates such dialogic practice to that used by Zen master to understand disciples’ perceptions of the world. The way in which understanding is built by children based on pre-existing experience is discussed as is the relationship between formal knowledge as derived through the schooling system and informal knowledge, as derived from prior experience in day to day activity.

Whilst the author presents a positive representation of intellectual development as reflective practice, he also acknowledges the ‘dark side’ of constructivism as being the possibility that the meanings that learners have already ascribed to different situations (and in particular, their understanding of the meaning of different subjects) may actually form a barrier that educators may need to become aware of and challenge.

In chapter 6, the relationship between mind and society is explored using the theory of social constructivism as developed by Vygotsky; key concepts of ‘proximal development’ and ‘scaffolding’ are discussed with reference to the significance of the place social interaction, exchange of perspectives and the cultural significance of activities in education. In this section, the author also introduces the concept of ‘kata’ or form, encompassing a set of actions in culturally inherited practices that form the consciousness of individuals. Such a ‘kata’ informs the way in which educators approach their teaching and the author invites the reader to critically reflect on what this might be in terms of the underpinning approach to our practice.

Chapter 7 deals with the nature of motivation, outlining theories developed in Western psychology including Bandura’s observational learning and self-efficacy. It also addresses goal, attribution, flow and self-determination theory. Once the application of each of these has been discussed, the Chinese concept of ‘Chi’, variously referred to in East Asian culture as ‘ki’ (Japan), ‘gi’ (Korea) and ‘khi’ (Vietnam) is explored in light of the way in which if enhanced through social interaction in education, it can fortify children’s motivational development.

A Freudian explanation of multiplicity of self forms the opening sections of Chapter 9 which deals with social and personal development. The psychologists’ ‘psychodynamic theory’ is applied to an educational context discussing the struggles that students may go through and the challenges that educationalists may face in dealing with their own psychological orientation in their work. This chapter also addresses Jung’s theory underpinning the places of ‘complexes’ developed by individuals as they work through situations of stress or anxiety and the way in which our consideration of the place of these in our students may facilitate empathetic approaches to teaching. Ultimately the chapter considers the development of social identity and how Western emphasis on ego contrasts with the East Asian ‘Yin’ and ‘Yang’ wherein the concept of ‘self’ is considered unfounded as it is only realised in relation to other factors in the world.

The closing chapter of this book challenges the reader to change their practice and invite them to engage in educational research, and, in particular, action research which, he suggests, can form a new ‘kata’ to improves personal educational practice.

This text effectively discusses the value of ‘Western’ epistemologies in education and then makes suggestions as to how such practices may be enhanced through the application of East Asian educational theory. The main focus when dealing with the concept of westernised practice is from a US perspective and therefore, most of the observation contrasting the two perspectives are drawn from the States. This does not mean, however, that the text is not of value to European audiences as the main challenge of the book lies in confronting our own educational practices and considering how these may be improved through critical evaluation using perspectives that are alien to our dominant culture. The author identifies an assumption that the reader will be in educational practice and the text is likely to be of value to those already teaching although may also be helpful to those currently training to teach; particularly as there is great emphasis on both reflective and reflexive practice in such courses.