Learning and Interdependence: Towards a Buddhism-inspired Theory of Learning

Soraj Hongladarom

Department of Philosophy, Chulalongkorn University

Introduction

Do theories of learning have universal import such that they should be applicable in all cultural contexts? The answer is both yes and no. On the one hand, theories of learning originally conceived in one culture can be adopted by others. This is a common occurrence. On the other hand, this does not mean that there is one universally valid theory, since any theory is adopted only because they are responding to the needs and goals that vary according to circumstances. The paper suggests a proposal based on the teachings of Buddhism as to why this is the case.

Globalization has spread its effects and impacts to almost all corners of the globe; this also includes how teaching and learning are conducted. As countries and cultures are interacting with one another intensively, they become aware of what others are doing and this can have profound effects on how each country or cultural region undertakes its ways of doing things and its practices. This interaction leads to countries feeling that they need to compete with one another: once certain practices arise in one culture, which are found to be advantageous by others, then it is quite certain that the other cultures will adopt them. These practices also include how education, especially the practice of students are being taught and how they learn, is conducted. Globalization has led to many countries around the world sharing its ways of how teaching and learning are performed.

However, this sharing of practices has its own set of problems. The logic of globalization seems to indicate, ideally: everywhere in the world should be homogeneous, having the same texture and the same features; but, that does not seem to be the case in practice. There have been apparent conflicts when certain educational practices from one place are adopted for use in another. It is often mentioned that the learning style of Asian countries is not suitable for producing critical minded students who dare to question authorities, or students who are creative and innovative. Rote learning has been blamed for this apparent lack in critical and creative thinking. On the other hand, we find US President Barack Obama extolling the virtues of the Asian style of learning, which led to their rapid economic growth (Nussbaum 2010). It is interesting to see how these different viewpoints on the Asian way of learning arise in the first place.

The contention of this paper is that culture is essentially involved in how teaching and learning are performed. Perhaps this is not surprising at all, but often discussions about theories of teaching and learning overlook cultural issues all together, proceeding as if students can be taught the same way no matter if they are in Singapore, Jordan or Bolivia. As culture is the total sum of beliefs and practices that inform a group of people in a society or a community such that the group becomes distinctive, there is no escaping the fact that culture is essentially involved in everything we do. What is at issue, then, is whether there is a universally true learning theory, such as it is applicable everywhere, or must learning theories forever be adapted to each particular community wherein they are going to be used in real classrooms.

1 Research leading to this paper has been supported in part by a grant from a grant from the Thailand Research Fund, grant no. BRG5380009, and the National Research University Project, Project no. AS569A and HS1025A. My thanks also goes to Dion Peoples, who commented on an earlier draft of the paper.
The answer to these questions is both yes and no. On the one hand, teaching and learning theories do retain some universal characteristics. This is the reason why we can study these theories across cultures and national boundaries, and why we scholars can communicate with one another in the numerous international conferences taking place all over the globe. However, on the other hand there seems to be obvious cases where there are problems of using a theory that has been developed in one culture in another one. A middle approach will be offered which neither falls into the trap of relativism (the view that each particular locality has its own valid ways of thinking and doing simply because they are being practiced in one place), or absolutism (the view that there is only one set of beliefs and practices that is valid across the globe regardless of cultural differences).

More specifically, the questions for the paper are: Does a theory of how teaching and learning should be done have a universal import, such that it is applicable anywhere in the world? Does it have only local applicability, and needs to be radically adapted if it is to be of use in a new cultural context from the one where it is first conceived? These are very complex questions, which do not admit themselves of easy answers. Nonetheless, I intend to provide some tentative answers to these questions in this paper. I will argue that insights obtained from Buddhism could illuminate this question such that a way out of the impasse between relativism and absolutism can be found. The impasse occurs when a dilemma arises between the need for cultures in the globalized world to interact and to get along with one another on the one hand, and the need for these cultures to maintain their own identities and sensitivities to local contexts on the other. In the context of teaching and learning, this plays itself out in terms of conflicts between what is believed to be universal learning theories and particular ones based on local traditions and cultures. An example might be that a learning theory adopted from the West, such as one emphasizing free exploration of ideas and content rather than strict transmission of received knowledge, could face problems arising from cultural conflict when it is adapted in Asia, where transmission of knowledge and information handed down through textbooks and the earlier generations appear to be the norm. This does not have to mean that the West is all about free exploration and the East is all about transmission, but the stereotype at least helps us see our problematic more clearly, which is how theories in education are always bound to local cultures and local contexts.

The dilemma is, then, only an apparent one created by a presupposition that cultures are static entities that exist in their own right. Viewed in this way, cultures become much like a substantive thing with clear boundaries and an ‘essence’ that defines it as what it is in contrast to other cultures. Once it is perceived in this way, it becomes difficult to see how cultures could interact with one another, giving and taking ideas, goods, beliefs, and practices from one another, something which cultures have actually been doing since time immemorial. The felt need to maintain cultural identity thus stems from the belief that there is something substantial or essential about a culture such that the substance or the essence here should remain in the midst of the exchanges that cultures are undergoing. It is, nonetheless, very difficult to state precisely what that essence of a culture is. More plausible is it to say that cultures are fluid and the boundaries between them much more porous.

The force of globalization of cultures has strongly highlighted this problem. A reason why many fear the threat of globalization is that it appears to threaten cultures. However, those who fear the threat of globalization have a point. They do not only fear globalization per se, but what they worry about is that the world itself could become homogeneous in such a way that cultural differences cease to matter altogether. For them the whole world would be much more impoverished. It seems that we cherish cultural differences and cultural identities, but we also enjoy the fruits of globalization too.
The proposal offered in this paper aims firstly at deconstructing the boundaries between cultures. This does not mean that cultures cease to matter, but it means that cultural identities and cultural differences are themselves cultural constructs and do not exist objectively on their own. Then, I will look at the very identity of a culture through a more pragmatic outlook. That is, instead of viewing cultures as static, one should look at cultures as serving purposes at hand. For example, when the matter concerns interaction and sharing among a smaller group of people who live together and are already sharing a lot of background information with one another, the culture that emerges can be an intimate one. Here one could say that the identity of this particular culture depends on the level of interaction and sharing among the participants. However, when the interaction is extended, as is the case when people from faraway places do meet and communicate with one another, there emerges another kind of culture which does not require much background information. This is known as the ‘thick’ and the ‘thin’ versions of culture respectively (Hongladarom 1999). Furthermore, when the interaction of these levels take place on a very intensive scale, such as what is now happening on the Internet today, the very distinction between the thick and the thin appears to be collapsing (Hongladarom 2008).

All this merging of boundaries and so on illustrates the Buddhist viewpoint of the interdependence of all things. The basic idea is that a thing is not what it is essentially, but is a result of some interplay and interaction among various factors. This is also the case for cultures and anything else. The implication for a theory of learning, and of leadership, is that one should recognize that learning always takes place within a context. Thus one needs to factor in contextual information as needed for the objectives of the learning at a particular moment and locality into consideration. This does not imply that there can be no universal theory of learning. What has been thought up systematically in one place can always be relevant in another. It only needs to be adapted as actual needs arise.

Two Cultures:

According to some viewpoints, many of the differences between the East and the West that we see today are in fact expressions of the differences between tradition and modernity. To those who subscribe to this view, the West embodies what is modern; and what is distinctive about Asian or other non-western cultures are characteristics of pre-modern or traditional cultures, such that when Asian cultures become modernized, they will eventually be like Western ones. What is distinctive about the West in the discussions on cross-cultural practices is in fact what is distinctive about modernity, and when the East has become thoroughly modern, then they will become indistinguishable from the West in beliefs and practices.

This view, however, has been under attack on various fronts. There are actually many traits that distinguish Western culture from modern culture, even though the former is thoroughly modern. Many have shown that Asian or other non-western cultures can maintain their identities even when they have become ultramodern. Japan has become perhaps the very epitome of modernity, but no one can deny that Japan has largely maintained its own distinctive culture which separates it from other cultures in Europe and North America. Furthermore, when one looks more deeply at the West itself, one also finds many differences between, say, Europe and the US in many ways. To illustrate some of the cultural differences between Japan and the West, one finds that in Japan people are more reluctant to accept that patients who are totally brain dead are really dead physiologically. For many Japanese, the notion of a patient whose body is still warm and breathing (even with the help of a ventilator) who is really dead is very hard to accept. On the contrary, the notion is rather widely accepted in the West so much as that it has
become a norm (LaFleur 2002; Nudeshima 1991; Picken 1977). Moreover, it appears to be easier for a typical Japanese to accept the development of human-like robots who are able to speak and play with us than a typical Westerner. This is perhaps due to the fact that Westerners are brought up in the Christian culture which gives a special prominence to human beings as images of God (Kaplan 2004; Bartneck, Suzuki, Kanda, and Nomura 2006). Furthermore, there are many marked differences between the cultures of the US and Europe. Dan Burk (2007), for example, has pointed out that the primary ethical theoretical framework in the US is utilitarianism and consequentialism, whereas in Europe the deontology theory emphasizing absolute rights seem to be preferred.

All these show that modernity and the West are not synonymous. The upshot is that the East can become modern without being identical to the West; thus one can devise a theory on learning and teaching which is modern and non-western, retaining distinctive characteristics of one’s own cultural tradition. It also shows that concepts such as modernity, Eastern and Western cultures, and so on are only constructs (Hongladarom 2001). They do not exist in objectivity; instead, they appear to exist as a result of our conceptual apparatus that defines them. That these concepts cannot be defined precisely is due to the fact that our conceptual apparatus has not given precise definitions to them. As a result we can recognize these concepts in paradigmatic cases, but when we focus on gray areas then it becomes difficult to say whether these instances belong to which concept.

In an article on “Asian Learning Culture,” Benjamin Vogler (2006) presents a useful comparison of learning cultures in the East and West. While he presents what many in the educational circle have already understood to be stereotypical conception of the two learning styles, his presentation clearly captures and highlights the differences between the two. The following table sums up these differences in the two cultures of learning:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TWO MODELS OF EDUCATION: East and West (Vogler, 2006)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Germany (Western countries)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Techniques of independent learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teamwork</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combination of theory and practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discourse/controversy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion (polarization)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis of objects, texts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making comparisons (differences)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experimenting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detecting problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work-sharing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criticizing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transformation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning is thinking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning by doing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relevance for practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acquiring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Active/Expertise</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The dichotomy between the two cultures is clearly presented. The East, according to this picture, emphasizes rote learning or “techniques of memorization,” which means that one learns by heart the received text with the expectation that one understands its meaning later on (the usual conception of rote learning as mere parroting is actually a misunderstanding); the West, on the other hand, emphasizes “techniques of independent learning,” meaning that one does the study on one’s own through one’s interaction with the text and with the teacher’s commentary. Here the understanding is supposed to occur at about the same time as the reception of the text. Another popular perception of the differences between two styles concerns the relation between the teacher and the student. It is well known, stereotypically, students in the East are much deferential toward the teacher and questioning the authority of the teacher is almost non-existent. In the West, on the contrary, students are more expected to challenge the teacher in order to engage in lively discussions of ideas.

The two stereotypical models presented here have been both praised and attacked alike. While many are familiar with the criticism of the Asian style of not being able to produce students capable of thinking creatively and independently, we have found some thinkers in the West arguing that it is in fact due to this so-called Asian style that is responsible for Asia’s surge as the world’s leading economic and technological power. US President Barack Obama, for example, has extolled the virtue of Singaporean education was on record saying that “[Singaporeans] are spending less time teaching things that don’t matter, and more time teaching things that do. They are preparing their students not only for high school or college, but also for a career. We are not” (Obama 2009). Philosopher Martha Nussbaum wrote that Obama was clearly in approval of the way education is being done in countries such as China and Singapore (Nussbaum 2010). In her article Nussbaum chastises the educational systems in China and Singapore, saying that they still stifle creative and critical freedom that is needed for a genuine democracy. According to her, the success of Chinese and Singaporean economy could be explained by how students in these countries are taught, but what is more important to her is “civic education,” which is sorely lacking in both countries. She sees Chinese and Singaporean students being taught to become cogs in the giant economic machines without much emphasis on how they become thinking citizens capable of deliberating on public issues that are essential to a democracy. Warning US leaders not to get caught up with “rose-colored glasses,” Nussbaum urges US policy leaders to remain firm in their own traditional models of fostering creative imagination and critical thinking (Nussbaum 2010).

What is shared by Vogler and Nussbaum here is their entrenched view that there are irreconcilable differences in the education styles and theories in the East and the West. However, there are research works showing that this dichotomy between the learning cultures of the West and the East are more products of exigent time and circumstance rather than their fixed characteristic. In my previous paper (Hongladarom 2006a), I show that traits usually considered as belonging to the West, such as critical thinking and the use of logical argumentation, did exist and prosper in the East centuries ago. Both ancient India and China did have sophisticated systems of logical argumentation that rivaled the Aristotelian system that was in use in the West. For example, in medieval India, debates between rival groups of religious adherents were abundant. Buddhist monks and Hindu holy men usually debated each other on theological and philosophical topics, and out of the need to codify these arguments and debates arose treatises on epistemology and logic, which were at least as developed as anything the Western world has to offer even today. Buddhist scholar-monks such as Dignaga and Dharmakirti were well recognized, both by Buddhists and Hindus, as very good exponents of logical thinking, and both did advance the knowledge in Indian philosophy.
on logic and epistemology a great deal. In fact that logical acumen of Buddhist philosophy does not limit itself to the Mahayana tradition, Dion Peoples has shown that logical argumentation and critical thinking has already been in Buddhist philosophy since the time of the Buddha himself (Peoples 2013). Furthermore, the Nyaya system in Hindu philosophy also did much work in logic. The existence of debates and codification and systematization of argumentation showed that the use of reasons and arguments was very well established in India. This extensive use of reason and arguments also existed in China too. Although Chinese philosophy is not as well-known as Indian philosophy as one emphasizing the use of logic, there is a school of Chinese philosophy, the Mohists, that developed much of the knowledge and use of logic which became part of Chinese philosophy (Hongladarom 2006a). All this evidence shows that it is not true that Indian and Chinese philosophical traditions did not have any logic, and thus the belief that logic and argumentation belonged to the West only is totally unfounded.

If this is the case, then the reason why there is the widespread perception that the Asian learning style does not emphasize logic and reasoning as much as rote learning is due to exigencies of the time. Even in the West, when Industrial Revolution was first developed and there was the urgent need to produce skilled personnel to work in factories, education for the mass took shape that did not pay much attention to the development of critical or creative thinking abilities. Instead the education focused almost exclusively on development of useful skills which can be used in the factories in shortest time (Cf. Lawton and Gordon 2002: 115 – 132). The education that fostered critical and creative thinking was an exclusive reserve for the ruling elites for a long time. Universities such as Oxford and Cambridge, for example, specialized in educating a small number of elites who would later become professionals and members of the ruling class in England. It was in this atmosphere that critical thinking was developed since the aim of the education was to foster leadership skills. However, this was not available to the toiling masses who were destined to become the labor force in the emerging factories in rapidly industrializing Britain. It is only after World War II that opportunities for university education began to open up to the masses in full force (McConnell, Berdahl, and Fay 1973). The situation in other western countries is not too different. The mainstream education in Germany had been vocational for a long time, a system whose purpose was to produce the working class for the industry. Even though there were no liberal arts colleges like Cambridge or Oxford in Germany, the country did develop the first Ph.D. Program in the world, as there was the need to produce researchers who were capable of producing new knowledge for the modern world (Mclelland 2008; 1981). The kind of education whose primary aim was to foster critical and creative thinking abilities was not given much attention in Germany for a long time. The vocational education system saw no need for them, and the Ph.D. programs usually bypassed these for the more specialized areas of research advanced fields of study. In the US, which adopted both the British liberal arts system and the German Ph.D., there seemed to be the atmosphere of anti-intellectualism which prevented students from actually realizing the ideals of liberal arts education for the majority of its population. Only a small fraction of the population was able to reap full benefits of critical and creative thinking in the liberal arts colleges. Much of the education in these countries, in short, focused more on rapid transmission of industrial skills rather than developing critical and independent thinking.

This situation is not much different at all from the Asian countries, which are also fast industrializing; the only difference is that the industrialization process took off later than in the West. The perception that Asian countries pay more attention to rote learning rather than development of critical thinking stems from the need of these countries to produce personnel for the emerging industries, and when they find that the other kind of education will be better suited to changing circumstances, then they feel no qualm in
switching their education system so as to produce students who are better trained with critical and independent thinking. How students in a culture are educated is not part of a fixed identity of a culture, but is a reflection of how that culture regards as important at a particular time.

An upshot of this is that the idea that rote learning belongs exclusively to Asian culture is untenable, so is the view that critical thinking belongs exclusively to Western culture. Each has its own advantages and disadvantages, a point missed by Vogler and many scholars. A clear advantage of rote learning, the style of learning that emphasizes transmission of information and skills in a rapid manner, is that it is necessary for producing personnel who are skilled at a particular task in a short time. In fact, this is also commonplace even in the West when the emphasis is on training personnel for particular jobs in the workplace. In an industrializing country facing the problem of shortage of manpower, the rote learning system is clearly required. On the other hand, when the emphasis is not so much on producing personnel for specific tasks, but for personnel who are more flexible and more able to think independently, then rote learning is inappropriate, and the kind of learning usually perceived as belonging to the Western culture, the kind that emphasizes critical and independent thinking, will be more suitable.

Other traits can also be regarded in the same way. Vogler is representative of the received opinion that in the East students are more deferential toward their teachers and rarely question the teachers’ authority. However, this is not the exclusive concern of the East. In medieval times, the authority of the teachers was unquestioned, since it was based on the authority of the Church and the received knowledge handed down from antiquity. To question the teachers was tantamount to questioning the Church itself, and the penalty for doing so can be severe. Since most education during this time was in the hand of the Church, whose primary interest was to perpetuate its own organization through recruitment and training of later generalizations of priests, rote learning became the method of choice. Beating of students was also the norm throughout the Middle Ages and continued to almost the present time. However, this does not mean that logical debate had no place at all in medieval education. On the contrary, the study of logic was part of the curriculum of all churchmen, and they became skilled in debates and logic, much like their Buddhist and Hindu counterparts in India. The study of logic and the use of debate were limited only to the received doctrine of the Church. A churchman can debate with his counterpart, but he cannot transgress these limits on pain of being branded a heretic. This is clearly not the same as the spirit of questioning authority that is implied by most studies on the Western style of education in the contemporary world. In the same vein, Buddhist monks debating among themselves could enjoy a range of freedom of thought and expression, but when it came to challenging the accepted doctrine of the Buddha, they ran the risk of being branded a “non-Buddhist” and hence unworthy of being a monk in a Buddhist monastery.

Hence, it is clear that rote learning and unquestioned acceptance of authority was not the sole prerogative of the East. In fact it is a function of society; when society needs one kind of personnel to fulfill its tasks, then it adopts an educational system accordingly. One might object that the system that existed in the medieval or in fact pre-twentieth-century West belonged to the past and does not represent what is happening there today; they might object that when the West became modern these educational systems were abolished together with the old regime. However, we have seen that to become modern does not have to mean to become Western; one always has to keep in mind that these two concepts are distinct.
A Theory of Learning

We have seen that the educational systems and learning theories that are usually regarded as “Eastern” or “Western” are in fact not necessarily so. One can find the systems that are typically associated with one in the other, and vice versa. Hence, the problem that we raised at the beginning of the paper, of whether learning theories can be universal can be answered in the affirmative. A theory of learning can indeed become universal if enough cultures in which it is adopted see a need for it. If all cultures of the world see the value of a particular learning theory and adopt it, then it does become universal in this regard. However, this is not exactly the sense that proponents of the universal theory intends. For them a theory should be universal due to its internal content; even if the actual situation is such that not every culture adopts a purportedly universal theory then all cultures should adopt it anyway because this is the right thing to do. Here one finds a similar situation in the case of ethical theory. A long standing debate among ethicists concerns whether there can be any universal ethical theory such that each culture should adopt it so as to become genuinely ethical. That each culture has not actually adopted it is beside the point, and is not relevant to the status of the theory as a universal one. However, since any theory of learning has been designed and adopted as a response to the needs of a society that vary according to time, place and socio-cultural environment, then it is difficult to conceive such a universal theory in this sense. One cannot say that the theory usually regarded as belonging to the West, one that emphasizes critical and independent thinking, is universal so that all other cultures should adopt it. The theory can be useful in some situation, but not in all, as we have seen. Thus it can become incongruent if one insists in adopting this theory in any circumstances. However, a theory can indeed become universal in the weaker sense alluded to above, when all or most cultures see its value for a particular circumstance and environment and adopt it together.

This interplay between the particular and the universal in the context of cultural practice such as teaching and learning reflects what I have written earlier on the “thick” and “thin” conceptions of culture in the globalizing world. Reflecting upon the impact on local cultures of the rapid advance in global network of information and communication technologies, I wrote that local cultures do have a means of maintaining their identities amidst the onslaught of the globalization force associated with the Internet (Hongladarom 1999). There was a concern then that the Internet could become an agent of globalization which could swallow up local cultures, obliterating any differences among them. What I found in the paper, on the contrary, was that local cultures could maintain identities even if they participated fully in globalization through the global network. What they did was that they separated between the “thick” culture of local and historical traditions which were unique to them, and the “thin” culture that they take up as a front when they participate through the global network with members of other cultures (Hongladarom 1999; 2000). The distinction between the thick and the thin culture was adopted from Michael Walzer, who used the term to refer to the particularities of local traditions and the common feelings one has when one sees common concepts such as truth or justice being used and claimed in other cultures (Walzer 1994). Instead of believing in the absolute dichotomy with the local and the universal, one has another conceptual tool which I believe to be more attuned to reality where what is supposed to be universal is in fact the thin veneer of common feelings and what is shared among people of various cultures when they meet and interact, and what is supposedly particular is none other than the thick local lore and stories that only members of that culture share among themselves. Furthermore, the situation nowadays is such that even the distinction between the thick and the thin itself is disappearing, as cultures appear to merge together while retaining their own identities at an increasing rate (Hongladarom 2008).
To translate this into the discussion on whether there are universal learning theories, one finds that there is the thick learning theory based upon local traditions, and the supposedly universal thin theory that one shares with other cultures. Thus when one talks about how a learning theory is justified on the basis of local traditions then this takes place at the level of the thick culture, but when one talks about how a learning theory can be shared among various cultures, then it is at the thin level.

This deconstruction of fixed boundaries among cultures also accords with key Buddhist teachings. One of the main tenets of Buddhism is that all things are interdependent. This means that all things do not possess inherent characteristics such that these characteristics can identify a thing to be what it is without relation to any other things. A table, for example, is a table not only in virtue of its internal properties (such as hardness, having a flat top and four legs, and so on), but also necessarily in virtue of its external relations to other things, such as the wood that was carved into the table, the work of the carpenter in making it, its use as a piece of furniture in a household, and so on. The fact that one usually thinks of the internal properties of a table as being sufficient in identifying it is due to our ingrained belief, stemming from the use of concept ‘table,’ that the concept has essential meaning such that it uniquely identifies what is a table and nothing else. The belief in uniqueness of conceptual meaning, then, depends ultimately on our common sense notion that language refers to things accurately just as a mirror reflects an image. This notion, however, is not tenable since language can never capture reality in full. Hence, all things are interdependent according to the Buddhists because our conceptual apparatus is only approximate and can never exactly represents reality (Nagarjuna 1995: 304 – 308). What this means in our case is that when we try to define a boundary separating one culture from another, we can only do so with prior assumption that cultures have fixed, essential properties, but since they do not, any attempt to fix boundaries for cultures can be only piecemeal, something done for the purpose of responding to exigencies and temporary circumstances only.

This Buddhist deconstruction of fixed boundaries between concepts then belies Vogler’s contention that Asian learning style is due to Asian religious traditions such as Confucianism or Buddhism (Vogler 2006). Confucianism, with its emphasis on relations among individuals, can also be regarded as providing a basis for deconstructing the boundaries between cultures in quite the same way as Buddhism too. In the attempt to search for learning theories that are suitable for particular cultures, one should indeed look at the historical and religious roots of that culture themselves. I have argued elsewhere that this attempt will not generate “alienation” that is actually felt by many non-western cultures when they are more or less forced to accept practices belonging to another (mostly western) culture (Hongladarom 2004; 2006b). Such alienation occurred when, for example, Thai culture felt that it needed to adopt the scientific material culture coming from the West in order to catch up with them and avoid being colonized. This acceptance led to epistemic clashes between what has already been believed as integral part of that culture’s identity and way of life and the scientific culture that comes from outside. Hence, a way out of this dilemma is for the local culture to find a source that would endorse the scientific and technological culture from its own indigenous sources, and I argue that this can lessen the alienation that can occur (Hongladarom 2004; 2006b). Consequently, in the case of adopting a theory of learning, one has to find its source from one’s own indigenous, homegrown source. The culture has to identify the problem that it needs to solve, and design a learning theory that can best educate its own students accordingly.
Conclusion

Teaching and learning theory, then, does not by itself have universal import; it is just a way society responds to challenges facing them at a particular place and time. This, however, does leave open the possibility that all cultures in the world might come to agree on some narrow set of teaching and learning styles, narrow enough to be regarded as similar in all cultures. Then these styles might be collectively regarded as universal. On the other hand, the idea that theories of teaching and learning are always local and cannot be expanded across cultures is rather untenable too. Cultures always look across their shoulders to see what others are doing, and they are keen to borrow ideas and practices from others if they see them to be beneficial to their own situation. The aims of education do not have to be everywhere the same, for education needs to serve the goals and values of society in which it finds itself (Hongladarom 2005).

So, what does a theory of learning should look like in concrete terms? It depends on circumstances, of course, but as the circumstance in the world today clearly calls for students who are capable of thinking for themselves and engaging in critical judgment and evaluation, these skills are necessary if students are to become successful in this early part of the twenty-first century. This does not mean that the older style, for example one emphasizing rote learning, is immediately out of fashion, for there can arise a need for such a style even in today’s highly globalized world (such as when there is a need to train new skills rapidly). Cultures and learning theories do interact with each other in an interesting way, and one cannot consistently pair up one culture with one learning theory in such a way that the culture is forever tied up with that theory.
References


