

Lancy, David F.: *Learning Without Lessons: Pedagogy in Indigenous Communities*. 280 pp. New York: Oxford University Press, 2024. ISBN 978-0-19-764559-8

David F. Lancy's *Learning without Lessons* is an important book for those interested in childhood, socialization, child development, and education. By contrasting Western formal school education with informal education in Indigenous villages, the author identifies two corresponding modes of learning: while in the first caregivers act as agents, in the second it is the children who enjoy autonomy of action. The directionality of the learning process has consequences for cognitive learning because in Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) contexts (Henrich et al. 2010) interactions with parents and teachers are structured by eye contact and verbal messages, while Indigenous children mainly learn through careful observation, eavesdropping on conversations, and imitating others. In WEIRD societies, children compete against each other for individual achievement; in Indigenous communities, the educational goal for children is to become helpful community members.

Lancy's insights are based on focused, ethnographic research, not only from social and cultural anthropology, but also from cultural psychology, developmental psychology, archaeology, and historical sciences. His intention is not to give advice on how to reform Western schools but to analyze the sociocultural forces that shape contemporary pedagogies. By providing a multitude of case studies from all regions across the globe to illustrate his theoretical assumptions (the reference list comprises fifty pages), it becomes clear to the reader that Indigenous pedagogy is following a systematic pattern with similar principles and practices, one that is decidedly different from Western modes of learning.

Learning without Lessons is organized into an introduction (Chapter one) and six further chapters. In Chapter two, Lancy explores the 'gulf between WEIRD and Indigenous pedagogy', which is nowhere 'farther apart than in the treatment of infants' (p. 13). He states that Western parents are anxious to optimize their children's development by using training materials designed for age-appropriate lessons. This is in large contrast to Indigenous caretakers who are mainly 'concerned with their baby's survival, [taking] great pains to keep the infant in a womb-like environment with reduced stimulation and disturbance' (p. 13). Unlike their WEIRD counterparts, Indigenous mothers do not often play with their babies. When they make use of speech, this is usually to give orders, not to produce psychic-emotional intimacy, as is the case among members of the Western middle-classes.

In Chapter three, the child's innate tendencies for self-learning are discussed. Indigenous children usually do not play with toys but learn through a hands-on use of real tools. Young children are eager to 'pitch in' (p. 65) and are highly motivated to join everyday activities such as foraging. However, they are not forced to participate but choose to do so voluntarily. There is usually no praise for children's achievements. Instead, children are rewarded when adults accept their contribution to a task. According to Lancy, in Indigenous societies it is generally the case that people are not told what

they should do. Parents accept that the practice of children learning through trial and error carries with it the risk of self-injury.

Unlike WEIRD societies, children in traditional Indigenous communities do not attend indoor classrooms, where they are supposed to focus on the teacher's (verbal) messages while ignoring all other environmental stimuli. Instead, they play in the village center, which serves as an 'everyday classroom' (p. 82) with rich opportunities for learning (Chapter four). From an early age, they spend the bulk of their time together with their peers roaming about the village and its vicinity without much adult interference. Another opportunity for children's learning is the everyday activities within the 'family circle' (pp. 88 ff.), for example, when children accompany adult caregivers to their fields.

In Indigenous settings, children are assigned specific tasks according to their age and abilities (Chapter five). They assist in caring for infants, gardening, herding, and foraging. In many Indigenous societies, there is no developmental timetable. Instead, '[p]rogress is marked by the mastery of skills ... [which] ... are not acquired at any particular age or stage but when the child decides to pursue them' (p. 125). From this it follows that a person's functional value is directly linked to individual performance, generating a strong motivation to 'travel up the learning curve' (p. 18).

In Chapter six, by reflecting on pedagogies in the Victorian era and Ancient Egypt, Lancy describes how modern schooling came into existence and stresses that instances of structured learning (e.g., initiation rites or craft apprenticeship) can be found among Indigenous peoples, 'particularly where sedentism and social hierarchy are well-established' (p. 20). He goes on to discuss the village schools that nowadays exist in many communities. The level of schooling is often low in these institutions, and drop-out rates are high. Furthermore, there is direct competition between school attendance and work.

The last chapter, entitled *Global WEIRDing*, is meant to suggest that Western pedagogical ideas, just like WEIRD culture in general, are spreading rapidly around the world. The self-initiated Indigenous mode of learning is increasingly viewed as inferior to the WEIRD model of good parenting and educating by local authorities and transnational organizations alike (Scheidecker et al. 2023). Not only in Western settings, but also in remote Indigenous villages, we are currently witnessing an economization and academization of education leading to a loss of skills and to the emergence of a 'schooled mind' which is characterized by the ability to '[place] ... objects in an analytical framework' (p. 181). Prosocial behaviors such as sharing and helping are becoming attenuated, and children's learning processes are increasingly based on speech and printed material. It is through Western style schooling that Indigenous children become alienated from their sociocultural and natural environments and lose their multi-focused attentiveness.

My main critique of *Learning without Lessons* is the binary opposition between WEIRD society (used in the singular!) and Indigenous communities that persists throughout the book. Lancy fails to define the two groups at all clearly and neglects

their internal differentiation. Furthermore, he introduces ‘village(rs)’ as a shorthand for ‘Indigenous’ (p. 13) and thus implies that the urban-rural distinction is a correlate of his group classification. By lumping all Indigenous peoples together into one category, Lancy steps into a Western-centric trap. (Admittedly, the ‘West-against-the Rest’ problem also appears in the work of other scholars – Heidi Keller (2007), for example, distinguishes between ‘Western urban middle-class families’ and ‘traditional rural families’.)

By looking primarily at the commonalities between Indigenous groups, important differences may be overlooked, and the danger arises that one inadvertently finds what one is searching for. Universal claims about human learning (or any other subject) are only justified if WEIRD people cease to be the overall point of reference. For this aim, I consider it necessary to distinguish between at least three (better four or five) groups to overcome the binary opposition between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples and to build up a novel framework which is not entirely based on WEIRD concepts and lifestyles. In my view, the ‘Indigenous’ mode of learning could be further differentiated by analytically separating egalitarian small-scale communities from farming societies, or by comparing pedagogies across different regions. In addition, it must be questioned why the ‘non-Indigenous’ mode of learning is reduced to WEIRD populations. In today’s multipolar world, local pedagogies are influenced not only by Westernization, but increasingly also by Sinification and Russification, to name just two examples.

Unlike what Lancy seems to imply, I do not believe that Indigenous peoples entirely give up their traditional beliefs and practices to adopt a WEIRD lifestyle. Their cultures do not disappear but are transformed into something new which is neither ‘Western’ nor ‘traditional’. Accordingly, the task of future researchers is not simply ‘to assess the degree of acculturation’ (Gallois et al. 2015, cited on p. 209), but to investigate which aspects of Indigenous pedagogies are more resistant to change than others, how the mixing of sociocultural features leads to new practices, and how these are endowed with culturally specific meanings.

Throughout his book, Lancy takes a cognitivist approach towards learning which does not sufficiently explain why Indigenous children have a strong desire to ‘fit in’ (p. 18) and to acquire knowledge and skills (p. 122). What is missing from Lancy’s analysis is a socioemotional developmental perspective. Although he points out that ‘...nowhere in the ethnographic record had I run across any mention of parents ... attempting to increase [children’s] “self-esteem”’ (p. 125), and that (for example) the Central African ‘BaYaka utilize a pedagogy based on mockery, play, and public speaking (p. 95)’, he does not reach the conclusion that pedagogies in WEIRD and Indigenous settings are accompanied by different socializing emotions (‘pride’ in WEIRD settings; ‘shame’, ‘fear’, and ‘anxiety’ in Indigenous settings; Miller and Cho 2018; Röttger-Rössler et al. 2015).

While these are serious shortcomings, I must admit that Lancy’s oversimplification also has its benefits. His reduction of reality could be viewed as a trick that helps us to

see the wood for the trees. His great contribution to the interdisciplinary study of childhood lies in the provision and systematic arrangement of a multitude of ethnographic examples which illustrate the geographical, cultural, and historical limits of WEIRD educational ideology. To be sure, others before him drafted similar theoretical frameworks (e.g., Keller 2007; LeVine et al. 1994; Rogoff 2003), but they only referred to a limited number of case studies, which made it easier for experts from other academic disciplines (e.g., Early Childhood Development; Global Health) to brush them aside as ‘exotic’ examples. It is decidedly more difficult to ignore Lancy’s empirically rich book, and this makes me hope that it can help to bridge disciplinary gaps.

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