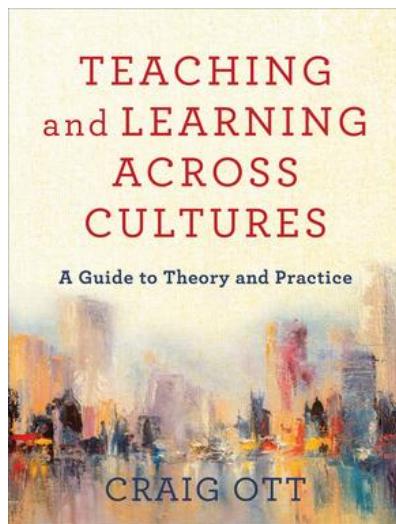


Book Reviews



Ott, Craig. *Teaching and Learning Across Cultures: A Guide to Theory and Practice.* Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021, 336 pp., \$34.

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Author's Profile

Ch'ng May Lee (MBBCh BAO NUI; MPH Malaya; MDiv STM) is a D.Miss. student of MBTS Penang. She is the author of *Love Your Kidney*. She has published several journal articles as a Public Health Physician, and Senior Lecturer/Associate Professor with private International universities. She is registered with the Malaysian Medical Council (MMC) and the National Specialist Register (NSR). She was conferred the Ahli Mahkota Perak (AMP) award by His Royal Highness HRH Sultan of Perak when she was holding the post of State Deputy Director (Medical) of Perak.

Introduction

Craig Ott's *Teaching and Learning Across Cultures: A Guide to Theory and Practice* was aptly published about a year after the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the COVID-19 pandemic. Ott helps the readers with the media dimension of teaching, advocating for online learning and culture and stating that online learning will be an emerging strategy likely to continue growing in practice and influence well beyond the pandemic. As such, this toolbox book, with its pedagogies of cross-cultural teaching and learning, is a valuable resource and an up-to-date reference for the cross-cultural teacher.

Ott (PhD) is a mission and intercultural studies professor at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois, and has overwhelming credentials to pen this book.¹ It is the fruit of his forty years of living and teaching cross-culturally. He has also authored several other books, including *Encountering Theology of Mission and Contemporary Issues*,² and *Global Church Planting*.³

Ott's intended audience in this book is formal teachers, professors, community workers, trainers, pastors, and disciple-makers (xiii). In addressing them, his central thesis is that awareness of the challenges of cultural differences alone does not automatically translate into the implementation of effective teaching practices. Instead, there is a need for cross-cultural teachers to bridge the cultural gap by contextualizing their instructions when adapting cross-cultural theories and pedagogical strategies, which he has expounded as five dimensions of culture influencing teaching and learning (2, 22).

¹ Craig Ott, Theologian, accessed February 11, 2023, <http://bakerpublishinggroup.com>.

² Craig Ott, Stephen J. Strauss, and Timothy Tennent, *Encountering Theology of Mission: Biblical Foundations, Historical Developments, and Contemporary Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010).

³ Craig Ott and Gene Wilson, *Global Church Planting: Biblical Principles and Best Practices for Multiplication* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011).

To help educators bridge this gap, the book examines those culturally related differences in teaching and learning and offers guidance. It explores ways to engage learners from different cultures and points to deeper understanding, effective teaching, and transformative relationships amid complex intercultural encounters. The book attempts to kindle an appreciation for human diversity and to see learners as persons created in the image of God with potential.

Summary

Ott structures most chapters by first dealing with various theories and empirical research related to teaching across cultures before listing implications for teachers (280). Chapters 1-3 frame the challenges, define culture, explain cultural competency, and describe culture's impact on learning. In Chapter 4, Ott begins his excursus on the five dimensions of culture: cognitive, worldview, social, media, and environmental. He first explains theories about how people perceive and process information cognitively. Ott acknowledges that readers are less interested in cognitive theories, encouraging them to skip these portions to the more practical implications found in subsequent chapters.

Chapters 5-6 encourage Western teachers who consistently utilize abstract methods to consider incorporating stories to better connect with concrete thinkers and oral learners (89-95). Ott highlights examples of storying (anecdotes) to support principles that may be applied to various contexts. Chapters 7-8 focus on worldview, and Ott mentions that foundational cultural commitments and non-reflective presuppositions often influence the learning environment (137-140). He acknowledges that teachers, especially those whose subject is Scripture, teach because they want to influence and bring about worldview change. Here, Ott provides biblical advice for those teaching theology cross-culturally.

In Chapters 9-10, Ott examines the social dimension of culture and argues that navigating relationships between teacher and student is perhaps the most essential skill the effective cross-cultural teacher needs (177). Throughout these chapters' discussions on individualism versus collectivism, Ott allows space for countercultural methodology but spurns any uninformed or naïve approach. Chapters 11-13 consider culture's media and environmental aspects and address misunderstandings resulting from the communication medium or the physical environment (229).

Critical Evaluation

The main strength of this book lies in its methodological approach, which the author presents using the five-dimensional model. Ott argues well for the cognitive and social dimensions based on the educational theory of constructivism (13, 55, 57, 135, 195). This forms a clear basis to help the readers construct the author's pedagogies in teaching and learning. Another strength lies in the descriptive matrices of teacher mindset versus learner mindset (1). The author engages recent scholarships with numerous citations, including those of Asian scholars (299-327).

In addressing cultural issues, Ott helpfully raises essential issues like the influence of individualism and collectivism, honor and shame culture, and the concept of "Face" (203, 207, 209). The methodology is transparent (22), and he presents realistic gender issues (1, 8). It is also helpful that the author presents an honest and realistic critique as to what the book is not about so as not to misrepresent itself or mislead the readers (xiii). The author's assessment is correct on the need to bridge the cultural gap, into which he often delves (4, 55, 240).

One concern for this book is how Ott presents the worldview dimension since he sees it as separate but overlapping with the other dimensions of culture. In contrast, and more accurately, Paul Hiebert counterargues that social and environmental dimensions should be

included within one's worldview.⁴ The danger here is that readers assume that cognition or environment are separate issues to evaluate when, in fact, they are part and parcel of one's worldview. Another weakness is that there is no mention of the philosophies of education except for a brief note on essentialism (48), nor is there a concluding chapter, which would have served the intended audience by showing the complementary nature of the five dimensions of influence.

Conclusion

Ott's work proceeds from his inclination of a redemptive-centered basic theological orientation and a Christian conviction that the ultimate goal of all teaching is human flourishing, which has its ultimate root in biblical values and the restoration of the divine image through the redemptive power of the gospel (xiii). *Teaching and Learning Across Cultures* is a well-honed piece of scholarship and an excellent read for cross-cultural teachers since Ott takes readers beyond the basics into nuanced depth. He urges humility and prizes the disposition to learn, which one needs to read a detailed and thorough book like this!

⁴ Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1985), 46.