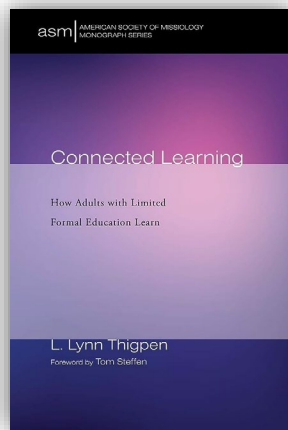


BOOK REVIEW

Connected Learning: How Adults with Limited Formal Education Learn

By L. Lynn Thigpen

Reviewed by Daniel Baker



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In Lynn Thigpen's book, *Connected Learning: How Adults with Limited Formal Education Learn*, readers are introduced to an important development in the field of orality studies. The book recounts the design, execution, and conclusion of Dr. Thigpen's dissertation research on Khmer adults in Cambodia who have had limited access to formal education. The book argues for a radical rethinking of pedagogy in Cambodia and a shift towards teaching which is determined not by instructor preferences but rather the needs of learners.

Thigpen arrived in Cambodia in 1999 as a cross-cultural teacher and had been prepared to teach using the highly textual pedagogies she herself had been emersed in for years as both student and educator. However, she found that the large majority of those she had been hoping to teach did not learn best through the tools and strategies she had brought with her. In the book, Thigpen does a wonderful job unpacking the

atmosphere of education in Cambodia and how war, poverty, learning disabilities, and other life challenges had produced many adults without much formal education, whom she terms, Adults with Limited Formal Education (ALFE).

Thigpen realized that the majority of learners she encountered did not learn best by means of print technology and textuality. This discovery agrees with the claim made by the International Orality Network and Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization that an estimated four billion people over the age of fifteen, or 80% of the global population, are oral communicators (ION & Lausanne Committee, 2005). Despite this huge number of oral learners, virtually all research done regarding education in Cambodia focused on understanding the efficacy of text-based models. This disparity led Thigpen to the important realization that "we cannot afford to continue the inequity of overlooking the learning strategies of a majority of the world's population" (2020, 10).

Thigpen began her research with the purpose of examining the learning strategies used by those who did not depend on print technology in Cambodia. She specifically targeted ALFE, which she defined as those without any formal schooling or who only studied up until the sixth grade. Thigpen's research led her to conclude that Cambodian ALFE learn through more than simply oral avenues—they relied on relational and communal learning strategies which Thigpen refers to as "connected learning." Cambodian ALFE, according to Thigpen, learn through their connections to trusted people. These "connected learners" prefer observation, experimentation, and dialogue as primary modes of learning—a process quite similar to that of socialization.

I believe that Thigpen's research was conducted utilizing a robust methodology which produced trustworthy study data and results. Knight's Contextual

Constructs Model (CCM) was chosen as a framework to help guide Thigpen throughout her study (Thigpen 2020, 73). This model approaches research in four phases: conceptual, philosophical, implementation, and evaluation (Knight 2008, 41). These phases help to guide the overall construction of the research plan.

In terms of the study type, Thigpen utilized an ethnographic grounded theory study. This choice seems extremely appropriate based on the overall lack of current existing theory regarding Cambodian ALFE. Both the ethnographic method and grounded theory allowed for Thigpen to explore her research questions thoroughly and to build a working theory as the study progressed. I believe that if the study were to be reproduced it would yield results consistent with the overall findings contained within Thigpen's research.

I believe that *Connected Learning* is a significant contribution to a number of research fields including orality studies, anthropology, education, and communications. Thigpen has raised the alarm that virtually all research into learning strategies and their efficacy has focused on those models which rely on textuality. This simply does not line up with what the increasing body of research teaches us about the way the majority of the global population actually goes about learning. Thigpen does not claim that her findings can be universally applied to ALFE learners around the world, however, it is hard not to see the potential if the results of this study are found to be consistent among other audiences. Further research is urgently needed.

Additionally, Connected Learning has major significance for the world of missiology which has become very focused on the issues of orality and oral learners over the past five decades. Thigpen's study prompts a number of important discussions. Of first importance is the question, "Is orality a fitting term to describe the phenomenon which has been discovered among many groups of people who do not learn best through print technology?" Orality emphasizes the ear; it perpetuates a dichotomy between hearing and seeing, or orality and literacy; it promotes a continuum of lesser to greater. Do we really believe this about those we would call oral people? Is it not more complex than simply learning through hearing?

Thigpen makes the following important statement, "Having worked over a decade in Cambodia, I observed these learners needed more than auditory instruction. They also benefited from visuals, from observational learning, from interaction, from drama, from ritual, from hands-on activities, and from real-life

experiences" (2020, 6). All these are encapsulated within the connected world of human relationship.

Connected Learning is sure to impact many in both academic and applied settings. Thigpen's book has only begun to set the stage for a new era of fruitful discussion surrounding how we should go about being the best that we can be in our communication and teaching.

References

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