

*Disciplines in the Making: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Elites, Learning, and Innovation* by G. E. R. Lloyd

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. (ISBN: 9780199567874) 224 pp.

Lucy Weir (University of Glasgow)

Marketing itself as relevant to scholars across a multitude of disciplines, G. E. R. Lloyd's most recent work takes as its premise a rather intimidating task; namely, establishing that the perceived cross-cultural value of our Westernised educational structure is, in fact, an inaccurate assumption. In this remarkably slim volume, he seeks to demonstrate the ways in which a range of eight subjects fundamental to the higher educational system – philosophy, law, mathematics, art, history, medicine, religion and science – are not universally valid concepts, and furthermore, that the increasing rate of specialisation in such areas can impede gaining a deeper understanding of their very natures. By regularly citing examples from two distinct ancient cultures (Greece and China), Lloyd examines the development of each of these disciplines in self-contained chapters throughout classical culture and into the present Western educational system. Accordingly, his writing traverses educational culture both from the past into the present, and from Western civilisation into the Far East.

This is undeniably a massive project to address, a fact that becomes evident when one considers the length of the book itself, at less than two hundred pages. However, this work does not represent a miniaturised ethnographic survey; indeed, it is significant that Lloyd goes some way to avoid what might be termed an 'Occidental' approach by including detailed discussion of ancient

Chinese civilisation and its contributions to the development of academic systems, at times also invoking his knowledge of Indian cultural history. Doing so provides an Eastern-oriented foil to his historical reference point in Classical Greece, from which many of the examples cited are derived. Lloyd's understanding of ancient societies contributes greatly to underlining his overall message – that is, by indicating the evolution of this variety of disciplines throughout time and across different social structures, he emphasises that our Western-constructed understanding of the development of knowledge is fundamentally flawed.

Lloyd's argument becomes all the more interesting when he turns his attention to the development of subjects such as philosophy in largely non-literate societies. He challenges the view that disciplines now established parts of the academic canon cannot have developed in cultures so distinct from the 'developed' Western variety, and draws attention to a collective Western ignorance by challenging perceptions of how we traditionally view non-literate societies, as well as those with little or no conception of number. There is a conscious attempt to eliminate judgement on this subject; literacy is not presented in the context of this book as a signifier of 'civilised' or modern society.

In his chapter on medicine, a subject one might consider the most 'universalised' of the topics selected here, Lloyd demonstrates once more the vast cultural divides between Eastern and Western societies, as well as (unnamed) illiterate versus literate ones. An example of Lloyd's premise could be surmised as follows: he states that common to almost all societies is the idea that illness is the result of some kind of 'imbalance,' but here the similarity ends. For the Ancient Greeks and Indians, this may have been related to the idea of humours, for proponents of Chinese medicine it may be an

elemental cause, and for modern Western medics it is likely the result of transmissible pathogens. By exploring the variety of ways a basic fact is disseminated across cultures, Lloyd demonstrates the culturally imperialistic attitude that would promote the Western academic structure as cross-culturally valid.

Where Lloyd's writing begins to falter is in his condensing of vast topics into short but intensely detailed paragraphs, an unfortunate necessity in composing a book of this size. It is problematic that he is forced to compress potentially fascinating discussions (for instance, how we naturally develop as children with regard to philosophical or mathematical understanding) into a few brief paragraphs or even footnotes, which ultimately leads to the reader feeling somewhat unfulfilled. Some excellent observations are made throughout the book, but few are expanded upon in enough detail to comprise a thorough analysis of any of the subjects discussed within; indeed, with eight topics of such importance, topics such as the development of historiography are awarded only brief discussion. All the same, Lloyd himself is quick to point out the shortcomings of this kind of reduced research. He regularly indicates the difficulties of generalising vast cultures like his two examples of Greece and China, stating that while he has chosen both of these as polar candidates in terms of the differences between them, within each culture are such diversions and unique elements that it is simply impossible to make accurate generalisations – surely itself a contradiction in terms.

A second point of contention is related to the sheer variety of examples cited within the text. In discussing cross-cultural significance, Lloyd includes in each chapter references not just to Greek and Chinese sources, but to a plethora of societies and tribes that, to the non-anthropologist, become simply too broad to digest. While he makes several very interesting reference points in this

respect, particularly in the chapter on art, there are just too many radically different examples cited for the reader to generate a detailed understanding of any one. For instance, in his 'Art' chapter, Lloyd goes from discussion of practices of the Melanesian Kitawan society in the next paragraph to issues of European baroque patronage, a fact that requires a significant intellectual jump on the part of the reader. Without specialised knowledge, therefore, aspects of the cultures discussed as part of the cross-cultural dialogue can be somewhat lost on the audience. It is also questionable how appropriate his inclusion of, for instance, law and art are in the context of this book, yet Lloyd himself acknowledges that these particular chapters have problematic elements; in particular the fact there is no real concept of universal law or universal art.

Nonetheless, it is perhaps more rewarding to consider this work a fascinating and highly useful starting point for a much wider argument of the relevance of the academic structure, as well as an initial challenge to the established concept that certain values have always existed in a format somehow resembling their current structure. By providing a historical overview of the development of, for instance, philosophy in two ancient societies, the reader begins to understand the extent of how Westernised education has warped perceptions of the relevance of study. Clearly, Lloyd has not set out to provide an in-depth analysis of the development of each of these eight subjects over time and across cultures, and as a starting point for scholars this is indeed a valuable work. However, the reader cannot help but feel it would be valuable to have had some more detailed analysis of overall themes, rather than several extremely specialised short arguments. Ultimately, however, his conclusion emphasises the 'elites' of the title, and underlines the fact that the rate of increasing specialisation in the areas outlined within this book pose a threat to

cross-cultural and interdisciplinary research. In a period of rising interest in cross-disciplinary work, his findings certainly warrant further academic discussion on a broader scale.

*The Kelvingrove Review*

<http://www.gla.ac.uk/departments/esharp/thekelvingroverevreview/>