

# Towards a Transnational, Decolonial, and Non-WEIRD Learning Sciences: Implications of perspectives from beyond “the west”

Members of the South Asian Learning Sciences Research Collective (1)

## Theme and goals

In this workshop, we seek to bring together voices and perspectives from across non-WEIRD contexts (2) to advance the learning sciences’ conceptions of learning and relevance for learners across the globe. By conducting this workshop, we aim to foster dialogues that move across various non-WEIRD contexts to better understand both contextually-situated specificities and larger lessons that can be learned by shared axiological attunements to core issues beyond those narrowly defined by western stakeholders. We aim to bring together between 10-30 learning scientists at various career stages and from a diverse range of non-WEIRD contexts to derive overarching principles for learning sciences that move beyond WEIRD perspectives. We will explore three core questions:

1. What different kinds and expressions of inequities can be surfaced when we prioritize lenses from different cultures (e.g., caste oppression), knowing that even the same lenses may have different expressions in different contexts (e.g., gender)?
2. What different conceptions of learning, teaching, and knowing can be foregrounded and centered through these different lenses (e.g., relational nature of the activity and research)?
3. What critical issues in the world need to take a more central role in conceptualizing what needs to be learned and how (e.g., histories of colonization and global power relations between nation-states)?

By the end of the workshop, we will generate shared artifacts and resources (e.g., shared annotated articles, relevant reading list) to catalyze continued engagement around the topic, to advance the conversation, and to work towards long-term projects (e.g., a special issue or conference proposals).

## Theoretical background and relevance to the field (3)

Like many design projects and academic fields, the learning sciences has largely been built on studies in North America and Europe. For example, when Yoon and Hmelo-Silver (2017) examined what learning scientists do, “three quarters of the active members in the ISLS database were from the United States” (p. 182). This pattern reflects what psychology researchers call the “WEIRD Problem” (Henrich et al., 2010)—when most psychological studies are based in countries and settings could be characterized as *Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic*. The field of learning sciences shares this WEIRD problem (Medin, Ojaleto, Marin, & Bang, 2017). When a field prioritizes WEIRD studies, it perpetuates the problematic assumptions (a) that these properties are desirable in a nation state or community, and (b) that findings based in such contexts meaningfully generalize outside of those contexts, while at the same time suggesting (c) that findings in non-WEIRD contexts are rarely considered relevant for research and practice in WEIRD contexts. These assumptions center concerns and values specific to WEIRD contexts, limiting the field’s attention to only certain people’s ways of knowing, doing, and being. In summary, the “WEIRD problem” in the learning sciences both renders the field’s projects fundamentally incomplete and fails to engage with the rich learning—and knowledge about learning—taking place across the world.

Beyond seeking equal *representation* in research contexts, however, an attention to non-WEIRD contexts surfaces the inadequacy of notions like “representation,” “generalizability,” and “inclusion” as sufficient for equity-forward learning research (as we discuss below). Thus, we see the prioritization of thinking and thinkers outside of “the west” as a *stance*, in which prioritizing non-WEIRD contexts supports heterogeneity and more substantial dialogues in the field about the meaning and consequentiality of learning. Such a positioning of diversity as an asset is a fundamental lever of equity (Bang & Vossoughi, 2016) and a move towards decentering a singular normative (Patel, 2016) in our learning research and design.

Fortunately, historical and recent advances have made more visible a pathway to challenging the WEIRD-ness of the learning sciences. First, powerful studies outside of the west are foundational to sociocultural theories of learning (Rogoff, 2003; Cole, 1996; Lave, 1996, Saxe, 1988). Second, across the world there is significant recent work making sense of learning, in both academic and beyond-academic theorizing contexts, by adopting and adapting tools from the learning sciences. For example, such work has taken place in India (Dutta & Chandrasekharan, 2018), Thailand (Thanapornsanguth & Holbert, 2020), South Africa (Tivaringe & Kirshner, in press), Peru (Rivero Panaqué & Suárez Guerrero, 2017), and Palestine (Fasheh, 1995), to name just a few. This work is also visible in the recent regional and affinity grants projects funded by ISLS, of which our group is a

part. Third, new theoretical tools have been brought to the learning sciences from critical fields that support deeper non-WEIRD analyses. For example, Philip and Sengupta (2020) built on the writing of Edward Said (1993) to call for a contrapuntal analysis of learning, one that “necessitates an explicit juxtaposition to histories and contemporary processes of imperialism” (p. 6). Fourth, indigenous scholars in the learning sciences have called attention to the role of colonization and settler-colonization in constraining learning, but also of the power of centering indigenous axiologies for designing better, less culturally-punishing science learning environments (e.g., Bang et al., 2015). Fifth, outside of the learning sciences, there are large, long, and varied traditions of de-westernizing work too numerous to cite (e.g., Fanon, 1952; Said, 1993; Spivak, 2003).

Taken together, these advances create a productive foundation for expanding learning sciences perspectives outside of WEIRD contexts. However, this foundation has not yet cohered into a theoretical and practical agenda that examines dimensions of solidarity, overlap, and difference *between various* non-WEIRD contexts. Such solidarity is important for a number of reasons: (1) it attunes us to the limits of the “nation” as a homogenizing political context even for non-WEIRD studies (for example, many indigenous communities around the world have been displaced from land that is claimed by a nation with which the indigenous communities largely do not identify; furthermore, sometimes such settler-colonization is done by nations that were themselves once colonized by the west); (2) it attunes us to the way particular equity-relevant phenomena move across multiple contexts (for example, understanding caste discrimination as a problem in India allows us to better make sense of caste discrimination in western nations); (3) many learning-relevant equity issues are fundamentally transnational (for example, anti-Blackness has historical roots in multiple geographies); and (4) many equity issues intersect with transnational identities in inseparable ways (for example, some mechanisms of gender oppression—and resistance to such oppression—in the Middle East relate to Islam in ways that make such oppression distinct from gender dynamics as understood in the west). Without a multicontextual solidarity, engaging with non-WEIRD contexts risks tokenizing and positioning these contexts as “the other” or different and thus continuing to center WEIRD ways of knowing, being, and doing, instead of breaking through to paradigm shifts. Further, multicontextual solidarities highlight that simply looking beyond the west, without an explicit commitment to equity, is not a move towards more equitable learning. In sum, multicontextual solidarities offer great promise to advance the learning sciences’ relevance and meaningfulness beyond WEIRD contexts.

## **Outline of planned activities**

To model our commitment for global participation, we propose a 6-hour full-day workshop design involving 4 hours of asynchronous and 2 hours of synchronous work. This design, in contrast to a solely synchronous workshop, helps support participation across every time zone and various language communities (i.e., for our intended audience). The four hours of asynchronous work will be spread across two weeks before the conference: (1) a week of personal reflection (~1.5 hours) followed by (2) another week of group web annotation of a select set of resources (~2.5 hours). Finally, (3) we will have a 2-hour synchronous workshop session during the ISLS meeting. During the first week, participants will be invited to read this workshop proposal closely and reflect on their motivation to participate by authoring of a short 150-word write-up. Further, in order to surface personal stories around their local, sociocultural, and sociopolitical contexts and histories, we will request them to respond to the question, “What’s in your name?”. This activity, adopted from Benjamin (2019), serves as both an icebreaker and a revealing jumping off point for key issues around generational inheritance, ethnic and gender identities, and so on. Participants will be requested to upload all the generated materials in a secure online location shared among the workshop to read and respond to one another’s stories. During the second week of asynchronous work, we will invite the participants to engage with a repository of resources (e.g., TBD readings from both academic and non-academic sources, videos, documentaries, podcasts, etc.) and socially annotate (e.g., through the *hypothes.is* tool; Kalir & Garcia, 2019) the same for further collective discussion. Similar to the ones mentioned above, we will curate resources that shed light on teaching and learning in non-WEIRD contexts or that adopt non-WEIRD lenses based on the selected participants’ backgrounds and interests.

On the day of the workshop, we will host a 2-hour synchronous session where we will facilitate group discussions around the generated shared artifacts. This session will consist of four parts: (a) introductions building off of the first week’s asynchronous activity (~30 mins); (b) discussion of the socially annotated resources to identify factors specific to non-WEIRD contexts that shaped teaching and learning (~20 mins); (c) collectively generate and imagine expansions in relation to what has been traditionally studied in the field of learning sciences (~20 mins); (d) a break, and finally (e) storyboarding to understand generated themes in terms of dialogue across the cognitive, social, cultural, and political dimensions learning sciences research should attune to if non-WEIRD contexts are prioritized in the coming year, sorting into themes for further consideration that cut across multinational considerations (remainder of time; ~40 mins). A shared virtual whiteboard will be used for this sorting activity and discussion. These themes will be organized towards building a Rapid Community Report in

the subsequent few weeks, an artifact that will sustain workshop participation beyond the synchronous time and make room for further collaborative undertakings. At the same time, the report will chart out probable future pathways and expansions for the learning sciences community to draw from and expand into the teaching and learning in non-WEIRD contexts.

### **Expected outcomes and contributions**

The learning sciences community has made loud and clear its commitment to further equity. While productive work outside of WEIRD contexts has taken place, the learning sciences as a field, similar to many other fields of study, has been slow in collectively and deliberately turning its attention towards these contexts. Thus, opportunity remains to more explicitly examine the influence of local and global social, political, and economic factors on teaching and learning within these contexts to offer numerous and more heterogeneous and complicated stories of what teaching and learning entail. Overall, the workshop outcomes will include (a) a deliberate dialogue in which participants understand their own research through lenses other than the ones developed and studied in WEIRD contexts, and (b) rapid community report for continuous engagement beyond the workshop. Given ongoing global calamities (e.g., COVID-19; climate change), multicontextual global solidarity is essential for communities to grow, sustain, and thrive through learning. For the learning sciences, then, a multicontextual solidarity contributes an alternative lens beyond normative US- or Euro-centric theories that offer promise for the field's understandings of ways of knowing, being, and doing.

### **Further information**

#### **Proposers/Organizers' Information**

The proposers are co-earners (with Dr. Deborah Dutta) of a recent ISLS Regional and Affinity Grant entitled "Soch: Expanding Indian and Indian Diasporic Ways of Thinking in the Learning Sciences." This project has entailed significant work learning from and alongside learning scientists, educational researchers, and educators located in India to develop ways of thinking about learning within Indian contexts and concepts. Uttamchandani and Kumar co-founded and have organized activities for the South Asian Learning Sciences Research Collective for 2.5 years, including monthly support calls, a reading group on caste, and workshop at LSGSC 2019 (Uttamchandani & Kumar, 2019). Separately, each organizer has experience facilitating conference workshops (e.g., Uttamchandani & Thompson, 2017, workshop at LSGSC 2017; Jayathirtha facilitating Huff et al., in press). Kumar is a doctoral candidate at University of Wisconsin Madison, Jayathirtha is a doctoral candidate at University of Pennsylvania, and Uttamchandani is a postdoctoral visiting research scientist at Indiana University.

#### **Intended audience, participation requirements, and expected attendance**

Our intended audience is educational researchers and practitioners, especially learning scientists, who identify with or have conducted research in "non-WEIRD" contexts or have centered minoritized peoples and perspectives in their work. Potential participants will be invited to reflect on how they relate to the topics and what motivates them to participate in this workshop. With an intention to maximize diversity of perspectives, we will require potential participants to submit a write-up responding to the question of "where and how do you see (or not see) yourself in this theoretical summary?" We intend to have between 10 and 30 participants. We welcome anyone who feels the affiliation with the ideas raised but will choose participants to maximize heterogeneity across contexts and career stages. Several scholars from around the world have already expressed interest in discussing these ideas, so we know that the conversation is meaningful to a diversity of non-WEIRD-based scholars.

#### **Relationship to similar events conducted in the past (e.g., at CSCL or ICLS)**

This workshop builds on, but is distinct from, a number of previous events. It has theoretical links to the workshop meeting of the South Asian Learning Sciences Research Collective at the Learning Sciences Graduate Student Conference in 2019, and to workshops at ICLS 2020 "What's Power Got to Do With It?: Exploring Participatory Research in the Learning Sciences" by Radke et al. However, to our knowledge this is the first proposal at such a conference to center non-WEIRD contexts broadly (rather than a specific such context) and equity together.

### **Endnotes**

- (1) This proposal was specifically written by Vishesh Kumar (University of Wisconsin Madison; vishesh.kumar@wisc.edu), Gayithri Jayathirtha (University of Pennsylvania; gayithri@upenn.edu), and Suraj Uttamchandani (Indiana University; suttamch@indiana.edu), but the collective authorship name is used to better capture how the proposal writing and thinking unfolded.

- (2) As elaborated on in the “theoretical background” section, “WEIRD” contexts refer to those that are Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic. Recognizing that no term can adequately name such a heterogeneous group, we (imperfectly) use the term “non-WEIRD” as an umbrella term for a variety of cultures and communities that were and are historically minoritized. When we use this phrase, we consider, for example, people from indigenous communities in the settler-colonized west and people from currently or formerly colonized places. Given the complexity of world history, and the movement of people across time, we welcome participants who identify with the term “non-WEIRD” either within or outside of enumerated national boundaries.
- (3) We are indebted to Dr. Deborah Dutta for some of the ideas and phrases used in the section.

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