

The Contextualization of Missionary Training

Robert Brynjolfson and Jonathan Lewis

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Contextualized missionary training tends to happen when people develop their own curriculum and programs from "scratch," and use local resources to create ongoing viability in meeting the training needs of their own people. We cannot assume, however, that because a program is contextually derived, that it produces effective people for mission ministry.

Since the Canada 2003 World Evangelical Alliance Mission Commission Consultation, the vision of the International Missionary Training Network (IMTN) has been to push towards the adoption of an integral (whole person) philosophy of training, strongly entrenched in the ideal that each missionary training (MT) program should be defined and developed within its own context to meet specific and objectified training outcomes in ways that effectively address the many contextual challenges faced. We recognize that there are a number of reasons programs don't conform to this ideal. A program's viability may depend on international relationships that dictate training content and methods. Or adoption of programs may simply be a temporary solution in light of lack of "know how." Sometimes it's a matter of offering a "plug and play" program or no program at all.

The question of contextually appropriate training

There is a general perception that the West has imposed its educational systems on non-Western societies and that this is not a good practice. This is a very complex issue which we won't attempt to resolve at this time. However, from our IMTN perspective, lack of Contextualization is primarily a problem when a missionary training program fails to produce intentional, desired outcomes that equip the missionary trainee for effective service. Whether or not a missionary training program or curriculum is adopted from the outside, or even "imposed" by international agencies or denominations, is less of an issue than whether or not the program is effective in generating specified outcomes that lead to effectiveness. If the program is measured by the generation of effective people for mission, then where or how the process was originally designed seems like a non-issue. Nevertheless, we strongly endorse the need for local institutions to determine their training outcomes and to utilize programs and methods that address contextual variables and generate effectiveness.

Here are some points to ponder in our concern for the contextualization of MT.

Accessibility

What do we mean by accessibility? Perhaps we can define this by briefly mentioning the interrelated hurdles and challenges that missionary candidates are faced with when considering training options. First on the list is the geographic and linguistic availability of training. Secondly is the cost of training, which is typically the responsibility of the

candidate. Thirdly, the value placed on the training by society, churches, and agencies (which is more an issue of accreditation and licensing than effectiveness). A distant fourth is the suitability of training (in terms of educational competence, ministry focus, intended field of service, etc.). These barriers must all be overcome in order for the training to be "accessible" to the candidate. And in our way of thinking, for missionary training to be accessible and sustainable, all of these issues must be faced locally in contextually appropriate ways.

Yearning for foreign training

Each year the small missionary training centre in Canada, with which one of the authors is associated, receives a multitude of inquiries from all over the globe. Many of these letters introduce what would appear to be exceptional candidates. Yet, each year, the reply goes back to these inquirers with the same suggestion: *find a missionary training program in your country or region that will provide you with the tools that you need to become an effective servant of our Lord*. Our response is based on the conviction that, for most of these candidates, their best option is contextualized training that is based on a profound understanding of the training needs of the missionary candidate and which caters to the circumstances which typically characterizes the candidate. Yet, we are fairly certain that these concerns are not uppermost in most of these applicant's minds.

The value of knowing your people

David Tai-Woong Lee, argues strongly for the need to train Koreans in a Korean context to address their particular cultural and world-view concerns. David Lee points out that the current generation of Koreans has been raised in a social context that has developed unique personality disorders. When they work with candidates, they are able to address these deep-seated issues in constructive ways. They have a remarkable record of field retention from their candidates and much of this can be attributed to the rigorous contextual training their candidates undergo in Korea.ⁱ

The global missionary movement has expanded to the point where we recognize the need to ensure that missionary training is accessible. It is imperative that every national missionary movement strengthen, encourage and develop missionary training opportunities within their contexts.

Transplanting programs

The transplanting of missionary training is a bilateral problem. The two camps involved are either importing (receiving) or exporting (producing) non-contextualized models of training.

Importing (Receiving) Missionary Training. Imported models of training are those that develop through local initiative, but are sourced from outside of the context. Sometimes whole curriculums are taken from one continent to another and puppet schools are set up. Frequently, course content is imported and used without modification.

The online Internet delivery of courseware is now a direct challenge to the contextualization of missionary training. Likewise is the development and use of video lessons or curriculum on DVD.

We need to ask, why are programs and courseware imported indiscriminately? In some cases, there may be a legitimate need based on lack of trained instructors. Yet, we suspect that many training institutions value efficiency and some administrators may all too easily accept mediocre educational results in lieu of a cost-effective delivery. Furthermore, some institutions may value the conformity in content that these homogeneous processes produce for whatever reason. Academic snobbery plays a role in this process as well. Sometimes foreign courseware is imported because of the impression that it is preferred, superior or of greater status. The bottom line is that importing courseware is easy, appears to be efficient, and may provide greater status, but users beware!

Exporting (Producing) Missionary Training. Exported models of training are those that are produced in a foreign context and delivered locally through extension offices or partnerships with existing educational institutions. This is not always bad. The particular challenge to contextualization of exported models can be significantly mitigated by adequate participation from a national stakeholder group or body that defines its own set of outcomes and can adapt the curriculum or system to its own needs. The problem of little or no local stakeholder involvement raises questions of legitimacy, long term viability, dependency and/or unfair competition with local training programs. The lack of know-ledge or "how to" obviously plays a role in adopting unexamined training as well. The IMTN has attempted to address this issue through the development and dissemination of a course on creating and evaluating training in contextually appropriate ways.ⁱⁱ

Contextual appropriateness is of ultimate importance because cultural differences play a significant role in the formation of missionaries, as do learning styles and preferences, socio-economic conditions, ethnic diversity, etc.. We all need to stop from time to time and examine the underlying educational assumptions upon which our training programs are built. Does our educational philosophy grow out of our Christian worldview, or is it heavily influenced by the non-Christian assumptions that drive secular educational institutions? Is it possible that training-as-business is a stronger motivation that drives our importing/exporting of training models? What operational values would cause us to set up a training program that competes with and threatens a national initiative?

The need for multi-cultural contexts

Missionary training must be multi-cultural in order to effectively acquire needed skills and attitudes. A properly contextualized training program will intentionally take advantage of more than one context to ensure that candidates are exposed to the kinds of experiences they will need to provide real-world tools and needed intercultural skills (e.g., cross-cultural adaptation skills, language learning skills, etc.), and to acquire needed attitudes (e.g., flexible, teachable, culturally sensitive, etc.). This is what makes missionary training different from ministry training: the cross-cultural outcomes will not be achieved without a cross-cultural context in which experiential learning can take place. This point does not contradict previous statements that training must be culturally sensitive, related to the needs of the candidate, etc.. Both contexts are essential.

ⁱ David Tai-Woong Lee, "Training Cross-Cultural Missionaries from the Asian Context" *Missiology: An International Review*, (Vol. XXXVI, no. 1, January 2008, pp. 111-130).

ⁱⁱ Brynjolfson, R. and Lewis, J. Eds., 2007, *Integral Ministry Training Design and Evaluation*, William Carey Library, Pasadena.