

25

Missionary Formation through Non-Formal Training

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At 21 years of age I set foot in Hong Kong for the first time, embarking on what would turn out to be over three decades (and still counting!) of service in the Chinese world. Two years earlier I had sensed a call to missions, the next year attended a five-month Youth With a Mission (YWAM) Discipleship Training School (DTS) and then traveled to Hong Kong for a short-term (six months') missionary experience. Back home in Canada other friends were also answering calls to service in church or missions, all of them choosing the more traditional route of Bible schools and seminaries. While I landed in a cross-cultural context quickly, my friends spent 5-7 years in classrooms before arriving at their destinations.

In 1980 short-term missions were becoming popular, but the path to long-term missions typically passed through Bible school and seminary. I sometimes felt like a kid who had skipped school and that, with only a year in an unaccredited Bible school and a YWAM DTS under my belt, I had bypassed some important step in missionary preparation. Moreover, it was tempting to feel inferior to the "real missionaries" I was meeting, the ones who had endured years of classroom training to be deemed qualified by their sending agencies.

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In the late 1960s, the term “non-formal education” began to find use as a way of describing something between formal education and socialization.¹ Eventually, I would benefit from further formal education as well, but in those early years my own missionary formation was largely non-formal and informal (socialization). In hindsight I realize that, along with many short-term and intensive training modules and seminars, some of the classrooms that prepared me well for missionary service were backstreet noodle shops, local homes, and meetings in Chinese churches.

According to Educator Ted Ward, in the past 200 years since the Industrial Revolution the creation of “education factories” has led to the mistake of making the term “education” nearly synonymous with “school.”² Ward asserts that since much learning occurs outside of traditional structures a better approach to describing education would be to differentiate between formal, non-formal and informal approaches to learning. He offers a simple description of each category.

Formal education is most often accredited, occurs in a recognized institution, and is “organized, planned, budgeted, staffed and deliberate.” Informal education is not intentional in the same sense, but occurs in many social contexts as naturally as a child learning to walk and talk. Between these two is the category of non-formal education which is also deliberate but, unlike formal education, is usually not linked to degrees in accredited institutions. Rather, non-formal learning tends to be intensely practical, seeking to provide “functional knowledge needed for contemporary life.”³

While each approach to learning can play an important role in missionary formation, this chapter will outline the nature and benefits of a non-formal approach. As we are most accustomed to institutional learning, it is helpful to describe non-formal education by comparing it categorically to its formal partner. In the continuum chart below, veteran missionary Tom Bloomer outlines the differences between the two approaches by comparing 10 aspects of training.⁴ We shall then employ these categories (lumping some of them together) to illustrate some of the benefits of non-formal missionary formation.

Time Orientation

First, formal and non-formal approaches to education may be distinguished by their respective orientation towards time. Whereas formal education tends to be future-oriented, preparing a student for an eventual role in society, non-formal education focuses on equipping a learner with competencies required for the present. This difference may be illustrated through the act of language learning, one of the first missionary tasks.

	Formal	←————→	Non-formal
Time	Formal	Future/Present	Immediate
Teacher	Certified, expert	Facilitator	Co-learner
Learner	Dependent	Self-directed	Has knowledge within
Modes/ Methods	Rigid, competitive, hierarchical	Loosely structured	Informal
Evaluation	Summative	Formative	Non-existent
Authority	Institution, state	Community	Learner
Context	School itself	Wider culture	Local community
Orientation	Subject, content	Serving others	Local problems, community
Outcomes	Degrees, professional qualifications	Diplomas	Skills, practical competence
Focus	Narrow, deep	Going deeper	Broad, shallow

Language acquisition is actually one of the first *human* tasks, a basic skill gained on a mother's lap and while at play with other toddlers, the most informal of all educational settings. The motivation to learn is simply that of being able to engage in current relationships, and the learner instinctively realizes that greater levels of competence in language lead to better communication and deeper relationships. Basic language acquisition, such as that experienced by a child, is largely the domain of informal education or socialization, and thus formal educational institutions offering language courses often do so with limited success.

I am typical of western Canadians in that I studied French in high school for three obligatory years but have never been able to carry on even the simplest conversation in the language. When I moved to Hong Kong and discovered that language schools were outside my budget, I bought books and tapes and began learning on my own.

But the biggest help came from a two-week LAMP (Language Acquisition Made Practical) seminar given by Tom and Elizabeth Brewster of Fuller Seminary. The Brewsters normally taught this course to prospective missionaries in a classroom at Fuller. While their students would certainly have benefited from a semester of learning how to learn a language (and at some later date pull out their class notes when they eventually arrive on the field) I was able to apply their instruction immediately. Indeed, LAMP encouraged me to learn a language like a child, to say what I could, hear the responses, imitate and make childlike mistakes until I was able to converse like an adult. I began applying the concepts on the very day I learned them, and used this method to learn Cantonese in my early 20s and then again to learn Mandarin in my late 40s. At the same time, I met many missionaries who had spent several years learning language in a classroom but, while they could pass a test, were unable to develop meaningful relationships in the language of their host culture.

The LAMP training I received is an example of non-formal missionary formation. It illustrates the importance of immediate application of lessons learned for the purpose of acquiring skills needed in the present. Indeed, in the intensely practical (incarnational) life of a missionary, skills in cross-cultural communication, conflict resolution, contextual analysis and so on are best acquired while on the job in non-formal settings.

Teacher and Learner

Some missionary skills such as, for example, the linguistic knowledge needed for Bible translation, are best transferred in a classroom by an expert. The training given in educational institutions is generally provided by teachers who have become certified experts in their fields through doing research for many years in accredited institutions. By correlation the learner is a non-expert, entirely dependent on the expert's knowledge.

Non-formal training, on the other hand, ties together the teacher and student in the task of learning. The trainer generally has the advantage of more age, experience or even book learning, but does not consider himself an expert. Moreover, in non-formal education, the learner is continually self-directed, taking the cues from within for her own educational needs. Whereas in a formal training context, the student may be one of hundreds listening to the teacher's lectures, non-formal training tends to emphasize a more intimate relationship between the two. Today we customarily refer to this as a mentoring relationship.

Although rabbinic schools existed in the first centuries and the apostle Paul had apparently attended one prior to his conversion, neither he nor Jesus chose to advance

their work by starting a formal school. However, both of them were “teachers” who considered the training of others to be essential for the advancement of the work. They developed highly personal relationships with their students, traveling together and experiencing gospel proclamation with them in a variety of contexts. When Paul dispatched Timothy and Titus to continue the church planting work they had begun together, he maintained this mentoring relationship.

The biblical training pattern as seen in the ministries of Jesus and Paul (not to mention the Old Testament examples, such as the Moses/Joshua and Elijah/Elisha relationships) is relational and both non-formal and informal. Kingdom workers will benefit greatly from having mentors guide them through a myriad of new situations. Jason (not his real name) is a Westerner who has lived in China for nearly two decades, and for the past few years has focused on reaching out to Muslims. (In one major Chinese city alone there are over 70 mosques compared with just 17 registered Christian churches.) Jason studied about how to dialogue with Muslims about Jesus through reading books and attending seminars. At the same time, he began applying this acquired knowledge by visiting mosques and learning to dialogue with Muslim believers. Before long, he realized that if he could equip Chinese Christians they could reach out to Muslims more effectively, sharing a common heart language and being less obviously different than a Caucasian. Jason has recruited some local friends, given them some basic orientation in small groups, and then takes them by ones and twos with him into the mosques. Though he acts as a catalyst and mentor, he relates to his Chinese brothers and sisters as a co-learner. Through intentional but non-formal training, these young Chinese Christians are being formed as missionaries to Chinese Muslims.

Locus of Authority

In placing a high emphasis on accreditation, educational institutions must comply with criteria determined by the agency and/or state, institutions that define best educational practices. The educational package, then, is delivered to the student without consultation with him. On the first day of class the students receive a syllabus (for which the teacher must also receive approval before handing it out) that describes or dictates the content and process of learning.

By de-emphasizing the need for accreditation, non-formal training is able to place the locus of authority on the learner. Rather than become a repository of information that another party feels is needed, the learner recognizes along the way the skills needed for accomplishing certain tasks. Necessity is the mother of invention. Experts are to be consulted, but the student must recognize the need for such expertise.⁵

One of the surprises of the Gospel story comes in Luke 11 when, having already followed Jesus for some time, the disciples make an elementary request: “Teach us to pray.” We may think of prayer as being among the basic of lessons in spirituality, and indeed is usually one of the first chapters in discipleship training curricula. Jesus, however, was not as interested in covering a list of topics as he was in helping his students truly learn. Their request arose naturally as a result of spending time with their teacher and observing him at prayer. Through this process over time they realized that they too needed to learn how to pray. This story illustrates the principle that learning may occur at the initiative of the learner.

It was the practice of Jesus to cultivate true learners, and not leaders who were merely able to follow rote instruction. Focusing on external credibility may easily become “authoritarian” or top-down heavy-handedness, whereas Jesus-style authority comes from within. In discussing the teaching methods of Jesus, Robert Pazmino makes the distinction between “authoritative” and “authoritarian.”⁶ Those who listened to his teaching remarked on Jesus’ authority (Mark 1:27) for Jesus’ teaching was “authenticated by who he was as a person.”⁷ However, he was not “authoritarian,” in that his teaching was never forced upon anyone. It was the recognized religious “authorities” of the day, the ones who had external credibility and who practiced authoritarian teaching (Matthew 23:1-11), who failed to recognize Jesus’ intrinsic authority (Mark 11:27-33). Let me suggest two ways that missionary formation will benefit from following Jesus’ style of teaching.

First, it leads to humility from which true authority flows. Missionaries arrive in a cross-cultural context as “tellers,” those entrusted with proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom. However, they must also keep in mind their role as learners in a new place and culture. Moreover, though they have received training in whatever form their sending agency has required, they arrive in a new culture with more questions than answers. Being encouraged to ask questions and then having opportunities for those questions to be answered is crucial for long-term missionary health. Again, the role of the mentor or co-learner is vital for many new missionaries. It is in response to the myriad of questions raised while on the field that new training programs may be developed, specific to the needs of missionaries in a particular place and time.

Indeed, maintaining the role of the learner enables the missionary to develop relationships from a posture of humility. When I learned Cantonese in my early 20s I had previously received little post-secondary formal education. In my late 40s I began learning Mandarin using the same LAMP method, but by this time I had accumulated two Master’s degrees, was partway through a doctoral program and had decades of experience in church and on the mission field. It would have

been tempting to feel that God's gift to these people had arrived in the form of me, and to build relationships from above, as a teacher and leader. However, starting work on a new language forced me back into the position of learner, and I was able to develop relationships with people in the host culture from a place of humility and dependence.

Second, a non-authoritarian approach to training provides a kingdom alternative to the top-down approaches of many cultures. Asian and African cultures especially tend to revere the teacher, and may too easily ascribe authority to a title rather than to a godly life. As we seek to help the next generation of missionaries from such cultures, it will be helpful to use forms of education that will build kingdom character in addition to expertise. This will require humility and mutual submission especially among the veteran missionaries as they choose to become co-learners with younger co-workers.

Modes, Methods, and Evaluation

Mission agencies of the 1800s may have required less in terms of formal training, but for missionaries to actually get from their homes to the mission field took considerable time and effort. Today the years of formal training required by many mission agencies is another kind of investment missionaries may make before arriving at their destination. These sorts of investments to attain to one's call may provide the psychological advantage of strengthening long-term commitment. One of the potential downsides of non-formal training is that in requiring relatively little in terms of time and finances, coupled with today's ease of air travel, the actual call to the mission field may be treated more lightly. Indeed, the leader of one mission agency that specializes in short-term missions and training likened his organization to a freeway, easy for participants to get on and off. As non-formal training is often modular and short-term it may be difficult to encourage long-term commitment. Moreover, because non-formal training is less concerned with knowledge obtained than with knowledge applied, evaluating the student's progress may become a more ambiguous procedure.

It is sometimes said that we are not to seek success as much as faithfulness. Veteran church planter Tim Keller suggests that it is better and more biblical to evaluate kingdom workers on the basis of fruitfulness. "Successfulness" may be biased by cultural perspectives and "faithfulness" actually requires too little, but the criterion of fruitfulness seeks to determine how God has been at work through his servant.⁸ Whereas formal training may evaluate the success of students based on things like

tests or essays, non-formal training is often in danger of requiring too little in terms of evaluation. Indeed Bloomer's chart uses the word "non-existent" to describe the evaluation procedures of non-formal training. The question we must answer about any kind of training and ministry is, simply, is it effective for the kingdom?

In 1 Corinthians 3:5-9, Paul describes how a kingdom worker is to be evaluated.

⁵What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task. ⁶I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. ⁷So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. ⁸The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and they will each be rewarded according to their own labor. ⁹For we are co-workers in God's service; you are God's field, God's building.

The missionary is a servant partnering with God, the one who is making things grow. The Lord has assigned tasks to each of his servants, neither for boosting the ego with testimonies of success nor for proving the missionary's faithful character, but ultimately to effect growth in the church he is building. For this reason we must evaluate our missionaries and missionary formation primarily on the basis of fruitfulness.

The Chinese church is poised to become one of the great missionary sending churches of the 21st century. However, among those who have been sent out to this point there are few encouraging stories. Most return home within a relatively short period of time having neither acculturated nor accomplished the thing they had set out to do. Recently a group of fifteen was sent long-term to a Middle-Eastern country but within a year all but one individual had returned home. They all went with enough passion to dislodge from home and thrust themselves into a strange culture but without a great deal of prior training. The "freeway" to the Middle East was relatively easy for them to access and, as it turned out, even easier to exit. Unfortunately the difficulties encountered by people arriving from a monocultural setting into a vastly different culture were insurmountable for nearly all of these passionate disciples.

As we evaluate the lack of "success" of those who have tried their best to be "faithful," we must ask the question of fruitfulness: what fruit has been borne as a result of the going? And if we identify that they bore little fruit, other questions must be raised. Why did they become discouraged so quickly? Did they lack skills that could have been learned in some kind of formal training? What further on-the-job training could have enabled them remain faithful to their call and to bear kingdom fruit?

There are increasing opportunities for potential Chinese missionaries to receive formal training, and certainly these ones would have benefited from a longer time in the classroom. But as the culture shock for these workers and loss of direction was truly felt while on the field it is unlikely that prior classroom training could have addressed adequately their emotional turmoil and discouragement. It is on the field that they most needed the mentors and on-the-job training that would enable them to make sense of their experience and be faithful to their call. Currently a Western couple, fluent in Chinese and with over 20 years of experience in the Chinese world is strategizing with Chinese missionaries, and planning to accompany them into a cross-cultural setting for at least a year. This multicultural team, including veteran missionaries who have actually experienced crossing into a culture, will be a group of “co-learners,” with the older couple mentoring the younger missionaries.

Context and Orientation

The context of formal education is the school itself and the orientation is the subject matter of each class. We sometimes refer disparagingly to the “Ivory Tower”—cloistered institutions of higher learning—as being out of touch with the real world, though most students have benefited greatly from receiving formal education. However, as ideas are sparked in a classroom, the school sometimes seems to encourage further study for the sake of study, and doctoral dissertations become increasingly specific and relevant to only a few others who share a particular expertise.

Non-formal training, on the other hand, is sparked by the perceived needs of the broader community. The incarnation event is sometimes seen as an incentive—and even as a general approach—to the missionary task, especially by Anabaptists.⁹ An incarnational approach to missions conceives of ministry strategy and training from within a certain community, as missionaries live among those they serve and perceive needs from within the community itself. In coming to a new culture, missionaries take both an etic and an emic approach.¹⁰ The former seeks to understand a people from without, and much from gained from an external analysis. The latter, however, requires the missionary to deeply engage in the host culture and to understand from within.

In a major Asian city, Susan returned to her homeland after eight years of studying in the United States. While in America she met Jesus and received a “missionary” call back to her own country but to a people quite unlike her. Susan had been raised in a modern city with relative wealth and a good education. She felt, however, the Lord was calling her to serve urban migrants, poorer country folk who had migrated to the city. Upon returning to her country, Susan moved into a migrant community, and quickly

discovered that the culture gap was even greater than what she had experienced in the United States. She had much to learn about the needs of these people and how to serve them. Her equipping for service has come through a combination of informal means (simple but radical socialization) and non-formal means, as she has attended courses and seminars pertinent to the ministry among urban migrants.

Outcomes and Focus

It would be an overstatement to list the sole outcomes of educational institutions as “degrees” or “professional certification,” as if these outcomes are somehow opposed to skills and competence. Indeed, in highly regulated professions such as medicine or accounting, certification and competence generally go hand in hand. However, though a medical college may at times graduate an incompetent doctor, it is even more common for graduates from seminary to feel that they lack ministry skills. A Master’s degree in Intercultural Studies is no guarantee of a successful missionary career.

The Apostle Paul wrote 2 Corinthians partly to answer criticisms leveled against his ministry qualifications. In that letter he describes himself and his team with the term “ministers of a new covenant” (3:6). They possess the skills necessary for kingdom work because their “competence is from God” (3:5). Moreover, Paul stands in contrast to those who “boast in outward appearance” (5:12) and believes that he is “not in the least inferior to these super-apostles” (11:5). New covenant ministers de-emphasize the significance of external degrees and worldly credentials, recognizing that these in themselves do not insure competence for kingdom work.

As mentioned earlier, some aspects of missionary service require specialized and even technical expertise, such as the linguistic skills needed for Bible translation, certain community development work or teaching subjects such as English. But most missionary work (indeed, most church work) requires a breadth of competence that must be learned over time. Whereas formal education trains students in an increasing narrowness and depth (so that a doctoral dissertation may be written on a single Hebrew verb!), missionaries must learn broadly from language acquisition to methods of evangelism to contextually appropriate forms of the church to training local co-workers to implementing social development programs.

The fruitful missionary, partnering with God for the growth of his church and kingdom, has grasped significant outcomes from the Builder’s perspective. All training—formal, informal or non-formal—must be for the purpose of preparing fruitful ministers of the new covenant.

Notes

- ¹ Philip Coombs, *The World Educational Crisis: A Systems Analysis* (Oxford University Press, 1968).
- ² Ted Ward, “The Teaching Learning Process” in *Introducing Christian Education: Foundations for the 21st Century*, ed. Michael J. Anthony, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 121.
- ³ Ward, “Teaching Learning Process,” 121. Informal education comprises learning through life’s daily activities, including such things as having conversations in a new language, pumping gas, scanning items at a supermarket check-out and learning table etiquette in a new culture. Non-formal education generally refers to non-accredited systems of learning, such as preparing for a driver’s test, craft lessons and Sunday school classes.
- ⁴ Tom Bloomer, “Dimensions of Variability of Nonformal Education,” copyright 1997 by Thomas A. Bloomer (paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the comprehensive final examinations for the Ph.D. in Education Science, Trinity International University).
- ⁵ Educator Jane Vella lists twelve principles for effective adult education. The first principle, “Needs Assessment,” calls for dialogue between the teacher and learner, so that the teacher shapes the content around the learner’s needs and questions. See Jane Vella, *Learning to Listen, Learning to Teach: The Power of Dialogue in Educating Adults*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002), 5-8.
- ⁶ Robert Pazmino, “Jesus: The Master Teacher,” in *Introducing Christian Education: Foundations for the 21st Century*, ed Michael J. Anthony (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 114.
- ⁷ Pazmino, “Jesus,” 114.
- ⁸ Tim Keller, *Center Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 13-14.
- ⁹ Ross Langmead defines incarnational ministry in detail using a biblical, theological and historical discussion, and he cites Mennonites as a group marked by such ministry. See *The Word Made Flesh: Towards an Incarnational Missiology* (Lanham: University of America Press, 2004). Mennonite anthropologist Paul Hiebert’s work *Incarnational Ministry* (co-authored with his daughter, Eloise Hiebert Meneses) is a more practical work that applies principles of incarnational ministry to church planting in a cross-cultural context. See *Incarnational Ministry: Planting Churches in Band, Tribal, Peasant, and Urban Societies* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995).
- ¹⁰ Hiebert and Meneses, *Incarnational Ministry*, 14-15.

Study Questions

1. Discuss some of the types of non-formal training in your community. In what ways are these different from formal education models?
2. Besides language acquisition, can you think of other aspects of missionary formation that would be best received while “on the job”?
3. Do you agree with the author’s assertion that specialized aspects of missionary service like Bible translation require formal education? What does this imply for non-Westerners who want to translate the Bible?
4. Discuss your experience of giving or receiving mentoring? What makes a good mentor? Why is mentoring especially important for new missionaries?
5. Consider the “locus of authority” in your culture’s typical approach to education. How closely do you feel it aligns with the methods of Jesus?
6. What specific fruit should we look for when evaluating the missionary’s effectiveness?