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Equipping for Global Mission

Theological and Missiological Proposals and Case Studies



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Chapter 1

Applying Ancient Principles to Renew Contemporary Mission Education

Evelyn Hibbert

As I envisage ideal education for and in missions, I see communities of learners who acknowledge they don't have all the answers. All members of these communities respect one another and actively make disciples. They evaluate cognitive knowledge according to real-life experience and the purpose of mission. The Bible is applied as a textbook for life and exemplary Bible teachers live it out in full view of the community. Learning continues as long as each member lives. Whatever is learned is a rich resource received to share freely with others, reproducing learners who perpetually reproduce new learners (Matt 10:8; 2 Tim 2:2). These are the ancient principles: (1) learn in community, (2) learn in everyday life, and (3) reproduce.

Education transforms us, not just through head knowledge but, hopefully, by developing all aspects of our being. Education is something that we do for mission and as missionaries. The specific challenges of cross-cultural ministry make specialized preparation necessary if we are to produce disciples who are not alien to their context. The same applies to education. It should belong to the local context and build up all who participate in it. It should pass on the full depths of the experience of God through whole-of-life exemplars who reproduce themselves in others.

In this chapter, after I introduce myself, I first discuss the nature and role of education in relation to mission. Then I describe the ancient principles, discussing how they can be applied in our current context. I conclude with a plea for renewal.

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My Experience in Mission and Education

I became a Christian as a young child. By the age of seven, I knew God wanted me to be a missionary. My mother introduced me to Scripture Union notes and daily quiet times that I diligently practiced throughout my childhood. While studying to become a medical doctor, I also studied Bible and theology through correspondence programs. Throughout my teenage and young adult years, I read just about every available missionary biography. I met my husband at university and together we answered the call to go to the unreached. We completed an obligatory year at a missionary training college and then joined the mission associated with that college.

We went to an unreached creative access nation. There, we were involved in evangelism and pioneer church planting. After this, we moved to Bulgaria. While planting a church in an unreached area, we were immersed in a spontaneous movement of thousands of Muslims to Christ. They refer to themselves as the Millet. We became involved in discipling this movement and developing its leaders. This movement stagnated at the end of its first decade but, as a consequence of the seeding effect of diaspora, has revived and is continuing today (thirty years later), spreading across Europe.

Eventually, we joined the mission's international leadership. Our roles included advising on the mission's strategic development, doing training and consultation across its fields, and evaluating its missionary training colleges across the world.

We pioneered a different way of doing missionary training for missionary candidates because we saw so many missionaries struggling from a lack of appropriate training and poor missiological practice. This training immersed candidates in church planting among unreached people. We also tried to move candidate selection and preparation back into the hands of local churches. This training was developed as a fully accredited program under the Australian government's education system. However, all these innovations were closed down in favor of institution-based training and agency-based selection and preparation. The principles, details, and challenges of this training are outlined in the book *Training Missionaries* (E. Hibbert and R. Hibbert 2016).

Following this, I ended up in a secular university, teaching and researching in education. This university was in a disadvantaged region of Australia. My research focused on the diverse population of that region.

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My husband became the director of the Centre for Cross-Cultural Mission at Sydney Missionary and Bible College but remained engaged in cross-cultural outreach to Muslims, insisting on taking students with him. Although I have helped Christian colleges significantly with missiology teaching, research, and program design, as a woman, I remain on the margins of theological education. Realizing that my situation was common for women missionaries and missiologists, and because women-led approaches to research tend to be more collaborative, creative, and flexible, I set up the Angelina Noble Centre. It provides an identity and a supportive research community for women missiologists. We were pushed out of the institution we began in and now function in a marginal, interinstitutional space.

All these things are relevant because they provide you with an understanding of the influences that inform my position on missions education. We cannot deny the effect of what we have experienced on who we are.

Role of Education in Mission

Education is simply a means to fulfill our mandate to disciple the nations. It should not be an end in itself.

Education for mission is necessary as missionaries need specialized, intercultural training. Education in mission (in the context of mission) is inevitable, primarily because discipling and developing leaders are both educational tasks. The same ancient principles apply to both.

As the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1970) stressed, education means more than just filling empty vessels with knowledge. Teaching and learning include social connections, feelings, and physical experiences. It is affected by the context of the learning.

Western education has done an outstanding job of separating text-based knowledge from human experience in all its fullness. We have decontextualized knowledge and successfully exported this way of educating around the world. Evangelicals have been among the worst offenders of this approach to education because, often, in emphasizing the written word of God we have neglected the person of the living Word who dwells among us. This "us" refers to the whole community of Christ's body, not just each isolated individual.

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I presume that the main reason why we have relegated learning to cognitive tasks in the classroom is that it seems more efficient. A decontextualized knowledge version of Jesus's curriculum could probably have been covered in a six-month lecture series. However, lectures can never have the same impact as the experience of the lesson in context. For example, Peter would no doubt always associate not being afraid with the vivid experience and feelings of being saved from drowning (Matt 14:22–32).

Good education brings transformation by helping us build connections between people, experiences, feelings, cognitive knowledge (represented by written or oral texts), and tacit knowledge (skills performed by bodies). It is holistic. It is embedded and tested in daily life. It is dynamic and, for Christians, life-bringing and reproducing. This type of connected learning has been represented as a circle or spiral (Kolb 1984; Schön 1991), a fence (Ward and Rowen 1972), or railway tracks (Plueddemann 1972). It is lifelong because there is always more to learn.

The need for specialist training for missionaries has been stressed for more than a century (World Missionary Conference 1910). Without specific training, it is normal for missionaries to introduce their own culturally shaped ways of doing things. Consequently, they establish Christianity as an alien presence (Whiteman 1997).

Although missionary-specific training has improved significantly, and many mission agencies offer it, too many missionaries still go into ministry without this training. Sadly, some with this training still practice mission with a seeming disregard for basic missiological principles. And in our churches and theological colleges, Jesus's command to go into *all* the world is too often neglected. That is, the age-old challenge of those without the opportunity to hear about Jesus is still forgotten amid the clamor of the needs of those who are already Christian (e.g., Stetzer 2013). Surprisingly, as the church declines in the West, many seminaries are dropping missiology altogether. We, as missiologists, have failed to effectively communicate missiology's relevance to our own contexts.

If the primary purpose of missiology is to improve the practice of mission, then the primary purpose of teaching mission is therefore to enhance the ministry of missionaries (R. Hibbert and E. Hibbert 2014b).

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As the EMS (n.d.) purpose statement outlines: "We exist to advance the cause of world evangelization to fulfill the Church's mandate to disciple the nations." My focus in talking about educating for and in mission is always to see new disciples come into being, who gather into churches, and who then make more disciples, who make more churches.

The Ancient Principles

Throughout the Bible, we see a consistent pattern of teaching and learning. Teachers and learners share life in community, doing ministry in everyday life, reproducing themselves in others as they pass on their life-experienced heritage to ensuing generations of learners.

In Community

We are created as communal, not isolated, individual beings. We need other people. In contrast, when Western individualists read the Bible, they quickly hone in, almost exclusively, on individual people. Examples of biblical learning communities are Jesus and his disciples; Paul and Barnabas, both with their companions; and the Old Testament community of prophets (e.g., 1 Sam 19:20; 1 Kgs 20:35; 2 Kgs 2:1–18; 4:38–44). Even the mentoring pairs in the Bible, such as Moses and Joshua, Elijah and Elisha, and Paul and Timothy, were continuously surrounded by other people.

Co-learners. As a community of Christians, we know that Jesus is among us (Matt 18:20). He alone is our Master Teacher. Learning in community forefronts the equal status of learner and teacher as co-learners under Christ. The focus is on collaboration and building up the body of Christ together. A collaborative orientation highlights the value of what each participant brings to the community. It gives the control of the learning into the hands of the community according to its needs as community members seek to make disciples in their local context.

The biblical learning community is part of the wider community that observes and flexibly joins in the learning. This style of learning is interactive, like an ongoing conversation, as teachers and learners engage with everyday events. Wider community members listen in and interject their questions and challenges.

Including. The principle of community values all participants. It means proactively valuing diverse perspectives. Teachers and learners are together

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