

## Upside-Down for Relevant Training

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To talk about training in mission without referring to 2 Timothy 2:2 is like talking about coffee without referring to Starbucks. So let me begin where tradition dictates "*The things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others.*" (2 Timothy 2:2, NIV). That is the basic action, the basic strategy of missions. Every phrase is potent - confirmed testimony, entrust to reliable men, qualified to teach others.

Great emphasis is correctly placed first on confirming the testimony of Scripture. Second, each competent leader seeks reliability in ministers and is ready to give ministry away to them - entrust them with the precious truths of the Gospel. What about the third phrase - what does it mean to be "qualified" and able "to teach others." Christ Himself gave instructions to "disciple... teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." Discipling, teaching - these are essential actions of ministry. How do we become qualified teachers?

How many years of schooling are required to be qualified? How many degrees are necessary before someone can be a qualified teacher? Should we establish institutes, schools, and colleges so we can have places to teach others? None of those common practices are essential to the task. Certainly there can be value in institutionally-based training with standards, degrees, and recognition. But none of these things ensure that we develop those "qualified to teach others." Neither does the absence of that preparation ensure ability to train others. The core challenge is in how we teach, and how we teach others to teach.

It is axiomatic that we teach others in the way we were taught. So training must be done in a way that can be effectively reproduced by those being trained. Many of those we are training will work in areas where open, organized witness may be impossible, or where technological support may be lacking. Teaching must, therefore, be constructed and presented in a style as similar to "grass roots" education as possible. What kind of teaching will that be? It will not be based on Western educational or discipling models.

Western education has produced impressive technical and social achievements, but cannot change the fundamentals of human behavior. Its prevailing power has further separated, then alienated the deprived and oppressed of the world. Western education in the Majority World has sometimes accepted differing cultural behaviors or used local illustrations, but deeply held beliefs and assumptions have been overlooked. The majority of all the world's peoples - European as well as Asian, Africans as well as Americans - continue in traditional beliefs, as well as indigenous reasoning and learning styles. Even when some become competent in "contemporary" patterns and skills, they still function largely with traditional values and assumptions - or revert to them under pressure. Educational, technical, and organizational achievement has left core beliefs untouched, even among many who claim to be Christian.

I illustrate from an “insider” book by a very capable and well-educated Sona woman from Zimbabwe. Sekai Nzenza-Shand was educated in mission schools, trained as a nurse, took advanced work in England, then a PhD. In International Relations in Australia, and married an Australian. She is clearly a fine example of mission fruit. Obviously I cannot read even major parts of her well-written view of Zimbabwean life in the late 1990's. I have selected excerpts that are insightful glimpses into the heart of the educated in that country.

*The belief in ancestral spirits is woven into village law. ... You ignore the ancestral spirits here at your peril, whatever the white missionary might tell you on Sundays about worshipping idols. People who observe the customs find that the ancestors look after them, as many freedom fighters reported during the war for independence. (p.32)*

*I am back at Kwenda Methodist Mission ... My father first attended this school in 1946. Soon after his teacher training here, the missionaries sent him back to his village with a mission: he was to establish the first school in the area, which he called Mufudzi Wakanaka School - Good Shepherd School. I was born when Baba was still a teacher and a loyal companion to the English missionaries.*

*But by the early 60's, my father had succumbed to what the missionaries darkly called primitive desires: he became a polygamist. ... my father's decision to take a second wife was sanctioned by my mother. The white missionaries were appalled at my father's conduct. After all the years spent educating him about the value of civilisation and good behaviour, my father had let the mission down. ... my father had gone as far as drinking European beer and spirits like vodka and whisky...*

*And when the Reverend Palmer arrived at the school one Sunday afternoon expecting to find my father preaching to the flock, he was enraged to discover all the village people at a traditional ceremony paying libations to ancestral spirits. To the missionaries' way of thinking, Africans who drank alcohol and worshipped ancestral spirits were primitive and abominable. Polygamy was merely the last straw, proof positive that they had failed to civilise my father.*

*Baba was summoned... a letter of dismissal was quickly written, 'Despite your knowledge of the Lord Jesus and the redemption message, you have chosen to continue worshipping idols and to mislead the natives. You have therefore been found unsuitable to remain as Headmaster...'*

*But his dismissal from teaching did not deter Baba from worshipping ancestral spirits, nor did he divorce his second wife. When we were growing up, he would tell us that if we wanted to be educated and get jobs, we had to obey the white man. In order to be successful in life, Baba would remind us, we should worship the white man's Jesus as well as ancestors and either way we would still get to God. But it was crucial that as we grew up, we should never let the white man know that we worshipped the ancestors.*

*And as the story continues, the writer went to the same mission school, and became a Christian. "I did not want to go back to ancestral worship, and the smell of cow dung and poverty in the village... I adored (her teacher) and her religion, which by then I had fully embraced. I also told*

*my mother that Baba had been wrong to worship ancestral spirits.*

*I became Miss Hutchinson's favorite pupil. ... she felt sorry for me and the following term she told me that a Methodist Women's Group in Sheffield had offered to pay for my secondary education. I was beginning to enjoy the benefits of being a good Christian, just as my father had done years before.*

*"While she talked about the kingdom of God, I was more interested in getting to know about her world." p.40*

Thoughtful leaders in Asia, Africa, and Latin America are asking how to change patterns that leave people in poverty, gross under-development, and spiritual darkness. Imitation of Western educational forms in the Majority World, and mastery of inherently foreign concepts, brings change only at a superficial level.

After her return from Australia with her husband, she was employed by a Christian aid agency which she carefully does not name. She would seem an obvious bridge-builder with the right credentials from a Western perspective. Her account of one field trip to a deprived and oppressed section of Zimbabwe raises serious questions about the reality of her Christian life.

*"Thomas drained his second beer and ordered another. 'We work for a religious non-government agency,' he reminded me, 'so do not mention to anyone that we drank beer on this trip. You understand, don't you, that working in the bush would not be much fun without beer - we would be bored to death.'*

*'We will have a few more beers, then we will have just a few more, and then we will be on our way," laughed Tapiwa. (P. 205)*

### **How fruitful, really, are missions?**

Is this just one exception to the success of missions? After all, everywhere there are those who profess one thing and act out another. In the early 1960's some 35 African nations became independent. Of all the new presidents, prime ministers, etc. 32 were the products of mission schools. Yet within a decade, almost all of those countries had stumbled into corrupt mis-government. Today, those countries that were led by the proud products of missions have a lower standard of living, less freedom in nearly every area of life, and are devastated by AIDS.

Neither Western nor non-Western modes of teaching have been able to change the nature of humans or society. In small conflicts or massive struggles, man seems equally intent on destroying others and himself, if necessary to destroy others. There is no evidence that Western styles are of any more value than non-Western in alleviating humanity's fundamental problems. So why is there such struggle to gain Western degrees? Western approval? To introduce Western methods in our ministries? There is a better way.

It is clear in the Word of God that humans need a new nature, and that God alone can create that in humans. He will do that when humans ask, taking Him at His Word. God has given us, His people, the privilege of communicating the story of God's deliverance. In fact, that is our central task, telling His story so He can bring change to believing and obedient persons. To do that

effectively, we must disciple and teach within existing thought-patterns and perceptions. Paul described the way he did it, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit:

*“To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law, so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law,... so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak.*

*“I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some.” 1 Cor 9:20-22 (NIV)*

Clearly, those patterns were not the same as prevalent teaching patterns of the twenty-first century. Can we still follow Paul’s way, or must we remain bound by traditions that originated elsewhere? If we are to be relevant to all societies and all levels of society, we must teach in the ways already being used by each society. What are some of those understandings, patterns of thought and styles of learning that we must know and use?

### **Normal Learning Compared to Academic Learning**

Some major distinctions between “Normal” learning and the “Academic” mode of learning<sup>1</sup> are suggested in this brief table.

<b>Normal</b>	<b>Academic</b>
Inductive development of principles	Deductive application of principles
Experiential learning Apprenticing Storying	Learning abstract or propositional truth Formal schooling Factual presentations
Event orientation	Chronological orientation
Validation of teaching authority by - age. Knowledge of tradition social position	Validation of teaching authority by - formal academic credentials “success” in a relevant area political or social position
Community-oriented	Individually based
Contextual, Semitic, Oriental, or Romantic logic systems	Linear logic system

*To better define the differences, this table shows polar opposites. A specific culture would probably not be totally on one side of the table above, but at some point between the opposites.*

Examining the differences briefly:

1. Inductive vs. Deductive. In the typical Western approach in education, we learn a

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<sup>1</sup> “Normal” learning is the term suggested by Timothy Olonade of Nigeria, as more suitable than “Indigenous.” “Academic” learning could also be described as the Aristotelian method of learning.

summary of the principles involved, defend them, and show how they are applied. We then normally leave it to the student to do the application. We deduce from the principle, or we are supposed to, how to handle the situation. But when does a football team become mature? After spring training, chalk talks, and drills - or in a real life game where each team tries to surprise the other with something new. The principles may work, but learning to apply them is a different matter.

In Normal learning, we are inundated with experiences - sounds, sights, smells, joy and anger (think of the first grader in his first day at school- it is amazing that they all do not break down in tears!) But from that tsunami of experience, we begin to form patterns, and then from the patterns a theory so we can anticipate what's coming next. That is inductive learning... the Normal way we learn about life.

2. Growing out of these fundamental differences in approach to learning are the next two differences shown in the chart - experiential learning versus abstract facts, and the method of presentation - storying as opposed to factual presentation of propositions. Learning happens in specific events, that are not neatly (for the Westerner) tied down in a chronological timetable. Thus Normal teaching rests on events as they flow in life, as the occasion demands. Development of a chronology may come later.

3. Validation of a teacher's authority rests on age, often assuming that age equals extensive experience and thus extensive normal learning. Age means wisdom in societies where Normal learning predominates. Age therefore gives social status and authority because a deep knowledge of tradition has been accumulated.

In the Academic approach, the teacher is primarily validated by degrees earned, and formal honors received. Success in the field being taught, often measured by wealth accumulated, strengthens credibility, which is however, based on academic success.

4. In Western Academic learning, it is virtually inconceivable to offer anything but individualized learning. We teach the value of community, but train in an implicitly competitive environment. Even when group work is encouraged, or at least permitted, grading is individual, making group work something to be used for personal advantage.

5. Major and valid differences in logic systems employed in societies, are a very significant factor in effective teaching and discipling of leaders. The Academic approach demands strict linear logic, ruling out irrelevancies, using illustrations, but not stories as the central conveyor of truths, strictly a cause-and-effect approach. It has produced incredible technology and human power, but it has not developed trusting and friendly relationships either individually or internationally.

Normal learning may employ one of several logic systems - contextual, semitic, romantic, or

oriental<sup>2</sup>. These slides illustrate (in a rather simplistic way) the reasoning lines of each logic pattern. Scripture illustrates the linear, semitic, and contextual patterns in different books: Romans is predominantly linear, The Hebrew Scriptures' historical books are often semitic, as are the prophets, and Hebrews is a clear example of contextual logic.

### **Is Contextual Better Than Linear?**

There is power in both kinds of learning, but differing outcomes. The Academic approach is essential in certain studies, technological areas for example. The Normal approach is much more appropriate when attitudes and relationships are the emphasis.

We are concerned with attitudes and relationships, not only facts. This suggests the need for a different methodology of teaching and training leaders of churches, a method much closer to that of Jesus and Paul than much current practice. Continuing to teach and train within a traditional Western Academic framework will not prevent learning, but will seldom offer a challenge to non-biblical values and assumptions.

This kind of teaching results in cognitive compartmentalization - lessons are learned, but fundamental assumptions and beliefs are untouched. Life continues with mental assent to the Gospel, but lacking an awesome, shattering confrontation with God. Outward behavior may change, masking the unchanged nature of the innermost person. This, I suggest, is the primary cause of remarkable church growth that nevertheless has little impact on a society's values and behavior.

(I speak here as a long-term resident of Africa, though presently based in the USA.) The root of the common mis-judgment of the African church, "Six thousand miles wide, but two inches deep" is not in the Message but in frequent failure to relate the message to the African cultural core.<sup>3</sup> There are many remarkable men and women of God from Africa, but congregation after congregation sees only a superficial relationship between the Word of God and traditional ways of life and thought. It is this superficiality, whether in Africa, Asia, South or North America, that we seek to change so that God's Word shapes the very core of individuals and societies. We have been charmed into accepting academic rigor as equivalent to the rigor of true discipleship.

Discipling considers the differing assumptions and beliefs of the disciple, and confronts those with God's Revelation. Teaching is done in a way that involves the total person, instead of an academic substitute. It begins with the trainee's experience, a mentor helping him to analyze what is happening in his own ministry, then considering case studies from other ministries to discern valid principles - all under the guidance of a personal mentor. The mentor directs the trainee to specific learning experiences from ministry - in books, DVDs, online materials, and

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<sup>2</sup> The latter three systems were identified by Harder in a seminal article in Media Development, published by the World Association of Christian Communication, after his observations during teaching in Japan.

<sup>3</sup> If the African church is six thousand miles wide and two inches deep, then the North American church is three thousand miles wide and one inch deep.

other available references, and is available for questions and discussions. As a small group train together online, students help one another. The training follows an inductive approach so that at the end of each unit trainees are able to state guiding principles for their own ministries.

This is the way we learn about life as a child and about new situations as adults. It is the “Normal” way of learning, and should be the way we disciple believers - using life “as it happens” and guiding to understanding in the light of God’s Word, and encouraging obedience to Him.

### **How Did Jesus Make Disciples/**

World Link University (a coordinating effort) of the Third World Mission Association is building that kind of training online through the World Link Graduate Center. Using a combination of short residential training, extensive use of the internet, and working with mission training centers worldwide, the life-changing truths of God’s revelation can be seen in a directly relevant and comprehensible manner.

“Normal” learning-teaching guides us to the heart instead of developing a two-level understanding: academic learning balanced precariously on top of traditional views of the spirit world and life. “Normal” discipling happens by learning through experience, enhanced by stories and apprenticeship. The disciple learns within life from an authentic teacher who has lived the Truth yet understands deeply the social and traditional environment from which the disciple is emerging. This is the pattern of Jesus.

This kind of teaching is not cost-efficient. It cannot mass produce mission trainers, even using modern technology. But the way of weakness is the way of power in God’s economy. Grand (and grandiose) programs seldom present God’s ways, often representing man’s vision or man’s attempt to solve problems. It is the still, small voice that showed God. A baby in a peasant society that was oppressed by the greatest power in the world became the Man that transformed human history and destiny. The Cross of Jesus, intended as the symbol of deepest shame became a glorious symbol of hope (*1 Corinthians 1:18-31, NIV*).

God communicated with us by becoming one of us, by participating in our feasts, our funerals, as a part of the fabric of our lives. He spoke our language, not calling on the powers of heaven to overwhelm our dullness of comprehension. (What an incredible high-tech show He could have dazzled with!) Instead, He acted out His love within the framework of our understanding.

Similarly, the structure of our teaching must reflect simplicity of Truth and the power of relationship within the limits of the world of those we seek to disciple. In that way, we can create understanding in those we disciple, in those we teach.

Portland, Oregon, USA  
September 11, 2007  
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