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Send out your light and your truth! Let them guide me. Psalm 43:3

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Missiological Education by Extension: A Case Study of the Course, “Foundations of the World Christian Movement”

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Missiological Education by Extension: A Case Study of the Course, “Foundations of the World Christian Movement”

“Our responsibility is to share the blessing of God with others. If we don't share that blessing, God will use any means to get us to bless others. I will use an example of a typical Spanish tradition, the bull fight. ...”

This is not a professor of missions speaking to a class of students eager to learn from the “expert.” Rather, this is a Latin American adult learner, participating in an online dialog while serving cross-culturally in Jordan. Among his peers are participants from Africa, India, Latin America and the U.S. Through a simple form of online education, this student has access to resources, both human and electronic, that enable him to stretch his thinking, apply existing knowledge to new contexts, and enrich the lives of the other participants in the online course, including that of the facilitator.

ACCESS is a network that arose out of the movement, Theological Education by Extension (TEE), which was birthed as a missions strategy in Latin America. As one of the founders of this movement, Ralph D. Winter went on to create “missiological education by extension” through a full degree program, World Christian Foundations (WCF). Started in the early 1990s, before online education became ubiquitous, the program was designed to be studied anywhere in the world, with a local mentor and hard copy texts as “the teachers.” Tests and papers were sent for grading to the institution granting credit. In this way Winter and the WCF editors continued the TEE tradition of supplying distance education to leaders in need of gaining knowledge and skills without leaving their context to attend “brick and mortar” schools.

Moodle for Dummies

That's what we needed a few years ago when the editors of WCF decided to condense the degree program into an introductory 3-unit course, Foundations of the World Christian Movement ("Foundations"). This course is a pre-requisite for WCIU doctoral students and we promote this as a "next step" opportunity for participants in the well-known course, Perspectives on the World Christian Movement. To make it possible to have discussion-based learning with students in many parts of the world, we wanted to upgrade technologically to an online format. Although in some countries students still cannot participate in high-tech online courses, due to erratic internet access (even access to electricity is problematic in some places), it has become normal for students anywhere in the world to have at least weekly access to download readings and upload papers.

To give students an opportunity to participate in a virtual community of self-directed learners and facilitated dialog, we asked for help from a missions-minded technology consultant, Jim Klass, jhklaas@sympatico.ca. Jim customized for our institution some of the online features available through the open-source course management program known as "Moodle." From a variety of options for delivering the assignments he set up the syllabus with due dates and created links to online readings, audio recordings, a discussion forum, and postings for student papers. He has continued to assist us twice a year to enter new student information and to patiently coach students who are new to online learning in how to log in and navigate the essential features.

One of the customized features we chose was to make the articles and books accessible as online PDF documents. These features differ from traditional online methodology in two ways. First, we are considering the financial needs of non-western students and missionaries by

providing all reading materials as part of the low tuition. Secondly, and for the same financial reason, we do not use expensive electronic books, but instead simply provide a PDF of the formatted text. While this lacks the bells and whistles of being able to bookmark, highlight, and automatically reference quotes, it follows the 80%-20% rule of thumb in delivering the content in a simple, accessible format. (Twenty percent of the effort to produce 80% of the results.)

Virtual Community and Social Learners

Many people, particularly those in relational cultures and the younger generation of the West, learn best in community with others. The opportunity for sharing insights, asking questions, receiving advice, and developing caring relationships are very important to many learners. Traditional approaches such as lecture in classroom settings, independent study in correspondence or individualized online courses, do not meet these needs. Social networking is a key ingredient in academic courses, and this is a key feature of the Foundations online course. A cohort of students begin the class together by introducing themselves through an “introductions” link provided in the first lesson, which includes posting a jpeg photo of themselves. Each week students post responses to several Reflection Questions and are required to interact analytically with at least two other postings. The dialog set up by these requirements is stimulating, culturally diverse and personalized. Students often mention special events in their lives, request and offer prayer for each other, and one time a student even wanted to get together at the end of the course for a “reunion,” forgetting the twelve participants were scattered all over the world!

Learning Multi-culturally

An example of the international flavor of one of the first Foundations cohorts included responses from a student from India, an American student, one from Latin America, and another from a West African country. They responded from their unique perspectives to this question: “Given

the Bible as supra-cultural truth, to what forms in your *own* culture should you be sensitive when transmitting the biblical message to *another* culture?”

The student from India mentioned worship style, clothing, foods, and structures for worship as distinctives that first came to mind. But as a result of the audio lecture by Ralph Winter he realized that more than outward forms of culture need to be evaluated; faith and inner heart issues also need to be examined. He stated, “I imagine for myself that it is easier for someone of my own faith and lifestyle to evaluate ourselves when we stand next to a person from a completely different culture.”

This principle was illustrated by the contribution of an American student who pointed out, “In Africa, the people emphasize community far more than we do in the States. Without a doubt we are being offensive in some of the baggage that goes with our message. Our denomination is emphasizing self-sufficiency, which may be difficult if even possible at all for an African culture. In India, a core value of the Hindu religion is hospitality. We are likely stepping all over people’s toes without intending to do so.”

A Latin American student serving cross-culturally in Jordan contributed to the discussion by pointing out his realization that being a Christian is a cultural matter, not just a way of saying you are a follower of Jesus. “Here in Jordan religion is tied to politics. Identifying yourself as Christian will put you in the box of a certain political party and then you will be viewed as against or in favor of the group with which you are trying to work.”

An African student further enriched this multi-cultural dialog by sharing a humorous story showing how lack of cultural self-awareness ended in a misconception by those not part of that culture of what a religious ceremony was attempting to convey. The story went like this: A missionary had dedicated himself to introducing Christ to the pygmies of Camaroon, a people of

short height who live in the forest. They are good hunters who use smoke to force out some animals who live in holes or to send away bees to get honey. The missionary invited some of the pygmies to attend a Catholic Church mass, during which the priest burned incense, bowed down and performed other rituals. At the end of the mass the pygmies told the missionary, “The man in the white robe tried to smoke God out. He was looking for God and God was nowhere to be found. For some reason God did not want to appear at that service.”

This story illustrates the need to be sensitive to the forms in our own culture when transmitting the biblical message to another culture. This student’s story added to the rich dialog and increased understanding of multiple ways to apply the principle under consideration in the Reflection Question of the Foundations lesson.

Respect for All Contributions

This story also illustrates the value of online discussion in which all contributions are valued and affirmed. In a typical face to face classroom, certain individuals dominate discussions while others make fewer contributions out of deference or feelings of inadequacy. This is both a personality and cultural phenomenon. In an online forum, all are required to submit responses to questions and to respond analytically and in a friendly manner to several student submissions. This creates a dialog that is richer because those who would normally not say much in a group setting are empowered to contribute their insights and points of view.

Self-Directed Learning

Through online forums like the Foundations course, Christian educators are encouraging self-directed learning by adults who know what they need to learn and who already have much to contribute to others on the subject. In this setting, the instructor becomes a facilitator rather than

the dictator of what to think, memorize, or repeat back. In fact, the instructor becomes one of the learners in this model.

The online discussion forum model holds the potential to help leaders in other cultures increase their leadership skills through analytical thinking and self-expression. Many Asian cultures foster rote learning. This limits the development of the society since new learning is hard to come by when only what is already known is all that is expected to be learned. The Foundations course has demonstrated that students from that type of background appreciate the opportunity to make personalized contributions, think for themselves, and come to new conclusions.

Conclusion

As Christian educators with a heart for all the peoples of the world, it is our responsibility to use the tools God has helped us develop to do the best we can to educate leaders of societies and agencies, working toward right relationships with God, with humans, and with creation. In short, we are agents of God's covenant with Abraham to bless, through his descendants, all the nations of the earth.

As my Latin American student said, "If we don't share that blessing, God will use any means to force us to bless others."

The torero enters the arena with the responsibility is to kill the bull. The bull comes into the arena to fight for its life. The spectators judge both the torero and the bull for a good fight. If the bull is not a good fighter it will be sent out. But if the torero is not a good fighter, it could cost his life, severe wounds or some bruises in the best of cases. If the bull kills or wounds the torero and he can't kill the bull, an older and experienced torero will go to the arena and finish the fight.

As toreros of the Kingdom of God we have accepted the responsibility of fighting against our enemy and his plans. ("The whole world lies in the power of the evil one," 1 John 5:19.) We know if we are not careful and responsible, it will cost us. May God give us grace to fulfill our part so He doesn't have to send someone else in to do what was prepared for us.

This illustration of the bull fight serves to remind us to use well, for God's glory, the resources with which He has entrusted us, including tools for missiological education by extension.