

SOLVING THE TRAINING PROBLEM: BEST PRACTICES IN ONLINE LEADERSHIP EDUCATION IN A POST-PANDEMIC WORLD

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INTRODUCTION

COVID19 introduced hundreds of millions of people to online education. E-learning has become normal, especially for the in-service training and licensing of active professionals. Learners are now used to virtual meetings, uploading assignments and engaging with content without the personal presence of an instructor. The pandemic also led to a rapid development of the supporting software and pedagogy which we can now benefit from in the work of missions.

Learning in 2023 takes place in a digital ocean and we can decide to sink with traditional learning only, or swim by embracing e-learning as appropriate.

As the management guru W.E. Deming once said “Every system is perfectly designed to give you exactly what you are getting today”. (https://www.azquotes.com/author/3858-W_Edwards_Deming)

The theological education we have today is the direct result of the systems of theological education we have today. If we want better results we will have to change the system.

W.E. Deming also said:

“The two basic rules of life are: 1) Change is inevitable 2) Everybody resists change”

and “It is not necessary to change; survival is not mandatory.”

Theological education needs to change profoundly in a post-COVID world!

As we reimagine 21st century theological education post-COVID here are some questions that engineers designing advanced project technology use:

1. Using no jargon, describe what problem you are trying to solve.
2. How is it done today, and what are the limitations of the current approach?
3. What is new in your approach, and why do you think it will be successful?
4. If you are successful, what difference will it make?
5. What are the risks, and how will you mitigate them?
6. How much will it cost, and how long will it take?
7. What are the midterm and final “exams” to check for success?

(Questions taken from: <https://www.gettingsmart.com/2023/04/11/embracing-the-darpa-model-for-edtech-innovation-charting-the-course-with-gpt-4-and-beyond/>)

The *problem* (Q1. above) is: providing appropriate and useful theological education to apostolic practitioners of the gospel, especially in indigent and remote regions of the world, who will start

multiplying movements of the gospel in their nations and people groups.

The way it is done today (Q2. above) is mainly via personal presence methods such as Bible colleges, seminars, visiting preachers and teachers and church-based training. The limitations are extraction, irrelevance, lack of access to world-class expertise, higher than feasible cost structures, and lack of adaptability to context.

Between 70% to 90% of the world’s pastors have very little theological training. [90% of pastors lack proper theological training, major conference is told | Evangelicals Now (e-n.org.uk)] This urgent problem will not be solved by building thousands of million-dollar Bible college facilities. Also, the days of sending \$5000 to sponsor a pastor training seminar in Africa are rapidly vanishing as various governments clamp down on organizations sending funds for charitable purposes. Online training and TEE (Theological Education by Extension) are going to be the main solutions for grass-roots theological education and most of this training is going to be delivered digitally, and in some places via mobile devices and Internet cafes.

The new approach (Q3. above) is the use of online leadership training as outlined in this paper. It will be successful in certain contexts such as:

1. Where the students are “digital natives” who prefer to interact by computer and who do not particularly want to meet with others in a classroom on a fixed schedule.
2. Training of scattered specialists who would otherwise have to fly in and pay hotel expenses.
3. Asynchronous learning where the participants are scattered across various time zones.
4. Short courses of four to six weeks duration, especially in-service training of people who already have some background knowledge of the topic.
5. Online resourcing of church-based training with PDF manuals, MP3 files and videos, this training may include some Zoom or WhatsApp calls.
6. Online training supplemented by in-house intensives. This model is used by many universities for their post-graduate courses.
7. Live-streaming of training events and seminars from a venue that has limited capacity.
8. When the educator wants a video or audio recording of the seminar available for student review after the training is over and desires discussion to take place in an online classroom.
9. If there is a high probability of student cheating on tests, then computer-based assessment can

randomize questions and check for plagiarism and even detect use of AI such as ChatGPT.

10. If mobile devices are the only technology available in a remote area then training can be sent to their phones/tablets via email or WhatsApp and a WhatsApp group can serve as a local online classroom.
11. In rural ministry contexts where extraction of students to a major city for long-term training is both financially formidable and often ineffective because the students tend to remain in the major city rather than returning to their rural parishes.
12. Where a large physical gathering of Christians would trigger surveillance or even direct persecution and the Internet is not yet under strict surveillance by the host nation.

If we are successful *what difference* (Q4. above) will this new approach (culturally adapted online learning) make? Millions will have access to culturally relevant Christian leadership training, on site, in their community of practice, at a cost they can afford.

The *risks* (Q5. above) are preoccupation with technology, government surveillance, power and Internet outages and a high student drop-out rate if the pedagogy is not done well.

How much will it *cost* (Q6. above)? About \$10 per student per subject based on our experience in grass-roots training. It is certainly not free, even with the leverage of technology.

How long will it take? About eighteen months to two years to set up and do a high-quality trial run in most cases.

What are the mid-term and final exams (Q7. above)? Student engagement, course completion, and demonstrated acquisition of the required leadership skills and theological perspectives.

Considerable experimentation is necessary before you find your feet with a solution that works for all stakeholders: students, parents of students, faculty, administration, donors, institutions, accrediting agencies and denominational hierarchies. Tweaking is just part of growing.

THE APOSTLES WERE VERY SMART

The New Testament apostles knew first-century culture, because it was their culture and they knew Greek, Aramaic, Hebrew and Latin because these languages were their languages. They either had known Jesus personally or they knew other apostles personally. They could heal the sick, raise the dead and start Christian revivals. No theologian alive today knows what those original apostles knew. We reconstruct their world and exegete their Scriptures. They lived in their world and wrote their Scriptures.

The leaders in the early Church were trained in and from the Scriptures, through personal mentoring and by apprenticeship to leading active practitioners of the faith. The early church leaders were spiritually formed through a process similar to an educational process

known as Action, Reflection, Action.

Action-reflection-action (ARA) is an educational process that involves taking action, reflecting on the results of that action, and then taking further action based on that reflection¹. It is a cyclical process of learning that helps one become a better learner by reflecting, testing assumptions, and asking questions to resolve complex ministry problems². The process is cyclical because as action leads to reflection, a new action develops, and the process repeats³. ARA is generally done in a small group with a team approach where members equally contribute and learn/teach each other¹². [Source: Conversation with Bing, 4/4/2023(1) What is Action-reflection learning (ARL)? | TalentLyft. <https://www.talentlyft.com/en/resources/what-is-action-reflection-learning-arl> Accessed 4/4/2023.]

ARA can be complimented with digital resources. We do not need to lock ministry candidates in a brick building far from home for four years. We can put them alongside apostolic leadership, seeing faith in action, and learning as they go, with digital resources being available to assist them in the process of Action-Reflection-Action. So, we can have Holy Spirit impartation, theological education and personal reflection working together in the life of the minister of the gospel. ARA also readily lends itself to deep contextualization.

THE APOSTOLIC SKILL SET IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Things have changed. The Book of Acts was at the beginning of the road of the gospel, now we are nearing the end of the road with the good news encountering almost every tribe, tongue and nation. Yet the apostolic skill set is not too different: proclamation, teaching, baptizing, and discipling along with the clear demonstration of spiritual power, the defense of the faith in the face of magicians and false gospels, the correction of error, the establishment of new communities of faith, dealing with local issues, maintaining order in the Church, and setting up competent and godly local church leadership. Each component of the apostolic skill set has different training requirements. The defense of the faith in the public square in the 21st century may well require a Ph.D. in Theology or Apologetics, while evangelizing and baptizing people may require little more than a good apprenticeship under a local evangelist. Also new offices have emerged that are not mentioned in the New Testament such as worship leader, youth minister and Christian counselor.

We find ourselves with the task of defining what each apostolic or five-fold ministry skill looks like in a particular culture and defining the educational foundation that must undergird the acquisition of that

skill. We are required to ask questions such as:

1. May this skill be acquired by local apprenticeship or personal discipleship alone?
2. Does it also require some theological input at an informal, non-formal or formal level?
3. Can the theological input be delivered remotely through some kind of distance education or online educational strategy?
4. What kind of professional ethics are required for this ministry skill and how are these professional ethics best imparted in this time, place and culture?
5. What kind of spiritual practices and competencies are required for person to have spiritual authority in that context? For instance, are they required to heal the sick, cast out demons or engage in spiritual warfare in order to be seen as a man/woman of God?
6. Which learning modalities (visual, auditory, reading/writing, kinesthetic) are best suited for imparting that particular ministry skill in its context? How do the trainees want to be taught?
7. What kind of workshop training is necessary for the formation of a skilled reflective practitioner and how much of this workshop training needs to be face-to-face as opposed to by some virtual means?
8. In an ideal situation, what would be the correct balance (for each skill) between: apprenticeship/discipleship, ARA workshops, lectures and personal research?
9. Is the skill rapidly evolving (such as the counseling of victims of trauma) so that constant in-service training and certification is required? Can this in-service training be adequately delivered online?
10. Is this skill a skill that the government of that nation will have some say about and require formal accreditation and licensing?

WHY INNOVATIVE COURSES SOMETIMES DON'T SUCCEED

There have been numerous attempts at innovative and transformational theological education that have run for a few years and then disappeared. Some of the reasons for this lack of success include:

1. They are marginal to the institution they are part of and are cut once funds get short
2. The "champion" of the innovative educational strategy leaves the institution.
3. Poor or absent recruiting where the value of the course is not explained well to prospective students and their main stakeholders (churches, parents etc.)
4. The course threatens traditional faculty members in some way.
5. Inflexible accreditation agencies in the host nation or religious denomination.
6. Lack of a clear discernible job outcome or job

title, the course designers cannot say: "this transformational course will enable you to become a X..." where X is a career of some sort.

7. The course designer is clearly anti-establishment and derides other modes of education in ways that create division and generate corrosive internal politics.
8. The course is just too expensive once the start-up costs are spread out over the relatively few initial students.

I am sure you can think of other reasons as well! Yet, we must get past these roadblocks if we are to train the vast number of Christians who need to be trained, with relevant, culturally adapted and apostolic theological and ministerial skills.

One possible approach is to take the innovative courses online at first. This greatly lowers the cost of adoption by the institution. Online education also allows specialized faculty in that area to lecture from around the world. Online courses are also generally less politically threatening to any existing traditional faculty.

SOLUTION-FOCUSED BRIEF COURSES WITH COMPETENCY-BASED ASSESSMENT

These are in-service courses that impart a certain set of solutions, and where students are assessed as either Competent or Not Competent. A course such as: "Effective Power Evangelism in Urban Slums" could be 8 weeks long with a practical component at the end where students use their phones to record six effective urban slum evangelism strategies that they are actually implementing. The student is then assessed around their competency at implementing the course content.

Such courses are not primarily conceptual in nature. They focus on mastering a set of skills that are solutions to actual defined problems in their community of practice, such as how to do evangelism in an urban slum. Experienced practitioners devise a set of solutions that they have seen work time-and-time again. These skills are then imparted, put into practice and assessed.

This can be done through ebooks and video-based training with highly-experienced practitioners sharing their own strategies in video clips, which the students then discuss online and learn from, contextualizing them in their own communities of practice and eventually uploading their own videos of themselves in action.

This style of training has a great deal of potential when a specific skill is suddenly in high demand because of some contingency and there is simply no time to come up with a textbook based solution. For instance, a course on Pastoral Counselling of Trauma Victims of Civil War in a certain nation, can be put together by ebooks and video quite readily, imparting the most necessary skills, in the language and culture of that nation, and with deep online discussion as the

various churches seek to provide an immediate and effective response.

Such in-service courses do not easily fit into a traditional degree structure however they do fit into the Kingdom of God and what the Lord may be doing through His Spirit at a particular place and time. Of course, there is still abundant room for traditional theological education such as the Greek exegesis of Romans. It is not an either/or situation.

Perfect practice requires good mentors, coaches and practitioners who can help Christian workers dig into their ministry skill set and so that real accomplishment occurs, yet without personal humiliation. This can even be done virtually where experts give coaching and reinforcement: (<https://trainingindustry.com/magazine/may-jun-2020/practice-doesnt-make-perfect-perfect-practice-makes-perfect-an-in-depth-study-of-virtual-leadership-development/>)

THE LAST MILE OF THE GREAT COMMISSION

How do we deliver in-context, on-time, training to indigent Christian workers in the most remote parts of the world? What technologies do they possess, if any? Is the technology of choice available, scalable and affordable for the prospective students? Is it actually a viable training technology or is it just dumping a huge amount of digital resources on them and expecting them to figure out how to use them?

Basic mobile phones are giving way to cheap Chinese smartphones. Radio is often available but requires the digital program content to be sent to the radio station, for instance by WhatsApp. People can crowd around a TV screen and watch DVD-based training such as that developed by ISOM (the International School of Missions) or Third Millennium. Local Internet cafes can provide access to training websites and it is often easier for students to do online assessment at an Internet café rather than on a phone. Oral learning initiatives can deploy solar-powered MP3 players provided by groups such as Megavoice. Affordable tablets are now a popular means of training in many local church-based Bible colleges.

The selected technology then needs to be combined with the appropriate software, pedagogy and training methodology.

The main software you will require is known as a Learning Management System (see a Wikipedia list here https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_learning_management_systems) and selecting the right LMS for your particular training need can be quite a long process.

Avoid those with a small team of developers or with limited support options. You do not want to suddenly find yourself without an LMS if developers quit. The one Cybermissions uses is known as Moodle (<https://moodle.org>) because it is very adaptable to various languages and is well-supported and established, that said, it is a bit clunky. I am also wary of any Google products because they tend to suddenly cancel their

projects.

It is best to think “mobile first” since many students will be accessing courses via their phones or tablets.

You will also require a means of face-to-face conferencing such as WhatsApp, Google Meet, Zoom, GoToMeeting, Facebook Messenger, Signal, or Telegram. The app you select will be based on your requirements for security, availability, technical capabilities and student familiarity with the app as well as the legal framework of the area you are operating in which may prohibit certain highly secure messaging systems.

IF THEY DON'T PAY THEY JUST DON'T STAY

In our experience when online education is free the drop-out rate is always greater than eighty percent. Cybermissions charges only \$7 USD per subject for our two-year church-planting course. This amount is still a challenge for many students. Payment ensures commitment! The price point for your area is something you will have to think about very deeply as you balance ensuring commitment, paying your expenses and being affordable to the students you most want to be training.

Completely informal training such as sending out training material via WhatsApp can be free. However, if you intend to provide certification of any sort and do assessment then some nominal cost needs to be involved. It may be of benefit to survey your local church leaders as to what a fair and affordable price point is deemed to be.

THE SECURITY QUESTION

Online education is non-ideal if security is a major issue for your ministry. There is no known way to protect the ordinary, regular end users of digital technology from hostile, determined government-level surveillance. Cybermissions has an information security links web page at: <https://cybermissions.org/infosec/> however we have chosen not to operate in the most challenging nations.

ASSESSMENT

Assessment is in crisis. Artificial intelligence has killed the college essay. ChatGPT has passed essay-based board exams in Law and other fields. (<https://www.businessinsider.com/list-here-are-the-exams-chatgpt-has-passed-so-far-2023-1?op=1#gre-4>) This is a critical threat to the validity of online learning.

Our tests at the Harvestime International Institute (<https://harvestimeinstitute.org>) are randomized so a student gets 75 questions selected out of a possible 100, and the order of the questions is also randomized. Ideally, the computer-based testing should be proctored at an Internet café or computer study center and not done from home.

Plagiarism is common and, in some places, it is

considered normal, since “getting the right answer” trumps personal thought and reflection. Plagiarism detection solutions abound and some of the better ones are listed in this article: <https://www.techradar.com/best/plagiarism-checkers>

Again, competency-based assessment by personal video is slightly less open to plagiarism or other methods of cheating and may be applicable in a wider range of contexts than first imagined.

CONCLUSION

The problem is scale. As Great Commission activity expands, an enormous number of leaders need to be trained in missional skills and matured in their understanding of sound Christian doctrine. This can only be accomplished by deploying some form of technology.

Finding the appropriate technology and pedagogy involves first defining the apostolic skill set, deciding on how it should be imparted; then working from this understanding down into the minute of details involved in setting up an online delivery system.

Most educators arrive at some type of blended solution involving online delivery and assessment and church-based face-to-face instruction. Video may play an important role in imparting practical skills. Pedagogical approaches may include Action-Reflection-Action and solution focused brief courses with competency-based assessment.

Technology is both unimportant and vital. Unimportant in that the work of spiritual formation is essentially a work of God through the Holy Spirit which can happen through almost any means. Vital in the sense that if the essential technology does not work then the whole educational strategy tends to fail. Technology is the supportive skeleton of a living enterprise.

Expect two years of trial and error and tweaking of systems. Getting e-learning right is a giant jigsaw puzzle. Do not launch early, except for a soft launch on a small scale. Students and faculty do not cope well with disappointment, confusion or technical failure.

We are in a time of rapid transition for theological education. E-learning will be one part of the puzzle and “getting it right” will be difficult. This is a prayerful challenge for those seeking to train, develop and send out laborers into the Great Commission harvest.

APPENDIX 1 - TECHNOLOGY TIPS

Below is a question and answer format of technology tips that was compiled from an interview I did with Anthony D’Angelo, an evangelist from California, who frequently visits rural areas of Asia. I am including it here as an example of how to think about delivering resources via technology. In the areas that we work in WhatsApp is the messaging platform of choice.

You will require:

1. A touch-screen mobile phone or tablet for each student, even an old one will do.
2. The E-Reader Prestigio (also called Prestigio Book Reader) app or other E-reader apps such as Librera, or Foxit, that reads ebooks and PDF files. (install from Google Play store, try them and then use the app that works best on your phone, the first two will also do text to speech.)
3. WhatsApp for distributing resources (install from Google Play store)
4. Occasional access to WiFi
5. Calibre Ebook Management software - <https://calibre-ebook.com/> (install on teacher’s laptop)

Problem: It is very expensive to print out the teaching manuals for each student

Solution: Have the students install E-Reader Prestigio (or equivalent) on their phones and they will be able to freely read and study the various textbooks, audio files and so on in digital form With no need to print anything out. E-Reader Prestigio also has text-to-speech, so students can hear the book read aloud to them, instead of having to read it as a print book. Here is a video about E-Reader Prestigio: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YdNCElSHJbE>

Problem: Sending the digital files to the students.

Solution: Create a WhatsApp group for each class, then attach the files to a WhatsApp message. For instance, if the class is learning “Ministry of the Holy Spirit”, you can send all the students the textbook in epub format (this format is very easy to read on a mobile phone) using WhatsApp. Here is how to create a WhatsApp group: https://faq.whatsapp.com/3242937609289432/?cms_platform=web

Problem: How to create an epub file (which has a much easier display on most phones)

Solution: The teacher uses Calibre ebook management software (above) to convert from PDF to epub. Here is a video about the Calibre software: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oGzfYEeshl4>

Problem: Messaging students about the class

Solution: Send the class notices to the class WhatsApp group.

Problem: Students do not have touch screen phones.

Solution: Ask people in the church to donate old touch screen phones. Have the teacher wipe the old phones that are given to the Bible college and reset them to the email address of the student. Install WhatsApp and E-Reader Prestigio once the phones are set up properly. You might want a friendly “techie” to help you with this bit.

How to wipe the old phone: <https://www.theverge.com/21419919/delete-data-android-phone-sell-trade-how-to>

How to set up an Android phone: <https://www.tomsguide.com/us/how-to-set-up-android-phone,review-5603.html>

Problem: We have many churches that want to learn but only a few good Bible college lecturers.

Solution: Use a mobile phone to video the class as it is being taught by the good Bible college lecturer. Use a mobile phone tripod to keep the phone steady. Have the phone close to the lecturer so that the picture is very clear and whiteboard notes can be seen. Send the video to the other churches using WhatsApp. You can then keep all the class videos as your own video library.

You will probably want to reduce the file size before you send it on WhatsApp so that it is less expensive for the students to download it. A useful free program for doing this is VLC which you can find at: <https://www.videolan.org/vlc/> it can also be used to rip the audio from the video so you can turn the video into an MP3 file which is much easier to send. If you are sending compressed audio set it to 24 kpbs, the file will be small but the quality will be OK.

<http://www.mobileministryforum.org/best-practices>

How to move files from internal storage to SD card on mobile: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q4H0nSHAvFA>

Problem: When we play back audio or video in class the volume is low

Solution: Affordable Bluetooth speakers are available in most electronic stores now, they can be paired with the teacher's phone or laptop and give out a good loud sound.

Problem: We often have no Internet to distribute files due to brownouts / loss of power in our area

Solutions: Get a Seagate Wireless Plus hard drive that works with no Internet at all. You can use it to serve files and play audio, video and much more. Put all the course materials on it and the students can access with their phones, they will see it as a wireless connection however it does not go out to the wider Internet. This review will tell you all about it: <https://www.pcmag.com/reviews/seagate-wireless-plus> (about \$199).

If the teacher has a good phone it can also be used as a wireless hotspot, up to 5 students can access the teacher's device at the same time and download files, here is a video on how to do it: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_fZG-HtoTbY your local techie will come in handy here as well to show you the first time. You can also share files between phones using Bluetooth: <https://www.lifewire.com/bluetooth-file-transfer-4147725> More mobile technical tips can be found here: <https://www.cybermissions.org/mobilemin/>

Problem: The phones are old and have very little memory

Solution: Put the class files/ebooks/MP3 files on micro-SD cards, the ones you can put in Android phones, 4GB should be enough. One card per student will do for the entire course. You can charge them a

little bit to cover the cost.

Problem: The phones are often low on charge when students come to class and we may not have electricity

Solution: Have some digital power banks and phone charger cables available. Charge the power banks when the electricity is on. You may ask your congregation to donate charger cables for different kinds of phones. Please use a surge protector when charging the power banks if the voltage in your area varies a lot. Plug the surge protector into the wall, and then connect the power banks to the surge protector.

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Mobile Ministry

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Cybermissions: <https://cybermissions.org>

Eurasia Media Distribution Conference: <https://emdc.online/home>



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