

IMTN A conversation of trainers that leads to action

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E-quipped to serve? Mission training delivered by e-learning. By Kate Wiseman PhD

Introduction

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More men and women today are being sent by the church across the cultures than at any other time in history. The Centre for the Study of Global Christianity (CSGC) estimates 400,000 international missionaries were sent out in 2010. This does not include the thousands working across cultures in their own countries. (The report *Christianity in its Global Context* 2013 is free and [downloadable](#)) Whether cross cultural workers are reaching across cultures in their own countries or serving in distant cultures all need preparation to be effective cross-cultural gospel-carriers. Mission training is one of the most relevant issues for the global church today. How can the church possibly meet the demand? We continue to use and contextualize well tested methods of training but we also cannot ignore the tools and technologies of our time. We must seek ways to make the best possible use of all the means available to us! And so it is with joy that I introduce you to the author of this month's two-part IMTN Bulletin, Dr Kate Wiseman. For more than ten years Kate has worked to understand how technology-enhanced learning can be an effective mode of delivery for preparing adults to cross cultures. As part of her study, she has worked with a team of mission trainers and others gifted with the skills to develop and deliver mission training via e-learning. Kate has reflected deeply on the effectiveness of e-learning as a mode of delivery and now, having written up her findings in a doctoral thesis in 2015, she is ready to share her insights from her journey into e-learning with those of us passionate about equipping the church for crossing cultures. Thank you Kate!

This IMTN Bulletin on mission training and e-learning is in two parts (February 2016 4 (a) and March 2016 4(b)) and it launches a new thread to our global conversation. We are working towards having pages on the IMTN website dedicated to e-learning. For follow up questions and comments do email Kate at: lkwiseman@hotmail.com or equippedtoserve@gmail.com or me at ruthmwall@gmail.com

E-quipped to Serve?

A journey into mission training delivered by e-learning

By Kate Wiseman PhD

Unanswered Questions

On joining the UK's largest mission training college, All Nations, as its Librarian in 2003, I found that I was often asked for information on our e-learning programmes. When I told enquirers that we had no e-learning programmes the reply was invariably "Why not?" followed by "Well, does anyone else do mission training through e-learning?" I could answer neither question satisfactorily; I had no explanation for All Nations not offering e-learning other than that we had not yet gone down that road. Nor could I explain an apparent dearth of mission training programmes delivered online or through other technologies. Unanswered questions are challenging to librarians, so I embarked upon a quest to shed some light on the mystery, only to find that it deepened further. I observed that whilst many mission organisations and training institutions were using the internet and other technologies to support the administration of their training and ministries, there was in some circles – and over a decade on still is – hesitancy, even reluctance, to use technology-enhanced learning, or 'e-learning' to train those preparing for, or already engaged in mission work. Why?

Initial investigations indicated that this hesitancy is primarily due to doubts about whether e-learning ("learning facilitated and supported through the use of information and communications technology"¹) is a suitable way of equipping mission workers. Such concern is not without reason. In his *Forward to Integral Ministry Training and Design* (2006) William D. Taylor expressed the dilemma facing many mission trainers: "*We share the deep commitment that the best training for ministry is done in community and this has radical implications. What do we do with the rightful place of the exploding educational options through the Internet?*"² Taylor's statement raised yet more unanswered questions. How can community – long considered essential for fostering the levels of personal and spiritual growth needed for effective mission – be developed at a distance? Can spiritual formation take place in a 'virtual classroom'? Is it possible to create a vibrant, mission-focussed, learning community that embraces the internet, mobile communications or other electronic and digital technologies? What about security?

Discussions with various mission organisations revealed that technological and economic constraints may also colour responses to the opportunities and challenges presented by e-learning, along with 'not knowing where to start' when developing programmes. Can these technical and economic obstacles be overcome? Where does one start? What does mission training delivered by e-learning 'look like'? What elements need to be in place for e-learning to be an effective medium for delivering

such training? Moreover, most importantly, can it equip mission workers for the ministry that God has called them to do?

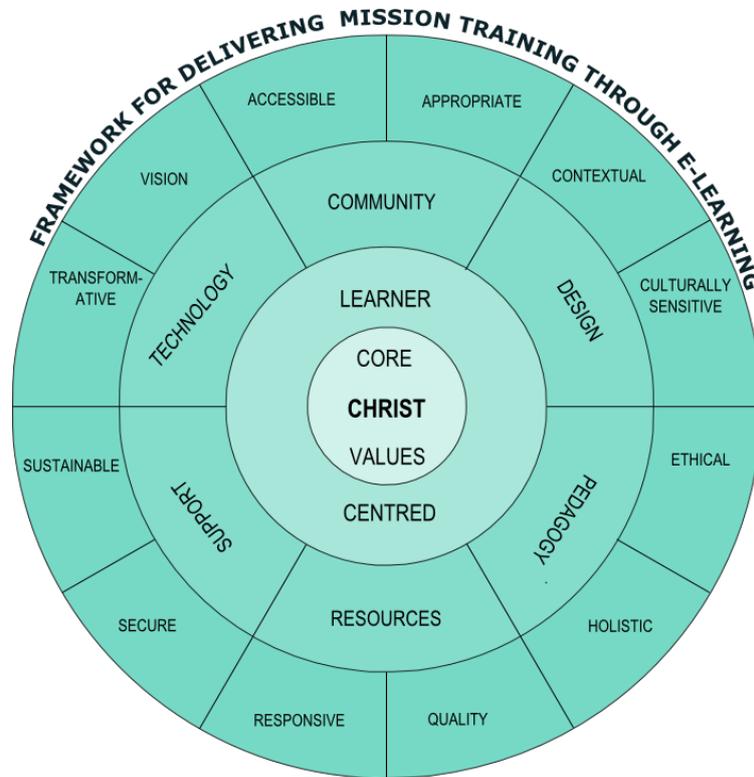
Searching for answers I embarked upon doctoral research into how holistic Christian mission training – training that equips the whole person (intellectually/cognitively, personally/spiritually and practically - ‘head, heart and hands’³) for mission work can be delivered effectively using e-learning. My aim was to try to answer two questions: What criteria (factors, elements, or conditions) need to be in place in order to deliver holistic Christian mission training effectively through e-learning and, Can those criteria be incorporated into a framework that could be used by mission trainers to develop or evaluate e-learning programmes? It has taken ten years to come up with some answers! Along the way, I have had the privilege of working with colleagues at All Nations to develop a portfolio of e-learning courses that have enabled over 130 students to be equipped for new or ongoing mission work. We started as complete novices in the world of e-learning and are now pleased to offer two short foundational mission training courses delivered totally online and a blended Masters programme involving both online and face-to-face study. Through this experience, and systematically reviewing literature and resources on mission training, theological education and distance learning I discovered that mission training can indeed be delivered effectively through e-learning, – *provided that certain elements are place.*

A Christ-centred framework for delivering mission training through e-learning

So what are those elements? My research indicated that 20 criteria are needed, 18 of which have sub-criteria associated with them. I found that these all need to be present and in balance with one another for mission training to be delivered effectively through e-learning. Most importantly, Christ and the learner must be at the centre of every element and aspect of the process as seen in the framework presented below (p4.)

Rather than seeing e-learning development and delivery as a linear process, this framework encourages us to take a holistic approach to e-learning in which our core values (Christ) and the needs of the learner affect every key element upon which effectiveness of the training depends – community, design, pedagogy, resources, support and technology. When we intentionally do this, our training programmes will display the characteristics seen in the outer band – they will, for example, be ethical, secure, responsive to the needs of learners and developments in mission, education and technologies, and have a transformative effect upon not only those being trained but those delivering the training. As we seek to deliver holistic mission training that seeks to equip the whole

person, and embraces the wholeness of Christ, our e-learning programmes can themselves become holistic in the way in which they are developed and delivered. The Christ-centred values upon which the framework is built will be discussed in part two (Bulletin 4(b) in which we will consider the various elements in more detail and how it can be applied in practice.



Seven conclusions

I would like to suggest that when all key criteria are intentionally present and are held in a harmonious, balanced relationship with one another as indicated in this framework, seven conclusions can be drawn.

(1) Community can be created through e-learning

My research and work at All Nations confirmed that equipping for cross cultural Christian ministry is most effective when it takes place within community. However, it also showed that community does not necessarily have to be face-to-face for it to be meaningful. A vibrant virtual mission training community can be created at a distance, provided that it intentionally incorporates collaborative and interactive learning, discussion, and 'social presence' (the extent to which a person is perceived as an authentic, 'real person' in an online environment) and aims for maximum learner and staff engagement. Such a community cannot replicate one created and designed for a face-to-face environment; nor should it, since they are completely separate entities with different dynamics. However it can be an effective, alternative or complementary 'seed bed' of learning, support and

fellowship that offers a truly global and cross-cultural learning experience. Where some form of face-to-face contact can be added (either physically or through networking tools such as Skype and 'webinars'), relationships and interaction can be positively enhanced. However the community's effectiveness and the level of equipping for ministry and mission is not dependent on this. E-learning can itself offer 'community' to mission workers – particularly to those who are isolated, either geographically or socially. In these circumstances, it can provide a vital sense of connection with others, enabling not only effective learning to take place but emotional and spiritual needs to be met.

(2) Personal and spiritual formation can take place within e-learning

A potential 'stumbling block' to the delivery of theological education and holistic mission training through e-learning is the concern that personal and spiritual formation cannot take place effectively outside a face-to-face, campus-based community. I found significant evidence that this is not the case, and that much personal development and spiritual growth can occur within a virtual learning community. (All Nations' e-learning courses have shown that personal and spiritual formation, and the transformation that is its goal, can take place in the virtual classroom). However, it needs to be actively promoted. Strategies to encourage the creation of the community in which personal and spiritual growth takes place should be intentionally built into the design of programmes and courses. These include interaction and engagement with peers, staff, mentors and learning content, appropriate activities, discussions, opportunities for Christian fellowship, prayer and worship and the modelling of core Christian values by staff. Programme design should also take account of the wider institutional and Christian communities of which the learner is a part, including the local church, and incorporate learning activities and networking opportunities that reflect this. With these elements in place, e-learning can not only promote personal and spiritual growth but also be transformative.

(3) Effective mission training delivered through e-learning needs engagement

A key discovery seen through delivering All Nations' e-learning programmes was the importance of both learner and staff engagement within the learning community. Lack of engagement negatively affects not only the one who is disengaged, but the e-learning community as a whole. Effective e-learning requires both a proactive learner-centred approach by trainers and a willingness by the learner to be totally committed to being part of the learning community. If one of these elements is missing, it will be hard for either learner or trainer to have a rewarding experience. When both are in place, however, learner and provider inspire one another to further engagement and responsiveness. There is deeper transformational learning on the part of the learner, and an increasing desire on the part of the provider to develop even more learner-centred resources. When provider and learner are responsive to each other in this way, e-learning can be not only effective but life changing for both

parties.

(4) 'Head, heart and hands' can be engaged within e-learning

Holistic mission training needs to engage 'head, heart and hands' just as much in the virtual classroom as face-to-face. Evaluations from All Nations' two foundational level online courses and an online postgraduate study skills course (part of the Masters programme) showed that e-learning can indeed be used to deliver mission training that engages 'head, heart and hands.' However, a holistic approach must be incorporated intentionally into activities, assessments and all forms of interaction. This can be done by actively encouraging reflective practice and adopting a blend of formal, informal and non-formal learning throughout the learning process. Since a key aim of mission training is to develop reflective practitioners, reflection should be an integral part of any mission training programme including those delivered through e-learning. Likewise, an appropriate balance between formal, non-formal and informal learning is essential for any form of mission training regardless of how it is delivered. It is the "three legged stool" on which that holistic training for ministry and mission rests⁴. Differences between Western and non-Western pedagogical approaches show how important it is for that balance to be culturally appropriate when developing mission training programmes. This is particularly vital with e-learning that crosses global and cultural boundaries. It takes thought and creativity to provide opportunities for non-formal (heart) and informal (hands) learning within the virtual classroom, whereas formal (head) approaches are generally less of a challenge. Nevertheless, at All Nations we found that it can be done and is not an obstacle to delivering mission training through e-learning.

(5) Effective mission training delivered through e-learning must have 'a human face'

It is impossible to deliver learner-centred holistic mission training that focusses on the needs of the whole person – educationally, emotionally spiritually and practically – without providing an environment in which the student feels supported, nurtured and encouraged to grow. Not only is this central to the Christian principle of discipleship, but to the very nature of mission training and theological education. This is no less the case within the e-learning environment than the face-to-face community. It has been said, "mission must have a human face⁵" and the same can be said about mission training delivered through e-learning. Somewhere, there needs to be at least one person who is able to offer a similar level of support and guidance as in a campus-based programme – someone with whom the learner can share thoughts and experiences 'face-to-face'. That 'human face' may be a mentor within the learner's own context, or a personal tutor, facilitator, subject expert or mentor who connects with the learner via Skype or similar internet facilities. Ideally, there will be an entire team of 'human faces' to share the responsibility of nurturing the learner.

(6) Effective mission training delivered through e-learning needs vision

Effective mission training delivered through e-learning extends far beyond ensuring the right elements are present to meet learning objectives. It requires a clear and prayerful vision of what can be achieved, together with an ability to see the 'big picture' by seeing the opportunities that technology-enhanced learning can offer. This vision looks beyond the challenges of developing community and spiritual formation, security issues and economic and technological constraints, important as these are. Rather, it envisages how technology can enhance opportunities for the relationships and growth that are so important for the effective equipping of mission workers rather than how it could reduce them. It involves being willing to look creatively at different options and consider which are most appropriate for the context and culture in which the training will take place and be applied. E-learning does not have to be delivered totally via the internet, or even at all, as seen by the positive effects of using multimedia resources within projects such as Live School⁶ and those by MAF Learning Technologies⁷. For particular audiences and circumstances, for example, in the case of advanced level mission training, a blend of e-learning and face-to-face training may offer mission trainers and learners 'the best of both worlds.' Such a vision needs to extend beyond the confines of an organisation, church or training institution, and reach out to the learners for whom the programmes are designed. Focus needs to be on those currently unable to access mission training and the difference that e-learning could make to them, rather than the obstacles to delivering that training. Mission training that sees beyond the challenges and looks forward to the outworking of that training in the lives of those who will access it, and those impacted by them, can itself be mission and ministry. From an eternal perspective, e-learning is as useful a tool for building the Kingdom as face-to-face training – it is just a different, complementary tool to be used (as with any tool) in the right context and for the right purpose.

(7) Holistic mission training can be delivered effectively through e-learning

At All Nations we have been very encouraged at the positive way in which our e-learning courses have been received by participants and the extent to which they felt that they were 'e-quipped to serve' through the programmes. Over a six-year period, 98% of students completing All Nations' foundational level e-learning courses (128) said that the level of preparation for mission had been very good or good, with the remaining 2% (6) considering that preparation had been satisfactory. Only time will tell to what extent the preparation will result in their effectiveness 'on the mission field' but the indications are that e-learning will have played a significant part in what is a lifelong process.

Conclusion

E-learning should not be seen as a threat to established programmes of mission training that are

delivered effectively in a face-to-face setting. The value of such learning cannot be underestimated and is not in question. However, it would be fair to say that there are labourers preparing to go into, or already in, the harvest field for whom face-to-face, or campus-based, learning is not an option due to family commitments, lack of resources, or physical and geographical barriers. For workers such as these, e-learning can open doors to learning that were previously closed. Over the last ten years what started as a research journey has become my mission. I have a vision to see those unable to access face-to-face training effectively equipped through e-learning to serve God in mission, and to help mission trainers explore the possibilities that e-learning offers both as a tool to enhance face-to-face training and as a delivery mode in its own right. It is my hope and prayer that today's – and indeed tomorrow's – technology can provide an opportunity for God's workers to be effectively "e-equipped to serve" and that through them, the Good News of Jesus Christ will extend beyond the boundaries of time and space to those who are "yet to hear."

Finally, to return to Taylor's question which was in many ways the catalyst for my journey into e-learning – whether our conviction that community is essential for effective ministry training and the opportunities offered by technologies such as the internet can be combined "in the same geography." My response is Yes, I believe they can, provided that the factors and conditions needed to build that community are in place, and that the community is set within a balanced relationship with the technology and the other key elements necessary to deliver the training effectively. As for those other important questions that pose such a challenge for mission trainers when contemplating e-learning – from my experience and those of my colleagues, I am confident that they too can be answered positively when seen as opportunities to break new ground and see what God can through perseverance, prayer, and partnership. What do you think? Let's have those discussions and share ideas and experiences!

Endnotes

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5. KOHL, M. W., 2001. Mission – the heart of the Church for the new millennium. International Congregational Review. no. 2, p. 98 [pp. 87-107].
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