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E-quipped to serve: A framework for delivering mission training through e-learning. By Kate Wiseman PhD

Introduction

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In the first of two articles Kate Wiseman set out a “*Christ-centred framework*” that has a “*learner-centred*” approach for delivering mission training via e-learning and defends this framework with seven conclusions to support her view that effective mission training **can** be achieved via e-learning provided that “*all key criteria are intentionally present and are held in a harmonious, balanced relationship with one another.*” In this second article Kate unpacks the framework arguing that mission trainers need to intentionally incorporate and balance every element of the framework namely; **Community, Design, Pedagogy, Resources, Support and Technology**. We are very grateful to Kate for sharing her insights with us and also for her invitation to IMTN members to get in touch with her equippedtoserve@gmail.com if you would like to discuss any aspect of mission training via e-learning.

Talking about e-learning reminds me that the IMTN network is a good place to share relevant resources that are freely available and useful for equipping the church. One such resource was brought to my attention recently. It is an app that can be downloaded to a phone or tablet and allows interaction with the Greek New Testament text – even without any knowledge of Greek. Go to: www.scripturedirect.com

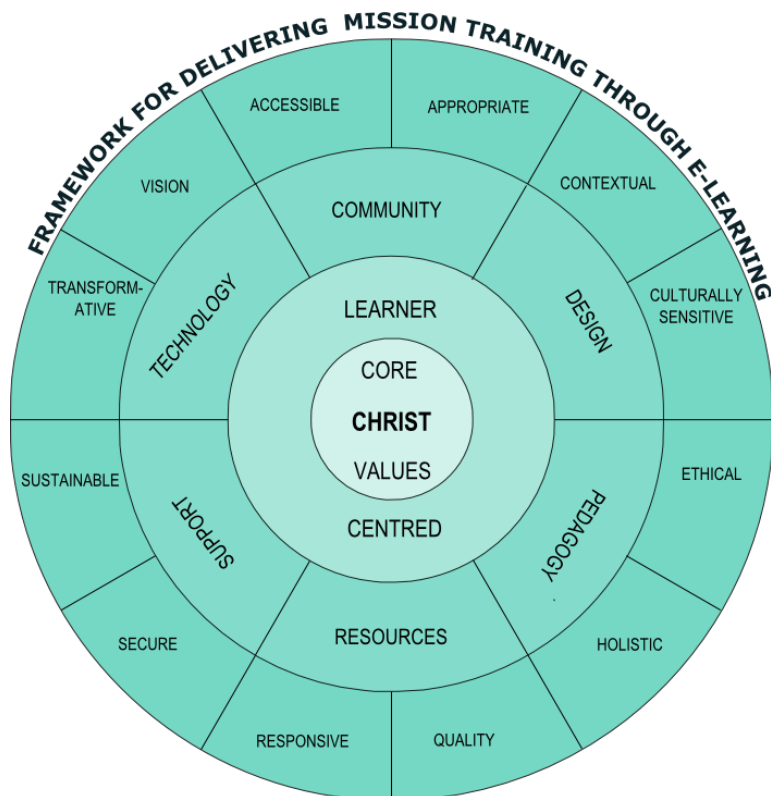
A framework for delivering mission training through e-learning

Kate Wiseman PhD

In my previous article (February, 2016), I introduced a framework for delivering mission training through e-learning. In this article we look at the framework in more detail and consider some of the practicalities of delivering ‘effective’ mission training through e-learning. Early on in my research, I realised that ‘effectiveness’ is very hard to define objectively and even harder to measure, even

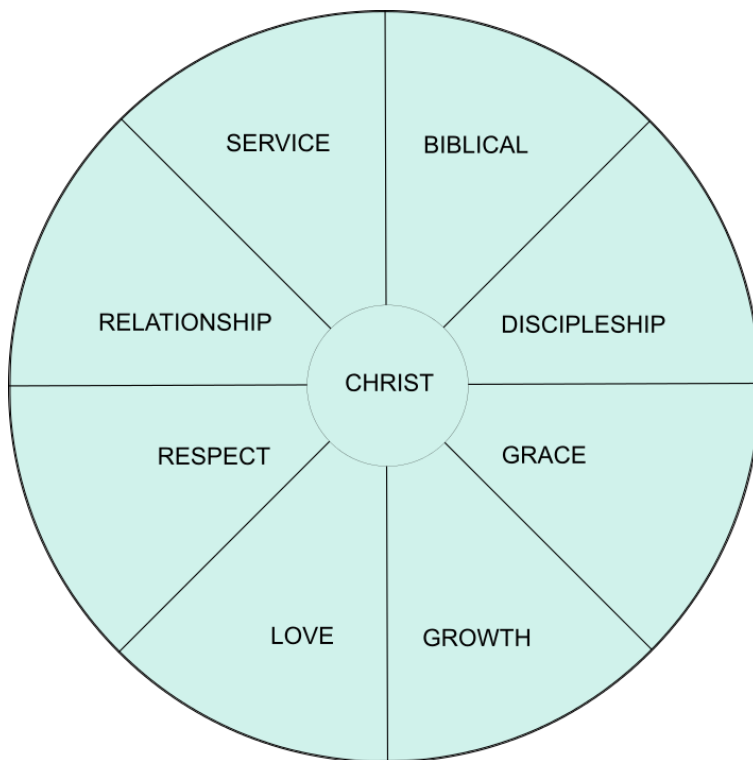
against standards and benchmarks. The defining test of whether or not mission training is effective (regardless of delivery mode) will ultimately be whether the mission worker demonstrates competency 'on the field'. Since this is so difficult to quantify, in my research and this article I use the term 'effective' in a more limited way to describe e-learning that shows evidence that the learner feels equipped (or more equipped) for mission as a result of participating in the training, and views that participation as a positive learning experience.

A Christ-Centred Framework



My research showed, unsurprisingly, that mission training, whether delivered face-to-face or through e-learning, must be built upon core Christian values. However, defining those values comprehensively proved to be a significant challenge, with scholars, organisations, denominations and churches all highlighting very different elements. Nevertheless, I did find that eight principles reflecting Christ's life and ministry are central to the Christian faith and therefore to theological education, including holistic mission training. Eight Christ-centred values of e-learning are: biblically-based, promotes discipleship and growth, demonstrates grace, love, respect and service, centres upon relationship with God and others. Different groups within the Church will interpret these values differently and place more emphasis on some than others. However, all are essential. At the heart of those values is Christ Himself – our ultimate example and model. *He is before all things, and in Him*

all things hold together. Colossians 1:17.



When placed at the centre of the e-learning process these values each have an impact on the development and delivery of mission training and affect the interaction between learner and trainer. This in turn will have an impact on the different components within programmes. For example, adopting a biblical approach will influence teaching methods and learning content. These will, one prays, in turn impact positively upon the spiritual formation of the learner. Whilst intentionally exercising Christian love towards the learner when delivering programmes will have a positive, even transformative effect on the learning community and the levels of support offered to participants. Brought together, the cores values should permeate every aspect of e-learning programmes of mission training from policymaking and stewardship of resources to learner support. When these core values “intentionally promote” the key concepts of “spiritual formation, dependence on God, and Christian community” (Next Step, 2004, 2-3) ¹ within not only learning content but every component of a programme, it can be effective in equipping for mission and ministry. I would suggest that such “intentional promotion” is even more essential within the virtual learning environment than ‘on campus’, where the Christian values on which community is founded may be more apparent through daily interaction, fellowship and worship.

Core Christian values, therefore, should be at the heart of and the motivation behind every aspect of programme development and delivery when using e-learning to train mission workers. As McKinney

noted, "*technology provides an opportunity for teaching eternal values to those who are part of this information age*" (2003, p. 12).²

A Learner-centred approach

If the core Christian values are central to its effectiveness, what will the practical application of those values look like for holistic mission training delivered through e-learning? My research indicated that it will be demonstrated by an approach to programme design and delivery that is consistently and intentionally centred upon the educational, personal and spiritual needs of the learner.

Just as face-to-face learning should focus on the learner rather than the teacher, so should any form of distance learning. Just as in the traditional classroom, e-learning providers must deliver their teaching in ways that acknowledge different learning preferences, cultures and backgrounds and express the value of each individual. For example, a-synchronous text-based learning and discussion may have particular appeal for reflectors, but this should be interspersed with more spontaneous activities to motivate activists. Learner-centred e-learning provides adequate support to enable the learner to participate fully in their training without struggling to find assistance. It ensures that programmes and the technologies supporting them are applicable to learners' own contexts. One model of e-learning will never be appropriate for all learners, or even a group. It certainly will not suit all contexts or cultures as explored later. Therefore e-learning programmes should be evaluated regularly to ensure that they remain firmly focused on the learner, considering their culture and context, level of experience and training needs and are flexible enough to be able to meet those needs as they evolve.

A learner-centred approach will also ensure that those learning independently of peers receive adequate support and are not left to their own devices. An isolated learner is likely to be a disengaged and demotivated learner. However, when e-learning is intentionally learner-centred it can provide a supportive environment for those studying independently. Indeed it can empower participants to move forward in their training confident that their needs are recognised and considered important.

The learner, therefore, should be central to every aspect of e-learning programmes, from the earliest stages of their development through to their evaluation and further enhancement. This is not a new concept for mission educators. Focussing on the whole person's needs is a key characteristic of Christian discipleship as modelled by Christ. Applying such an approach to the virtual learning environment is, therefore, not an 'optional extra' but a prerequisite for delivering

mission training through e-learning effectively. When brought together with the core Christian values highlighted above, it forms the pivot around which all other criteria revolve.

Six essential elements

My research found that six distinct elements are essential for the effective delivery of mission training through e-learning – **Community, Design, Pedagogy, Resources, Support and Technology**. These elements must be in a balanced relationship with the core Christian values and learner-centred approach at the heart of the framework. If one element takes ‘centre stage’ (or even all six) the importance of Christ and the learner will be diminished. One might, for example, feel that surely pedagogy should be at the heart of any mission training programme; however if that pedagogy is not built upon Christ-centred values and learners’ needs, it will be training without a mission. Nor can a programme’s design take central place. If the design is created without the learner’s needs being at the centre, important aspects may be overlooked such as accessibility and support. One of the most valuable lessons I learned during my research was that ‘one size does not fit all.’ Models designed for foundational level mission training will not necessarily be appropriate for advanced level in-service trainees. Therefore, being learner-centred must take precedence over design. The same goes for community, resources, support, and technology; the core Christian values and the learner at the heart of the process must be what shapes each element.

The individual elements also need to be in a balanced relationship with one another. Each is essential, and if any are absent this will impact negatively upon a programme’s effectiveness. Without technology, those unable to attend face-to-face training will not be able to access the information needed to equip, or further equip, them for mission and ministry. Without pedagogy, they will not receive the guidance to be able to process that information. Without robust programme or course design, the learning will lack direction and structure and engagement within the learning community will be restricted. Without community, the learning will be a solitary experience lacking the richness and challenge of Christian fellowship. Without support, the learner’s experience is likely to be diminished through the strain of having to deal alone with personal and practical challenges. Without resources, any programme, however well-designed and pedagogically sound, will be unsustainable.

On the other hand, if one element has a more dominant role than the others this may also have a negative effect. For example, the design of e-learning programmes should complement, not dictate the pedagogical approaches adopted. Likewise, there should be a similar balance between design and technology; the latest technologies should not be the driving force behind the design of

programmes, tempting though it may be to incorporate attractive features.

Having a balanced relationship between pedagogy and technology is essential. New technologies may not be appropriate for traditional pedagogies. Just as new wine requires new wineskins (Matthew 2:22), new pedagogies should be devised that are appropriate for those new technologies, rather than forcing traditional pedagogies into a new delivery mode simply because it is available or to be seen to be 'moving with the times.' Both pedagogy and technology should be appropriate for the context and culture in which the learning will take place; in some situations, the best technology may be no technology at all. An online training programme that presents the learning content through text-based lessons is unlikely to be appropriate for oral cultures or other contexts where learners have low literacy levels. Nor will it help those with limited computer skills or access to technology. It may be far better to use simple multimedia resources that deliver the learning audibly or visually such as CDROM, DVD and audio players and, in some cases, mobile phones. Pedagogy and technology should work together, with the technology serving and supporting the pedagogy and not vice versa.

There should also be a balanced relationship between technology and resources. Programmes will be ineffective or unsustainable if technology costs exceed available resources (financial, human, or time.) However, practical measures can be taken to ensure the necessary balance. For example, using free open source virtual learning environments (VLEs) and software rather than commercial products can help to keep technology costs down, and outsourcing technical support can reduce the strain upon human resources for mission training institutions. There should also be a correct balance between design and resources. A complex design that exceeds resources will not enhance the learning experience or effectiveness of the training and may even exclude learners from accessing all the attractive, but possibly unnecessary features.

The delicate balance between technology, design and resources affects another key element – support. If there is imbalance, there may be insufficient support for learners. From my experience, effective mission training delivered through e-learning necessitates robust administrative and technical support, facilitation, pastoral care and mentoring. Hannum et al. (2008, p.213) observe that *"many distance education courses push content to learners via the internet, but fail to provide students with necessary support for learning."*³ In contrast, having adequate support will impact positively upon both the learning and teaching.

Perhaps surprisingly, my research revealed that technology is no more essential for delivering effective mission training through e-learning than any of the other elements. Far more important is

the embedding of programmes within core Christian values and a learner-centred approach. Their fundamental impact upon the nature of community, design, pedagogy, resources, and support mechanisms will direct the choice of technology. Clearly one cannot have any e-learning programme without technology, but nor can one have one without appropriate pedagogy, design, community, resources or support. Technology, whilst being essential, can only contribute positively to the effectiveness of mission training when operating in harmony with the other, equally essential elements.

When design, pedagogy, resources, support and technology are in a harmonious relationship with one another the conditions are right for a positive and vibrant e-learning community in which learners can grow. This balanced relationship between these six elements and the Christian core-values and learner is, I suggest, the key to the effective delivery of mission training through e-learning. When the core values upon which these elements depend are centred upon Christ, and the learner viewed not merely as a participant but as a disciple created in God's image, the foundations for transformative learning and equipping for God's service are put in place and programmes will display certain positive characteristics reflecting this ethos.

Twelve Characteristics of Effective e-learning

My study indicated that when built upon the central principles and elements highlighted above, an effective e-learning programme of mission training will display 12 characteristics. It will be **Accessible, Appropriate, Contextual, Culturally Sensitive, Ethical, and Holistic**, demonstrate **Quality**, be **Responsive, Secure, Sustainable, Transformative**, and have **Vision**. Whilst being the outward demonstration of a Christ and learner-centred approach in which **Community, Design, Pedagogy, Resources, Support and Technology** are in a balanced relationship with one another, each characteristic has its own essential role to play in ensuring that mission training delivered through e-learning is effective. For example, a programme must be appropriate for the cultures and contexts in which it is being accessed. If it is not, the programme will not equip mission workers effectively within that culture or context. If a programme is not culturally sensitive or contextualised for those accessing it they will not be able to relate to the learning content, apply it within their own contexts or develop the cross-cultural skills needed for sensitive mission and ministry that the training should model. Ultimately, the overall training will not reflect the Christian values and learner centred approach that should be at its heart.

Just as the absence of a particular characteristic will impact negatively upon a programme's effectiveness, its presence will have a positive effect upon both the programme and the various

components within it. Intentionally ensuring that a particular characteristic is a feature of a programme should result in a model of e-learning reflecting Christ's values and the significance of the learner. As with the essential elements, the different characteristics also impact upon one another. For example, the accessibility or inaccessibility of programmes may affect whether or not they are delivered ethically. Likewise, if e-learning programmes are not delivered ethically, they may not offer the levels of security needed to enable the community to function effectively.

Two characteristics, 'holistic' and 'quality,' more than any other characteristic can be intentionally embedded in e-learning programmes in a way that reflects the core values and commitment to the learner. Mission training is defined by its holistic approaches that consider the whole learner – 'head, heart and hands' – at every stage of the learning process. That 'holism' should therefore be a feature of programme design, pedagogy (e.g. the blend of formal, informal and non-formal approaches), community, support, resources and technologies. Significantly, when all the components within the framework are in harmony with one another the defining feature of that e-learning programme will be that it is itself holistic, a united entity rather than a 'patchwork' of separate components. Likewise, quality – the pursuit of excellence - should permeate pedagogy and technology and the structures supporting them. It should be what makes the community effective and the programme design distinctive. Again, when every component is in balanced relationship with one another the entire programme will be defined by its quality.

Conclusion

There is much to discuss about how each individual components of the framework can be applied in practice. For example, how can we avoid imposing models of e-learning created in or for one culture, upon others, or promote cultural sensitivity in an online programme that attracts learners from multiple contexts or cultures? The following expanded framework gives an indication of various factors (sub-criteria) that were associated with the different elements and characteristics. These factors provide some pointers towards good practice. Through 2016 I intend to write some shorter articles on the individual components with practical examples of how mission trainers can integrate them into e-learning programmes. These articles will be made available in the IMTN Mission Resource Centre.

Please let me know if there are areas of particular interest to you and do please also share your own experiences of using e-learning so that we collect and share ideas.

<p>ACCESSIBLE</p> <p>Accessible at any time or in any place</p> <p>Accessible to those with disabilities, speakers of other languages and those in developing countries</p> <p>Affordable</p>		<p>APPROPRIATE</p> <p>Appropriate to the context in which it is delivered</p> <p>Appropriate use of VLEs</p> <p>Considers learners' experience</p> <p>Course material appropriate to the level of training</p>		<p>CONTEXTUAL</p> <p>Applicable to learner's context</p> <p>Delivered in a cross-cultural context</p>			
<p>VISION</p> <p>Embraces partnership</p> <p>Ministry as well as training</p> <p>Sees beyond the challenges</p> <p>Shared by leadership and all staff members</p> <p>Strategic to the institution's aims and objectives</p>	<p>COMMUNITY</p> <p>Collaborative learning</p> <p>Discussion</p> <p>Interactive</p> <p>Learner and staff engagement</p> <p>Models core values</p> <p>Social presence</p>		<p>DESIGN</p> <p>Appropriate for limited infrastructures</p> <p>Employs appropriate technologies</p> <p>Flexible delivery modes</p> <p>Learner-centred</p> <p>Promotes personal/spiritual formation</p> <p>Takes account of different learning styles</p>		<p>CULTURALLY SENSITIVE</p> <p>Demonstrates cross-cultural skills</p> <p>Develops cross-cultural skills</p>		
	<p>RESOURCES</p> <p>Financial</p> <p>Human</p> <p>Learning resources that are appropriate, accessible and accurate</p> <p>Time</p>		<p>LEARNER</p> <p>CORE CHRIST VALUES</p> <p>CENTRED</p>			<p>PEDAGOGY</p> <p>Balanced relationship with technology</p> <p>Different learning styles</p> <p>Encourages reflective practice</p> <p>Adult learning,</p> <p>Experiential learning</p> <p>Formal, informal and non-formal learning</p> <p>Lifelong learning</p>	
	<p>TRANSFORMATIVE</p> <p>Promotes personal formation</p> <p>Promotes spiritual formation</p>		<p>ETHICAL</p> <p>Models accountability</p> <p>Models respect for copyright and intellectual property</p> <p>Provides parity with face-to-face courses</p>				
<p>SUSTAINABLE</p> <p>Adaptable learning materials</p> <p>Effective succession planning</p> <p>Long-term strategic goals</p> <p>Sufficient resources (financial and human)</p> <p>Value for money</p>	<p>SUPPORT</p> <p>Administrative</p> <p>Facilitation</p> <p>Learning</p> <p>Mentoring</p> <p>Technical</p> <p>Tutoring</p>		<p>TECHNOLOGY</p> <p>Balanced relationship between technology and pedagogy</p> <p>Mobile</p>		<p>HOLISTIC</p> <p>Assesses the whole learner</p> <p>Considers the whole learner</p> <p>Engages 'Head, heart and hands'</p>		
	<p>SECURITY</p> <p>Prevents assessment compromise</p> <p>Protects learner privacy and anonymity, confidentiality/safety of learning material</p> <p>Protects access to infrastructure and systems</p> <p>Safe learner environment</p> <p>Safe environment for learners</p>		<p>RESPONSIVE</p> <p>Evaluated regularly</p> <p>Responds to changes within its disciplines</p> <p>Responds to changes in technologies</p> <p>Responds to evaluation findings</p> <p>Responds to learner needs and feedback</p>			<p>QUALITY</p> <p>Attention to detail</p> <p>Conforms to appropriate benchmarks and standards</p> <p>Strives for excellence</p>	

Endnotes

1. NEXT STEP, 2004. *Missionary Training Assessment: an instrument for evaluating and improving training programs* Available from: <http://missionexus.org/the-next-step-the-missionary-training-partnership-of-missio-nexus/>
2. MCKINNEY, L., 2003. *Evangelical theological education: implementing our own agenda* [online]. ICETE International Consultation for Theological Educators. High Wycombe, UK. 20 August, pp. 1-16. Available from: <http://www.icete-edu.org/pdf/0%2003%20McKinney%20Our%20Own%20Agenda.pdf>
3. HANNUM, W., IRVIN, M. J., LEI, P-W. and FARMER, T. W., 2008. Effectiveness of using learner-centered principles on student retention in distance learning courses in rural schools. *Distance Education* [online] vol. 29, no. 3, pp. 211- 229. Available from: <http://wallacehannum.com/DE%20dropouts.pdf>