

International Education

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This paper provides an overview of global issues in international education within the church. These are observations arising from years of teaching in a variety of cultural settings. Students have enriched me more than they realise. They have taught me a host of important issues beyond the outline of this paper. Nonetheless, the following are worth considering.

These “Lessons Learned While Teaching Cross-Culturally” began thirty years ago. My first cross-cultural experience was in an Anglo background country. On the surface, much was the same as in my country of origin. But I soon learned that English is not just English. There were many variations and implications rich in meaning in my new country void of meaning in my home culture. Underlying values and worldviews differed. Those were only the beginning of the lessons I continue to learn:

LESSON I: Some things never change:

That spark of recognition when a person fully grasps a difficult subject for the first time. This light in the eyes is the reward every teacher yearns for. That same light shines in the face of people wherever they live. Learning is uniquely delightful – there is a universal expression of recognition as new concepts become one’s own.

The universal sufficiency of God’s grace! Theologizing and categorizing Biblical truth varies from culture to culture, but there is a commonality in the human need for His full salvation and the supra-cultural provision of grace greater than our need. THIS IS THE SOURCE OF OUR Theological Coherency – the full salvation through Christ, which meets universal needs. In cultures that have not yet heard the name of Christ prevenient grace, first, gives hope of deliverance and salvation from that which binds through the preaching of the Gospel. The message of full salvation lifts hope that people can enter the provisions of entire sanctification. Full salvation covers not only ALL MY needs, but the needs of the world. The Gospel meets the needs of all peoples – it is supra-cultural. It is not bound in time or to a location.

LESSON II: Some things change drastically:

While grace is universal, teaching methods and learning styles are not! The methods and styles of my original culture rarely fit the destination group across the cultural chasm. While some prefer to teach others as they were taught, learning is best facilitated in the pattern that best fits the learner in a given time and setting, particularly in cross-cultural education. Here are a couple of issues that are wisely addressed in international education:

Learning Style, first of all. Every teacher realizes that individuals differ in their preferred learning style. To empower students and to facilitate their learning, one is wise to consider how they best learn and how they like to learn. What is their preferred method of learning and processing information?

LEARNING STYLE DIFFERENCES ARE CRITICAL IN INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION. There are two considerations here.

First, *the inherited or imposed learning style – the one taught to the learner by educators in that setting*. For instance, in colonial times, people in an area were convinced that one learned best by imitating the learning style of the colonial power. This has coloured expectations in many world areas.

Second, the natural propensities of the students within a culture that arise from who they are without the influence of educational systems. While people are still individuals and learn differently than others in that same culture, there are cultural propensities or proclivities within each culture. Some cultures tend to value tight structured living and thinking. Other cultures are relationally oriented with group decision-making and information processing.

In my adopted country, Islander students often say that good teaching is the style preferred by Europeans. It is culturally expected for them to say what hearers like to hear. A recent paper glowingly reported the responses of Islanders on a questionnaire. They prefer to be taught by the teaching style preferred by European teachers rather than by Islanders. The paper's respondent showed the fallacy of this approach and questioned the validity of the data. He too had worked in the Islands and had heard these very comments, UNTIL he was accepted as a confidant. In cultures that value giving responses that please their hearers, most questionnaires are useless. This paper was flawed by the younger scholar's quantitative methodology. Islanders responded as they believed she hoped they would. Once they know what one wants – they will provide the data accordingly.

Categorization of information may also differ from culture to culture. Truth does not change! How it is organized to make sense to people, however, may vary. This again, adds richness to an international church.

LESSON III: LEARN – LISTEN AND OBSERVE

Observe, don't just ask, "How do elders and decision influencers transmit knowledge, values and norms to other people?" "How are decisions made within the culture?" These questions will provide clues to expectations students bring to the learning experience. Literature in cross-cultural teaching is of limited help, for teaching must be custom designed for the setting in which it occurs. Case studies report attempts to custom design teaching-learning methodologies for given cultures. Only by observing people as they learn within their home cultural context and by listening in non-formal settings can one understand the learning styles inherent within a culture.

LESSON IV: KEEP LEARNING

The longer people participate in cross-cultural education, the more they realize how much there is yet to learn. Cross-cultural educators learn from the culture more than we teach within the culture.

LESSON V: EQUALITY

My culture is not superior to yours, nor yours to mine. Respect is the highest value in cross-cultural education. We are partners in facilitating learning whenever two cultures involve themselves with one another.

Equality is an assumed value – but it is also sometimes forgotten. It is easy for partnerships between institutions, for instance, to resemble FATHER-SON relationships rather than BROTHERHOOD. Paternalism has no place in education if the church is to be truly international.