Nurturing Missionary Learning Communities

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About the Authors

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Introduction: The Need for On-the-Job Missionary Training

Many missionaries struggle as they transition from their initial years of language learning and cultural acquisition to engaging in ministry. There is often no clear road map for how to go about their ministry in a new cultural context, especially when they are working among unreached peoples in the pioneering tasks of evangelism, discipling, and planting churches. Along with many of our co-workers in the Middle East, we found that the primary task of learning the local language and culture during the first two years on the field was clearly mapped out for us, but that once we launched into our work of cross-cultural church planting, we had very little idea how to proceed. We wrestled with questions such as "How do we form a church planting team?" "How should we present the Gospel?" "How widely should we share the gospel?" "How should we respond to local cultural practices?" "How should we disciple those who come to faith in Christ?" "How and when should gatherings start?" It was rare to find a team member who had been introduced to these questions in Bible college or seminary classes, and when we began to wrestle with these issues on a day-to-day basis, we had very little input from experts to guide us or to help us reflect on our practice.

This kind of struggle is not limited to us or to the Middle East. For the past 12 years we have been visiting and interacting with missionaries from several mission agencies, listening to the issues they face and giving some training input to them. We have discovered that most of these missionaries have had very little current missiological input to help them develop their ministry or reflect on their task. Those that have received some missiological training before coming to the field have thought through some basic issues of communicating across cultures, learning a new language, and surviving in a new culture which has prepared them relatively well for the first two to three years on the field, but it has not usually equipped them for the work of cross-cultural evangelism, discipling, church planting, or training local leaders.

A survey of active missionaries from WEC International working among unreached people groups in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Europe (Hibbert and Hibbert 2002) asked them to indicate, from a list of ten possibilities, the three that they believed were the greatest hindrances to their reaching the unreached with the gospel in their area. After "resistance of the people group," (included by 68% of the 63 respondents among their top three hindrances), "lack of experience or training" was the most frequently noted hindrance (indicated by 59% of respondents). Respondents who were members of church planting teams (56 of the 63) reported that "lack of training in evangelism and church planting" was the second most significant hindrance to their work.

Although larger mission agencies usually offer some on-the-job training to their missionaries, this training tends to focus on helping team leaders and field leaders with their leadership task. Occasional workshops on church planting or specific approaches such as Bible storytelling are becoming more widespread, but many missionaries still receive little intentional on-the-job training input from their organizations. As a result, too few field workers are being helped to make sense of what they are doing with the help of missiological tools. A few missionaries engage in further formal missiological study through universities, but many of these move on from active missionary service soon after finishing this formal study.

The work of missionaries could be further enhanced by appropriate on-the-job learning and training. Pre-field training is at best preparatory; much more must be learnt by missionaries after they have left home and started on their cross-cultural ministry in order for them to become effective workers. "In our missionary communities and agencies we urgently need to create a climate of humble, committed, life-long learning, and the willingness to grapple long and hard with deep issues in cross-cultural settings" (Dowsett 2005:41). The thesis of this paper is that collaborative learning communities that connect experienced and novice missionaries and help them connect practice with theory are a particularly adaptable way of meeting this learning need.
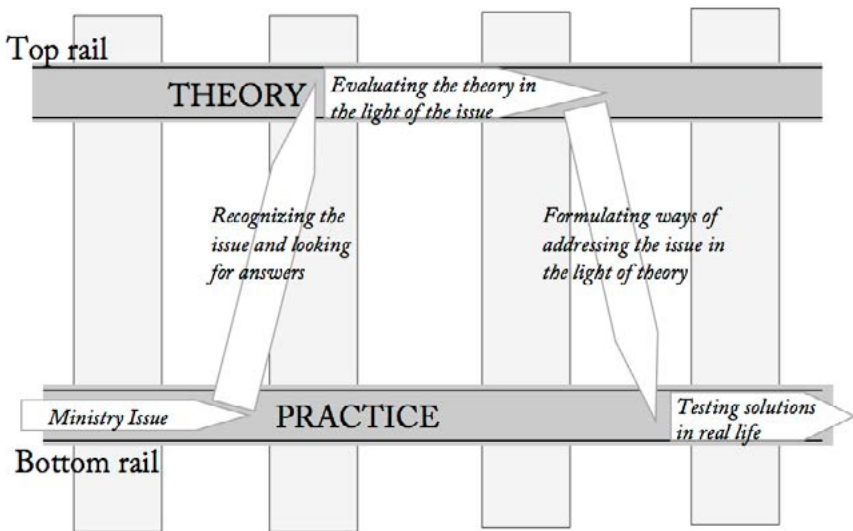
Missiological and Educational Assumptions

This paper assumes that the primary purpose of missiology is to improve the practice of mission and that the primary purpose of teaching mission is therefore to enhance the ministry of missionaries. Dwight Baker eloquently expressed this ultimately practical purpose of missiology:

> Missiology does more than simply record missionary practice; it seeks, as stated, to reform or reshape missionary practice, missionary theory, even missionary strategy, and to refine missionary self-understanding in ways that will enhance missionary effectiveness (Baker 2014:17).

Secondly, this paper assumes that good education helps learners make strong and multiple connections between theory and practice which help them enhance their life and work. This connection-making process occurs when learners reflect on their practice in the light of theory and apply the insights they gain from this reflection. Ted Ward and Samuel Rowen conceptualised this process using a split-rail fence in which the top rail represents theory and cognive input, the bottom rail represents ongoing practice or field experience, and the vertical fence posts represent the making of solid connections between cognitive input and field experience through dynamic reflection (Ward and Rowen 1972:24-27). Many other educational theorists confirm that connecting theory with practice is fundamental to learning (e.g., Kolb 1984; Schon 1983). This understanding of learning is depicted in figure 1.

Figure 1. Learning as connection-making between theory and practice (based on Ward and Rowen 1972: 24–27, and Plueddemann 1972:89-90).

Top rail

THEORY | *Evaluating the theory in the light of the issue*

Recognizing the issue and looking for answers

Formulating ways of addressing the issue in the light of theory

Ministry Issue | PRACTICE | *Testing solutions in real life*

Bottom rail

A third assumption of this paper is that good education is holistic and integrated. Learning should include not only dynamic reflection that connects theory and practice, but must also involve the development of essential character qualities and attitudes. Good education is holistic, then, in the sense that it integrates knowing, being, and doing (Brynjolfson 2006:27-36).

The Purpose of On-the-Job Training: Nurturing Reflective Practitioners

The most helpful kinds of training help learners to keep on learning. On-the-job training for missionaries should therefore ideally inculcate in trainees the ability to connect missiological theory with their own field experience. Such training nurtures reflective mission practitioners. Reflective practitioner missionaries reflect on their ministry experience, experiment with new ways of doing things as a result of that reflection, and in the process acquire a special kind of practical understanding that Donald

Schön calls "knowing-in-action" (Schön 1983). This practical knowledge enables reflective practitioner missionaries to navigate their way through ambiguous and complex ministry situations.

Reflecting on action, adjusting ministry approaches in the light of this, and evaluating those adjustments is an iterative process. Reflective practitioner missionaries are therefore lifelong learners. They are constantly open to knowledge that may help them to see their work in new ways and eventually help them become more effective. They look for help from many sources: they read the Bible to find insight about their ministry, they immerse themselves in the local culture to gain insights about it, and they listen carefully to local Christians and to fellow missionaries to understand their perspectives and practices. This kind of openness to new knowledge is a *habitus*, a habitual attitidunal posture. It is more than just wanting to study courses or read books; it is a disposition of continual openness to new experiences, ways of thinking, and intentional learning.

The ability to think and act missiologically is best developed by a combination of engaging in missions practice and reflecting on that practice in the light of missiological theory (Ward and Rowen 1972; Schon 1983; Kolb 1984). Both good theory and ongoing practice are essential to good missiology. Theory helps improve practice. "There is nothing more practical than a good theory," argued Kurt Lewin (Lewin, 1951:169). Missiologists, as developers and teachers of mission theory, should therefore provide ways of understanding problematic missions situations that will help practitioners solve those problems (cf. Vansteenkiste and Sheldon 2006: 63). But missiological theory does not stand alone; ongoing mission practice is also essential to the process of effective learning both for the field missionary and the missiologist. Ongoing practice forces missiologists to remain earthed by making them engage with the complex dilemmas that characterise missionary work and resist simplistic solutions.

The Role of Communities of Practice in Nurturing Reflective Practitioners

Some missionaries are able to engage in on-the-job learning without much support from a group. They reflect on their experience largely on their own in the light of reading and non-formal or formal seminars. For the majority of missionaries, however, solitary reflection does not come naturally. Social interaction is a key stimulus to their learning, and they learn most through being part of a learning community of fellow missionaries who are reflecting on their missionary practice. Ward and Rowen (1972: 275) put it like this: "If a student is to make a solid connection between cognitive input and his field experiences, he needs someone to talk to—preferably someone who is learning along with him."

The concept of learning communities has been gaining traction in many areas, particularly in the fields of business and education, as learning is increasingly being understood as a social process (Streumer and Kho 2006:23-24). College faculty, school principals, and business managers, for example, are encouraging the formation of learning communities to enhance the pre-service and in-service training of teachers and corporate employees (e.g., Whitford and Wood 2010; Yendol-Hoppey and Dana 2008).

Etienne Wenger and Jean Lave coined the term "communities of practice" to describe these learning communities in order to emphasize their ongoing commitment to and engagement with a particular practice that the members of the community are engaged in. Communities of practice are "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (Wenger 2014). They have three key dimensions: (1) a joint enterprise—in this case their missionary work; (2) mutual engagement, meaning that the members keep interacting with each other about the work they are engaged in; and (3) a shared repertoire of values, stories, concepts and ways of talking about and doing things that the group develops over time (Wenger 1998: 72-85).

Advocates of communities of practice suggest they are particularly powerful vehicles for helping their members connect theory with practice (Islam 2008:279-280). Their argument is based on a social theory of learning that sees learning as primarily a social process that occurs through the communicative practices of people who share similar goals and interests. This is in contrast to the classical paradigm of learning, in which individual learners internalise a largely cerebral and decontextualized body of knowledge from a teacher or expert usually in a classroom (Lave and Wenger 1991: 15, 47-49). Lave and Wenger found through their ethnographic study of apprentices in several countries that learning was happening not mainly by formal instruction but by participating in the community of fellow apprentices engaged together in their particular trade. The combination of active social participation and mutual engagement in a work practice was the primary vehicle of learning. In addition to small amounts of teaching by the master trainer, apprentices were continuously engaged in learning as they tried out aspects of the new practice and were caught up in the circulation of knowledge among their peer group of apprentices (Lave and Wenger 1991: 61-87; 92-93).

The members of a community of practice are not primarily theorists but practitioners of shared practice. Members of a missionary community of practice are therefore engaged in mission work themselves. The ultimate purpose of a missionary community of practice is to learn how to better engage in mission. This kind of learning is not defined as knowing about something but as competence—the ability to do the task well. "What they learn is not a static subject matter but the very process of being engaged in, and participating in developing, an ongoing practice" (Wenger 1998: 95).

In order to learn—to become more competent at their task— members of a missiological community of practice meet together to talk about the enterprise (missions) they are concerned about and engaged in. They help each other solve problems that arise as they go about engaging in missions, and they share information, insights, and advice. They think together about common issues and explore ideas and new ways of doing things. They hone their understanding of their task by generating multiple perspectives on their task and work to reconcile conflicting perspectives. Over time they develop a shared perspective on their specific missions context and a body of shared stories, knowledge, approaches, and practices.

Advantages of Learning in Communities of Practice

The kind of learning that occurs in communities of practice has several advantages over the traditional model of in-service professional development. First, because it is focussed practice, putting improved practice at the centre of its concern, it honours the contributions of each of the practitioners who comprise its membership (cf. Palmer 1998:115-138). Subject matter experts such as missiologists from the academy may contribute to the learning from their reading and research, but their contribution is of equal value to the practitioner who has not formally studied missiology but is *doing* the subject.

A second advantage of this kind of communal learning is that it is holistic. "As an aspect of social practice, learning involves the whole person; it implies not only a relation to specific activities, but also a relation to social communities" (Lave and Wenger 1991: 53). The process of engaging in learning as a group helps to overcome a tendency to perceive learning as primarily intellectual because not only cognitive abilities but character qualities and social skills are needed for this kind of learning. *How* members learn together in these communities is as important as *what* they learn. Attitudes of openness, acceptance, and respect, and skills of listening and negotiating in participants that are necessary for and enhance all aspects of missionary life and work are developed (Elmer 2002: 87-97). Through the process of discussion, listening to the perspectives of other group members and of the missiological literature, and negotiating an integration of these perspectives, members grow in their capacity to carefully listen to others, value their perspectives, agree or disagree respectfully, and negotiate a common outcome (cf. Lave and Wenger 1991: 15-16).

A third benefit of learning in communities of practice is that it encourages experimentation. Learning in these communities is framed in terms of developing, testing out, and evaluating the implementation of new ideas and approaches. Openness to experimentation and taking risks is engendered through this approach. The learning community not only allows members to try out innovative solutions to problems but also provides a supportive community which can allay the stress and

anxiety of trying new things. If innovations fail, the community can share responsibility for the experiment and frame it in terms of ongoing learning rather than failure.

Fourthly, in contrast to traditional models of on-the-job or in-service training that are focussed primarily on the individual's acquisition of knowledge, learning in communities of practice is a social process that benefits not just the individual but a whole group of people (Yildirim 2008: 234). What any one member learns belongs to the group and therefore is shared with them. Being part of a community of practice therefore provides to its members personal experience of a collective learning approach that will enhance their ministry to people from collectivistic societies and help them relate better to team members from collectivistic cultures.

A fifth advantage of this kind of learning is that it is contextualised. It is situated in a specific context that includes both the learner's community of co-learners and teachers and the practice in which they are all engaged. This is in contrast to the traditional model of on-the-job training which usually involves in-service workshops and seminars in which the content is often decontextualized, disconnected from daily practice, and focussed on correcting deficiencies as perceived by governing bodies away from the front line of practice (Yildirim 2008:234). In response to objections that their theory seems to make knowledge and learning too parochial and limited to a given time and task, Lave and Wenger argue that every kind of learning must eventually be contextualised to be useful: "Abstract representations are meaningless unless they can be made specific to the situation at hand" (1991:33-34). Learning is an "indigenous enterprise" in that the group that is learning together responds to local conditions that are not determined by outside authorities (Wenger 1998:79).

Sixth, this kind of learning is highly accessible to missionaries. Learning communities can gather wherever learners are, at times that suit the participants. These communities are not dependent on large facilities and can regroup wherever participants find themselves. Also, as learning communities focus on learning *together* they are more amenable to incorporating learners from all stages of practice, in distinct contrast to the competitive, hierarchical and often exclusive structures traditionally associated with institutionalised learning.

A seventh advantage of communities of practice is they foster a habit of lifelong learning. Stimulated by regular discussion and interaction in the group, members develop the habit of missiological reflection. When

a learning community is working well, positive feelings of belonging and being encouraged in their ministry increase members' motivation to learn and keep on learning. This positive experience of learning has the potential to encourage participants to replicate that experience in new situations they move into.

This kind of learning is also consistent with prevailing theories of adult learning developed in the West that propose that adults learn best through an active process driven by the adult learner who brings to it the problems they face in the course of living and working (Knowles 2011:67). Every member of the learning community is an active participant who brings the dilemmas they are facing in their work to the thinking and learning process, in contrast with the traditional model of on-the-job training in which seminar attendees can easily become passive recipients of knowledge (Yildirim 2008:234). Communities of practice allow learners to be self-directed (Knowles 2011:65), but to do this in community with a group of other self-directed learners. They organize themselves, take the initiative to diagnose their learning needs, shape their learning goals, discover and employ strategies for learning, and evaluate their learning (Hansman 2008:301).

The learning that occurs in a community of practice also accords with recent thinking about missions education. David Fenrick (2013), for example, convincingly argues that current missiological teaching needs to shift from focussing on cognitive development to a missional pedagogy that develops "missional activists," whose attitudes have been shaped and whose skills developed for effective missional action. The essential ingredients of such a pedagogy, according to Fenrick, include many of the elements that characterize communities of a practice: integrated learning, problem-posing content, reflection and critical analysis of experience, and cooperative learning in community.

Examples of Communities of Practice

Examples of communities of practice can be found in many contexts. They are being started and fostered at various levels—by mission agencies, by individual field and team leaders, and by mission agency executives in sending countries. One interdenominational agency working

in community development and church planting in Central Asia, for example, has developed a strong culture of on-the-job training. Each of this agency's eight teams in one country I visited meet once a week as a learning community to discuss an issue they are facing in ministry. Facilitation of these learning sessions is led either by a team member who has been reading about a particular issue such as what the Qur'an says about Jesus or a visitor to the team who has expertise in some area such as teaching cross-culturally. Another example comes from a small group of cross-cultural workers in South Asia who meet once a month at a coffee shop to present and discuss the ideas for ministry that they are working on and approaches they are trying out.

The Church Missionary Society (CMS) in the UK is an example of a mission agency that is nurturing communities of practice. The purpose of these communities is to enable missionaries to learn from one another through discussion of issues, problems and their solutions, ideas, lessons learned, and research findings. Members of these learning communities are expected to share what they learn with others, and it is anticipated that this will "generate innovation and creativity in the practice of mission" (Goh et al. 2003:2).

Seminaries can also foster communities of practice. Andrew Wingate, who served as a theological educator missionary in India in the 1970s, described his seminary as "a laboratory of the gospel" that employed an action-reflection approach to learning. Faculty members and students were "deeply engaged with the world outside, as a learning and acting community" (Wingate 2010:223). Teachers were expected to be involved in practical ministry outside the college. Wingate, for example, was assigned together with a group of students to prison ministry where he recalls experiencing the power of the gospel to change lives and faced the complexity of sharing the gospel with Hindus and discipling life prisoners. Engagement with the practice of ministry outside the classroom enlarged his and his students' appreciation of the gospel and the complexity of human problems, and their ability to minister to people from vastly different religious, cultural, and socio-economic backgrounds than their own. Although Wingate suggests that the whole seminary was a community of practice, he does not give details of how this worked. It seems likely that faculty members formed one learning community as they discussed the issues they faced in their out-of-classroom ministries,

and groups of students together with individual faculty members formed another kind of learning community as they engaged in and reflected on ministry they did together, such as the prison ministry.

Nurturing Missions Learning Communities: The Role of Missiologists

Communities of reflective missions practitioners transcend the dichotomy between practical and theoretical knowledge as they intentionally and systematically integrate their mission field experience with missiological theory together with other missionaries. They critically research their context and the practical knowledge generated in it, evaluate insights from theory, and integrate these in a dynamic way. In the process, they become practical missiologists, doing in-context missiological theologising and theorising in a way that shapes their practice and their understanding of the missionary task.

Seminary-based missiologists could have a significant role in nurturing missionary learning communities and thus developing future missiologists as well as a wide-based foundation of missiological expertise across the mission fields of the world. Four steps that missiologists could take towards fostering these communities are: (1) recognizing the need for more integrated missiological education; (2) planting the seeds of learning communities through the way they teach their seminary classes; (3) becoming a resource for field-based missionary learning communities; and (4) establishing local missions practitioner learning communities.

1. Recognize the need for more integrated missiological education

Many Bible college and seminary programs perpetuate a separation between theory and practice. The International Council for Evangelical Theological Education's (ICETE 2013) Manifesto on the Renewal of Theological Education acknowledges this weakness: "We are at fault

that we so often focus educational requirements narrowly on cognitive attainments, while we hope for student growth in other dimensions but leave it largely to chance." The need for greater integration between theory and practice has been confirmed by a recent survey that asked more than 1500 theological educators and church leaders from all major Christian traditions in every part of the world, "What are the most important elements in the program of preparation and/or formation for Christian ministry?" Their responses stressed the need for experiential learning in the location of ministry to be integrated with spiritual formation and academic programs (Global Digital Library on Theology and Ecumenism 2013:5).

Despite this widely felt need, some Bible colleges and seminaries continue to resist the kind of rethinking that is needed to integrate theory and practice (Taylor 2006:x). For missiologists to embrace and support missionary learning communities, they need firstly to recognise the need to improve current training models. They need to resist Western education's captivity to ancient Greek educational traditions, in which practical experience is treated as a poor cousin to intellectual learning (Ward 1996:43-44; cf. Elmer 1984: 230-231).

Missiological education and mission professors are not immune to this weakness. The majority of missions classes in both Bible colleges and seminaries focus on cognitive outcomes. Practical engagement with people from other cultures is generally limited to an occasional field trip or short-term trip overseas. While these are steps in the right direction, holistic, integrated development of the whole person's attitudes and abilities in cross-cultural engagement requires further shifts in our approach to teaching and learning.

2. Model reflective practice in classes

Seminary-based missiologists could plant the seed of missionary learning communities through the way they conduct their classes. One way to do this is to model in their classes how to learn together in groups and how to make connections between theory and practice by discussing and critiquing theory together based on students' life and ministry experiences.

Another way of modelling reflective practice and sowing the seeds of missionary learning communities is to make seminary-sponsored seminars, such as doctoral seminars, more accessible for practitioners. Through collaborating with mission agencies, seminars that cover topics that are particularly relevant to practitioners could be opened up to more missionaries for audit, but conducted in a way that models and develops learning community approaches which could then be reproduced and possibly supported on the field. Although seminary courses are not necessarily practical in their focus, by increasing practitioner participation and by missiologists being ready to adjust their teaching according to their students' questions, there is more likelihood that relevant practical issues can be explored and debated together.

3. Become a resource person for field-based learning communities

Communities of Practice require intentional nurturing to help them reach their full potential (Wenger *et al.* 2002:13). One way that missiologists could contribute to their nurture is by offering their expertise to mission agencies to provide input to their field-based learning communities. They could be in direct contact with missionaries about current issues being faced in their ministry and provide relevant resources and teaching. They could also work on joint research projects that seek to address questions that are of current concern to missionaries.

Another way that missions educators could nurture learning communities on mission fields is to act as mentors or guides for the missionaries who facilitate those communities. Facilitators of learning communities fine-tune and nudge discussion and the group's learning in helpful directions (cf. Yildirim 2008:239). They could benefit greatly from the missiological theory and information about recent missiological developments that the missiologist could provide.

4. Start a missions learning community

A final way that seminary-based missiologists could contribute to missions learning communities is to start or become involved in one close to where they are based. Many seminaries and Bible colleges are close to culturally diverse communities which either have or need Christian ministry among them. As a practitioner, the missiologist would engage in sharing the gospel, discipling, planting churches, or training leaders. This group of learner-practitioners could include local Christians wanting to learn how to minister to people from other cultures as well as some of the missiologist's students. As they engage in local ministry, members would also experience a learning community, and some could take this model of learning with them when they move on to cross-cultural ministry elsewhere.

This kind of local learning community would go some way towards addressing the need for greater integration between theory and practice in pre-field training. Most proposals to address this need urge faculty to be holistic examples who are involved in ministry alongside students as mentors and models, sharing not only knowledge but their lives (e.g., Frame 1984:379-380; Jeyeraj 2002:249,264-266; Banks 1999:171-175; cf. 1 Thess. 1:5-6). Professors in such learning communities would spend significant time with students in the community over meals, in their homes, and doing ministry together.

Missions has always been an on-the-edge endevour. Missionaries step into places that the rest of the church does not go and take risks for the sake of the gospel that are unthinkable for many. Perhaps it is time for missiologists to lead in a new paradigm of theological training which integrates the Bible, theology and missiological theory with the kind of missionary attitudes and practices needed for authentic cross-cultural ministry. This requires a paradigm shift towards lifelong learning in which missiologists provide practical, prophetic, and reflective input into real life situations.

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