



The Emergence of the NFE Emphasis at MSU Following Coomb's Definition¹

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In 1971, when Philip Coombs created the term nonformal education, he opened new worlds of thought about educational process. It gave the educational community a new way to think about modes of education. We had been working with this bipolar, formal to informal, language where everything is somewhere on the continuum, and he came up with this third point. We began to see a triadic space, and its reception was quite electric.

At this time, MSU was involved with the US Agency for International Development (USAID)—the agency involved in providing various kinds of aid to developing nations. During that particular time we were engaged in educational support. USAID immediately saw the implications of US grants going to developing nations and used largely to expand their formal schooling. USAID responded that if Coombs was correct, then we are not doing the best possible thing by granting people more money to build more schools. They encouraged us to get together and plan how to take advantage of this new triadic space. But we had no literature. USAID gave a large grant to the group I was in at MSU, and gave us a year to come up with a collection of literature that could be put people's hands. That grant jumpstarted the literature for nonformal education. Some of the earliest, substantial monographs were done by groups of Christians under my supervision at MSU. That's why so much of the early literature in nonformal education is so shot through with Christian values. We also did a lot of fieldwork, because we were part of a group at the university USAID contracted with in addition to the literature grant. They funded what were called "flying teams" to work with national governments in various parts of the world on short notice. Seventy MSU faculty, including myself, were on 72-hour notice to show up anywhere in the world. Various specializations were represented: landscape gardening, sanitary engineering, education, and many others. The team coordinator could create a team of specialists according to the need in a given nation.

Through this period I worked in about 60 nations. We were gone as much as we were home, because we would take off at very short notice and show up in places like Nepal, Ghana, Ethiopia, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, various African nations, and on and on. We worked for periods of time with national planning groups. This was our overt motive: to help them think more broadly about educational expenditure, and not to invest exclusively in more schools. We wanted to do this in such a way that we were stimulating thought and dialogue about ideas and strategies. In essence USAID wanted us to tell them that they would not be given money if their intent was to build schools. But we decided not to work that way, and instead developed kind of a heuristic discovery approach to helping national planning groups with these issues. It was in that same period of time that the TEE movement was emerging. There was enough similarity and enough comparability with that movement that many times we would do missionary related or national church related conferences on lay and ministerial education alongside our fieldwork for USAID/MSU.

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