



The Cultural Basis of Learning Effectiveness¹

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Nonformal education differs from informal education in that it is deliberate, structured to some extent, and sponsored by an agency other than an informal institution of the society. “Informal education,” the anthropologist’s term for those processes of learning that constitute basic socialization of the child (e.g., home, family, clan, neighborhood) reflects the sanctions and values of tradition and thus is relatively insensitive to overt forces from outside the local environment. By contrast, nonformal education is commonly an attempt to change something, to bring about some alteration in the local *status quo*. For example, social development programs of all sorts, from literacy training to family planning represent, to some extent, forces of change from outside the local environment.

Outside efforts to change an environment are neither inherently good nor inherently evil. Even programs of change that are ineffective or unaccepted may be well-motivated, beneficent, and potentially of value to the well-being of the target audience. Conversely, a program of change that is accepted and is successful may turn out to be disastrous in its ultimate effects. Examples of the first sort are easy to find: the sanitation, inoculation, and clinical therapy programs that are rejected, leaving the door open for ensuing epidemics. The second sort are also widely evidenced though not so well publicized: the safe-childbirth programs and infant health campaigns that contribute ultimately to tribal starvation, for example.

The moral dilemma for the person representing the outside force is best expressed in the response one makes to local rejection of the outsider’s good idea. Are people to be respected to the point of allowing them to reject what would be good for them? It might even be questioned whether there is any inherent difference between a government’s imposing a force of social change and an outside cross—national force (such as the mission of a church) inducing a social change. The great contribution of Paulo Freire, for example, is based on respect, for local views of needs—indeed it is his doctrine that success lies only in the identification with those needs and with fundamental commitment to the emergence of autonomy and self-determination. These moral issues are important since so much of what we know about nonformal education we know through the eyes of outsiders. And so much of what we intend to do with this knowledge we intend to do as outsiders!

Long-term concerns about learning effectiveness must take into account the whole socio-political-economic context of the innovation, considering the effects of the change on the total way of life. Short-term concerns about learning effectiveness must take into account the contemporary situation in which the learning will take place: the characteristics of learners, the value system, and social structures that relate to the *local meaning*, the planned change, and the expectations and preferences of the intended learners in reference to what constitutes a valid learning experience.

¹ Unpublished paper, 1973

In its role and activities as a force of change from outside the local community (commonly called missions), the church has historically engaged in both formal and nonformal education. The church's activity as a planter of formal education during the empires of Western Europe is common knowledge. What is less known and poorly documented is the church's use of nonformal modes of education. Many of the great periods of development in the church, nationally and internationally, have arisen from moments of extensive use of nonformal education, and in certain cases, such as the Wesleyan movement in England (1730-1760) and as extended to the American frontier, nonformal education has served the church as a deliberate means of breaking the grip of formalized institutionalism.²

Many illustrations and, indeed, much insight into the problems and prospects of nonformal education are available from the church mission sector. The same forces that have combined to alert the secular world of international development to the realities and validity of nonformal education have also served to alert the Christian church in many regions to the need to again employ educational ways and means broader than those of the institutional forms of formal education. The so-called extension seminary is perhaps the best example of the consequences of this awareness. Far more than typical extension education and its transplanting of the formal learning experiences to other places, the extension seminary has become synonymous with new modes, forms, objectives, and even new target audiences for leadership education within the church.

Recapturing and updating some of the Wesleyan nonformalism yet holding tightly to the Wesleyan fear of disorder the de-schooling of leadership training is picking up momentum.

² Bernard Semmel. *The Methodist Revolution*. Basic Books, 1973.

