



What Happened to Theological Education by Extension (TEE)?¹

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Introduction. In this paper, Ward calls attention to the probability that TEE became ineffective because of too much emphasis on its technology and too little attention to its problems. Sometime during the 1970s, Ted and Margaret Ward undertook a two-continent tour to examine the uses of a programmed instruction text they had written, and examined seriously inadequate efforts being made in a number of missions to establish TEE programs for pastoral education. As a result of the tour, the Wards burned about 200 remaining copies of the text believing that it was contributing to TEE's ineffectiveness. The key problem was that so few missionaries knew how to design and/or conduct learning experiences or materials for TEE. Ward's correspondence about this issue in 1975 was the origin of *What Happened to TEE?*

What went wrong? Theological Education by Extension seemed like such a good idea: increasing the number of pastors, providing improved basic pastoral education at lower cost, allowing leaders to stay on the job while engaged in studies. Any possibility of achieving these outcomes would surely be greeted with enthusiasm. Yes, it might require a bit of change, but no one would object. Theological Education by Extension (TEE) would also resolve the economic problem that slows the growth of the church: requiring the most promising of the emerging leaders to undergo the social and economic hardships of taking two or more years to prepare to serve the church. These hardships are especially burdensome in the typical third world situations where the support of family and local churches is especially limited and where the personal stresses are burdensome and unfamiliar within the culture. Long periods away from family and community often result.

TEE seemed to promise an alternative to formal schooling as typically required for ministerial preparation and academic qualification. The necessity of relocating to an institution at distance and taking on unmanageable expense would be eliminated. The idea seemed so exciting, so promising, so simple, and so cheap. Perhaps the unexpected problem emerged from the series of hopes just mentioned.

Exciting? Yes, to the supporters it offered a great thrill speculating what TEE would mean for educational reform, effective ministry, and church growth. But to the majority of educators, especially the power-managers of schooling, it sounded very much like one more episode in the ancient story of boom-and-bust educational innovations. This newest educational gimmick brought along an additional handicap. It is especially hard to support new strategies, especially when they suggest no more school buildings and worse, learning without teachers. Looking more closely, and with a bit of stretched imagination, the promoters assumed that while seeking new employment, the best of the present-day supply of teachers would happily become the designers and writers of these much-needed new miracle study-books.

¹ Ted Ward. What Happened to Theological Education by Extension (TEE)? Unpublished paper, 1975. Subsequently published in *Common Ground Journal*. Vol. 11 (1) Fall 2013: pp. 52-55.

The caricature above is somewhat exaggerated to help the reader begin to understand why the excitement rapidly gave way to suspicious disdain.

Promising? The hopes were very optimistic. Here is “the innovation of the century” with its prospect for ushering in a whole new mode of theological education that could transform the field. Perhaps it would bring to theological education the sort of transformative improvement that Abraham Flexner’s work had brought to medical education at the turn of the twentieth century. But wait, Flexner’s efforts were research-based, not simply speculation.

TEE was pioneered by engineers, preachers, and a handful of administrators. Most of the authors of the movement had little research experience beyond rudimentary demography. They lacked the major requisites of effective change agents, particularly an understanding of social change process and the necessary conditions for encouraging institutional change. Innovation was simply expected to happen; no one knew how to instigate it.

Distrust and suspicion became commonplace. Resistance grew rapidly. Even the early adopters soon became aware of the obstacles. The few who had made investments with such great hopes became disillusioned. The sleeping giant, formal schooling, yawned once or twice and nodded off. Why? What went wrong?

Many of the promoters of TEE were particularly keen about developing a new medium and a whole body of new instructional literature: programmed instruction (PI). But very few knew much about PI or how it was designed. But was all of that really important? The promises seemed enough to assure success. Not only did it sound too good to be true, it indeed proved to be a fading vision.

The miracle stuff turned out to be extraordinarily difficult to develop. The few trial programs seemed to be limited to “Sunday school” levels of trite information-memory. The hope for curriculum that would prepare seriously attentive and responsive pastors seemed to be out of reach.

Experienced teachers vigorously reject the very idea of putting themselves out of business. Thus teaching without teachers was seen early on as an ill-conceived goal. Similarly, the level of linguistic facility demanded for the design and writing of programmed instruction was well beyond the majority of missionary-volunteer educators. Whatever was assumed about TEE, the coupling with programmed instruction was ill-conceived. It proved to be an Achilles heel.

The dominant promoters of TEE were evangelizers and experienced flag-wavers. One of the most disturbing problems was the disinterest in utilizing the educational community itself to guide the search for a better way. It is readily acknowledged that institutional people tend to be defensive, resistant to change, and somewhat stubborn about their own status quo. In retrospect, a successful introduction of the innovative features could have resulted from a more careful, orderly, and less vigorously promoted attack on the time-honored traditions of the academy. Successful change agents know the hazards that can be avoided: misjudging the capacity, motivation, and competency of the “old guard,” for example. When the campaigns toward TEE began, there was little attention given to the innovative educators with proven insights about the ways and means of working toward change. In fact, the efforts were invested too narrowly in the mistaken belief that change could be made rapidly and with a minimum of preparation. The failure to recruit persons with research-based competencies in educational management and innovation was evident very early.

Instead, much time and effort was wasted by exalting a handful of willing disciples; few of these had any actual experience with even the most relevant forms of nonformal education—literacy campaigns, rural development, community development, and collaborative promotion of public health and agricultural innovation. At the heart of the issue is the evident narrowness of missionary competencies. In sum, the TEE disaster has prompted a few mission agencies to re-think the narrowness of their recruitment practices, and to consider adding a few carefully selected specialists in appropriate technologies fields.

Simple? Theological Education by Extension was heralded as a valid and simple solution to the major gap in the evangelization-to-church-growth enterprise. Development of leadership for the church is a major concern. Christian converts need to be introduced to the Bible if they are to grow spiritually. At the heart of Christian growth is prayer partnership. The Christian life is not solitary; discipleship is a shared task. Churches are strong when the community of faith grows together. Leaders must develop the capacities for listening attentively and interacting wisely, guided by the truth of Scripture. Thus the pastor must be a community leader, and the wisdom required demands an education rich in experience and nurtured in respectful sharing of understanding.

Surely a more effective approach to leadership education is still needed. Seminaries seem handicapped by a rapturous infatuation with an accumulated mass of erudite information. Pastors commonly show dissatisfaction with the way they have been educated: too much information, too little attention is given to real human needs, inadequate emphasis is placed on the formation of understanding and the nurture of spirituality.

Cheap? Although education hardly seems “cheap” from any perspective, the sad fact is that what is tolerated as competent education in the “keeping school” mode is already carried out at nearly minimal costs. Short of inventing an intellectual funnel to fill human brains on a wholesale basis, lowering costs and increasing intellectual competencies are rarely compatible. Suggesting ways to save money are soon recognized as unsupportable propaganda. Education, responsibly defined, is a complex matter, hardly given to short-cuts and clever schemes.

Schooling itself may be part of the problem. Far too often, teaching is practiced as if it were dedicated to building memory. The focus is on information. The proverbial ancient professor who teaches from threadbare notes exemplifies this mode. Even each “joke” is scripted, to be recited at its own particularly dull moment. Yes, this sort of “teaching” can be common in the crowded lecture hall and can be packaged and sold (or given away at low cost) in a PI textbook. But does this sort of teaching and learning meet the standards for a competent theological education?

Time to Start Over? The pace of technological progress is increasing. A new start for TEE, as it was imagined in the past, is unthinkable. Programmed instruction has had its day on the scene. Some good came of it, but very early on PI was by-passed by a wide variety of educational uses of the computer. Already we live in a very different age.

TEE had been touted as a way to vastly increase the number of students that could be educated, especially in hard-to-reach places. There really was no practical limit; just keep printing the PI booklets. And, of course, mass production suggests greater cost-effectiveness. For the more experienced and sensitive educator, this image was quite repulsive. For those who committed themselves to a relationship-grounded form of education, the quantitative argument for TEE fell on deaf ears. Or worse.

Certain things still hold true. The defunct professor described earlier still can be found tiresomely at work in the lecture hall—but this professor’s newest tasks are keeping the dullards from texting each other or escaping to the more compelling internet. Of far greater significance are the emerging reminders that learning must be understood as two different concepts of the mental processes:

1. Learning is what happens when information is committed to memory.
2. Learning is the very complex process that we simply call developing understanding.

These two different ways to conceptualize learning represent a virtual watershed that differentiates competent teaching from incompetent teaching. The first of these concepts is represented by rote-learning, drill-and-practice, repetitions, and usually “out loud” reciting with mechanical utterance of word sequences, as if their sound patterns were ultimately important. Example: As you stroll toward an elementary school in many parts of the world, especially in much of Asia and in various Islamic regions, the dull buzz slowly becomes as a rhythmic pattern—always a

sort of accented monotone. And there it is: what much of the world has long accepted as the mumble of “busy learners.”

By contrast, the heavy lifting of human learning is the discussion among learners, interacting as they bring their thoughts together, bouncing them off each other to critique, compare, and refine ideas and to explore what an idea means. This second concept represents the real meaning of learning—developing understanding. The important issue is not selecting methodologies on the basis of their cleverness or technological feasibility, but rather considering what sort of teaching and learning will meet the standards for a competent theological education.