



Background to the TEE Idea¹

Ted Ward

The context of nonformal education *creates special conditions and problems* for learning. In much of formal education cognition learning is assumed to be valuable—even when no particular transfer to lifestyle or to practical uses has been demonstrated. In nonformal education, the value of cognitive learning cannot be assumed. The necessity to deliver a relatively short educational experience that will be put to functional use during or soon after the learning experience constitutes one of the most important distinctives of effective nonformal education.

The relatively short time spans in which nonformal educational experiences occur places an especially heavy demand on the learning environment: there usually isn't time to bring the learner into attunement with the learning experience; instead, unless high rates of dropout and non-learning cases are acceptable, learning experiences must be designed as adaptations to the learners.

The context of nonformal education creates certain *potential advantages for* effective learning. The linkage between learning and a practical reward system can be more direct. In formal education, the reward of schooling is often more schooling, and learning is only loosely linked to rewards in lifestyle. By contrast, nonformal education is potentially less bound to delayed rewards and can be linked to practical consequences in lifestyle.

The context of nonformal education is the marketplace of usefulness of learning. While the purposes and goals of formal education are broad and general, emphases within testing programs reveal that the goals are often approached through masses of miniscule bits of information. The constraints on nonformal education usually disallow miscellaneous, tangential and otherwise “enriching” bits of information. The effectiveness of learning is assessed not against classical traditions of disciplinary information but against a pragmatic marketplace use of the learning. Thus evaluation of learning is a matter of determining the ability of learners to apply new skills and information to matters of practical lifestyle.

One of the characteristics of the TEE idea has been to try to accommodate the needs and the schedules of people who are engaged already in some kind of vocation or ministry or responsibility. This practice contrasts with what we do in conventional theological education. You accommodate yourself to it; it meets on a certain schedule; whatever you need to drop to get there, it's what you have to do to get into it. Whereas theological education by extension turns that around and says, “What kind of time do you have available, and how can we make a schedule that will fit into your available time?”

So you find some kinds of programs operating during summers; some spring and summers; some operating on holiday schedules; some operating in a night school kind of format, for every night of the week for 3-4 weeks. Others operate only one night per week, or one Saturday morning for many months. Many variations are possible.

¹ Ted Ward. Background to the TEE Idea. Transcribed address, November 1998

Consequently it's a fundamentally slow approach to moving through the equivalent of a formal education, and as a result, many will get discouraged and drop out. Yet, the fact remains, that many pastors, especially unschooled pastors, will not be able to accommodate themselves to a formal education program. The TEE idea has been one kind of solution to that problem.

A common problem, a common criticism of nonformal education, is the limited ability of those who organize the educational activity. In the United States, who is it that organizes teaching events? Schools, schools! And the TEE idea is basically a non-school. Why would school administrators want to organize a non-school? It's can be perceived as a competition—or irrelevant because it is non-school. So literally there is no one in school systems to organize TEE.

There are some notable exceptions. In India, an organization was formed to organize theological education by extension efforts. So we're seeing in India the emergence of a new hope, especially for small and poverty-area churches, where pastors at least have some opportunity for learning.

But when TEE is adopted by a formal system, it tends to take on the characteristics of schooling—including diplomas, degrees, equivalency, and a schedule! By design, there is no standard set of characteristics for TEE.

The popularity of the term TEE came about mostly in the 1970s-1980s, and it hit fast. By 1973-74 it was talked about extensively by everybody, especially those involved in missions. In 1965-1968, the Presbyterian church in Guatemala valued a formal, high level intellectualism; and they were degree-oriented. To become ordained in the Presbyterian church within the Western world, a graduate degree, typically the MDiv, is required. Now most of you are aware that a high percentage of the people of the world do not even finish six years of schooling!

The point is that missionaries from North America tend to visualize a situation using American norms. In much of the two-thirds world even high school graduation is rare. Many high school graduates become pastors without going through anything like a bachelors degree; or the bachelors degree they take is a combination of a few general courses plus the theology courses. Programs, in general, are at a pre-graduate level—even in programs leading to ordination. In reality, the majority of the churches of the world are pastored by people with about 8-9 years of formal education. The Presbyterians in central Guatemala had done a good job of seeing to it that *all* their churches were pastored by people with a kind of graduate degree. But the churches weren't growing very rapidly, or multiplying. There were at least two reasons for this situation: (1) In order to multiply, it was presumed that the church required another seminary graduate coming in to help. The pastor had no idea that it would be possible for another church to grow up around someone in the church who was educated in nonformal ways. The pastor tended to think in terms of credentials and the leader of a daughter church would also have to have those credentials.

This problem wasn't unique to the Presbyterians; but for purposes of background for TEE, it is important to note that the Presbyterians ran out of students in Guatemala. Their theological school served the central valley very well until all of a sudden, they finished the job. All the Presbyterian churches that had been "planted" in that central valley had seminary graduate pastors, and the missionaries realized that they had a problem. How do you write a missionary letter home to report, "Hey, we're out of a job"?

One of those missionaries was a young man who had gone into ministry as a second career. He had been contracted with NASA as an engineer. He applied to Fuller Seminary when his work at NASA ceased. He completed a degree in theology and another in missions. He was ordained in the Presbyterian church, and they sent him to Guatemala to become a missionary educator in the seminary. Ralph Winter has become an important person in the development of missions in the last thirty years. He is also widely known as a fervent promoter of causes he supports.

Ralph Winter saw the problem clearly—they had run out of students, but they hadn't run out of possibilities. Along with James Emery, they conceived a strategy where they would go to the other side of the mountain to train pastors. And they would educate them in context. In Guatemala, all the valleys are remote from one another. You literally have to go over a huge mountain to get from one valley to the next. So they loaded their books into two vehicles, one Land Rover and one Jeep, and they went over to the next valley where they knew there were some Presbyterian churches. None of these churches was pastored by an "authorized" pastor. No one was ordained, but there were people fervently preaching the word of God! Winter and Emery offered to teach them.

Using their "Jeep curriculum" they taught in one village, then another, then another. They moved around like the itinerant Bible people of the old days in Asia where the Bible Leagues went from village to village teaching the Bible to laity. By the way, the Bible League was a women's movement, and one of the most important contributions to the expansion of the church in China. The original missioning of China was done largely by women. Unfortunately, many of those women were in the Presbyterian denomination. They were not wanted in the seminaries, which meant they couldn't earn a theological degree—and, therefore, weren't recognized as important leaders. It is a sad fact of the church that women have been treated historically as unimportant, even though quite often they are the real force of missions.

What Winter and Emery found in the new valley were people in need of ministry education. Jim Emery the anthropologist said, "We'll never build a school here." Ralph countered, "Why not? Let's get something started, and then we'll get money from North America and build a new school right here. It was a more sensible option than expecting the students to come across to the other side of the mountain. The leaders had families they had to support. They couldn't abandon their families or their churches. Winter and Emery looked for a way to bring learning to them and that was the origin of TEE.

Who were the creators of the movement? Unemployed missionaries with a compassionate heart for the needs of people in place. That was the new thing: *in place*. Until that time there was little enthusiasm or vision in theological education overseas to educate leaders in place. Most western missionaries carried with them the image of a school, to which students came and spent months and years of their lives in formal education. The particular contribution of theological education by extension was *to make biblical education available wherever people are*. Ralph saw this as such a good idea that he began to promote it as something that should be developed all over the world!

Jim Emery, on the other hand, suggested that they needed to learn from the Guatemala experience before exporting it. Ralph disagreed and pulled away early on in the Guatemala program and became the worldwide promoter of this movement. While in Guatemala, in 1968, Ralph organized an international theological education conference. Many from Latin American countries came to that conference because they heard that something new had been developed about how to do theological education.

Unfortunately, Ralph didn't understand the anthropology of schooling. That is, when you bring people together who are interested in education, and especially interested in educational innovation, most will be educators. So, those who came to the conference were representatives from theological schools all over Latin America. Now what would be the attitude of school representatives toward an argument that there is a better way to do theological education? Predictably, the reaction was largely negative—the result of over-promotion too early.

The fact that this movement survived at all in this period was a miracle! Ralph continued to promote the idea for many years; and his efforts were, for the most part, more positive than negative. But clearly the failure to come to terms with the vested interests and resistance of the formal educating establishment was part of the problem.

In what was thought to be a strategic solution to the criticisms from formal education, Ralph Winter downplayed the educational significance of TEE—and by extension, nonformal education. (In the late 1960s, Philip Coombs coined the term nonformal education.) Ralph decided that school stakeholders needed to see TEE as inferior to formal schooling—arguing that one could never do in an extension program what could be done on campus. He began talking about how to make TEE “nearly as good as what you can do on campus.” The argument persuaded some from the schools to accept TEE as long as it didn't have any prospect of becoming “the way.”

Unfortunately for the long term health of the movement, people picked up on his “almost as good as” argument and said, “Why do we settle for ‘almost as good as’? The North American missionaries have had the benefit of formal education. Why shouldn't we have similar credentials? Why are they giving us something second-rate?” And that was the next big blow to the movement.

But, Sam Rowen made a visit to “the other valley.” He was based in Kingston, Jamaica as the coordinator for the mission now called World Team (formerly West Indies Mission). He went to Guatemala to see what was happening on the other side of the mountain. He saw the initiative as a potentially significant form of educational reform for the church. The movement could succeed because (1) it was sociologically more appropriate. It fit into one's life space; (2) it was teaching people who were already raising questions unlike those raised by seminary students with little experience in ministry. From his experiences we wrote articles about the movement seeking to cast it in a more favorable light. [For example, see “The Significance of the Extension Seminary 1972” in the Document Archives.]

The underlying premises of TEE needed to be made more clear. Sam and I argued that it was an appropriate and significant mode of learning because it was sociologically and pedagogically valid. Much of formal education delivers a standard product without particular regard to learner needs and experience. One of the great hopes of TEE was that it would accommodate people whose experience would enrich learning; and who could remain in ministry applying and reflecting upon what they were learning.