

## Two Important Research-Based Missionary Training Principles

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### Abstract

Research carried out on 75 long-term missionaries in Asia revealed two high-impact training principles. While each principle is important in its own right, when combined, training effectiveness is multiplied. These principles, however, go against recent training and equipping trends, especially in the wake of Covid-19. Also, these principles are not a given since many missionaries reported that they lacked at least one of them in their own training experience. In light of the evidence for the importance of these principles, contemporary missionary training would do well to incorporate and emphasize them.

**Key Words:** cross-cultural training, missionary equipping, missionary training, on-field training, pre-field training

### Introduction

What are the most important principles for preparing, training, and equipping cross-cultural missionaries? Practical? Contextualized? Just-in-time? Relevant? From extensive research on long-term missionaries in Asia, two principles emerged that are among the most important in training and equipping cross-cultural missionaries. While each of the principles is important on its own, when combined their effect is compounded.

Before presenting the findings, it is important to clarify this article's use of the word "training." For many cross-cultural missionaries, "training" often conjures up the idea of sitting in an enclosed room with others at round tables that are decorated with colored sticky notes, with a trainer standing in the front of the room using a flipchart or making a PowerPoint presentation. However, this narrow concept of training is *not* what is intended here. This article uses the word "training" in an inclusive sense, meaning the preparation, education, discipling, training, and equipping that is needed for a cross-cultural missionary to do his or her job—including skills, attitudes, knowledge, character traits, and behaviors. It is important to keep this holistic idea of training in mind throughout this article.

### Research Findings

This article's field research was conducted in the spring of 2020 and involved interviewing 75 long-term North American missionaries serving in Asia. The missionaries were serving in 15 Asian countries, represented over 25 sending agencies, and averaged 18 years of cross-cultural service. The interviews inquired about the training and equipping that had proved the most valuable for the missionaries during their years of missions service. Interviewees were asked about the best training they received, what they valued most about their training, those who played a significant part in their training, and what training they would recommend for prospective missionaries. The missionaries were also asked to rank various training options and the rationale for their rankings. (See Appendix A for an interview template.) This article hopes that missionary training will be strengthened by considering the findings from this research.

Three lines of evidence were considered for reaching conclusions from the research: what participants described as the most valuable training they had received, how they ranked certain training options presented to them, and their recommendations and advice to other potential missionaries. In that sense, the evidence was both descriptive and prescriptive. Some participants volunteered information by making statements such as, "The best training I ever received was ...." Others revealed their perceptions in the comparisons they made as they reflected on their training experiences. If they said, "That was a helpful course" at one point and "That was an *extremely* helpful workshop" later, the inference drawn was that the workshop was more valuable than the course. The entirety of the evidence led to several key principles. From these principles, one overarching conclusion was drawn involving two of these principles.

The overall conclusion was that *experiential, relationship-based* training is the most valuable type of training for cross-cultural missionaries. As the missionaries reflected on their missionary careers, thought about the training that benefited them the most, and gave advice to prospective missionaries, with only a few exceptions (considered below), experiential, relationship-based training was most highly valued. Furthermore, while caution should be taken when generalizing research findings from one region and applying them to others, this article suggests that the same

conclusion about missionary training—with the below qualifications in mind—can be applied outside of Asia as well.

### **Principle One: Experiential Training**

Experiential training involves “learning while doing” or “on-the-job” training. In medicine, doctors complete residencies; in the military, paratroopers go through Jump Week; in education, teachers do student teaching. The cross-cultural missionaries interviewed mentioned that their most valuable training came from experiences such as living in a Thai village and serving in their local Thai church; serving on a team in the Philippines under their Filipino team leader; spending a summer serving in the South Pacific with other college students under a dynamic leader; serving in a therapeutic wilderness camp for troubled boys; serving drug addicts in Hong Kong under a spirited leader; and, living and teaching in an intercultural community in Singapore with people from all over Asia. The interviewees spoke more highly of this type of training than any other.

Why is experiential training so valuable? First, it engages the body, mind, and heart. In that sense, it is the most holistic form of training. Second, the training environment overlaps with the environment and context in which trainees will be serving in the future. This overlap allows the missionaries-in-training to become familiar with and gain exposure to situations, challenges, cultures, and languages in which they will serve. Regarding the location of the experiential training, most missionaries said that they would want to train in the same place as they were going to be serving, or at least somewhere similar. Otherwise, they may have a great deal to “unlearn.” As an example, one long-term missionary in Nepal strongly felt that cross-cultural training in Mexico would not have been beneficial for his service in Nepal.

Third, experiential training is valuable because trainees are challenged and stretched to grow, learn, and adapt in ways not possible in other forms of training. It is much more difficult to design stretching or stressful experiences in the classroom or training center than in applied settings. Fourth, these experiences are memorable and often stick with missionaries for the rest of their lives. Several missionaries recalled certain training experiences that took place years or even decades in the past. They had carried those lessons with them into the present. Fifth, experiential training helps trainees know themselves and their own training needs. They see where their skills and knowledge are inadequate or insufficient. They become aware of specialized knowledge and skills they need to gain. They are then able to tailor subsequent educational and training needs based on discoveries made about themselves and their context. As an aside, this increased self-understanding is one of the biggest advantages of receiving experiential training *before going to the field long-term*. While it is possible to continue learning virtually on the field, missionaries often get busy with language study, life, and/or ministry, and ongoing training may not be high on the priority list.

Some readers may be thinking, “Well, don’t missionaries get experiential training naturally when they go to the field?” While some organizations do include on-field training as part of the process of going to the field long-term, many do not. Additionally, few church-based sending programs include an on-field training component or have the resources to do so. As a result, many missionaries get “thrown into the deep end”—including a number of the missionaries interviewed in this project. When asked what they thought about that experience, they spoke of the stress that it caused and the avoidable mistakes they made. While they did get *experience*, it was unnecessarily hard on them and their families. When I asked whether or not they would recommend or encourage that same experience for others, they unanimously responded, “No.” It is also insightful to consider “being thrown into the deep end” from the perspective of other vocations. That is, should soldiers receive their training when they go to war? Should athletes receive their training in competitions? Should doctors learn to practice medicine by experimenting on patients? The answers seem obvious.

### **Principle Two: Relationship-Based Training**

The second training principle that emerged from the research was *relationship-based training*. Relationship-based training is essentially training in which the trainee is engaged at some level with others. “Others” could include a community, a mentor, a coach, a supervisor, a team, or other peer missionaries. The form may be different, but the relational dynamic is similar. Enoch Wan, Mark Hedinger, and Tin V. Nguyen have also written about the importance of this training principle (Wan and Hedinger 2017; Wan and Nguyen 2014). Noteworthy, however, is that these authors’ starting point is theological as opposed to evidence-based, as this article’s research has sought to be.

Relationship-based training is vital for effective training and fulfills numerous functions. First, trainees can observe skills and attitudes being modeled. Young missionaries can “see how others do it” and observe living examples. Second, they have someone to whom they can go with questions when curious or stuck. They can also do so in real time as their life and ministry unfolds. Third, others can provide follow-up, accountability, and support. These are often vital missing pieces after receiving training. Fourth, others often have certain knowledge, experience, and skills that the trainees need. Do others need to be experts? While learning from those with experience and expertise was perceived as highly valuable, special expertise is not always necessary. That is, even if others are not experts, they can still serve as a sounding board, provide a listening ear to help the trainee process experiences, and provide the meaning and stimulation that comes from learning, experiencing adversity, and “being stretched” together.

While the importance of relationship-based training seems obvious, it is astonishing how many missionaries lack such relationships. One missionary said that he did not have anyone to train him or mentor him after arriving on the field. He proactively sought out several individuals in his location who could fill this role. Unfortunately—and to his surprise and dismay—none of them had time for him. Research with other missionaries confirmed such situations were prevalent. Participants gave several reasons. One was that equipping the next generation is not a high priority for most missionaries. It is simply not in their job description. Another reason was that missionaries are too busy. Training takes time, and missionaries are typically busy people. A third reason involved a hesitancy to invest in those who may not have a long-term commitment. One missionary said he would only invest in younger missionaries if they had been on the field for at least two years, thus indicating a commitment that would make offering personal training worth the investment. Several missionaries questioned the value of apprenticeship programs in which new missionaries learn from experienced ones. They doubted whether the missionary would invest in them, would be able to adequately train them, or would “click” well with them. One organization formerly ran a “senior missionary, junior missionary” program, but for whatever reasons had stopped the program.

The missionaries interviewed gave various other reasons why the relationship-based component was missing. One said his leader was on home assignment when he arrived on the field and that he had to figure things out by himself. Others said that they were dropped off in some remote location to learn the language and culture. One even said that he was part of an experimental program in which his organization placed new missionaries in pioneering cities to start church planting movements. When asked why he thought they would implement such a program, his response was, “I don’t know.”

Speaking personally about the importance of relationship-based training as a research finding, this principle was rather surprising to me. As with several interviewees just described, I received very little relationship-based training in my early years in the field. In my first one-year stint, I was sent along with three others to teach at a university overseas and to reach out to students. The four of us functioned independently, had no leader, and were not equipped to serve as a team. Years later when I returned to the field to serve long-term, I joined a team whose leader had been expelled from the country shortly before my arrival. After his departure, there was no replacement and the team became disjointed and disconnected. The relational component was largely missing from my own training experience—even though the basic importance of such training clearly emerged from this article’s underlying research.

### **Combining the Two Principles**

Experiential and relationship-based training are two of the most important principles in training effective, cross-cultural missionaries. However, while these principles are valuable individually, they also have a synergistic effect when combined. Examples include a young carpenter apprenticing with a master craftsman, a young boxer being trained by a seasoned coach, or an army cadet experiencing the camaraderie and encouragement of other cadets in training. It is instructive to imagine removing either the experiential or relationship component from yet other examples, as in the case of a young girl learning to play the piano on her own, a student studying Spanish alone and having no one with whom to practice, or a newly-appointed leader having to figure out how to lead on his own.

Combining the two principles provides some unique advantages. Several missionaries mentioned the importance of having someone “speak into their lives” while engaged in some type of experiential training. Such training surfaced emotional issues or character issues to which the trainer or mentor could then respond. Others mentioned the fact that the training can be provided at the time that is it needed. As trainees are engaged in the training experience, they become aware

of their needs and questions. They can then go to teammates or trainers to ask questions and get feedback. Such timeliness also makes trainees more receptive to receiving the training because they are aware of their need for it. In contrast, pre-field training that is “front-ended” and content-based is usually less engaging, since the trainees are unaware of its relevance or importance.

### Implications and Qualifications

It is important to carefully consider current training trends and practices in light of experiential, relationship-based training principles. In the wake of Covid-19, the trend in training is to make it available online (Handley 2021). Indeed, it may be hard to imagine in our post-Covid-19 context how training could take place without Zoom! Yet even before Covid-19, training was hardly experiential or relationship-based. It often was carried out in the confines of a conference room over a specific number of days. It was common to hear missionaries on the field speak of training as, “We’re going to a training in Penang over the break.” Many missionaries, both potential and active, enrolled in formal intercultural studies or missions programs, assuming that such programs would equip them for cross-cultural service. In my own training, I was given an extensive book list that I was expected to read through and write reports on or discuss. These same approaches to training are still prevalent today.

However, the research results outlined in this article suggest that the most effective training is not aligned with contemporary training practices or trends. The research results also mean that books, seminars, workshops, and formal training in seminaries and Bible colleges should not be the default, go-to training for prospective cross-cultural missionaries—*unless* they include experiential, relationship-based components.

Some qualifications are needed for the sake of clarity. First, this article is *not* suggesting that other forms of training, such as books, workshops, seminars, formal training at seminaries and Bible colleges, and various forms of online training, are *not* valuable. The missionaries that were interviewed certainly benefitted from many of these training forms. The “Research Findings” section above mentioned exceptions to those missionaries who most valued experiential, relationship-based training. Here are two examples. One participant said the Perspectives course was her most valuable training. In fact, she had taken the course more than once and had become a Perspectives coordinator in her city. Another participant said that the doctoral program that he had pursued on the field in Cambodia was the best training he had received. He said that it had helped him to gain a deep understanding of the Cambodian culture, a culture that had previously baffled him. Because he was living in a village at the time, he could immediately use certain elements from his courses in his context. Both of these participants mentioned forms of training that were more content-based than experiential- or relationship-based. These exceptions could point to the fact that missionaries and their needs are unique and there is no cookie-cutter approach to training—which is undoubtedly true. It is also possible, however, that those who most valued content-based or other types of training *had not actually received* experiential, relationship-based training and thus were unable to speak of their value.

Second, this article does *not* wish to imply that experiential, relationship-based training *must* be carried out in person. It can certainly be done virtually, and many missionaries mentioned mentors, supervisors, or peer missionaries in other locations who gave valuable input into their lives. Third, this article is *not* claiming that experiential, relationship-based training always works out. There are indeed bad experiences as well as certain conditions that need to be in place. Considerations include the chemistry between the trainee and his trainer, the context and location of the training, and the timing in which training occurs. (Additional considerations are in Chapter 3 of Lin 2021.)

What this article *is* suggesting is that *relationship-based, experiential training is a superior form of training for most missionaries and that organizations would do well to plan their training with these principles in mind—instead of defaulting to current training practices.*

### Conclusion

Admittedly, experiential, relationship-based training can be messy, costly (in both time and human investment), and difficult to plan and execute. It is much easier for a sending organization to offer a weeklong church planting training than to arrange for an aspiring church planter to sit at the feet of a seasoned church planter who is planting churches. It is also much easier to give trainees a list of books on strategies for world evangelization than to require a trainee to engage in evangelism with an experienced team living abroad. But if experiential, relationship-based training is required to become teachers, doctors, athletes, and soldiers, why should it be any different for missionaries?

The feedback of the missionaries interviewed in this article's research project suggests the need to prioritize experiential, relationship-based training for the next generation of missionaries.

Jesus clearly employed experiential, relationship-based training with his disciples. He brought them along with him, taught them, modeled for them, spent time with them, made himself available for them, answered their questions, and sent them out to preach, heal, and cast out demons. Through Jesus's training, the disciples gained skills and knowledge and grew in character. Their experiences surfaced issues of the heart which Jesus then was able to address in real-time. It was certainly a time investment that he knew would be important in world evangelization. Jesus's example as the Master Trainer confirms the feedback of experienced missionaries living in the days of PowerPoint, Zoom, and sticky notes: experiential, relationship-based training is of central importance.

### Appendix A: Interview Template

1. What's the first thing that comes to mind when I say the word "training"? What about when I say, "equipping the saints for the work of ministry"?
2. Could you give me an overview of the training and equipping you have received for cross-cultural missions service in your field?
3. Using the following categories, please evaluate the aforementioned training in terms of its value and benefit to you:
  - a. What particular courses, seminars, or modules within your school or seminary were most useful to you now?
  - b. Is there anything that stands out as an absolutely essential, "I wouldn't be here without it" training?
  - c. What courses, seminars, or other training programs did you feel were *not* helpful, minimally helpful, or simply a waste of time?
  - d. What *formats* (formal schooling, workshops, seminars, mentorship, apprenticeships, practicums, self-study, books, etc.) did you find particularly helpful?
4. Looking at your training and equipping from a people-centered perspective, who were some of the key people who equipped and trained you for cross-cultural ministry? In what capacity did you relate to and receive training from them?
5. Are you able to identify any training needs that you *wish* you had received? What kind of times on the field have you felt unprepared or ill-equipped for something?
6. How would you assess the way your organization does training? What strengths and weaknesses does it have in training and equipping cross-cultural workers?
7. If you were to advise a new missionary about getting the best training for a lifetime of cross-cultural ministry in your field, what would you advise?
8. If a potential missionary with an undergraduate degree had the choice between the following four types of training, how would you rank these as training options? Why?
  - a. A master's degree from a seminary in missions, cross-cultural ministry, or intercultural studies. This would be a two- to three-year program in the United States or Canada.
  - b. A six-month community-based training program in which he or she lives, eats, and trains with other potential missionaries *in* a cross-cultural environment, but not the one he or she will ultimately serve in (such as training in Mexico, the Philippines, Singapore, or in another third culture). This community-based training would include experienced trainers, morning classes, and afternoon outreach activities.
  - c. A one-year apprenticeship program in which he or she spends a year learning from and serving alongside a long-term, cross-cultural missionary in the country where he/she is planning on serving.
  - d. A professional degree in, for example, teaching English as a foreign language, business, healthcare, I.T., or engineering that could be used in a professional capacity on the mission field.
9. Are you receiving any ongoing training / equipping / continuous learning through either your organization or another source? How would you assess that training?
10. Which of the following do you think would result in the greatest effectiveness in your present ministry? How would you rank them? Why?
  - a. A mentor with whom you meet regularly to discuss ministry direction, challenges, needs, etc. This is not just a spiritual life mentor, but also someone who is on a similar path as you, has done the same type of ministry as you, and can advise you from his/her experience.
  - b. A close-knit, goal-oriented team with a common mission, vision, values, and target people group that meets weekly to pray, plan, strategize, set goals, and celebrate successes, completion of goals, or answers to prayer.

- c. A group of fellow missionaries (your peers) who do not have the same mission. They may serve different target people groups or belong to different organizations but recognize the value of the input and counsel from others and meet weekly or bi-weekly to pray, discuss challenges one other is facing, offer solutions and ideas and suggestions to each other, and with a lesser degree, try to hold one another accountable to weekly goals.
  - d. A personal coach who is not as familiar with your ministry context—they probably haven't served in [your country] or in Asia—but who is very skilled at asking stimulating questions, could help keep you focused and on track, challenge you to set big goals/SMART goals and have a big vision, and just in general, help you make progress towards your ministry goals.
11. The next questions are just to give you some space to share any additional thoughts you have about missions training and equipping. You may think of this in terms of:
- a. If you were in a room of missions trainers, what advice and suggestions would you want to share with them for implementing in their training programs?
  - b. What lessons would you want to pass on to a younger person?
  - c. What have you experienced regarding training that you don't want others to have to experience?
  - d. What have you experienced regarding training that you would also want others to experience?
  - e. What complaints do you have about the training you've received?
  - f. If you were to become a director of training, what would you want to implement into your training?
12. In regard to this interview itself, as you have reflected on and assessed your own training, thought about your organization and how they do training, and thought about how to advise and direct a young person who wanted to get the best possible training, what thoughts, feelings, or reactions has this interview itself stimulated, triggered, or reinforced in you personally?

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