

Distance education as a means of continuing professional development for indigenous Christian theological educators in rural Papua New Guinea

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The need of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) for indigenous teachers at Bible schools in rural Papua New Guinea (PNG) is described. Aspects of culture, traditional adult learning and religion relating to constructs of knowledge and learning are noted, particularly as they affect the development of critical reflective thinking. Topographic, economic and infrastructure factors suggest that Distance Education (DE) by a mixed mode of correspondence and residential seminars is the most appropriate method of delivery of CPD in this context. The use of a modified Australian qualification is raised.

Introduction

People in Papua New Guinea (PNG) are challenged by the 'The tyranny of terrain' (Nyondo, 1999, p.2). There are mountains, rivers, swamps, dense rainforests and islands. Most (87%) of the population live in rural areas (National Statistical Office, 2003). Roads are few, and travel is usually by foot, on rivers / oceans or sometimes by small aircraft. These factors affect the manner in which Continuing Professional Development (CPD) can be provided to faculty of Bible schools in rural PNG.

In 1990 there were approximately 92 Christian theological schools in PNG, with around 58 of these in rural areas. At these rural Bible schools were about 159 full time teachers (Brimblecombe, 1990). I suggest that in 2005 the number of teachers in rural Bible schools is perhaps between 250 - 300. These people are the focus of this work-in-progress.

The paper begins with the background of indigenous teachers at Bible schools in rural PNG. The characteristics of one group and the needs for CPD they expressed are highlighted. The development of Critical Reflective Thinking (CRT) in teachers at Bible schools is presented as an important element of CPD. Aspects of animism which affect CRT are discussed. Distance Education DE as a possible means of CPD in the PNG context is assessed. A proposal to use a modified Australian accredited qualification is outlined.

Background

Census data from PNG shows that 96% of the population claim to be Christian. A great change in religious allegiance from Animism to Christianity has occurred in the past 160 years. Most published literature on missions/church history in PNG includes accounts of training institutions or programs for indigenous church workers¹.

The Evangelical Church of Papua New Guinea (ECPNG) is the denomination arising from the work of the Unevangelised Fields Mission. The first expatriate missionary was sent to PNG in 1931. In 1966 isolated groups of Christians were united to form one denomination. Now, over forty people groups are represented, with a constituency of about 70,000 (Prince & Prince 1981, Prince & Prince 1991).

The first Bible school was run by expatriates, 1945-1952. The aims were to enable new believers to learn more of the Christian faith and how to apply it to their daily lives, to develop leaders for the growing churches, and to train missionaries for work among other people groups. Later other Bible schools were established. A committee was formed in the 1970s to give coherence to various aspects of training.

There is a standard curriculum for a Bible Training Programme which can be done over two or three years; it is not formally accredited. There is no formal denomination-wide job and person description nor duty statement for the position of teacher at a Bible school. These teachers need CPD.

The need of CPD for teachers

Universal Primary Education (UPE) and CPD for teachers

The United Nations (UN) set eight Millennium Development Goals, the second of which is the achievement of Universal Primary Education (UPE). The UN recognises teacher quality affects the accomplishment of UPE, and endorses “implementing inexpensive but effective models of in-service teacher training” (Birdsall, Levine, & Ibrahim, 2005, p.4).

The Commonwealth of Learning sees open and distance learning (ODL) as a key strategy. ‘Training and retraining teachers is the major bottleneck to the achievement of UPE but conventional teacher training methods cannot expand to meet the challenge. ... COL therefore helps Governments develop policies to use ODL for national priorities.’ (2004, p.6).

Gunasekara (2004) reports ‘At present in Papua New Guinea there are about 900,000 students and over 30,000 teachers in more than 6,000 institutions in the national education system. Out of these about 23,000 are not trained’ (p.1). AusAID funded a project in PNG called PASTEP – Primary And Secondary Teacher Education Project – which included a component for ‘a feasibility and design study of distance education in teacher education’ (National Department of Education PNG, 2002). Many teachers in theological education need CPD.

Characteristics and needs of ECPNG teachers of rural Bible schools

In June 2004 a CPD workshop for Bible school teachers was held. From a pool of 89 teachers (and potential teachers) forty one delegates attended, representing 13 Bible schools. Information from members of the pool was collated. A profile suggests that in ECPNG most teachers at rural Bible schools are male, around 40 years of age, have not completed Grade 10, and have been teaching for less than 8 years. I suggest that these people are both underqualified for the responsibility entrusted to them and untrained in the skills of being teachers.

Bible school teachers wanted to be refreshed and renewed, to share with and listen to other experienced teachers; they wanted to improve their skills as teachers, including lesson preparation, how to write lesson plans including objectives, classroom management, and assessment. They wanted to understand content better, know how to write timetables, and how to design a curriculum. They wanted to be more creative and effective, and to discuss Melanesian ways of teaching. They recognised their lack of teaching qualifications, and the infrequency of in-service courses.

These teachers also face challenges such as: theological issues – e.g. world religions, sects, cargoism and cargo cults; increased level of education among villagers compared to their own; impact of globalisation through material goods, knowledge, and attitudes; economy - development - environment issues; HIV/AIDS; increasing cost of fuel; law and order / crime; tribal payback fighting; general breakdown in delivery of government services such as health, education, and post. Oplatka (2004) notes that non-western principals in developing nations show a “tendency towards conservativeness and avoidance of change” (p. 437).

Bible school teachers require skills to meet their needs, face challenges, and make changes; Critical Reflective Thinking could assist them.

Critical reflective thinking

Critical Reflective Thinking (CRT) relates to problem posing and problem solving. I define CRT as a conscious attempt by an individual adult to consider his/her own presuppositions as he/she examines assumptions underlying a certain issue, with the expectation that transformation (personal and/or social) is likely to occur.

There are several models and theories of learning in adulthood (e.g. andragogy, Knowles, 1980). Key authors in adult education relating to CRT are: Paulo Freire, Jack Mezirow, Jane Vella and Stephen Brookfield.

Freire (1970) described conscientization as a process in which people 'achieve a deepening awareness of both the sociocultural reality which shapes their lives and of their capacity to transform that reality through action upon it' (p. 27). Action taken on the basis of reflection is called praxis. Mezirow and Associates (1990) suggested that transformative learning occurs when people reflect on their meaning perspectives, and revise or reject their assumptions. Two emphases have emerged: one is to focus on change in the individual (e.g. Mezirow, 1991; Vella, 2002), and the other is to advocate change in society (e.g. Freire, 1970 & 1973; Brookfield, 2005).

There are several models of phases in critical thinking which can be used to assist others to enhance their skills. Egege & Kutlieh (2004) discuss cultural groups learning critical thinking skills at a western university, and point out that reasoning skill is a cultural construct and is defined, valued and practised in a variety of ways. Hence, we must consider the Melanesian context.

Culture, knowledge and change

Melanesian cultures and traditional religion in PNG have been described as animistic. Animism is defined as '...belief in spiritual beings who are concerned with human affairs and capable of intervening in them...' (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2002). Trompf (1991) identifies five major themes in Melanesian religions: deities and spirits; cosmologies and mythologies; revenge, reciprocity and the explanation of significant events; ritual life, religious specialization and the capacity for change; sacred space and creative artistry.

Whiteman (1984) states: 'Melanesian epistemology is essentially religious. That is, Melanesians rely primarily on religious knowledge as their basis for knowing and understanding the world in which they live' (p.87). McLaughlin and O'Donoghue (1996) present several characteristics of knowledge in the Melanesian context; it was relevant and pragmatic; satisfying; efficient; adult oriented; and village centred. They point out that 'The conceptual framework for Melanesian knowledge processes is inspirational, revelatory and transmissional ... 'new' knowledge was received through initiation, dreams, purchase or through various ritualistic devices ... It was not self generated, nor was it critically assessed' (Traditional Knowledge and Western Knowledge).

Traditional adult learning was characterised by formal education as entrance into and progression through stages of adulthood. McLaughlin and O'Donoghue (1996) state: 'The "secret" or "true" knowledge could not be naturally learned but had to be passed on to the initiates by those who were already in the know' (Curriculum). A person must wait passively to be entrusted with knowledge. Those who enquired would probably be punished.

Learning strategies involved isolation of initiates; distinction between teachers and learners; verbal skills and performance of ritual actions through observation, imitation and successive approximation until rote memorization of a set body of knowledge led to mastery; group activities reinforcing orthodoxy and conformity through fear of public shame, which enhanced the status of the knowledge custodians.

The way of life had been revealed by spirit beings; it was thus perfect and needed no change. In general, knowledge is seen as static and finite. It provides logical and rational explanations for all that is. Change occurs only by endorsement of spirit beings. Trompf (1991) notes that innovation or 'shifts in practice, as well as of belief and outlook, needed to be vouchsafed by contact with extra-mundane dimensions' (p.26).

I suggest that a background of Animism with the features of Melanesian epistemology just described are a hindrance to the development of CRT in adult learning. This is expressed in studies from PNG.

Kavanamur (2001) described PNG cultural factors affecting business organisations: e.g. low abstract thinking (high on associative thinking), past-present oriented time perspective (short-term), passive/reactive task orientation, low individualism (high collectivism), high uncertainty avoidance (c.f. Hofstede, 1997). Kelegai & Middleton (2002) note that cultural attitudes about knowledge and elders mean that 'students are expected to respect teachers as a source of knowledge and wisdom, and never dispute what is presented' (p.18).

Kingsbury (2002) identified ten factors having impact on teaching for critical reflective thought in Anglophone Africa, but did not highlight the impact of traditional religion and epistemology. A program for CPD which includes CRT must consider these issues.

Distance education as a means of delivery of CPD

Distance Education in PNG

Wong (1992) provided a short history of the use of DE in PNG, which started at the Correspondence School in 1952. This has been updated by Nyondo (2003). An organisation called the PNG Association of Distance Education (PNGADE) has ceased to operate (personal communication from past President, Mr Paraka Pena, September, 14, 2005).

Gunasekara (2004) stated 'The existing Teacher Training Colleges cannot cope with the demand....Training of teachers in the distance education mode is the only viable solution considering the huge amount of money involved in training teachers in the normal mode' (p.2).

Factors affecting DE in PNG

The proposed CPD programme for teachers at rural Bible schools in PNG is planned to be print based with two residential seminars per year. Nyondo (2003) states '... print will continue to dominate for a long time as the main medium for distance education in Papua New Guinea' (p.79). He further adds 'The use of videos, television [,] computers and other technologies is not possible in the rural areas at the moment. Radio based programmes, if they were developed would be very popular and more accessible to the majority of the population' (p.80).

Christian church and mission groups in PNG have used DE for many years via printed materials, in a variety of vernacular languages as well as the national languages. At times these have been supplemented with audio cassettes.

Nyondo (2003) identifies numerous factors affecting DE: home and study environment, affordability of tuition fees, transportation, and learner characteristics (age, maturity, and learning styles), lack of place for study in the house or neighbourhood, homes usually busy with relatives through out the day, drop in motivation due to lack of support from immediate family members, physical tiredness after producing food for their family or for sale, isolation and lack of peer support, lack of access to other support services, poor community attitude to further education – unwillingness to pay, no Government funded scholarships for DE.

Other issues should be considered: Banda (2004) draws attention to the specific needs of female DE students (in Malawi); extensive support services need to be provided - Roberts (2004) discusses the situation in South Africa; Dash (2004) emphasises that opportunities for face to face contact are important

Thomas (2004) describes benefits of DE for teacher training – e.g. gaining skills and attitudes on site, little disruption to family, and less costs than residential training. I suggest that DE, using a mixed mode of print media and residential seminars, is an appropriate way to provide CPD for indigenous teachers at Bible schools in rural PNG.

The proposed CPD

My intention is to modify an existing qualification accredited within the Australian Qualifications Framework. This might facilitate accreditation with the Melanesian Association of Theological Schools.

Model	A Competency-based training (CBT) approach to develop skills, knowledge and attitudes in Christian Ministry (c.f. Vocational Education and Training (VET)).
Level	Certificate IV
Delivery	Distance Education
Format	Mixed: correspondence + residential workshops
Time to complete	2 years

Two qualifications could be modified. The old BSZ40198 Certificate IV in Assessment and Workplace Training has recently been replaced with the new TAA40104 Certificate IV in Training and Assessment. Some units focus on issues similar to those identified by the Bible school teachers as their felt needs.

Ormsby, Naiman, & Berkovits (2002) described a program of teacher training in PNG and claimed that 'adaptation of curricula to foreign settings can be effective' (p.98). However, Thaman (2004) warns against 'the homogenising effects of globalism'. He states 'We [Pacific Islanders] are interested in participating actively in discussions about our own knowledge systems, as well as having time to research, record and disseminate that knowledge and build on our capabilities' (p.15).

Conclusion

Indigenous teachers at Bible schools in rural PNG are generally underqualified and untrained for the job. A programme for CPD needs to be provided. DE is seen as the best means of delivery, by using print materials and residential seminars. The modification of an Australian qualification might facilitate the design of the CPD. CRT is seen as an important skill for these teachers to develop to empower them to face the challenges of an increasingly turbulent world, which impacts remote and isolated villages in PNG. This may assist in the contextualisation of principles and practices which impinge from outside, and so lead to personal and social transformation.

Given that Christianity is the largest religion, with about 33% of the world population, and that the majority of these adherents are in non-western nations, then the field of CPD for theological educators in non-Western contexts is an example of an emerging market for international DE.

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Notes

1. Anglican: Wetherell (1977); Lutheran: Wagner & Reiner (1986); United Church: Williams (1972); Methodist: Burton (1926); London Missionary Society: Goodall (1954); Catholic - Missionaries of the Sacred Heart: Delbos (1985). Mission literature in general provides important information, e.g. ethnography / anthropology, linguistics and history (Whiteman 1983, 1986, 2003).

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