

TECHNOLOGY & TEE

Everyone is aware that we have entered the digital age, where new technologies offer many new possibilities for delivery of information, for connecting people and for providing spaces for them to work together. How might these be used so we see more lives and communities transformed through encounter with Jesus Christ?

One huge area of development is the use of technology to provide access to resources and information. Here 'digital' has advantages over 'paper' in a number of areas: younger people may prefer it, storage can be more secure in areas of persecution, and materials can be accessed globally. Websites are already making resources and training materials available in many languages, e.g., *farsinet.com* in Persian.

In most countries different versions of the Bible are available for your mobile phone. MAF Learning Technologies has developed an exciting Android app called Estante (Spanish

for bookshelf; see www.maf.org/estante) that allows users to download and share resources.

So far, so good. Digital technology is well able to make information available, online and offline. But can new technologies help in teaching, training, discipling and preparing godly leaders?

In this area, experience of pastors, teachers and cross-cultural workers from New Testament times onwards has repeatedly emphasised several vital principles:

- 1) the importance of content: teaching must be sound, Christ-focused and Bible-based;
- 2) the importance of obedience to Christ: at the heart of discipleship;
- 3) the importance of relationship and community: modelling, mentoring, growing as disciples and learning to be church are not solitary activities. And Asian cultures in general place great importance on relationships – they are 'hi-touch' before they are 'hi-tech'!
- 4) the importance of contextualisation: understanding culture, and addressing relevant needs, so that real learning and lasting transformation take place.

Connected to these principles, we might add another: the importance of good educational methodology. Training and discipling are not only about imparting information – they



are also about equipping with new skills, and formation of godly character. Head, hands and heart are all three vital for whole-life growth in service. New technology needs to be harnessed to serve these training goals, not used for its own sake!

To ignore these principles is at best ineffective, and at worst dangerous. Examples might be downloading materials prepared in one culture for learners in a very different culture, trying to create a course from videos of lectures or sermons that are not interactive, or focusing simply on information for the head, and ignoring practical application and the needs of the community.

So, one way forward is to start with models of training that are in line with these principles, and that have already proved fruitful, and then ask how technology can enrich and strengthen something already good.

One example is TEE, traditionally standing for 'Theological Education by Extension', but now more readily explained as 'Tools to Equip and Empower'. TEE is a method of church-based training that has been active for half a century, and in any one year probably at least 100,000 Asian and Arab Christians are learning through TEE¹. TEE combines three different strands of learning: individual learning through home study prepares the student for interactive, participative learning at a weekly group meeting led by a trained facilitator, which leads to learning by doing through practical application. In fact, for decades TEE has been using the 'flipped



classroom' now favoured by progressive campus-based institutions!²

How can technological innovation be used to enrich TEE?

- **Through delivery of course materials:**

Print-on-demand companies now allow TEE courses to be printed anywhere in the world, such as Nepali language materials in the USA, Canada, the UK and Australia to serve the Nepali diaspora there. And prototypes are being developed for courses on hand-held devices that can easily be brought to group meetings.

- **Through support for group leaders:**

Small group leaders are so vital to the

fruitfulness of TEE. The internet can provide them with additional downloadable materials and can connect them with peers and mentors for continuing training and support.

- **Through connecting groups with a wider circle of learners:** Regular, usually weekly, face-to-face group meetings connected with the local church remain a core strength for TEE, with obvious advantages. But technology allows occasional connections with others outside the local context. For instance, diaspora Afghans are linking up using Skype.

Jorge* It was in a prison cell that Jorge's faith in Jesus Christ deepened and strengthened. Unjustly imprisoned in a predominantly Islamic country, Jorge already knew he was a Christian, but his faith was weak. He was visited by local TEE tutors during his imprisonment, and their encouraging presence helped to bolster his faith. He began taking TEE courses, was tutored by personal visits and mail, and then completed both his certificate and diploma courses of study.

As Jorge's faith and personal conviction grew, his fellow prisoners and guards noticed a difference in how he conducted himself. His lived-out testimony gave Jorge opportunities to talk about Christ with those around him. His TEE training helped Jorge in personal scripture study, and enabled him to instruct and counsel fellow prisoners in the Christian faith, as well as to tackle questions of faith from sceptics. Now released from prison, Jorge plans to continue his studies. ☞

Paul* After coming to faith in Jesus in 1985 whilst studying at a Syrian university, Paul was encouraged by local church leaders to develop his gift of teaching. He was ready to serve the Lord in any way he could. But since Paul lived far from any seminary or Bible institute, his dream of theological education seemed nearly impossible. It would involve leaving his work and family, to which he was also committed.

However, in 1996 when a group of TEE leaders travelled to Syria to hold a tutor training seminar, Paul enrolled to become a tutor. The church in Syria was experiencing revival at that time, and TEE courses helped Paul greatly as he provided leadership to the growing churches.

In March 2005, Paul gained his Bachelor of Theology degree. He says, "I thank the Lord for TEE. It has been able to reach so many people like me in places where seminaries do not exist." ☞

Sonam* was a Muslim Mullah, a righteous young man who took his faith seriously. In his Central Asian homeland everyone was meant to be Muslim and only traitors turned away from this way of life.

One day while saying his prayers in Arabic, he suddenly found himself declaring, in his mother tongue, "Jesus is Lord". He cursed himself for such blasphemy and thought he was losing his mind! Then, in his dreams, he met a man in white and the experience changed him profoundly. In the past he had been witnessed to by a Christian friend, and now he felt he must go to church with him. There he soon came to know that, indeed, Jesus is Lord.

Sonam grew in his new-found faith and went on to study theology at Bible College. During this time, and immediately afterwards, God used him to plant two or three churches. But he found it both challenging and problematic that, in such a mountainous country, it was not easy to visit his groups to nurture them, and it became all the more difficult when he started a family and had young children.

After some time, he was introduced to TEE and realised that this was just what he needed. Here was a way to help his groups grow in faith and become effective disciples of Jesus even when he was not there! Sonam now leads the TEE programme in his country, and he is convinced of its importance to help people, especially in isolated areas, to grow in their knowledge and understanding of the Lord. ☞

Shahid "I was studying for my MA when I was asked to translate a TEE course called the 'Life of Christ'. I was not a believer at that time, but I had a very good relationship with some missionary friends and I had already translated some books for them.

"As I was translating this course I had the opportunity to learn in-depth about Christianity and I think that Jesus was descending slowly, gradually, into my heart. Eventually, when I was translating the sixth book, I became a follower of Christ! Now, I am translating more books into the Bangla language, to make them available to our Bangladeshi people." ☞

Wailes "I first came to know about TEE in 1999, when I was a university student in Bangladesh. At that time, I had no possibility of going to seminary for theological education, so I was excited to be able to attend TEE classes. I continued studying until I qualified for my Bachelor of Theology degree. I became a TEE tutor myself in 2004, and since then I have had great opportunities to train many people.

"I had one group of students from a low-caste Hindu background who worked in a hospital as sweepers. Since TEE is so flexible, I was able to organise group meetings according to their free time, even if it was at night. It was exciting to see how, during their night duty, they took the opportunity to share with their nonbelieving co-workers the things they had learned from the group meetings. If they faced any difficult questions, then we would discuss them at the next group meeting. In this way, through the TEE programme, many came to know about Christ and to accept Him as their Saviour." ☞

* Names have been changed

Another fruitful training model is the residential college that brings learners together in community for an intensive, immersive experience. How can technology serve this pathway for learning?

Multimedia resources could enrich it. An example here is Third Millennium Ministries (thirdmill.org), an organisation that provides a seminary-level, multimedia, theological curriculum as a resource for training colleges worldwide. The aim is to free up time for local trainers to focus less on imparting information, and more on training in ministry skills and personal development.

In England, All Nations Christian College provides cross-cultural training, with a strong commitment to learning in community, and reaching head, hands and heart (see www.allnations.ac.uk). A team was tasked with developing e-learning courses – but could e-learning create community at a distance, and lead to real spiritual growth? Team member Kate Wiseman comments, “We were amazed at the level of interaction and the deep relationships that were built up between e-learning students.”

So technology can play an effective role in bringing together individuals unable to meet face to face. But perhaps ‘blended’ learning programmes offer a good way forward in some situations – the advantages of face-to-face participation with the possibilities of e-learning. In a blended programme, learners come together face to face for short

periods of time, and then use e-learning for the rest. For example, the Pars Theological Centre (www.parstheology.com) is providing Farsi language training by Iranians for Iranians. The Centre’s BA programme blends online study, intensive face-to-face teaching conferences, and church-based training with mentoring and opportunities for ministry.

In summary, technology does not need to replace what is already fruitful – but it can make it even better. It can improve access to resources where needed, complement face-to-face relationships of learners with learners, and learners with tutors, and link isolated learners – opening doors that were previously closed to many people.

Many possibilities are ripe for development. Let’s pray for the people, time and financial resources to use the technology that is already available to serve the Great Commission! ☺

This article was prepared by Increase, a group with the aim of connecting and strengthening church-based training movements, including TEE, across Asia and beyond. For more information see www.increasenetwork.org.

¹ For more stories about the use of one of the sources of TEE courses used widely in Asia and beyond, see www.seaninternational.com/news.html. For more information on TEE, see the Increase TEE e-newsletter on the Increase website.

² ‘Flipped classroom’ – a model in which teachers pre-assign whatever lecture-type material is needed as homework, and use the classroom time for peer and interactive learning.

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