

Elders Council – a method of teaching in a way that is vulnerable to majority world contexts, even if one has no choice but to use English.

By Jim Harries, January 2019.

... A particular methodology has come to mind. As far as I am aware, this methodology is unique to me (!). Usually when one thinks that, one subsequently discovers that others have used it. I would value some 'expert' feedback on it.

I think many of us are aware of some of the basic issues / traps, when it comes to teaching missions to non-Western people: we tend to teach them how to reach themselves as if they were us, instead of teaching them how to engage with their own (or related) cultures themselves according to who they are. Allow me to explain that:

Everyone sees the world from their own vantage point. This results in people's interpretations of what is going on around them being very culturally loaded. Of course, 'we' often don't perceive that; individuals, especially when senior in years or experience, frequently see themselves as having a broad accommodating outlook. I have come to see that as a common kind of 'self-deception'.

The above realisation has had me come up with an inter-cultural teaching methodology that endeavours to 'force' myself as tutor into a learning position. That is the methodology that I am here describing. It endeavours, in other words, to by all means enable me as missions' tutor to 'hear' as locals hear. This is far from adequate compensation for actually learning the indigenous language in context. But it is a means that moves towards facilitating indigenous students to themselves address 'real' local issues, with the tutor 'overhearing' the discussion.

I suspect that this methodology is particularly apt in Africa. Most African people groups have been colonised. Even those who have not been, have been overwhelmed by a 'superior wisdom' and a superior civilisation from the West, to which they have, on the surface, largely capitulated. As a result, a visitor to many parts of Africa will see much evidence around them that suggests that African people are 'European-like.' For example someone is likely to be addressed in a European language, find European educational systems, European governmental terminology, languages, road signs, roads, even house design, people's clothing, phone-technology, and so on. All these things can look very familiar!

On the other hand, when one begins to explore in more depth, differences with European society are everywhere; deep, and concealed! If ignored, those differences cause endless projects and plans that are 'made in Europe' to flounder. The methodology I am here advocating is a means to begin to bring those differences to the surface. It is a means to encourage African people to build on their own life-foundations, rather than overtly to 'ditch' them so as to comply with a formal but foreign alternative.

We called this methodology 'elders council'. I implemented it a few times in the bible college I was teaching at in Kenya at the time (between 2001 and 2010). I think it worked very well, or even, was excellent. On the other hand, I concede that the students didn't all like it. The reason I think – it was a methodology that pushed them towards their own issues, whereas they liked when at college / university to learn to address things in Western ways. I report on the way I used this methodology in 2001 here: <http://www.jim-mission.org.uk/articles/elders.html> On that occasion the topic was customary law and the church. I subsequently used the same methodology to teach missions.

1. Students, with the lecturer, prepare a set of questions. These should be open ended and focused around the topic in hand, e.g. how to do mission within an African context, as an African. We found we needed about 30 questions.
2. 'Elders' are invited to attend the school. These should usually be local church leaders. They are told they will sit with students for 2 or 3 hours. They are told that students will ask them questions. They should not be told the theme in advance. This is because the answers we are looking for are not answers they will acquire by researching the theme from books (written in the West), but from the context of their routine ministry.
3. Elders are told in advance that what they communicate will subsequently be analysed in detail. They are treated respectfully, according to expectations of their own 'culture'. The elders are asked the questions, one at a time. They are free to answer as they are led, i.e. as they like.
4. It is important that the questions be asked using the indigenous language of the elder concerned. Ideally, even should the elder be good at English, they should not even hear the English (difficult in practice). Even if they hear the English, they are told they must respond using their own languages. The questions they should respond to are not the ones in English, but the ones translated into the local vernacular.
5. Students of the language group of the elder do the translation, back and fore.
6. All students listen attentively. Roles can be designated, such as:
 - students familiar with the language concerned, who pay special attention to the translation process;
 - students who take copious notes – who record content;
 - students who are asking questions and are actually dialoguing with the visitors (they may be encouraged to, if the elder raises a query, simply to repeat a question rather than to explain it, as the latter would clearly introduce bias);
 - students who look out for clues like anger, fidgeting, body language, eye movement, stuttering, hesitation, side-ways glances, looking down, coughs, frustration and other emotions, by the elder.
7. In subsequent discussion of students together with the lecturer, a detailed analysis can be made: what was the person saying, what were they trying to communicate, what were they concealing, what were they feeling, what key words were open to mistranslation, how were

terms translated into local dialect, was the elder drawing on their Western education or their indigenous knowledge, etc. etc. etc.

- I found the above to be a profound experience with the students. In effect, it was an unpacking of their 'culture' with respect to the theme – e.g. in this case mission. Obviously, one very soon hit issues, like how to translate the term 'mission' and 'missionary'. Did those terms refer to foreigners? Should one use apostle, or translations thereof ... and so on. It was my conviction that these issues are exactly the key issues that we do not address when simply passing on what we know using English, even if we encourage a lot of student engagement / discussion.

8. Students could write up, having examined the issue concerned at some depth with genuine in-depth respect to their own community and culture.