
TEACHING IN A
DISTANT CLASSROOM

Crossing Borders for
Global Transformation



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Introduction



Crossing borders to teach in a distant classroom can be the most surprising, challenging, difficult and rewarding experience life has to offer. However, even the most experienced teacher can be knocked off her feet by the hardships that come from living in a different culture. People who take teaching assignments overseas often underestimate these difficulties. As a result, they struggle both inside and outside the classroom.

The opportunity to live and teach abroad is sometimes idealized. Among Christians, the thought of serving Christ in a foreign land can seem noble and romantic. However, expatriates can be blindsided by the challenges of living and teaching crossculturally. Simple tasks such as ordering dinner in a local restaurant or making copies for a class assignment can become nightmares in a crosscultural situation. Anyone living and teaching overseas quickly discovers that norms of social discourse, manners, customs and daily life are gone. The honeymoon evaporates all too soon. Day-to-day difficulties and struggles can become overwhelming. In overseas classrooms, crosscultural challenges create conflicts and misunderstandings that not only can reduce the credibility of the foreign teacher but seriously hamper learning and create frustration for both teacher and student.

Classroom assumptions about learning and teaching that apply in the teacher's home culture don't necessarily transfer. Cross-cultural teaching requires a committed individual who is well-prepared, reflective and most importantly, teachable. Misguided motives, combined with a lack of crosscultural understanding and preparedness, can cause even the most seasoned educator to crash and burn overseas.

Overseas teaching assignments require crosscultural sensitivity and self-understanding. The teacher in a distant land is like an athlete preparing for a game: practicing, knowing his own strengths and weaknesses, understanding the rules of the game and the layout of the field. Educators must understand their own cultural backgrounds and their personal limitations. This demands analysis of teaching strategies and understanding the host culture and its students' particular view of the world before classes even begin.

We have identified three common types of Christians teaching overseas. The first is the *seasoned veteran educator* with an extensive teaching background in North America. This person is an expert in her academic discipline, has a wide range of classroom experiences, and possesses a clear, well-formed philosophy of education and methodology, yet has no (or very limited) overseas exposure.

The second type is the professional expert. We call this the *sink-or-swim instructor*. They are not trained teachers, but perhaps experts in their fields. Many learned their teaching methods as graduate students. Some may be college-level instructors, while others became successful in their vocations and now want to teach overseas. However, North Americans are not innately equipped to teach internationally simply because they have a graduate degree or marketplace experience. Success in the overseas classroom is not guaranteed by North American know-how. Most of these well-meaning instructors find that teaching in North America and teaching overseas are two very different experiences.

Finally, there is the *recent college grad*. These are the most common, especially in Southeast Asia. These are enthusiastic, gung-ho

followers of Christ who have earned their college degrees, signed up with a missions-sending organization, received the blessing of families and churches, and left home earnestly desiring to change the world for Jesus Christ. Unfortunately, good intentions don't necessarily lead to good teaching. The recent college grad brings energy and enthusiasm into the overseas classroom but few have any teaching skills, understanding of pedagogy, educational philosophy or even the basic skills needed to design a course syllabus. Even those who have some experience or formal teacher-training may lack the necessary insight, knowledge and understanding required to teach effectively in a crosscultural setting.

For the seasoned veteran educator, this book offers some guidelines for developing a fully orbbed Christian worldview. It aims to shed light on the importance of excellence in the classroom and in relationships with students and faculty. Our goal is to help the seasoned veteran educator better understand teaching overseas as a true Christian mission, with Christ's lordship over all things.

For the sink-or-swim instructor, this text will help you form a philosophy of education and develop a pedagogical style. Our goal is to provide a starting point for shaping and focusing existing beliefs about the crosscultural classroom and for developing a more comprehensive Christian philosophy of education.

Finally, for the recent college grad, this text will encourage your reflection about experiences in education and help develop a working philosophy of education for teaching in a crosscultural environment. It will also help you consider how faith shapes your teaching and how teaching is a true Christian mission and calling.

This text is also designed to help the inexperienced *English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instructor*. Foreign universities are often willing to accept native English speakers holding a bachelor's degree (in any subject) to teach EFL courses. This need for EFL instructors is God's opportunity for believers to serve Christ in nations that are closed to traditional missionaries and Christian workers. Many such EFL teachers have their hearts in the right

place, but the majority have little professional training or teaching experience. They may have taught Sunday school or Vacation Bible School or given professional presentations in the workplace, but these are not adequate preparation for teaching in an overseas classroom. Some missions organizations provide a six-week EFL intensive training course, but this is often still insufficient. This book is offered as a vital resource and training manual to equip instructors in grappling with the complexities of teaching in preparation to teach in a distant EFL classroom.

Because we are evangelical Christians, our concerns reach beyond pedagogy and academic discipline to include a strong commitment to the spiritual lives of our students and colleagues. This book is especially for other evangelical Christians who find themselves called to teach outside their homelands, taking seriously the words of Matthew 28:19-20:

Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen. (KJV)

Most biblical scholars would agree that not all Christians are called to be formal evangelists. But certainly every Christian has gifts and abilities that can be tools to fulfill the Great Commission. Individuals with the ability to teach can further God's kingdom and reach the lost in nations with little or no Christian witness. As followers of Christ who teach, we can enter distant classrooms with well-honed teaching skills, excellent pedagogy, and a well-defined philosophy of education with a comprehensive Christian worldview. By doing so, we bring glory to God and Jesus Christ in classrooms around the world.

Whether you are a new or seasoned teacher, we hope this book will challenge you to think Christianly about your pedagogy. We will provide opportunities to engage in critical evaluation of the beliefs

and values that are foundational for educational practices. Our goal is to spark reflection on educational theories and to differentiate between Christian and secular thinking about education and classroom teaching. We hope that you will be better prepared to present Christ within your academic discipline in a manner that is philosophically sound, practical and intellectually viable.

Real-life examples and stories are provided to illustrate principles and to emphasize the importance of critical reflection in the foreign classroom. As authors, we understand the limitations of any writing. So we include sections at the end of each chapter titled “Going Deeper, Going Further” that provide additional questions, exercises and recommended readings for further study.

This book is based on our international, crosscultural and personal teaching experiences in nearly a dozen nations. We have worked together on an academic training project in Kabul, Afghanistan. We have witnessed firsthand the good work Christian teachers have done around the globe. But we have also seen Christian teachers who have struggled and felt ill-equipped for their task. It is our hope and desire that this book can empower and equip our brothers and sisters in Christ who have dedicated their lives to teach for him in a distant classroom. We hope you will develop a Christian mind, thinking Christianly and critically about living and teaching as you bring the hope, life and light of Christ to students and colleagues abroad.