

THE INTERACTIVE PROCESS IN PRE-FIELD TRAINING

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Preparation for cross-cultural service is becoming more demanding, as the gap widens between the complexity of the task and the readiness of trainees. Those who are preparing for service in difficult cross-cultural settings need more than mere facts. For this reason, an active, indeed interactive process is required, in order that critical personal issues may be adequately dealt with during training.

Definition of the Interactive Process

An interactive process is vital for adequate preparation for effectiveness in cross-cultural ministry. Participants are actively involved. They interact with ideas, concepts, and questions in ways which cause them to look deep into themselves, and hopefully grow as they do. People rarely change by receiving copious amounts of information. They change as a result of confronting core issues which speak to their inner lives.

Participants must confront, grapple with, and struggle with key concepts, principles and values. These core issues have been carefully selected as essential to be wrestled with at that particular time in their journey through the preparation process.

They enter into serious dialogue with God, themselves, family (if relevant), staff members, and fellow participants. Hopefully this dialogue will bring them into a confrontation process which will bring to the surface values, attitudes, convictions, and behavior patterns, many of which have been unconscious until now.

Purposes of the Process

Personal growth is the first purpose of this process. As participants confront these issues in a safe, caring environment, they normally begin to grow in areas important for effective service. The specific areas to be addressed are determined by the goals of the specific training program.

A second purpose is to provide an ongoing process for determining where each person will serve God most effectively. As participants fully enter into this decision-making process, it becomes a “no-lose” experience, whatever the outcome. In traditional methodology, trainees do their best to squeeze through an organization’s training process. It’s like an obstacle course. If they jump high enough, run fast enough, and keep out of trouble by not revealing weaknesses,

perhaps trainers won't give them a failing grade. If they pass they "win;" if they don't pass, they "lose."

But the interactive process is a time in which participants and staff together seek a mutual understanding of where growth is needed. Participants can be honest with themselves and with staff members. They don't have to hide their warts, because they believe God will use their honesty to provide maximum opportunities for growth. Staff members can be honest with participants. They can lovingly give feedback because they believe God will use their perception as a key element in the process of preparing participants for maximally effective service.

Key Factors in the Process

The interactive process is very delicate. It is an exquisite procedure in which several essential variables must be in balance. It works best when each element of the process is sound and interacts effectively with the other components. As each factor is described below, keep in mind that it interacts with every other element. Also remember that the persons and other factors involved don't have to be perfect to be effective.

1. Spirit of Place.

The spiritual, emotional and interpersonal environment encourages growth, healing and openness through active participation. It is safe and emotionally secure--a place where deep, heart-level sharing can take place, without fear. Mutual trust pervades relationships. An atmosphere of mutual servanthood encourages ministry to one another. A sense of corporate worship prevails. The stress level is high enough to enhance interdependence, but not so high that participants isolate themselves from one another. Although participants are stretched, confronted, corrected, and led into self-correction, staff work hard at preventing life from being so rushed, hectic and pressured that time for reflection and interaction is discouraged.

Children are valued and welcomed as participants, rather than seen as a bother or a competing element which must be kept quiet and out of the way as much as possible. Single and married people, females and males are all equally valued and encouraged to fully interact with one another in godly ways.

The first day of the program is crucial for laying a positive foundation. Indeed, arrival experiences set the tone for the rest of the program. For example, when staff members serve as servants to newcomers in helping them get settled, participants begin to experience the "spirit of place" in tangible ways, and most will respond with greater trust and security.

A few adjectives may help to describe a spirit of place which enhances the interactive process: loving, honest, open, transparent, warm, wet (appropriate crying is valued), unhurried, peaceful, worshipful, safe, and secure. The spirit of place is actually the result of the following factors effectively functioning together as an integrated whole.

2. The Staff.

Staff members include everyone involved in making the program happen. All are vital to the process, although obviously those who have more direct involvement with participants carry greater responsibility. Books could be written to describe all the important qualities, attitudes and behaviors of staff members. Only a few key issues vital to the interactive process are mentioned here.

Staff members are actively growing in their own lives, and are serious about their personal relationship to Christ. They are growing in self-awareness, recognizing their own strengths and weaknesses, while not defensive about revealing who they are to others. In other words, they are willing and able to be vulnerable--Honest, Open and Transparent-- with God, themselves, each other, and with participants. They are effective observers, encouragers and confronters. They are not defensive in response to defensiveness, hard questions and confrontation.

Their field experience is in correct perspective: they neither white-wash it nor do they paint it black, and they are willing to talk about it honestly. They are able to utilize their cross-cultural experiences and insights in observing and understanding each participant's areas of needed growth, and confronting potentially destructive patterns.

They model healthy interaction in relationships with their own family, other staff members, and participants. They are not rushed or pressured, and are able to clearly communicate that they have time for participants and for each other. They go out of their way to make themselves available in formal and informal settings. They enjoy and value spending time with participants.

3. The Participants.

Before attending, applicants are provided with adequate information about the nature of the program. Issues such as its purpose, nature of the courses provided, amount of work and commitment required, nature of the process, and desired outcomes are addressed.

4. The Process.

By “the process” we mean the complex dynamics of all events in the program, with an emphasis on interaction: between participants and God, themselves, staff, other participants, and with the material presented. In programs where personal and interpersonal growth is in focus the process may be more important than the content.

Each facet of the program is thoughtfully conceived and constantly examined with the process in mind, with the goal of maximum learning through mutual interaction. “Learning” here refers not merely to learning facts, but also in growing spiritually, emotionally and interpersonally. For example, courses on cross-cultural adaptation not only present facts, but are designed to confront participants with the need to personally examine their own values and expectations in relation to those of another culture.

When the process is valued, it sometimes takes priority over content. For example, when a critical event occurs, time is taken to debrief or “process” the event by providing opportunity for open sharing, expression of feelings, prayer, or whatever else will help turn the event into a “teachable moment” in the lives of participants and staff alike. This may mean that some course content may be dropped or rearranged in order to have time for processing these events.

Perhaps the interactive process can best be described by these adjectives: self-confrontive, participative, mutual, affirming, intense but unpressured, God-ward, secure, caring, deep, profound, challenging, lovingly confrontive, relevant to field life, and appropriately stressful (not contrived, but a natural outcome of the whole program).

5. The Content.

Content not only includes course curricula, but all information given throughout the program. Courses are carefully designed to address the specific issues participants must grapple with at this particular stage of their journey toward serving God. Typically, staff members continually face internal and external pressures to add more and more content to the program. This requires regular, painful reassessment of content in light of program values, purposes and realities. As content increases, an inverse relationship develops between amount of content and quality of interaction with it. Too much material seriously hinders participants from effectively absorbing, confronting and assimilating it on a deep level.

The content of chapel or worship times is crucial. As staff members openly share about aspects of their own journey, participants are explicitly or implicitly invited to confront their own related issues and discuss them with staff.

Critical content includes vital issues participants must confront themselves with. These issues may be presented as very personal questions which participants ask themselves, and often struggle with. These are designed to help them get to know themselves in relation to key values, attitudes, expectations and skills which will influence their ministry, especially in a cross-cultural setting. As responses are shared with various trainers, staff are helped to get to know participants better also.

6. The Schedule.

Every facet of the schedule should be examined regularly, to make sure it enhances rather than inhibits the interactive process. A question that must be constantly asked is, “Does the content or the process drive the schedule?” When growing pressures to increase content prevail, the schedule becomes more pressured and hectic, and priceless opportunities for participants to wrestle with core issues in their lives are lost.

Summary

The reader may feel a little overwhelmed by the complexity and difficulty of making the interactive process happen. But the effort is well worth it. And it doesn't have to be done perfectly to be productive. Every effort to make a program more interactive will probably increase its effectiveness.

We trust that this paper will serve as a stimulus for staff members of mission training programs to continue working toward an interactive process, and as a checklist with which they may examine each facet of their programs in light of its contribution toward that process.