

“From Answers to Questions: A Personal Journey”¹

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It happened under some palm trees during a pick-up basketball game on the other side of the world. Although it took less than two minutes, it turned my whole approach to education upside-down. Assigned to manage a relief and agricultural extension program in Zaire, I became a part-time math and religion teacher when political turmoil disrupted local schools.

Four weeks of language (Kituba) classes gave me enough background to begin teaching religion. Armed with several translations of the Bible and an English-Kituba dictionary, I began to teach. Because of the total immersion in the language, I learned it quickly and well.

The class did poorly on the first test so I began to copy my lecture notes on the blackboard. This gave my students a more accurate record of the course content. Knowing that most families owned no books, my sense of satisfaction grew as I watched the students fill their notebooks with the information I transmitted in class.

The math class was a more difficult challenge. I myself had done very poorly as a student in math. What little I understood was the “old” rather than the “new” math I was expected to teach. The textbook was written in French, Zaire’s national language, which I could neither read nor understand.

When I had originally raised this as a potential problem, the school director advised me to assign lots of homework problems, take French lessons, and remember that the students had no other alternative. Without me, they would be totally unprepared for a national math test at the end of the year. I agreed to teach.

On the first day I assigned several math problems and allocated the remaining time for homework. I began the second class by asking for volunteers to show their solutions. One student presented the answer to the first homework problem on the black board. It looked and sounded reasonable so I congratulated

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him for his good work. Another protested, "That answer is wrong!" He offered a second solution. Again, I was impressed. A third student, insisting that both answers were wrong, worked the problem another way. Then someone asked the inevitable question, "Which is the right answer?"

I had no idea so called for a class vote and declared the most popular answer to be correct. Subsequent sessions generally followed the same pattern. I assigned problems and students presented their solutions in class. I asked questions and the students answered them. Through this process, I also became fluent in Kituba and learned some algebra.

Inevitably, one day no one could work a particular problem so I reassigned it for the next day and went for help. A teacher in a nearby primary school translated the problem for me and explained the answer. I was actually disappointed the next morning when an excited student burst into class shouting, "I've got it! I solved the problem." This cost me my long-awaited opportunity to finally "teach" some math.

MY ongoing frustration in math class was offset by the sense of fulfillment that came from teaching religion. My students seemed highly motivated because they copied everything I wrote on the board. They memorized their notes and did well on the tests so I concluded they were learning.

Wanting to spend more time on agricultural extension, I used the end-of-year holidays to develop my lesson plans. I made a two-month head start on my lectures for the next semester.

As usual, I played basketball with several of my students one afternoon. They gathered around and said, "We would like to talk with you about something." "Sure," I replied, "go ahead," "It's about your class," one of them said. "What about it?" I asked, growing defensive. "It's nothing," another replied, "let's play ball." "No" I insisted, "you wanted to tell me something so say it!"

After a long silence, a student blurted out, "Your class is not good!" Furious, I reminded them of the crisis that brought me to their classroom. "If my class is 'not good,' I snapped, "I'll quit teaching, and you can take the state math exams without any additional help from me!"

Horrified, a student protested: “No, you don’t understand. You’re the best math teacher we’ve ever had. Because of you, we understand math. It’s your religion class that doesn’t make any sense!” In shock and disbelief, I walked away to think.

During the next few days, I came to several conclusions. First, people learn best when they discover things for themselves. Second, by asking questions, I could actually help people learn things that I myself did not understand. Third, the teacher did not have to be the expert on everything. Students could learn from each other.

I then reflected on how to apply these new insights to my religion class. I now knew what worked, but never having taken a course in education (or even read a book on the subject) I had no idea why. Neither did I know how to ask questions in another content area. Math had been easy. “Who has the answer?” “How did you work the problem?” “Why?”

After some thought, I simply transformed my religions lecture notes by inserting a question mark after every statement. “The thesis of this chapter is . . .” became “What is the thesis of this chapter?” “The author is writing to . . .” became “To whom is the author writing?” “The implications of this passage are . . .” became “What are the implications of this passage?” It worked.

When I recognized the change in my classroom, I also modified my approach to village extension. I no longer assumed that I had all the answers to local problems. I stopped dispensing technical information and began asking questions that engaged people in the analysis of community issues. This also worked.

Several years later, I discovered a graduate program in adult educating at the University of Wisconsin. I was startled by the teaching method of Professor Jerry Apps’s “Philosophy of Education” class because I had seen it only once before—in a little bush school in central Africa. The approach I had discovered in desperation, he seemed to use by choice. Apps assigned books by Carl Rogers, Paulo Freire, John Dewey, Roby Kidd, and Malcolm Knowles that helped me finally understand that defining moment under the palm trees.

Since that day, I have led workshops around the world on adult education and community development. I have seen many community organizers, agricultural extension agents, health workers, and teachers embrace this problem-posing approach. In many cases, it has revolutionized their work. Others have resisted strongly.

It seems that people who are most confident of their own expertise are usually the most reluctant to accept someone else's knowledge. In my experience, three groups of professionals-- theologians, physicians, and university professors-- have been most resistant to the facilitator approach. More than any others, they have rejected indigenous knowledge, devalued personal experience, and failed to recognize local potential.

The lesson learned on that basketball court in Africa has endured. It transformed my approach to education and community development. It also taught me humility and gave me faith in people's capacity to solve their own problems.