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What is Theological Education by Extension?

1. Introduction

What is the distinctiveness of Theological Education by Extension (TEE)? And how do its practitioners understand its uniqueness and its contribution to theological education? What is TEE anyway? My interest in these questions is not simply fuelled by a technical desire for a definition of some kind or by a historical investigation how TEE practitioners envisioned TEE to work. A better understanding of TEE, its distinctiveness, its approach - as well as a definition - might help its practitioners to better utilise TEE's unique contribution to the field of theological education.

In the early stages of conceptualising TEE, Kinsler already proposed that TEE is more of 'a movement and a vision ... than a specific technique or system.'¹ One can argue that this has helped TEE to be widely adopted, as it is perceived as a flexible method that adapts well to changing circumstances.² However, a method that is too flexible and that is not easily definable can easily lose its distinctiveness and become blurred and irrelevant.³ This can be seen in a re-formulation of TEE into BEE or TEEE.⁴ Kinsler's broad and inclusive vision might have helped initially to promote TEE as an

¹ Kinsler, *The Extension Movement*, p. 30.

² Kinsler and Emery, *Opting for Change*, p. v.

³ See also Harrison, 'Forty Years On,' p. 318 for a similar criticism of vague and unhelpful labelling.

⁴ BEE stands for Biblical Education by Extension and TEEE is sometimes used for Theological Education and Evangelism by Extension. The problem arises when TEE as a method is criticised without a proper understanding what it actually means.

alternative and flexible form of theological education; however, it has also undermined the very adoption of TEE that it was trying to promote. This is because the distinctive strengths of TEE and its approach are not clear, and there is no provision of a framework for practitioners to consistently utilize TEE as a method of learning. This has resulted in a situation where TEE rather than leading the conversation about appropriate and contextual theological education has been looked down upon as a method inferior to residential theological education.

This essay is built on the assumption that a comprehensive definition is fundamentally informed by the key elements that are utilised within TEE. First of all this essay looks at definitions of TEE as found in the key literature. This is then followed by a critical engagement with selected attempts to clarify TEE and to extract its distinctive contributions. Finally, this essay will conclude with offering its own answer to the questions of what TEE is and how it works.

2. The Origin of TEE as an Approach to Theological Education

TEE is an educational response to the need to de-centralise theological education, however, in its development it went beyond simply developing an institutional response to change the training philosophy of the church. TEE highlighted (or re-discovered) an alternative biblical image to the professional clerical class that dominated all affairs of the church. TEE envisioned a church that stresses equipping all its members for the ministry of the church (Eph 4:12) and specifically utilising the experience of the mature and experienced lay church leaders.⁵

The origin of the movement lies in 1963 at the Presbyterian Seminary of Guatemala. Structural changes were introduced in the seminary that transformed it from training residentially (in the capital city) exclusively for the professional full-time ministry of the church to a training model that trains de-centralised (predominantly in rural areas) part-time church leaders. This change was driven by the realisation that the majority of trainees that originally came from the rural areas did not move back after finishing their residential training in the comfortable environment of the capital city. Furthermore, the members of the Guatemala Presbyterian Church could not provide full financial support for the employment of full-time pastors throughout all its mainly rural presbyteries. It was realised then that the seminary was preparing young unproven men as leaders for the handful

⁵ Winter, *Theological Education*, p. xix-xx.

middle-class churches that were in the Guatemala, thereby ignoring the natural leaders who already were ministering in the church.⁶ It was evident that those experienced, mature, tested, and respected rural church leaders could not attend full-time a residential seminar because they were subsistence farmers whose extended families depended on their on-going labour for survival. Additionally, these church leaders, though gifted by God, did in most cases not have the necessary academic school certificates to be admitted to an institute of higher learning.⁷ Yet at the same time it was clear that it is surely not in the interest of the church to sideline well-respected, mature and proven church leaders and excludes them from theological training. This resulted in the development of a decentralised method of theological training which was open to everyone, and which utilised elements of distance education. But it also had an integral face-to-face group meeting system and a focus on practical ministry application. Out of this TEE as a method of theological training developed.

TEE as a movement grew in phases: the first phase was the conceptualisation stage from 1963 to 1974 (period of origination), the second stage from 1975 to 1984 (period of rapid expansion), which is followed by a third stage from 1984 until the present which is described in the literature as the period of evaluation). The early years of TEE saw some re-thinking as well as further conceptualisations and development of the initial idea, therefore it is important to recognise that not all initial writings on TEE promote the model that was used when TEE became world-wide phenomena from 1975 onwards.⁸ The initial 'battle line' was between extension programs and residential studies, but with the growth of alternative or diversified forms of theological training both methods are more and more seen as different tools at the disposal of the church to train for all forms of ministry.⁹

⁶ Kinsler, 'Extension: An Alternative Model,' p. 32.

⁷ For more information on the birth and history of the TEE, see Kinsler, 'Theological Education', p. 1-29 or Kinsler, 'Equipping All', p. 26-28 also Mulholland, 'Presbyterian', p. 33-41, or Harrison, 'Forty Years On' p. 315-328.

⁸ See Snook, *Developing*, p. 25, where he provides a historical outline of the development of TEE in different stages. See also Winter, *Theological Education*, where the initial discussions, developments and the refining of the method is traced through the significant documents of the founding period of TEE.

⁹ Kinsler's latest book "*Diversified Theological Education: Equipping All God's People*" brings together a diverse group of theological training programs from lay training to ministerial degree programs all under the headline of Diversified Theological Education.

2. Literature Review – definition of TEE?

This section will look at individual definitions of TEE as suggested by its key practitioners. Very often TEE is described using a three-component definition that goes back at least to Kinsler. It is a rather surprising discovery that in a good number of the initial TEE works, TEE as a learning method is not explicitly explained or its unique contributions highlighted. Throughout the literature there is actually an unspoken agreement of what TEE as a theological learning method is all about. It is just unfortunate that it is not explicitly stated. Fremont and Sara Regier in the *African Nonformal Theological Research Project* (ANTERP) - which particularly researched TEE programs in Africa - observe that much of TEE is 'a far cry from the classical Ross Kinsler model.'¹⁰ This is an important point as this essay is specifically interested in the conceptualisation of TEE as found not in practice but in the literature. The reason, as alluded to above, has to do with the difficulty that practitioners face when implementing a TEE program while not being sufficiently exposed to the underlying theory. Due to its diversified nature it is better, as Harrison as also argued, to define TEE based on its original Guatemalan model.¹¹ The main definition, as elaborated in the majority of cases in the literature, usually employs a three-component definition. There are however, alternative suggestions how to describe and explain TEE, notably, Fremont and Sara Regier, Stewart Snook and Carol Mouat.

2.1 The three-component definition

An insight into TEE could simply be gained from the descriptions included in its name: namely theological, education, as well as extension. Yet it would be expected that though a clue might be in the name, the definition is expected to explicitly highlight the unique contribution of an approach.¹² Therefore, the starting point in identifying an appropriate definition of TEE must be Ross Kinsler, who served for thirteen years on the faculty of the Presbyterian Seminary of Guatemala and was foundational in the conceptualisation of TEE. He describes the origin of TEE as follows,

In Guatemala, since our students were local church leaders, heads of families, mostly employed in secular jobs or subsistence farming, scattered over large areas, we could only plan to meet with them once a week or twice a month at locations accessible for them, though some travel for them and more for our faculty was often necessary. Since those meetings could only last for two or three hours, we had to use that time for discussions and debate, not for lectures or

¹⁰ Rieger, *ANTERP*, p. 16.

¹¹ Harrison, 'Forty Years On,' p. 318-319.

¹² For such a straightforward definition, see Holland, *Teaching Through T.E.E.* (1975), who draws a description of what TEE is from its name. Firstly, TEE is theological in the sense that it teaches what God is like and what he does. It teaches at a 'deeper' level all the basic foundation of faith. Secondly, TEE is education as it is built on 'sound training principles.' Thirdly, TEE is extension that 'takes the training to the student' (Holland, *Teaching through T.E.E.*, p. 9).

monologues. This in turn meant that the students had to be able to get the basic course content (cognitive, affective, practical) on their own in preparation for each group meeting. So we devised basic self-study materials for the relevant “academic” levels and cultural contexts. The third component, in addition to daily individualized study and weekly or bi-monthly group discussion, was on-going, practical testing or application of the substance and issues of the course material in the students’ local ecclesial and social contexts.¹³

Educationally TEE has often been defined through the following three components: a) self study; b) guided group discussion; and c) practical ministry application.¹⁴ Similarly, Kinsler and Emery, *Opting for Change*, (1991): “common and distinctive to all TEE programs is the combination of three basic program components: ongoing guided study, ongoing practice of ministry, and regular seminar meeting to integrate and reinforce study and practice.”¹⁵ Kinsler, *The Extension Movement* (1981) also lists the three essential elements as a) self-study, b) practical work, c) regular encounters or seminars. He continues there to emphasize that the seminar is the heart of TEE.¹⁶ Patricia Harrison (2004) also defines TEE through its three main components: ‘*self-study materials, regular seminars and life experience and ministry* in the students’ own context.’ Furthermore, the idea was that these components closely relate and are intertwined. None of these components were unique or new but rather it was this ‘*particular combination and inter-relationship* of these elements that was distinctive.’¹⁷ Snook, highlighted that the development of the fence model by Ted Ward in 1972 actually defines the original TEE model as three-fold.¹⁸

What the definitions above have in common is that they use individual components to define a method of theological education. However, a definition should express the true essence and

¹³ See Kinsler ‘Equipping All,’ p. 26-27.

¹⁴ These three are also the key ingredients and used as definition with the All Africa TEE Association (AATEEA), see Mabuluki, ‘Diversified,’ p. 251. The image used to convey the elements of TEE are the ‘rail-fence analogy’ (see Kinsler, ‘Equipping All,’ p. 27) or the three-legged African pot (see Sales, ‘Tripping,’ p. 117) or in Ethiopia the traditional Ethiopian three-legged chair/stool. However, within the literature there are variations in the order; ‘field experience’ is sometimes listed as the second element while at other times as the final element. The naming of the individual elements differs from author to author though in their essences they are conceptionally alike. Nevertheless, the slightly different emphasis in the naming can lead to rather significant differences in the application of a concept. The classical analogy for TEE is the rail-fence (two parallel horizontal lines held together by a vertical pole, see Kinsler, ‘Equipping All,’ p. 27). The vertical pole is traditionally seen as the central pole that holds the whole together. That pole is the TEE Group Meeting (see Kinsler, ‘Equipping All,’ p. 27 and Snook, *Developing*, p. 7). An initial reading seems to suggest that self-study and praxis take place parallel to each other, while in the analogy of the three-legged African pot as well as in recent written descriptions of TEE (see, Mabuluki, ‘Diversified,’ p. 253), the impression is given that the elements follow in chronological order. In the written description, the problem arises due to bullet point orders and a lack of clarification that the order might be different than it appears through the formatting.

¹⁵ Kinsler and Emery, *Opting for Change*, (1991) p. v.

¹⁶ Kinsler, *The Extension Movement*, p. 34-35.

¹⁷ Harrison, ‘Forty Years On,’ p. 319.

¹⁸ Snook, *Developing*, p. 7.

distinctness of the descript item, rather than simply list its components. Though the three-fold definition is the most common form to describe TEE, additions to the list of essential components have also forcefully suggested in the past, notably: spiritual formation.¹⁹ The listing of a component-driven definition is like trying to define bread as a combination of flour, water and yeast instead of defining it through its primary characteristic, namely food. A definition should highlight the essential function of the object that it describes. The components of TEE, though essential, conceal the real essence of TEE. The disadvantage of defining TEE through the use of each of the three elements elevates each delivery method to the status of being indispensable. This eliminates alternative delivery forms, like e-learning, from being utilised within TEE. Similarly, defining TEE through written self-study material excludes a great number of people in the developing world from accessing theological education – namely those that do not read or write. From the anecdotal evidence that I have gathered TEE actually goes out of its way to accommodate those in its training that have been excluded due to their lack of reading and writing skills.²⁰ Therefore, the three component definition overshadows the essential contributions of TEE – namely: extension of *access* to theological training to those who have been excluded for geographical, educational, ecclesial, gender and other reasons. Kinsler, rightfully stresses that access is of the central concern of TEE.²¹ If we ignore in Kinsler's description the three components for a moment, then other important elements come to the forefront: discussion and debate or dialogue as the place to emphasise learning as well as inbuilt application, testing, and reflection in context. Nowadays we would describe this as in-service training.

2.2 Fremont and Sara Regier in ANTERP

Fremont and Sara Regier were involved in the African Nonformal Theological Education Research Project (ANTERP) (1994). This was a study that looked at the state of non-formal theological education in Africa with special emphasis on TEE in Sub-Saharan Africa. The Regiers, unfortunately, did not define TEE in the study but nevertheless highlighted throughout the work some of the distinctives of TEE which justifies a brief discussion here about their contribution. They raise the issue of the lack of application (which they call the theory-practice gap) in adult education especially in

¹⁹ Holland, 'TEXT-Africa,' p. 105-106, already had suggested that the three-fold rail analogy should be expended to include a fourth element – spiritual formation. In his analogue the rail track rest on a (elevated) foundation and this bed of gravel symbolises spiritual formation as the foundation on which TEE rests.

²⁰ See also Gaikwad, 'Ecclesia,' p. 26, who rightfully said, 'any TEE program which depends upon the reading and writing method, would not cater to the needs of a significant section of the church.'

²¹ Kinsler, *Diversified*, p. 8, lists the following areas: geographical access, economic access, cultural access, ecclesiastical access, gender access, race access, class access, pedagogical access, and spiritual access.

Sub-Saharan Africa and suggest TEE to be the corrective because of its inbuilt application emphasis.²² They recognise that the over-emphasis on cognitive learning (head knowledge) requires a shift so that the transformation (of the heart) can bring about actual, 'change and action in the learner's life.'²³ They especially highlight that reflection and especially critical reflection about one's life situation is foundational in non-formal adult education. This insight is based on numerous adult-learning theories.²⁴ Their other important contribution is their observation that contextualisation is an important part of how TEE theologises and bridges the gap between learning and life of the students. This is of course due to TEE in its origin being influenced by liberation theology and its emphasis on bottom-up theology.²⁵ They approach TEE in their descriptions from the other side namely, where they are interested whether or not TEE can contribute to the theological transformation of individuals. In that regard they highlight TEE's inbuilt application emphasis, as well as that transformation takes place upon reflection when the students of theological learning apply their learning to their own diverse local contexts.

2.3 Snook's 'Praxis Oriented Program'

Stewart G. Snook, in *Developing Leaders Through Theological Education by Extension* (1992), defines TEE as a "field-based form of theological education which does not extract the student from his normal, productive environment."²⁶ He then continues to state a similar definition to that of Mullholland and Kinsler before adding a reflection based on the words that describe TEE: 'theological,' 'education' and 'extension.' Interestingly, he continues over the next five pages - all still under the heading of 'Definitions' - to describe the terms 'TEE Program' and the 'TEE Model' and then offer a definition of a 'Praxis Oriented Program' before concluding with a list of essential 'Component Parts' of TEE. Unfortunately, he does not link the different elements together to produce an all-encompassing definition of TEE, nor does he explain why differing terminology is used, and how concepts like 'TEE program' and 'TEE model' are either related or complementary. He clarifies the three-fold TEE model in a new way when he describes the components as '1. Cognitive input utilizing self-study material, 2. The experience of the student-participant serving God; 3. Reflection on one's

²² Rieger, *ANTERP*, 9-10. They also recognise that too many extension programs have failed in this key area of the methodology.

²³ Rieger, *ANTERP*, p. 9.

²⁴ Rieger, *ANTERP*, p. 7. This is not the place to investigate whether or not adult learning is actually conceptually different from the learning of children and young adults.

²⁵ Rieger, *ANTERP*, p. 16.

²⁶ Snook, *Developing*, p. 6. This definition based on unpublished class notes by Ralph Winter.

action in group discussion.²⁷ Snook's definition of the TEE Model is followed by a definition of a 'Praxis Oriented Program'. His definition is worthwhile repeating here:

'A praxis oriented program is one in which the interaction of the three essential component parts function in a reflection-action-reflection pattern. The first component part (self-study material) involves reflection. Students reflect cognitively on a biblical lesson. The second component part (service to God) involves action – the participants act in response to their previous reflection. In the third component part (group discussion), they bring the results of their service to the discussion seminar and reflect on the consequences of action to refine and better their ministry.'²⁸ He then goes back to list seven internal factors/elements/ingredients which are intrinsic to the model and without them the TEE model is incomplete: 1. Type of Student; 2. Self-study material; 3. Service in the church; 4. Discussion Seminars; 5. the Discussion Group Leader; 6. Spiritual Foundation and 7. Administrative Supervision.²⁹

Snook's list is the most comprehensive and detailed list of essential ingredients of TEE. It is especially noteworthy that he included as essential the tutor and spiritual formation.³⁰ Snook's list is the amalgamation of the functionality of the programs that he had observed and should therefore, especially for the practitioners, raise the issue of the essential ingredients necessary for a successful TEE program. It is a highly recommended study. However, the way forward cannot be to add to the list of essential ingredients to the definition of TEE but rather to highlight the educational methodology underlying TEE.

Snook's greatest contribution comes in highlighting the intrinsic reflection-action-reflection pattern of TEE. He uses this pattern to describe the essential functions of TEE, through linking each individual component to an essential function: self-study as reflection, practical ministry as application and the TEE group meeting again as reflection. He is the first one to explicitly highlight and state that reflection is a key element in the TEE group; but he actually goes further than that in his recognition that reflection is *the* key element, and that the TEE group meeting is only a vehicle of learning. He

²⁷ Snook, *Developing*, p. 7.

²⁸ Snook, *Developing*, p. 8-9.

²⁹ Snook, *Developing* p. 7-8.

³⁰ Snook highlights that in the initial TEE setup an important role was reserved for the tutor/facilitator as an additional source of cognitive learning and as resource person (Snook, *Developing*, p. 42). It is of course interesting that the African images used to describe TEE (three-legged pot or the three-legged stool) are actually made up of four components: the three legs and the central element that holds the legs in place: the pot or the seat. Turley (an unpublished work cited in Snook, *Developing*, p. 106-107), stresses that the teacher/tutor is actually the central element ('heart of the program') that holds the TEE group together and makes it successful. TEE necessitates that human element. TEE needs someone who can model and embody in real life the principals taught in the course. A similar idea is present in the early period of TEE where the tutor was initially described as a midwife helping the students to bring to life biblical truth in their hearts and minds (Savage, cited in Snook, *Developing*, p. 33). TEE programs often describe their workbooks as *the* teacher when it actually should be (as it was in original Guatemalan model) simply *a* teacher (see Snook, *Developing*, p. 41-42 for the detailed discussion). This then would allow for a more nuanced use of both the workbook as well as the tutor.

further stresses that reflection is an internal process of learning that is concerned about one's own action. However, the reflection pattern within TEE is more fundamental and more central to the setup of TEE than Snook allows for. TEE actually creates a multi-directional reflection and application flow between all elements of TEE. Another way to describe this would be: self study is followed by reflection as well as application, ministry (action) is followed by reflection as well as application and the group discussion is based on every group members' self study, ministry, multiple reflection as well as multiple applications. Reflection is *the* key element that holds TEE together.

2.4 Mouat emphasis on the components of the learning philosophy

Sendegeya and Spencer in ANITEPAM (2001) published a study entitled: "Understanding TEE: A Course Outline and Handbook for Students and Tutors in Residential Theological Institutions in Africa" and uses a definition of TEE by Sister Carol Mouat of TEE College (South Africa). Unfortunately, the choice of this definition was not further explained. TEE is defined as

'a method of training for ministry in the church (lay and ordained). The philosophy is concerned with the method of theory and praxis. While the students study for the ministry in their home environment they continue to serve their congregation. The theory is an academic process which the student translates immediately into action in his or her pastoral ministry within the church. Reflection takes place in small discussion groups. This spiral of knowledge – being and doing – enables the student to reflect critically on theological issues which are directly related to life situations. ³¹

The interesting thing about Mouat's definition is that it focuses on the learning philosophy rather than on listing three static elements. She rightfully emphasizes the TEE group as the central element, and it seems to be an issue of emphasis that she locates reflection exclusively within the TEE group. Reflection is taking place both during the self-study as well as during the practice and of course in the interplay of self-study with the field experience and finally should express itself during the TEE group.

3. Summary

In light of the above discussions I would suggest that TEE practitioners move away from a static component based form of definition and instead focus on defining TEE based on its unique contributions to theological education as well as its essential learning philosophy. Unfortunately, the three component definition overshadows one of the most important contributions of TEE, namely, a theological educational system with a centrally in-built multi-directional reflection and application

³¹ Sendegeya and Spencer, *Understanding TEE*, p. 25.

approach/cycle. TEE is a vocational approach with an emphasis on hands-on-training or training in ministry. TEE is vocational in the most positive sense of a training course that recognises that applied and contextual learning is of highest importance for transformative theological learning. TEE is part of the field of theological education and therefore operates within a framework that emphasises spiritual formation as well as preparation for the ministry – ministry of the whole church rather than an exclusive training only for the ordained ministry.³² TEE is decentralised in the sense that it is concerned about widening access to theological training especially geographical, but also to those excluded because of other exclusions. TEE requires an ongoing reflective conversation to take place between oneself, the cognitive learning, the ministry-practice and the learning community, (TEE group meeting) as well as the application of new insights to one's spiritual as well as ministerial growth.

It seems that beside the three components definition throughout the history of TEE consent existed about the essence of TEE and how reflection and application are defining elements of TEE. Kinsler already stated in the very beginning that TEE is based on application and reflection. The Regiers highlighted the inbuilt application emphasis as well as contextual reflection. Snook then stressed that TEE is a praxis oriented program or in other words a program with an emphasis on application. Yet his most important contribution comes through highlighting the reflection-action-reflection pattern of TEE. He unfortunately limited his description to ascribe different functions to different components when reflection-action-reflection actually describes the overall educational approach of TEE: reflection followed by application. Ideally this followed by further reflection followed by further application. Similarly, Mouat also defined TEE based on reflection as well as on being and doing. TEE can be defined on primarily on its unique contributions to theological education as well as its educational philosophy.

So what is TEE?

TEE is a decentralised ministry-orientated form of theological education with an emphasis on the extension of access to theological training and with an inbuilt and ongoing conversation based on reflection followed by application.

³² See also Holland, 'For Ministers,' p. 137.

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