

The Contextualization of Technology



Contextualizing technology is the art of making your project workable, practical and acceptable in the local environment with its unique constraints, beliefs, languages, social structures and its view of what is acceptable and unacceptable.

As John Dyer says “technology is never neutral”. Technology is a cultural artifact that is fitted into a person’s worldview, and which can even change that world-view. Books changed Europe, and TV changes many indigenous cultures. Missiologically speaking, technology needs to be “contextualized” so that Christ is made clear and any unnecessary offense is minimized. This is by no means obvious nor is it at all intuitive.

In 2001 I arrived in the Philippines carrying a Phillips Twist mobile phone that was seven years old and about half the size of a brick. My personal view of mobile phones was that they were ‘just a business tool’. I was a missionary, I didn’t spend money unnecessarily and I was quite happy with it.

It would have worked in the Philippines as they used the same frequencies as Australia. I just wanted to change the SIM card. The Filipino salesman refused to sell me a SIM card. To him I was being socially shameful. Not only that but all my Filipino friends all told me “John, you can’t use that old phone!”. So I had to purchase a new Nokia phone that was considered socially acceptable in the Philippines. My good old faithful phone had become a cultural obstacle!

Any technology-in-missions project must be workable under local conditions, practical for folk to use without feeling awkward, and socially acceptable in that culture.

In some locations we had to remove the game of Solitaire from Windows XP machines because card games were deemed offensive. And in privacy conscious cultures we had to set up screens around the computers.

Second-hand donated technology may be acceptable in a few places, however some contexts are deeply offended by it, and in yet others it is even considered as illegal dumping. So you have to have deep local knowledge BEFORE you even launch your project.

Since both technologies and cultures are changing rapidly there is simply no anthropology textbook that you can pick up and read and figure out instantly how to contextualize your website, app or computer center for people group X.

You and your team will have to do local on-the-ground research and therefore I have compiled a list of possible survey questions that you might like to use to jump start the research process.

Feel free to add questions of your own, these are merely a guide. You might also want to combine these questions with some qualitative research process such as participant observation. The questions need to be asked gently, respectfully and with a very open mind.



"*You*" = the local population being surveyed
"*It*" = the technology/project/software etc

WORKABILITY

- Will *it* (the technology you want to set up) work under these local conditions (voltage, dust, heat, power outages etc)?
- Can *it* easily be repaired here? If so who will repair *it*?
- Is *it* legal here?
- Is *it* likely to be stolen? If so how may *it* be protected?

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

- What activities would *you* use *it* for?
- Is *it* fun?
- Can *you* afford to use *it*? If so how often?
- How easy is *it* to for *you* to use? Is *it* confusing?
- What do *you* (the locals) think of *its* user interface?

CULTURAL ASSUMPTIONS

- How does *it* work?(Testing what they think the technology does, you might be surprised!)
- What does *it* do? How does *it* function in this culture?
- What do other people here think about *it*?
- What do people here like? What makes them jump for joy? How can we incorporate that insight into this project?
- What do people here dislike? What makes them feel bad or annoyed? How can we avoid doing that in this project?
- Do you think that *it* will cause infertility or disease? (e.g. mobile phones being thought to cause brain tumors)
- Will *it* offend the deity, gods, or the religious leaders?
- How could *it* make things better?
- How could *it* make things worse?

- Does *it* need to be changed in some way? What do we need to be careful about?
- Tell me a story that you have heard about *it*.
- What sort of people here own *it*? (bad people, good people, only rich people etc)
- Who are the most likely people to use *it*? Men, women, children, students etc?
- Will people share *it*? How will they share *it*? Are there caste, clan or gender issues involved in sharing?
- How will *it* affect or facilitate social transactions and conversations?
- How will it affect or facilitate trade and financial transactions?
- Is there anything that annoys you or offends you about *it*?
- How does *it* make you feel?
- Is it socially acceptable for a person like *you* to own/use/be trained by *it*?
- Will *it* cause feelings of inequality, envy or resentment? Will *it* start fights?
- What social systems would use *it*? How will *it* integrate with village life, urban life, farming seasons etc.



PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION QUESTIONS

- How is it named, what is *it* called, what cultural categories does it fit in? (list of nouns)
- How is *it* described, what are its qualities? (list of adjectives)
- What are *its* functions? (list of verbs, adverbs and participles)

You may even discover that your project is not needed, or is not desired, will blow up under local conditions or even might be totally illegal and get you arrested. If so you have got some very useful information! You have saved a lot of money, and gained valuable time you can use to “go back to the drawing board” which you would eventually have had to do anyway.

Knowing that it won't work in that particular location is not a defeat, nor is it a lack of faith. It is just God sending you to Macedonia instead of to Asia (Acts 16).

On the other hand if you do get the go ahead from your survey results then you have to be diligent to carry the project through to completion and that means working with a reliable, faithful and highly competent team of local Christians. Contextualizing technological solutions requires continual input from those who know the actual on-the-ground situation.

For instance in some cultures a large project may create a lot of envy and suspicion and hurt the church leaders in the area who are working with you because opponents of the gospel will be spreading spiteful rumors (e.g. its a CIA project!!). In such a case every sensible person will tell you to start small. Listen to them!

Who should be on your local contextualization team?

1. Generally two or three very senior local Christian leaders who give their gravitas to the project and who can untangle major clashes with the community, these should be used sparingly as they are very busy people.
2. Then you should have two of the best technical people you can find who know everything about what can and does go wrong in that area.
3. Then you want some pastors and local businessmen who have their ear to the ground, and some workers who can make things happen. Businessmen will also know what people are prepared to pay if it is a business-as-mission project e.g. an Internet cafe.
4. You may also require a translator or linguist and a local graphic artist.

One important point: do not have your graphic art done in the West.



I learned this when consulting on websites in the Chinese context. The Chinese seem to like “noisy”, busy websites with many flashing icons. Only a Chinese graphic artist can understand the rules of Chinese website design!

So it is with every people group. The meaning of colors, pictures of people (esp. In Islamic contexts) how words are placed on a page and so on, is so varied that local input and local design is far and away the best choice (Even if you personally don't like it!) Remember its not about you it is about the clarity of the gospel.

Branding is another sensitive issue. Conspicuous branding is considered ostentatious and egotistical in many cultures. In Australia or England naming a ministry after yourself is a huge mistake and is only ever done by very “flaky” people. In Japan where self-effacement is a strong value one of the major retail companies there is called Muji which means “no brand” and they have a minimalist “no logo” policy. If there is considerable criticism of your image or brand then you may need to do a major rebranding exercise, or even have a no-brand policy.

Stay out of the way. Local contextualization, when done properly, greatly increases the feeling of community ownership which is key to participants caring about the technology project after you have gone home and back to the office. The more local input the better. The more that local input is listened to and appreciated, the better.

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