

Pray, Work, Study, Log On: Can Libraries be a Common Ground in Online Theological Education? (Teaching and Learning Interest Group)

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Part One:—Online Information Training in Theological Education William Badke

The role of online or hybrid courses within theological education has long since moved from novelty to significant component. Whether it is as simple as a live course professor putting assignments and forums online through courseware, or as complex as mounting an entire course online, the idea of remotely educating students is becoming commonplace.

Leaving aside the crucial discussions of how professors and students may connect effectively in a digital environment and how professors may mentor or provide help in spiritual formation at a distance, I would like to consider ways in which information needs of online students may be met effectively online. By “information needs,” I do not mean the imparting of content (which is either done by the professor or is managed by various library resources), but the needs students have in knowing how to acquire and handle information well.

Students who are online are not, of course, always at a distance. A lot of students who can easily go to the institution’s physical library take online courses. Thus their “information needs,” or more clearly, their “information literacy needs” are the same as students in live classes. But for students who are truly at a distance, their understanding of the library’s information systems is often severely limited.

In our setting—Associated Canadian Theological Schools—we have chosen not to distinguish between truly distant students and local ones but have decided to provide all students with intensive information literacy instruction through a one-credit course required in all programs.

I’d like to explain the basic features of this course and introduce a number of other ways in which we are using online tools to support online students.

Online Credit Course

Since 2000, we have offered it both in live and online sections of a one-credit research course (<http://www.acts.twu.ca/Library/research500.htm>). The “one credit” is somewhat of an in-joke in that the work load is easily between two and three credits. We just wanted to ease the financial burden somewhat by limiting it officially to one credit. The online version of the course is likely the first graduate level information literacy credit course ever produced, so I’ve had a lot of time to refine it.

The basic plan is fairly simple:

**To view the PowerPoint presentation that accompanied this session, visit <http://www.atla.com/community>.*

- 1) The course is required of all ACTS students. They take it in their first year of studies, either in the live or online version (though most take it online).
- 2) The online course consists of five modules, each of which calls for reading, and then an assignment that covers one aspect of the research process. The modules are structured chronologically through the research process, from creation of a research question or thesis to a final outline and bibliography. Students are encouraged to use topics for which they are actually writing papers in other courses. Online students cover two topics but do not have to write a full paper. Live students do one topic, but they have to submit a final paper.
- 3) The key to the success of this course, especially the online version, is extensive grading, with helpful comments sent to the student. Students are cautioned to read the previous assignments' comments and incorporate changes into the next assignment rather than sending in all assignments at once.
- 4) The result is two relatively fully researched topics. Generally there is an improvement in research assignment grades over the course of the semester, and the final assignment provides a good measure of what the student is able to accomplish in research.

How does such a course support online instruction? How well is an online research course able to improve the research ability of students? It appears that the course, now over ten years old, is doing well. Student satisfaction with it is high, and my later work with students on research papers and graduate essays shows they are retaining their skills.

Two elements could be seen as troublesome—how do we build community and spiritual formation into an online course? Both of these, frankly, have been minimal concerns. Students doing this course have lots of other venues for community and spiritual formation. My attempts to incorporate these elements into the online course have failed to produce interest. Students, doing a variety of different topics, find their highest value in their relationship with me as mentor and really do not care to spend time interacting with others in the course. This makes online research instruction a phenomenon different from other types of online seminary courses.

Other Options for Online Support

Many institutions cannot provide online credit research courses, yet distance students still need a great deal of support. Here are options that we are using:

- 1) A distance education library information page on the library website: <http://www.twu.ca/library/distancestudents.htm>.
- 2) A pictorial guide to the library's functions: <http://www.acts.twu.ca/Library/AboutTWULib.htm>.
- 3) Extensive online help—messaging, e-mail, etc. on the library home page: <http://www.twu.ca/library/>.
- 4) A set of animated research tutorials, many of them created by my colleague, Duncan Dixon: <http://www.twu.ca/library/flashtutorials.htm>. Such tutorials can be created by using free tools like Wink and Jing or commercial tools like Camtasia and Captivate.
- 5) An interactive tutorial that we currently use for undergraduate English students but which could be adapted for seminaries. The tutorial uses the quiz program

in common courseware such as Blackboard or Moodle. Students open a second browser and are required to be able to answer 20 multiple choice questions by doing various live searches.

Library Support for Online Education

There are many ways we can support online education in seminaries. At the most direct level, I have been involved in development of policy and training for online instruction in our seminary. This has been a rewarding experience that has improved my understanding of what is needed to support online/distance courses.

It is crucial to overcome the challenge of distance students who have difficulty connecting with research resources. Offering tutorials and making sure students at a distance have solid links to our resources is the minimum required. I would, however, urge all seminaries to find ways to incorporate credit instruction with assignments into their curricula, whether as a stand-alone course or as modules within existing courses.

Why is connection and instruction so important? First, because students at a distance lack the opportunity to become familiar with research resources and develop research ability in the way that residential students can. Second, because students who feel cut off from potential research resources are more likely to drop out of programs than those who feel connected to the means to carry out their research. Those who feel confident about doing research effectively are more likely to continue to graduation.

[PowerPoint: <http://www.acts.twu.ca/Library/atla2010.ppt> or <http://bit.ly/aFiJME>]

For Further Reading

Badke, William. Research Strategies web: <http://www.acts.twu.ca/Library/textbook.htm> (online courses, course syllabi, teaching manual and additional resources).

Badke, William. "Associated Canadian Theological Schools: Building an Online Graduate Information Literacy Course Without a Blueprint." *Public Services Quarterly* 3 no.3/4 (2007): 19-35. <http://www.acts.twu.ca/Library/ACTSPubServRev2007.doc>

Badke, William. "Graduate Online Information Literacy: The ACTS Experience: Associated Canadian Theological Schools." In *Information Literacy Programs in the Digital Age: Educating College and University Students Online*, ed. Alice Daugherty; Michael F Russo. Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2008, 3-12.

Part Two—Online Challenges: Spiritual Formation and Faculty Development Jay Endicott

Spiritual Formation

Mission: Asbury Theological Seminary is a community called to prepare theologically educated, sanctified, Spirit-filled men and women to evangelize and to spread scriptural holiness throughout the world through the love of Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit

and to the glory of God the Father

Online Formation: Formal Component Challenges

- Transform students in spiritual formation
- Six Core Values—Christian Formation Plan (CFP)
 - Justice and Mercy
 - Local and Global
 - Academy and Church
 - Social and Personal Holiness
 - Crucial Moments and Continuous Process
 - Believers and Humanity
- Use of technology to deliver CFP

Challenges

- Technology
- Method
- Collaboration—whole community
- Training of faculty and students

Christian Formation Plan Course

- Intro
- Guide

Online Formation

- Website
- iTunes U
- Portal
- Blogs
- Moodle Forums
- Twitter
- Facebook

Informal Components

- Website
- iTunes U
- Portal
- Blogs
- Moodle Forums
- Twitter
- Facebook

Faculty Development

- Effective Support
 - According to a recent survey by the Association of Research Libraries, 74 percent of their respondents were planning on providing support services exclusive for faculty and/or graduate assistants (<http://www.arl.org/news/pr/spec308-16dec08-print.shtml>).

- Faculty Collaboration
 - The Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning for Theology and Religion has been helpful in this regard. Grants, workshops, best practices, and online resources are just some of the offerings of the Wabash Center (<http://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu>).
- Needs Assessment
 - Increased faculty confidence and encouraged early adoption of the Moodle platform as Information Services customized the Moodle interface based on faculty input
 - Essential for improving services and convincing decision makers
- Innovative Instructional Resourcing
 - Example: Faculty distance learning education was altered from a week on-campus experience to 2 day on-campus visit supplemented with a month online session facilitated by the Director of Distributed Learning.
 - Regent Example
 - Talk Back Sessions
- Technology Integration in Education: The Faculty Connection
 - <http://www.ats.edu/Resources/Publications/Documents/Colloquy/09FallColloquy.pdf>

Part Three—But What About . . . ?
Some Common Issues in Online Education in the Humanities,
and How Theological Librarians Might “Stand in the Gap”
Jennifer Woodruff Tait

- Faculty in general—and humanities faculty in particular—often have philosophical questions about the whole online endeavor.
- Theological faculty ask:
 - How can spiritual formation be conducted online?
 - Does teaching online require “selling out” to a marketing/business model of education?
 - Isn’t face-to-face contact especially important in theological education due to the incarnational nature of our faith?
- On a practical level, even if some of those questions are resolved, faculty also ask:
 - How do I set up my class to facilitate learning?
 - How do I set up my class to facilitate transformation?
 - How do I set up my class, period?
- Teaching online faculty—a training course
 - Answering the question: Why do this at all?
 - Answering the question: How do I do this?
- Issues I wanted to consider:
 - What is the nature of learning?
 - Does this change in any way when we change the format of our encounter?
 - How can we use “new media”—particularly visual media—in the online classroom?

- Does online teaching require a different set of skills? But what about . . . ?
- My overall plan for the course
 - Allow people to reflect at some length on the philosophical and pedagogical issues all this raises before they start tweaking software.
 - Give them experience navigating a site as they discuss content before they start tweaking software.
 - Give them experience with different aspects of the software so they can weigh what is most appropriate to their courses.
 - I also tried to simulate the a-little-hectic-but-I-can-do-this-if-I-focus pace of an online course, combining reading assignments, discussion, and several assignments to complete.
- Print texts
 - Mike Rose, *Why School? Reclaiming Education For All of Us* (New Press, 2009).
 - Bonnie Elbaum et al: *Essential Elements: Prepare, Design, and Teach Your Online Course* (Atwood, 2002).
 - Andy Crouch, *Culture Making* (InterVarsity, 2008).
- Online resources
 - *Innovate*: <http://innovateonline.info/?view=issue>.
 - *Faculty Focus*: <http://www.facultyfocus.com/>.
 - Michael Wesch, digital anthropologist: <http://www.youtube.com/user/mwesch>, <http://mediatedcultures.net/ksudigg/>.
- Training Course Objectives
 - To broaden understanding of the issues presented by adult learners.
 - To develop a community of reflective practitioners of online education.
 - To learn basic technological aspects of mounting a Moodle course.
 - To use this theoretical and practical knowledge to begin developing a specific online course.
- Learning Outcomes
 - At the end of the four-week training, participants should be able to:
 - Reflect critically on benefits and challenges of teaching adult learners.
 - Reflect critically on benefits and challenges of teaching and learning in the online environment.
 - Navigate the basic aspects of a Moodle course site.
 - Apply these reflections by beginning to select useful pedagogical and technological tools for their own courses.
- Course outline
 - Week One: Reflections on Education.
 - Week Two: Reflections on Online Education.
 - Week Three: Designing Online Education.
 - Week Four: Designing Your Online Education.
 - During the course we will interact with each other on weekly discussion boards (just as your students will most probably be doing) and will collaborate in building a course glossary of useful resources. The last week of the course will consist of hands-

- on practice in course design; you should come out of it with a set of discussion questions and a learning activity which can be used in your first course.
- **Week One Questions:** Answer the following questions where indicated in the discussion forums, based on the readings and your own educational experience:
 - What is your one-sentence definition of education? Does this definition change when working with adult learners? If so, how? If not, why not?
 - Where do you agree and disagree with Rose's vision of education? Which of his proposals would you adopt? Why? ("None" is always a perfectly legitimate answer to this question, by the way.)
 - Where do you agree and disagree with Crouch's vision of how Christians engage, critique, and create culture? Does this Christian commitment affect your definition of education (if so, how)?
 - How do political and economic realities shape 21st century education? As we confront those realities, what should not be lost?
 - Make **two** responses to colleagues in the discussion forums.
 - **Week Two Questions**
 - Where do you agree and disagree with Boettcher's vision of education? Which of her proposals would you adopt? Why?
 - Do you agree with Downes, Mabrito, Medley, and Wesch that the electronic environment permanently reinvents education? Why or why not?
 - What might online education do better, and what might it not do as well? What should not be lost, and why?
 - Are any of the questions raised by Rose and Crouch last week relevant to this discussion? Which ones? How can an incarnational faith be presented in an online environment?
 - **Week Three Questions**
 - Which of the practical elements of online course design suggested by the readings are already characteristic of your educational practice? Which represent a "shift" of teaching philosophy or practice? What should not be lost, and why?
 - Which practices would be most useful for your subject matter? Which practices would be difficult to implement? Are any of them puzzling (and, if so, why?)?
 - How can you use these practices (and which ones are most useful) to advance your vision of education from week one? How can you use them to keep what should not be lost?
 - **What went wrong?**
 - Many practical things:
 - Timing.
 - Textbooks.
 - Communication.
 - Lack of incentive to complete the class.
 - Lack of interest in the discussion.
 - Tried to be both a "why" and a "how-to."
 - **What went right?**

- Fruitful discussion by those who participated.
- Knowledge of new resources.
- What would I do differently?
 - Communicate the nature of the class more clearly, and in a more timely fashion.
 - Not try to do so much so quickly.
 - Solicit more input about the questions faculty need answered.
- What would I not do differently?
 - Keep asking the philosophical questions.
 - Keep raising incarnational concerns.
- Theological librarians have a unique privilege.
 - By virtue of our training, we have a level of technological comfort beyond that of many faculty.
 - By virtue of our calling, we have a commitment to not be seduced by technology for its own sake.
- How can we help our faculty navigate this new environment? How can we help them use the gifts it offers while still keeping what should not be lost?



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