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The Online Theology Classroom: Strategies for Engaging a Community of Distance Learners in a Hybrid Model of Online Education

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Abstract

The key to success in online education is the creation and sustenance of a safe and vibrant virtual community. In order to create such a community instructors must pay special attention to the relationship between technology and pedagogy, specifically in terms of issues such as course design, social presence, facilitation of sustained engagement with course material, specially tailored assignments, and learner expectations and objectives. Several strategies for accomplishing this goal are presented here based on the author's experiences teaching second-career students in hybrid introductory theology courses at a mainline denominational seminary.¹

Introduction

As institutions of higher education confront changing demographics, including an increasing number of second-career students juggling the demands of careers, families and education, creative teaching strategies are needed to meet the needs of contemporary students. Seminaries in particular are turning to distance learning to increase opportunities for students to enroll in degree programs on a part-time or even a full-time basis. These changing dynamics require new strategies for instruction; one such strategy is the development of online courses for distance learners. This article will demonstrate how the creation and sustenance of a safe and vibrant virtual community is an essential component of successful online education and will propose some strategies for success that have served the author well as an instructor of online courses.

My own experience of teaching an online course is perhaps most accurately labeled a baptism by fire, with all of the terror and exhilaration that image provokes. In 2007 I designed and taught the inaugural online introductory theology courses for distance learners at Union Theological Seminary and Presbyterian School of Christian Education in Richmond, VA. The students were pursuing the Master of Arts in Christian Education degree entirely through distance learning in the seminary's Extended Campus Program (ECP).² The ECP employs the "hybrid model" of distance learning, combining significant online interaction with an intensive one-week session on campus in the middle of each term (Delamarter and Brunner 2005, 146-148; Brunner 2006, 229-230).

¹ This paper was presented at the Teaching of Religion session, "Online Learning? An Oxymoron?" at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion in Montréal, Québec, November 10th, 2009.

² I wish to thank Lynne Clements, Catherine Devins and Shauna McCranie, students in Union-PSCE's Extended Campus Program, for their helpful and insightful comments on their experiences in my online courses.

Because theology had never been taught in the ECP before I was asked to assume this duty, to my normal course preparation were added several new and unique considerations. The challenges confronting anyone designing a new online course are perhaps obvious, but a significant cause of frustration is the difficulty many instructors find in making the transition from the traditional classroom model to the online, "virtual" community.

Resisting the Temptation to Translate

One of the most significant issues facing instructors designing and teaching online courses is the temptation simply to replicate as nearly as possible the traditional classroom model (Ruth 2006). Newcomers to the world of online education often assume that the content of their courses needn't be altered to account for the new instructional context and that the subject matter will translate seamlessly from one venue to the next.

The temptation certainly exists, and not without some justification. Instructors naturally believe that their subject is inherently fascinating and compelling and many also firmly believe that inordinate "bells and whistles" will only serve to obscure the beauty and significance of their discipline. As romantic as this devotion to "classical" pedagogy might be, the reality on the ground tells a different story. Form does indeed matter, perhaps as much as content. Form matters precisely because the content of any course is inextricably bound up with the means by which that content is delivered to learners, and this is especially the case in online courses. Because many instructors simply take the traditional classroom model for granted, the online model is still novel enough to require deliberate and intentional reflection on the part of the instructor, specifically in terms of creating a safe and vibrant community of teaching and learning that respects and values the unique considerations and needs of the learners, the material, the instructor, and the delivery platform itself.

These concerns are first addressed in the design of the course itself (Delmarter and Brunner 2005, 151-152). Writing the syllabus for an online course must include considerable reflection on the nature of online education and the most effective strategies for accomplishing the objectives of the course in this context (WPI Teaching with Technology Collaboratory 2005). While many expectations and considerations must be taken into account, in my own experience teaching the introductory courses in theology in the ECP my primary objective was to ensure that students were consistently engaged with the course material.

Ensuring Engagement

Traditional on-campus courses ensure consistent engagement with the course material through regular class meetings in physical community, where teachers and learners interact with one another in one location for a shared period of time. Typically these courses consist of lectures, discussions and group work in various combinations, all intended to foster consistent engagement with the course material and with one another on a regular basis.

Distance learning, however, fundamentally alters the dynamics of time and space in the educational process. Teachers and learners share neither one physical location nor one period of time, as interaction is spread across many spaces and many moments. Instead, the virtual community itself serves as the touchstone for shared time and space (Anagnostopoulos, Basmadjian and McCrory 2005). In courses conducted exclusively online, this is the only shared time and space teachers and learners will experience, while hybrid models of online education combine distance learning and on-campus learning in various ways. The ECP at Union-PSCE operates on the “split time” type of the hybrid model, meaning that students complete approximately ten weeks of the course before coming to campus for the intensive one-week session and complete an additional four weeks at home after the on-campus session. This means that there is no “face time” at all for the first two-thirds of the course, by which time the dynamics of the course have already been firmly established. Creative strategies for consistent engagement with the course material are required to compensate for the realities of the course calendar.

The strategy I chose to implement to ensure consistent engagement was to require weekly blogging on Blackboard Academic Suite. Students were required to post reflections on the weekly reading in order to facilitate engagement with the texts and with one another as a community of learners. My intention with this requirement was to mimic as nearly as possible the dynamics of an on-campus discussion section in which students have the opportunity to discuss texts, ask questions, and learn from one another in smaller, more intimate groups. Students were required to submit posts on any aspect of the weekly reading they found significant and interesting with their discussion grade for the week corresponding to the number of quality posts they submitted. Posts could either be initiations of new discussion threads or responses to the posts of other students, but each post had to refer to at least one relevant passage from the text on the topic of the week.

I was surprised to discover that this requirement caused considerable anxiety for several students, many of whom were not used to such sustained involvement with the course material in their experiences with online education before beginning my course. What amounted to approximately one to two single-spaced pages of writing per week was described by some students as unreasonable, by others as unfair, and by one student as enough of a demand on her time to force her to withdraw from the course. However, despite the initial resistance to this level of engagement and with some modification of the requirement on my part, the students eventually grew to take pride in the depth of their engagement with the course material. In their final evaluations many students remarked that they could not believe how well they came to understand the topics of the course, due in large part to this requirement. According to one student,

Although the blogging was difficult on top of the reading, I don't think my learning would have been as authentic without the online application. It forced me to learn the material and challenged me to unpack it in order to discuss it.

While the weekly blogging on the course texts formed the foundation of the course, paper assignments offered an opportunity for students to consolidate the information about which they were blogging weekly and gave me some indication of how well they had integrated the material

into their reflections on their vocations as Christian educators. Each semester students were required to write one short paper and one final project. The short paper of the first semester concerned the importance of theology in the congregation and the short paper of the second semester was a theological analysis of three hymn texts. Both of these assignments enabled me to gauge how well students comprehended the course material while simultaneously offering students an opportunity to engage in deep learning by applying the subject matter of the course to their own ministerial contexts. The final project for both semesters was an additional opportunity for deep learning in which students applied what they had learned to their vocations as Christian educators by designing their own curriculum for teaching theological doctrines in their congregations. These paper assignments reinforced my insistence on sustained engagement with the course material over the course of the semester while also allowing students to begin their own process of integrating what they had learned of theology into their daily tasks of ministry as Christian educators in the congregation.

Such sustained engagement with the course material requires a high degree of trust and comfort between students and the instructor and between the students themselves. Without that trust and comfort, meaningful dialogue and personal interaction and growth are difficult to achieve in an online setting. Such trust and comfort are admittedly more directly and easily established through local, personal interaction between students and the instructor. Indeed, a common frustration in online education concerns the lack of “face time” shared between students and instructors (Savery 2005, 142-143). It is this lack of local interaction or community that presents one of the most significant obstacles to effective online education, partly because many instructors are unsure of their ability to express their own personality and style in a new medium. As social creatures we naturally rely on both verbal and nonverbal communication in every aspect of our lives, and teaching is certainly no exception. Tone, pace, facial expressions, and body language all contribute to the effectiveness of our communication. However, these communication tools are difficult to replicate online. This reality requires creative strategies for online communication, both in terms of interactions between the instructor and the students and between the students themselves (Ascough 2007, 132-133).

Creating and Sustaining Community

In my own teaching, one of my primary goals at the beginning of each semester is to establish a certain type of community in my courses. The initial class meeting, nominally dedicated to introducing the course and reviewing the course syllabus, is also an important early opportunity (perhaps the most important opportunity) to introduce my personality, to learn about the students’ personalities, and to establish a general “mood” for our time together. While the lack of immediate, personal interaction between students and instructors in online contexts certainly makes this task more difficult, there are many useful strategies for facilitating this type of community-building online.

One helpful strategy to implement at the beginning of the semester is to create an online space for introductions. In my courses I created a discussion thread on Blackboard called “Building Community,” which served two purposes. First and foremost, it provided an opportunity for students to reconnect with classmates if they were already established in the

program or to introduce themselves to the community if this were their first course. It also provided an opportunity for me to introduce myself in a less formal way and to learn about the women and men with whom I would be interacting during the coming year.

But a second purpose served by this strategy was to introduce students to the mechanics of blogging without the stress of being evaluated on their performance. They learned how to create discussion threads, how to respond to posts, how to attach documents, videos and pictures, and how to feel comfortable in their role as online learners. Additionally, the instructor can utilize this early thread to determine student fluency in computer and internet use and to detect patterns of online expression and interaction. This allows the instructor to tailor the delivery of material to these patterns of usage without either overwhelming students or failing to meet students where they are as consumers and producers of online information. I was surprised to see that posts on this early thread continued throughout the semester as the students and I learned more about one another and found additional items of interest to share with the group. One particularly enjoyable byproduct of this community-building thread was a dinner prepared by the students at the end of our on-campus session partly consisting of dishes whose recipes were shared on that thread at the beginning of our time together.

Additionally, instructors could make use of social networking sites such as Facebook to create a group for their online classes. Students who already maintain an online presence on Facebook are comfortable with this type of interaction and will appreciate the opportunity to integrate their online habits into their coursework (Schroeder and Greenbowe 2009). Facebook also provides a platform for posting videos, links to websites, pictures, and other online material in a way that is second nature to internet-savvy students. While I did not incorporate this strategy in the online courses at Union-PSCE, I have done so in traditional on-campus courses at Butler University with varying degrees of success. It should be noted, however, that a certain level of due diligence is required on the part of faculty when integrating personal Facebook usage with professional usage, as numerous cases clearly warrant (Young 2009).

Because it is especially important in online education for students to have a clear understanding of the objectives and requirements of the course, another useful practice is to invite students to participate in an online discussion of the syllabus. At the beginning of the semester, in conjunction with the community-building thread, I created an additional thread for discussion of the syllabus on which students could ask any question about the course and expect to receive a timely response. This strategy is especially beneficial in terms of setting expectations and establishing a good working relationship rooted in frank and open communication. Students also feel that their input is valued and that their hopes and concerns are being heard and addressed. This process can and often will result in certain negotiations and compromises between the students and the instructor, and such a process requires the instructor to be open to discussion of diverse and sometimes conflicting commitments and expectations (Ascough 2007, 134).

Another useful strategy, but one I have not yet had the opportunity to implement, is the creation of a video introduction to share with students at the beginning of the semester. This video can accomplish a number of objectives: it can be cast as an introduction of the instructor in which some basic personal and professional information is shared, it can serve as a general

introduction to the course, or it can be used as a more personal method for presenting the syllabus and course requirements. Additionally, online video-conferencing programs such as Skype can provide a platform for students and the instructor to engage in dialogue about the syllabus and other aspects of the course in real time. The unspoken but enormous benefit of a video introduction or video-conferencing is adding a face and personality to the instructor (and to the students, in the case of video-conferencing) at the beginning of the course, which is especially important in a hybrid model of online education in which students and instructors do not visit campus together until far later in the term.

Related to this strategy is the strategy of persistent involvement in the daily patterns of the online course. Much has been written about the importance of “social presence” in online education, and several strategies can contribute to an increased level of social presence on the part of students and instructors (Tu and McIsaac 2002; Savery 2005; Xu 2005; Shore 2007). The posting of an introductory video increases the social presence of the instructor early in the term, but perhaps the most important means of maintaining a social presence throughout the course is dedication to following the discussion threads and contributing to them whenever possible. The video introduction serves to personalize the instructor so that students will hear a particular voice, see a particular face, and detect a particular personality in online interactions with the instructor throughout the course (Savery 2005, 143-144). However, in order for this strategy to succeed the instructor must maintain a visible online presence throughout the term.

The weekly blogging requirement can only succeed in accomplishing its objective if the instructor is willing to read every post and respond when necessary with clarifications, questions, or relevant additional information in order to demonstrate genuine engagement with the students and commitment to this model of education. An additional strategy for maintaining this online presence and for ensuring that the key topics for each week are sufficiently addressed is the practice of posting a weekly summary of the main themes of the texts after students have completed their blogging. Without such sustained involvement on the part of the instructor students quickly begin to lose interest in the weekly blogging and feel as though the instructor is more concerned with their completion of “busywork” than with their learning.

Another strategy for maintaining an online presence for students is regularly scheduled virtual office hours, which could be held in any number of forums. For example, students and the instructor could utilize live chat programs to raise and address questions and concerns in real time. Finally, regularly emailed updates on each student’s performance help to maintain a more personal connection with each student while also providing them with valuable feedback on their progress in the course. Such sustained involvement requires considerable commitment from the instructor to maintain an online presence and to engage students in a timely fashion, and other time commitments must be factored into the design of the online course in order to allow for this level of involvement (Delamarter and Brunner 2005, 151). But the benefits of such involvement are not lost on students, as one student revealed in her course evaluation:

As much as I hated all the writing in the beginning of theology, writing about our faith, articulating thoughts in words on the page became so very important to what I learned in [this] class. There are nuances to the faith that can only be picked up by writing. I also liked that [the instructor] was able to pick something out of even

the lamest posts (mine included) and find something relevant to discuss. That was important to creating a safe environment in which we dared to write and make mistakes and think and learn and laugh.

Making Effective Use of On-Campus Time

Finally, the success of the hybrid model of online education depends on the efficient and effective use of the on-campus portion of the course (Delamarter and Brunner 2005, 152). At Union-PSCE the on-campus portion takes place in the middle of the term, a bit of scheduling that makes creating a safe and vibrant online community that much more essential to the success of the course.

There are many possibilities for the most efficient and effective use of the on-campus session, and my experience concerns only one of these possibilities. In my online courses I have used the on-campus portion to provide lectures on the themes we have been discussing and will continue to discuss throughout the term. While there is certainly a danger of this practice leading to exhaustion for both students and instructors, there is no simple substitute for the opportunity to deliver so much necessary information to students in such a short period of time. But rather than simply summarize the required texts – something already accomplished by the weekly summaries posted online – I used the lectures as an opportunity to introduce students to the broader history of approaches to the doctrines covered during the semester.

During the course students read John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, the *Book of Confessions* of the PC(USA), and a few more recent articles and essays on selected doctrines. The lectures, then, were dedicated to providing a broader historical view of these doctrines, beginning with the biblical witness and moving through the early church, the Middle Ages, the Reformation, the Modern period, and contemporary and revisionist approaches. It was important to observe strict time guidelines in order to allow ample opportunity for questions and discussion, and students generally appreciated this approach to the on-campus portion of our course. The transition from online to on-campus interaction is made considerably smoother if a good working relationship is already established at the beginning of the term by implementing some of the strategies already outlined here.

Conclusion

As my experiences have shown and as I have argued here, the key to a successful online course is the creation and sustenance of a safe and vibrant virtual community. I have outlined a number of strategies for accomplishing this objective and propose that these strategies have value beyond the specific context in which they were first implemented. As online education is growing in popularity across the spectrum of institutions of higher education, it is incumbent upon those who are called to teach in such a setting to recognize the possibilities and potential pitfalls inherent in such a model of education in order to provide the best possible learning experience for students in our digital age.

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