

# The Virtues of Online (Faith) Learning

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## An Anecdote

At a recent meeting of the Religious Education Association, a colleague and I were met with an unexpected question about our work [supporting communities of digital faith formation practice](#).

I am sure the question wasn't intended to be hostile, and yet it has haunted me in a way that only a truly penetrating question can – one aimed not at the execution of one's work but at its underlying principles:

“What are the distinctive Christian virtues of online learning?”

I work as the digital missionary in a [teaching and learning center](#) at a large protestant seminary, so the notion that online learning is important is encoded in the DNA of my daily life and routines. My colleagues and I want to help the people we serve to nurture more consistent and intentional discipleship in the people *they* serve; if there's nothing distinctively Christian about that work, then we are doing it wrong.

I didn't mean to be glib, but I'm sure my defensive and terse response (to a Christian education professor of no small renown, I later learned) came across that way:

“Just ask St. Paul.”

A puzzled silence followed, and understandably so. My less-than-obvious point was that we might think of the online class or learning network as the natural outgrowth of the correspondence course. Stephen and Mary Lowe put it this way: “The social ecosystem that connected Paul with persons in his churches and the spiritual connection they enjoyed together as members of the body of Christ made it possible for spiritual formation to occur without face-to-face contact” (97). St. Paul was the first of many epistolary professors who taught the Christian faith not just in person but from afar.

When our interlocutor and I connected after the talk, I learned that the question is the one *he* encounters from his fellow faculty members at the large protestant seminary he serves. They believe very strongly that the distinctive virtue of Christian teaching is the way the classroom serves as a sort of extension of the chapel, continuing the liturgy of the Body of Christ gathered for prayerful proclamation.

To put it another way, he said that the incarnation is the reason his seminary is committed exclusively to traditional classroom education: reading, wrestling, and responding *in person*. In

the flesh. Convenience, his school has decided, is not a good reason to give up on that commitment.

I would never encourage any Christian community to gather for learning exclusively from a distance (Paul always expresses his desire to visit in person) or for the sake of mere convenience. But I do believe there are distinctive Christian virtues being nurtured when disciples learn and grow in faith online. And I think these virtues matter as much, if not more, for faith formation ministers serving in congregations as they do for those who teach in theological schools. Consider this essay a first draft in articulating them for the faith formation context as 2013 draws to a close.

## Hospitality and Adaptation

Like any human community, we Christians have a blind spot for people who are different from us. Jesus understood such blind spots profoundly and built most of his teachings around helping us learn to open our eyes to the other.

In every congregation I've been a part of, a consequence of our blindness is that our ministry models are built, first and foremost, to reach and teach people like us. It's no surprise and maybe no sin that we start there, but it can't be where we end if we are to be faithful to the call of Christ and to honor the many diverse gifts and burdens borne by the members of Christ's body.

I believe the Web can help us take important steps in including folks in our communities of learning whom many well-meaning Mainline congregations under-serve, including

- ◇ people who work anything but a 9-5 workday Monday through Friday,
- ◇ people who can't always provide or afford childcare or transportation,
- ◇ people with physical disabilities or special learning needs not well accommodated by aging church buildings or noisy groups,
- ◇ people who are new to the faith and not ready to prioritize faith learning, and
- ◇ people whose lives are over-structured as it is, and who have the courage to recognize that attending one more meeting or class right now will create more spiritual chaos than the meeting or class has any hope of redeeming at present.

Around the world of theological higher education, I have heard it asked of those who resist uprooting their families to move to a residential seminary "What are you willing to give up for Jesus?" This strikes me as a profoundly misguided question in light of the largely discouraging data on church leader wellness. I don't believe it is wise or just to restrict access to formal training for church leadership to those who can afford this luxury good. (And then there is the pragmatic reality that there are not enough full-time jobs for seminary graduates, period. And there are even fewer that pay well enough to promise any reasonable hope of paying off student loans efficiently.) There's a similar point to be made about learners in our congregations: if we demand that learning happen entirely in person and according to our programmatic preferences, I worry that we are restricting access to a profound opportunity to

encounter God. With a “one size fits all” approach, we are coming up short in our Christian vocation to hospitality.

In his essay “The Divine Pedagogy as a Model for Online Education,” Roman Catholic educator John Gresham points out that such restriction is not just unjust but un-Godly. He builds a case for online learning on the claim that it can help catechists more effectively emulate God’s own “teaching style.” Gresham discusses what I have called hospitality under the wider rubric of “adaptation”: the willingness – first by God and then by us in emulation – to adapt the message to the audience “according to their age, culture, and social environment” (25). Gresham continues

[B]y moving learning from the classroom to the students’ own world, the instructor might find it easier to use the student’s own life experience as the context for theological reflection, facilitating the recognition of the divine presence enfolded within the student’s own life and circumstances. Critics of online education are correct to emphasize the need for an incarnational pedagogy but they err in focusing such pedagogy on the physical presence of the instructor in the classroom. Rather ... it is the sphere outside the classroom, in the daily life of instructor and students[,] where one should look for the embodiment of divine truth. (27)

The insight that one’s daily life, rather than a Sunday school or seminary classroom, provides the real venue for sustained spiritual growth is a touchstone of good faith formation practice, as Mary Hess points out in her excellent book *Engaging Technology in Theological Education* (65). Online learning helps teachers in any setting reach students closer to where the lasting learning happens.

## **Community (Yes, Community)**

I believe another factor at work in the resistance to online faith learning and spiritual formation is a nostalgia about the effectiveness of traditional pedagogies to foster a true group experience. For instance, even the best instructors in gathered classrooms have to contend with the overeager, the know-it-all, and the external processor who sometimes comes unprepared to class. I don’t wish to vilify any of these learners, but it is true that more traditional pedagogies, especially in inexperienced hands, favor the learning styles of some over others. Bodies in the same room do not experience Christian community just because the teacher intends it to happen. Incorporating an online component into faith learning can change things up in a way that is especially helpful for internal processors and those struggling with the material.

Here again, Gresham is helpful. He goes on to discuss a second aspect of the divine pedagogy, the “communitarian dimension” (God teaches us in community):

Online education provides many communications tools that can facilitate group discussion and cooperative learning through interpersonal dialogue among students. Such dialogue can be quite difficult in a traditional face-to-face classroom. Within the physical classroom, social and environmental conditions conspire to limit the full involvement of all students ... In an online environment such as an asynchronous

discussion board, all students have opportunity to participate ... The learning community often takes on aspects of a religious community as students spontaneously share personal religious struggles with the class. At the same time, it is clear that these discussions are facilitating mastery and comprehension of the content and material of the course. (27)

Of course, we shouldn't glorify online learning either, or overlook its very real shortcomings. But to say that the kind of incarnate, in-person community we want to form will happen automatically just because we've brought people together in a classroom is to ignore much of what we now know about learning styles and group dynamics. Against this backdrop, online learning can be "invigorating and refreshing" (Hess, 74), challenging and transforming.

## Participation and Exhortation

Gresham's final appeal to the divine pedagogy points to God calling us all to active participation in the life of faith. We must avoid being "hearers of the word and not doers" (James 1:23, NRSV). Online learning is helpful in this final respect as well: "Rather than the passive absorption of information delivered through a lecture typical of classroom teaching, online learning almost by necessity requires a more active role for the student" (Gresham, 28).

Of all the forms of active online learning in the faith context, perhaps the most exciting is the movement across denominations to take seriously the notion of digitally mediated (or at least digitally prompted) spiritual practices. The growth in use, even just in the last eighteen months, of online meditations, daily prayer reminder software, "Bible challenge" online support groups, and even digitally delivered "faith at home" activities and curriculum has been remarkable. Not only in theological degree programs but in congregational life, online learning is helping bridge the gap between gatherings, nurturing religious practice and expression in the process.

I wonder if there is a final, related benefit as well. Online learning seems to offer a way through one of our particularly troublesome institutional roadblocks: the tendency for communities of faith to avoid conflict and critique ("nice kills the church," [one colleague says](#)). You simply cannot participate in an online course or group without getting the hang of expressing disagreement and challenge. And you can't be a Christian growing in an authentic faith without receiving some (again, just ask Paul). Might we get the hang of graceful but firm exhortation by practicing, some of the time, in the lower-stakes environment of a trusted online community of learners? It's an intriguing idea, and one I plan to pay more attention to in the coming year in the educational and pastoral settings I work in.

## A Personal Theological Postlude

As a member of another theological tradition that highly values the Christian doctrine of the incarnation, I can't help but agree with Gresham and Hess that our interlocutor's colleagues are missing the mark about what this doctrine means for online learning and spiritual formation.

The Word wasn't just made flesh; the Word was also made a carpenter, a rabbi, a public speaker, etc. We actually sell the incarnation short if we don't participate in the social structures of our day, and for us, that means having a presence online and doing some of our church business (proclamation, service, prayer, fellowship, and teaching, to borrow from Maria Harris's *Fashion Me A People*) in the online space. The people we serve spend a lot of time there, as do the people we'd like to serve. We need to be there too, especially if we're to emulate the pedagogy of the God who is with us as Emmanuel.

Online learning isn't a silver bullet, but it's an increasingly essential tool for doing the urgent work of forming disciples to be Christ's hands and feet in the world. What could be more incarnational than that?

## Works Cited

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