

Teaching Theology Online

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ABSTRACT

Can theology be taught successfully in the online environment? This article will draw upon theoretical literature and the author's practical experience in answering that question. Along the way, this article will discuss the various motivations for teaching theology online and acknowledge the opportunities presented by the online medium. It shall address conceptual shifts prompted by online education such as the shift from correspondence to distance to open education. The article will then discuss evolving teaching practices and methods. There will follow a discussion of the crucial issue of theological formation and scholarly interaction and how these can be approached online. After that discussion, the article will cover various challenges faced in teaching theology online. At the end of the article, some observed outcomes of online theological education will be presented and some recommendations made regarding the effective delivery of theological education in the online environment.

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Introduction

Online technologies have provided many opportunities for theological education. These technologies facilitate access to education for many students who would not otherwise be able to pursue the studies of their choice. These same technologies also allow educators to customize their classes with multiple formats and modes of delivery while at the same time allowing classes to be linked to vast resources of theological knowledge. Online technologies are also prompting the globalization of education and allowing education to become more equitable in its availability and delivery.

While online education offers unprecedented new opportunities, it also prompts a rethinking of traditional paradigms and it challenges teaching methods and practices used in the online environment. This article will examine a number of issues concerning the teaching of theology online. It will first outline some motivations for conducting online education and collaterally raise some opportunities provided by these technologies. Then it will explain conceptual shifts and challenges to

educational paradigms prompted by online education. Next, the article will discuss evolving teaching methods and practices in relation to online education. The article will then discuss the question of theological formation and interaction in the online environment. We shall address the issues of learner styles and personalities and the relative merits of self-paced vs. paced learning. The article will then discuss some challenges prompted by online education. The last topic will cover observed outcomes of online education both generally and specifically with regard to theological education. While the article's content will have relevance for subjects other than theology, it will be mindful mostly of the needs and experience of theological education in the higher education sector. The article will draw upon the author's experience as director of a pioneering and rapidly growing online graduate theology program¹ as well as making use of theoretical literature. It will also draw upon a 2007 survey of online students in the [University of Dallas School of Ministry's graduate program](#).² The article will also contribute to redressing an imbalance in the literature on online education. Ngwenya et al. (Anderson and Elloumi 2004, 319) note that most research on online education has focussed on traditional cohort type learning. In addition to this model, this article will discuss other more individualized and asynchronous models, which may be more specific to online learning. Moreover, as Heinemann (2007, 202) and Amos (1999, 126) note, there has been substantial research done on distance learning in general, but very little research on theological distance learning. This lack is exacerbated by the rapidly improving technologies that mean significant changes in approaches to online learning. It should be said also that this article has been prepared intentionally for online publication. It is thus not without a sense of irony that one notes that much of the current secondary literature on online education has actually been published in-print.

Motivations for Offering Online Education

Even within the field of theology, motivations for offering online education are myriad (cf. Schiffman et al., 2007). These motivations often vary according to the purposes of the offering institution, be they rank commercialism, a desire to increase a student body or a more principled vision for justice and equity in education. Regardless of the institution's basic motivation, what unites effective online education programs

has been an educational culture of “access for all,” which may be facilitated by online education technologies.

Online education can be conceived positively in terms of facilitating greater access to education, or negatively in terms of online technologies’ breach of barriers to education. Traditionally, barriers to education have been conceived in geographical terms, with their breach being initiated older style “distance education” and completed by online technologies through which students no longer bear the geographical burden of attending on-campus classes. That much is familiar to most people but one of the more surprising and welcome developments in online education is the way that it can breach barriers not traditionally accounted for. Online education has prompted a rethink of what constitutes “distance” education. For example, Heinemann (2005b, 278) cites Moore’s understanding of distance as not only a matter of geographical distance, but also “a distance of understandings and perceptions...” Such a broadening of the concept of distance is not insignificant because as also noted by Heinemann (2005a, 192) the text-based online interaction that is used so often in online education “can have a levelling effect, neutralizing the factors of culture, gender, status, and so forth.” This theoretical point is affirmed by Ascough’s observation (2002, 19) that in online education, unless one willingly self-discloses one’s background, other students do not know one’s race, gender or other parts of one’s background. In the concrete, this means that online education has the potential to reduce much of the prejudice encountered in the classroom. He reports that “[m]any African-Americans report experiencing less discrimination in the online learning environment.”

So online education may be chosen by an institution or a student because it fosters an equalitarian classroom experience. In this author’s opinion, this benefit is presently underappreciated and underexploited in conceiving and promoting online education. We will turn now to more conventional motivations for choosing online education.

Heinemann (2005a, 189) notes that “[t]he reason most often mentioned for choosing distance education is convenience.” Likewise, Ascough (2002, 19-20) and Cannell (1999, 6) reinforce the importance of convenience by noting that distance education generally and online education specifically are chosen because they facilitate

education for those who find that traditional education would impact adversely upon work or family, those for whom geographical relocation is undesirable, or those whose age, demographic background or personal mobility renders the traditional classroom either burdensome or disagreeable.

Online education also affords opportunities for the disabled, be they disabled students or professors. For students with vision or hearing impairments, multimedia online education offers more opportunities for learning than the “monomedium” more commonly associated with onsite education. Moreover, mobility-challenged students or professors, despite the accommodations made by various legislations, often find online education a far easier environment in which to study or teach.

Internationalization of either the student or teaching body may be another motivation for offering online education. When online education is effective and enables student interaction, it can help global perspectives emerge in the educational context. For example, if one conducts a class on poverty in Africa, it is one thing to have an African student talk about their experience in a classroom in which they are a foreign presence, but quite another to have them participate in an online discussion in which they are equals. In the words of one student, “in cyberspace, there are no nationalities.”

Apart from offering education to students from all over the world, there is also great potential to internationalize the faculty body by way of employing overseas-based faculty to teach courses. While there is a danger of such practice degenerating into outsourcing, there is also a great potential benefit of giving students a genuinely global perspective and experience by exposing them to professors for whom multiculturalism and international perspective are not only taught in the classroom but also daily lived out realities.

A final motivation worth mentioning is offering courses to niche groups of students (cf. Ascough 2002, 20). The global reach of online education makes possible recruiting the minimum number of students that can make a course viable without over-committing an institution's resources.

Shifts in the Conception and Constitution of Higher Education

Cannell (1999, 7-16) observes shifting paradigms of off-campus education, such as that from “correspondence education” to “distance education” to “open education.” Correspondence education, which was the dominant model of off-campus education until the 1970s, generally involved an institution sending printed class material in print. Teacher-student communication, apart from assignment work was perceived generally to be one-way. Distance education places higher value on interaction between teacher and students. However, the content, design and evaluation of the students’ learning program is still very much in the hands of the institution. Open education puts control of learning in the hands of the learners who set their own goals, set their own learning strategies and exercise greater choice regarding content.

Online education has facilitated both distance education and open education, but for the purposes of critique it is necessary to be clear as to whether one is envisaging open or distance education. The one may be open, democratized and learner-centred while the other can at least potentially be centralized, institution-centred and a fundamentally closed system.

Online education is facilitating trends towards open education by enhancing student mobility. That is, students are relatively free to pick and choose among the range of courses and programs available online. For example, a student may select systematic theology courses offered by one professor or one institution, but may elect to take their Biblical studies elsewhere. The ability of a student to take such an open approach to learning may be restricted by the rules of a degree-granting institution, but whether or not open learning is allowed by an institution, the technology-enhanced autonomy of students does and will continue to place strong pressure on institutions to adapt to an open learning model.

It is now generally accepted (cf. Cannel 1999, 16-18) that online education is facilitating the option of a learner-centred paradigm of education rather than an instructional or institution-based paradigm. Such changes, however, depend upon the willingness of institutions to adapt to a learner-based paradigm but, as I will

argue below, online technologies can also be used to the opposite effect in terms of centralizing or institutionalizing education.

Where learner-centredness is embraced, online education will prompt and enable distributed learning strategies, as contrasted against models of centralized education. Between the demands of many students with their myriad goals, strategies and desired outcomes and the pressures of supplying labour-intensive classes, it becomes clear that no one institution can respond to the needs of all students. This would mean either a merging of institutions, which in most cases would be impractical, or a shift from the level of institutions to systems in conceiving, delivering and assessing education. Such systems would involve some cross-institutional cooperation but probably more so involve cooperation between networks of faculty and departments.

The need for lifelong learning is another challenge to traditional concepts of education. When any subject, especially theology, is seen as academic preparation for a vocation, lifelong learning is a necessity. The USCCB (2006, 163) affirms this point, noting that “the study of theology must be an initiation into a lifelong study of the truths of faith. If the priest is to be a teacher, he must first be a student who continuously pursues an understanding of the faith to which he commits himself and invites his people.” Traditionally, the closest realization of lifelong education was usually during sabbatical leave. But that is not true lifelong education so much as it is intermittent education. Online technology can aid lifelong education by breaking down the barriers of time, distance and work that have been mentioned before in this article.

In the context of paradigm shifts towards open education, many think of online education as facilitating democratization of education. It may be preferable to argue that online education generates tendencies towards deinstitutionalization because online education can potentially facilitate two opposite trends. The trend towards democratization works against traditional models in which universities have thought in terms of recruiting students over whom they have a virtual monopoly for the term of their degrees. In online-enabled open education, however, students are not bound to a geographical campus, they are free to pick and choose among the offerings of different institutions. With this freedom, it is easy to see rapid shifts from institution-

centred to learner-centred concepts of education. Martorella (1996) envisages a “degathering” of education in which smaller, more specialized schools could cater to the wider choices of increasingly autonomous students. At the same time, the opportunities presented by online education, most notably an ever-decreasing need for physical library resources means enhanced opportunities for independent faculty or groups of faculty. That is, without the physical constraints and economies of scale required by traditional higher education, faculty will be more at liberty to establish their own smaller-scale educational enterprises.

Online education can, however, facilitate an opposite trend in deinstitutionalization by enabling meta-institutionalization. For example, in order to render seminary curriculum uniform, the Vatican could mandate that all lectures be taught by one instructor with those lectures delivered electronically around the world. The role of local instructors would then be reduced to that of tutors or seminar leaders. With recording, subtitling and sound-dubbing technologies, such a project, if desired, would be relatively straightforward to execute.

Having said that such meta-institutionalization is possible, it may be the case that such an approach may be useful for some education services for the military, government, or a large corporation. But would this approach be a positive one for a worldwide church? This paper shall not enter into that debate other than to say it is possible, and even if not likely on the worldwide scale, could certainly be seen as desirable by some on the national or semi-national scale.

The deinstitutionalization brought on by online education, be it sub-institutionalization or meta-institutionalization shall bring with it challenges regarding accreditation and quality control. In the face of meta-institutional education, accreditation would be stripped from independent, academically-oriented bodies and taken into the hands of bodies like churches. Sub-institutionalization, however, would make accreditation difficult. It would be hard or impossible to have smaller, niche market groups accredited in the same way as larger universities. The possibilities here are manifold, but one strong possibility is that accreditation bodies switch from accrediting institutions to accrediting students, adopt a laissez-faire approach to teaching bodies and instead conduct annual standardized examinations for students.

Technology and Pedagogy

Online education technology offers some considerable benefits over and above traditional onsite education. Anderson (Anderson and Elloumi 2004, 271-294) highlights some of these advantages, such as the ability to present course content in multiple formats, the customization of content and presentation modes, the provision of supplemental materials and the enablement of access to extensive repositories of knowledge. These benefits relate to both the flexibility and the efficiency of education.

First, online education allows the flexibility of delivering content in a variety of formats, be they multimedia, text, audio, first-person video of the instructor or third-party video of another expert. Online education also allows for considerable customization of content delivery. Because it is bound neither by the physical classroom, nor time constraints nor specified formats, online teachers are free to present their material in whatever formats may best suit a certain course or even a specific class. Secondly, online technology makes easier the provision of supplemental materials. These may range from mini-lectures to informal insights, material taken from related courses or third-party material. This facility can help teachers serve a wider body of students with specialized interests or needs. That is, one could reserve the main part of one's content delivery to the broad needs of all students, while supplemental materials could be supplied to meet special interests. Thus a teacher can preserve and present material that is of interest to some, but not all, students and which is impractical to deliver in a standard teaching time.

The third benefit, of providing access to extensive repositories of knowledge, means that the sorts of resources that had been available only in the best research facilities can now be made available anywhere, be it a classroom or laboratory or a home.

A key question is whether these benefits should be restricted to online-only education. It seems obvious that the collateral benefit of online technologies will be the enhancement of traditional onsite classroom education. In the first place, it seems reasonable to predict that the online resources described above will soon become an essential part of onsite classroom teaching. In the second place, this technological enhancement of onsite education will blur the boundaries between online and onsite education. The technologically up-to-date onsite course would

differ from its online counterpart perhaps only in the medium of delivery of the teacher's content. This does, however, raised a pedagogical-technological question, namely, where does instruction occur? Common to both online and onsite learning will be the question as to the extent that learning occurs during the teacher's delivery of content, the student's discussion of ideas or in the supplementary materials and resources associated with a course.

While technology can bring obvious benefits realized through online education, it is not the case that all uses of technology are pedagogically beneficial. In some cases, inappropriate use of technology may actually hinder the education process. A good example is the cognitive overload observed by Sweller and explained by Cooper (1998) in which multimedia technology, such as Microsoft PowerPoint, can be overused to the extent that it impedes the learning process by overloading the mind with an excess of data.³

Some critics of online education have cited phenomena such as cognitive overload as evidence against online education or even against the use of technology in the classroom. However, just because technology is sometimes used ineffectively it does not follow that this is an inherent flaw in the technology. Rather, teachers need to be informed about the effective and ineffective uses of technology. Just as a non-technologically enhanced lecture can be either engaging and informative, or a meaningless monolog, a technologically enhanced presentation can range from being media-rich to media saturated. In the case of multimedia presentations, graphic, video or animated presentations may be helpful in providing visual imagery through which students may experience relevant insights. Yet the use of multimedia should be judicious and the instructor must be careful to use multimedia to nourish the cognitive process rather than overload it.

One question regarding the use of online technology is whether one intends to replicate the conditions prevailing in an onsite classroom or whether one intends to create a new learning environment. One's approach to education will certainly guide one's answer to this question. At the lower end of pedagogical effectiveness, one could, if one followed a knowledge transfer model of education, simply deploy an

online course that was little more than an expensive alternative to print-based correspondence education (Ascough 2002, 18). A greater commitment to effective pedagogy, however, will result in more innovative approaches to online education technology. Dukes and Bourgon (1999, 123) argue that merely replicating traditional pedagogy through technological means will not work. This is evident enough, but the challenge is to identify students' pedagogical needs and to utilize the online technology in a way that meets those needs. However, in adopting such an approach theology professors run the risk of creating a divide between onsite and online courses. To give an example, some online educators find it more expedient to deliver in shorter, modular format. One may deliver single courses over five weeks instead of the standard semester length. While there may be benefits (or otherwise) in such an approach, such an approach can present problems if, for example, the short-term modular course is out of synchronization with its onsite equivalent or if the mode of delivery forces the delivery of material too different in content to that of the onsite equivalent.

Theological Formation and Interaction Online

If we turn this paper to the issues of theological formation and student interaction, we find the most challenging issues for teaching theology online. Because the issues overlap, we shall deal with them together in this section.

To clarify the central concerns, it seems helpful to recall Bernard Lonergan's (1973, xi) definition of theology as an academic enterprise that "mediates between a cultural matrix and the significance and role of a religion in that matrix." The key challenge regarding online education would seem to be how this medium can facilitate this mediation.

First, though, we should acknowledge the scepticism or outright hostility towards online theological formation. To give a clear example, Mercadante (2002, 58) expresses her scepticism by asking if online media can replicate the "transforming experience of scholar-communities involved in open-ended proximate mutual exploration." Yet in asking the question, she reveals both an underlying assumption and implies the solution to the problem. The underlying assumption is that onsite/proximate scholar communities are the best and perhaps only model for theological education. That assumption, while widespread, is often asserted rather

than argued and it is surprising how often this model is taken for granted without any critical self-assessment. In response to such an attitude, Hess (2002, 36) asks “How many of your faculty colleagues have argued that online distributive learning can’t ever be implemented in theological education because theological education requires face-to-face learning?” She then responds that “[u]sually such arguments are built without any real understanding of the internal logic of distributive electronic formats. Actually, they are often built without much reflective understanding of the internal logic of classroom-based pedagogies.”

It can be argued that the viewpoint that theological education and formation is best achieved or even possible only with onsite, proximate interaction in a physical classroom is a presumption that is made without sufficient reflection and which survives only because of the familiarity of that method of education. One can also argue that if one can see online education not as a replication of onsite education but as an innovative replacement, using different pedagogical methods, one can more insightfully and creatively approach the question of whether effective online theological formation is possible.

Having said that, our pressing concern should be whether concrete, empirical evidence reveals any efficacy in online theological education. Fortunately some studies have been done in this field, most notably by Mark Heinemann of Dallas Theological Seminary. Heinemann’s research (2007, 194) shows theological students self-reporting that online teachers were interacting at “more than satisfactory level.” The satisfaction level with online interaction is probably a function of the fact that, while interaction between teachers and students is an important part of theological formation, it is not the sole element in this formation. Learner-to-learner interaction, which seems to be fostered by the online environment, is also a crucial element of theological formation (cf. Heinemann 2007, 196-8).

If the evidence points to online theological education being successful to a degree equal to that of onsite education, it remains that the qualities or characteristics of online education differ from traditional education. Such differences are alluded to by Walther (cited in Heinemann 2005a, 191), who concludes that “on-line participants, if given enough time, develop ‘normal but temporally retarded’ interpersonal relationships.” There are also reported (Heinemann 2007, 195) statistical differences

between cognitive and affective learning gains. Online courses appear to yield smaller affective learning gains than their onsite counterparts. Related to this point, Heinemann notes (2005a, 190) that “because the on-line environment is confined to reading and writing, the nonverbal messages of face-to-face interaction are missing. Researchers report, however, that participants learn to make up for this lack by manipulating content, using, for example, humor, linguistic style, and paralinguistic cues.” In defence of online methods, one may argue that technologies such as live video chat lend themselves to the non-verbal communication mentioned above. But that does not absolve online educators of an important responsibility, that of asking how online media may be used creatively to realize pedagogical goals and how pedagogical methods vary between online and onsite environments.

If we accept first, that interaction is important in theological education and second, that online educators need to be innovative with regard to theological formation, then it would help to discuss some of the guiding principles and issues associated with online theological formation.

One key guiding principle is that quality interaction leads to improvements in both cognitive and affective learning. Patterson (1996, 67) observes that in terms of instructional motivation and instructional support, interaction with a teacher is crucial. That is, student-student interaction does convey some benefits, but the evidence points towards teacher-led discussion groups being most effective in terms of improving cognitive and affective learning. This point is significant with regard to planning interaction. Amos (1999, 133-4) notes that interaction has been conceived of as occurring through on-campus attendance, cohorts of students having relationships with local churches or through online discussion. While other forms of interaction have their value, it would seem that teacher-student interaction is crucial for the best quality of theological education.

Patterson’s observations regarding interaction are hardly unique to online education. Educational quality is proportionate to interaction even in onsite education. Ideally, then, if student-teacher interaction results in the best educational outcomes, it would seem that the traditional “Oxbridge” model of one-on-one tutoring would yield best results. Yet, as Pauls notes (2003, 1) the Oxbridge model was forgone in the USA in favour of large-class settings which were less labour intensive and less expensive.

While this approach implies challenges for both traditional onsite and newer online education, the risks peculiar to online education need to be accounted for. If one adopts a one-way, monolog-lecture model of education, then one can accommodate an almost limitless number of students in any one online class. This lack of limits has obvious financial attraction. Yet a mass-market approach will inevitably compromise the quality of education, especially in an interaction-dependent field such as theology.

So if theological education requires teacher-led interaction, how can this be achieved in the online environment?

In the first place, the evidence points towards online education being more interactive than traditional onsite education. Despite online education being more labour intensive for professors and despite sometimes costing more for students, online students have stated that they get more “bang for their buck” by way of greater interactivity with their professors (Bremner 1998). Part of this perception may stem from online education’s breach of the tyranny of time. This means that there are no time limits on classes. So, rather than having a professor available for only three hours class time and limited office hours, online students often perceive their professors to be available as often or as long as the relevant technology allows.

A further principle in delivering online education is that the quality of the course depends on the course author leading the discussion. Negatively, Kaye and Rumble (1991, 219) observe that the quality of discussion is compromised when discussion is led by persons other than the “master teacher” who prepared the class materials. Again, this “quality of discussion” issue has been raised by online practices, but also impacts upon traditional onsite education in which, for example, a lecture is given to a large group, followed by tutorials/discussions in smaller groups led by less qualified faculty. The question raised is whether this weakness in some online practice translates into the onsite environment. There seems to be no reason to suspect this problem is unique to online education. However, in considering specifically online education, it would seem that theological formation is maximized when the teacher who prepares a course is the one who leads the discussion of that class material. Thus, the practice of having an instructor of record who prepares the course then

having another teacher (usually one less qualified) lead the discussion would appear to diminish the quality of education.

Online education in theology does, however, offer some opportunities for formation beyond those afforded by traditional onsite education. One sometime surprising advantage is that online interaction is often more free and uninhibited than face-to-face contact. Despite the obvious limits of text-based chat, this author's experience is that students feel less inhibited and more open to free, frank and direct expression in online chat. Anyone who has experienced the dark side of the internet would know that people often reveal far more of themselves online than they would in person. The reasons for this are myriad and involve complex psychology and sociology. Yet this dynamic is ironically helpful for theological formation. Text-based chat allows students to open up and confront issues more quickly and more directly than traditional onsite discussion. While use of online technology is not universal, among those who can use the technology, opportunities for meaningful interaction are greatly facilitated. Cormode (1999, 105) notes that online communities, be they by email or other messaging systems, evolve spontaneously among students. Such spontaneous germination of interaction has been both a positive development and a challenge. The positive development is that students use the online technology to continue their formation outside the classroom, often with great enthusiasm. The challenge is that these interactions often occur without direction of the teacher. This phenomenon raises questions regarding the teacher's role. Is one meant to direct all student interaction? Is one meant to guide the formation process or let it develop spontaneously?

Online interaction in theological education challenges traditional models of the learning community. Reissner (1999, 90) notes that most institutions in the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) regard formation as occurring within a community. The challenging question here is whether community needs to be a geographic community. Reissner (1999, 92) notes that in 1957 Morgan had argued that geographical proximity would not be necessary for making community. The reality today is that with technology and communication media undreamed-of in 1957, community is today formed not only geographically, but also through common interests and values. This author would argue that in a "niche market" like theology, it

may be more expedient to gather together people of common values than to force such people to come together in the same geographical place.

If we take the premise that theological formation aims not only to convey information but also to promote and develop thinking skills, we find further opportunities with online education. It is proposed, for example (Cannell 1999, 15-6, 23), that online theological education can help transform students from passive learners into reflective practitioners by linking them more proximately with their communities and with the practical application of their theological skills. One strategy of online education is to situate a student within a community context in which he or she can ponder the practical application of one's education. This means that, ideally, in addition to student-instructor interaction, there is also peer-peer and student-community interaction.

This approach to online theological education does, however, rely on the assumption that an online student will actually be engaged with one's community. It also largely assumes that the student will be engaged in part-time studies while engaging in substantial ministry. While such an approach is worthwhile, it cannot be assumed, unless such a placement forms part of the admissions process. So in planning for online education, theologians would need to consider whether in fact their students will be engaged with the community or not.

From another perspective, the community-engagement formation opportunities of online education raise a conceptual question. Wherein lies the "distance" in distance education? Is the "distance" between the student and the institution, or between the student and the community one serves or will serve? Such a question challenges our traditional educational paradigms. It would seem that onsite education creates distance between a student and his or her community, and that the opposite may also apply.

The idea of the Church as learning community also bears directly upon issues of formation. Given that, as Reissner notes (1999, 99), formation for distance education students may switch from the campus community to the local church community, we may ask how can community-interaction be theologically formative? Reissner also observes (1999, 90) that students in distance learning are often more rooted in the

local or church community and that theological interaction occurs within those communities. Because of their community interaction, it may be that online students are less in need of student-teacher or even student-student interaction than more traditional students.

The prospect of community-based interaction, rather than campus-based interaction, will inevitably mean that education institutions will have less control over the content and quality of students' theological interaction. But if a student's interaction occurs within the Church, one may ask (Kemp cited in Cannell 1999, 19), "Is the Church such a bad learning community that the campus community has to replace it?" If the answer to this question is positive, it may make theological education very different to education in other fields. In theology, the likely "employer" is known from the beginning of a student's studies and so we have the ability to place people in practical field situations while undertaking their education. This means that online education in theology provides the opportunity for a student to optimize one's education with a combination of onsite practice and off-site education.

The situation just described can apply to one theology student situated within the community. But online education can also help to form local learning communities. These communities exist where education is based in one location, but a group or cohort of students is gathered together in an off-campus setting. The formation of such local groups has the challenging element of semi-independence from professors. Yet, if professors allow students this latitude and yield their regulation over student learning, students can find peer-support with which to measure their ideas and insights. In this way, online education, especially in its facilitation of local learning communities, represents a definitive break with the model of "banking education," that is familiar from the work of Freire.

Lastly, in terms of interaction and formation, online education can promote global peer-to-peer to peer interaction. This may at first seem like a contradiction, given that online education can also facilitate interaction among people who share a common experience or even common location. But online education can facilitate interaction both among those located close to each other and those located around the world. One of the distinct advantages of online education is that it can bring together international students, and professors for that matter, as peers within "cyberspace."

The potential for internationalizing and broadening students' perspectives through online education is a great asset to online pedagogy.

Learner Styles and Personalities

Learner readiness is a crucial issue for online education (Anderson and Elloumi 2004, 369-70). Online education requires students who are comfortable with using computers. Also, while the need for self-discipline is common to all forms of distance education, online students require an even greater level of initiative and self-discipline as well as possessing a capacity for active inquiry. It is clear then, that online education is not for passive learners or those lacking appropriate skills or self-discipline. From another perspective, online education is often chosen because students have a preference for working alone (Heinemann 2005a, 189). One surprising discovery though, is that beyond learners' preferences, online education may be a medium better suited to the learning styles and personalities of some students.

The concrete experience of this author and his colleagues has been that students with particular personalities and learning styles flourish in the online environment. This experience has been reinforced by observing students who have taken both onsite and online courses. To give a broad view, students who are introverted and who tend to be very quiet in onsite classes can come alive in an online, asynchronous environment. Teachers at all levels have experienced the quiet student who sits at the back of a classroom and asks a question or makes a brilliant comment twenty or so minutes after it was relevant. The experience of online educators has been that such students flourish in an asynchronous online discussion when they have time to think and reflect in between being posed a question and responding to it. It seems then, that even though there are some students who are unsuited to online education for different reasons, there are those students who actually do much better in online education than they do in onsite classes.

This experience is affirmed by the literature that indicates that many learners, especially those of an introverted disposition, can actually perform better in an online environment. This situation is described by Ascough (2002, 19). "Whereas classroom discussion often provides a forum for extraverted learners to participate, it

does not always allow room for others to process information at a comfortable level or for introverts to muster the courage to jump into a discussion.” Welch (Byer et al. 2002, 115) also observes that “quieter students are much more inclined to interact online.”

From both the literature and concrete experience, it seems that online education is opening opportunities for theology students who otherwise may have found traditional education constricting or overwhelming. One can call to mind the sort of theology student who in previous times may have been labelled a “dumb ox.” The spontaneous and immediate environment of a traditional classroom can be intellectually suffocating for such a student, whereas the asynchronous online environment that allows for careful reflection and the gathering of one’s thoughts before speaking can allow an introverted student to maximize the formation potential of theological education.

Paced and Self-Paced Learning.

In delivering online education, a choice needs to be made between paced and self-paced learning. Students have self-reported (UDSOM 2007) that they see “self-paced learning” as effectively equal to “no pace learning” and that they require the discipline of weekly tasks or assignments. Anecdotal evidence suggests that students require an extraordinarily high level of motivation and self-discipline to succeed in self-paced learning. There are other key principles to bear in mind, though, if deciding between paced and self-paced learning.

Self-paced learning allows for maximum flexibility in learning, but at the same time it results in minimum interaction. In fact, there are substantial differences observed between paced and self-paced learning (Anderson and Elloumi 2004, 325). Interaction in paced learning can occur through email, telephone, live chat, asynchronous discussion boards, web announcements, teleconferencing and videoconferencing. Unpaced learning interaction is limited to sporadic telephone and email contact along with limited web announcements. While paced education allows for student-student and instructor-student interaction, unpaced education effectively eliminates student-to-student interaction because students do not cover the same material at the same time. It seems then, that for any meaningful interaction to occur

between students, online learning must be paced so as to specify timeframes within which interaction should occur.

When it makes a decision regarding paced or unpaced learning, an institution needs to clarify whether it wishes to replicate the physical classroom online, or whether it wants to innovate completely with regard to the needs of its students. However, in order to preserve the flexibility required by students from different time zones who need to access the course at different times of the day or the week, some chronological flexibility is needed for a course. It would seem that the optimal “pacing” for online theological education would be to present lectures at a specific time each week (or perhaps other set time period) and to give students that week during which to present their asynchronous contributions to a discussion board and also respond to other students. That sort of asynchronous interaction within a timeframe would allow for flexibility of schedule, while also keeping students paced alongside one another. At the same time, having some sort of optional synchronous contact – be it text chat or video chat is valuable for students who enjoy spontaneous interaction. Fortunately with advances in technology, it is easy to have the best of both worlds in terms of both synchronous and asynchronous interaction.

Challenges

This paper will now outline some of the challenges facing the teaching of theology online. The first and perhaps most hard-hitting challenge is prejudice against, and lack of understanding of, online learning, especially in theology. Example of the prejudiced views can be seen first in a quote such as, “I am not a technophile. My favourite way of teaching theology is to gather a group of people around a common text. Chalk remains my favourite teaching technology.”(Pauw 2002, 39) There is irony in such a statement. The text, be it scroll, book, or computer-based, is one technology or another. Likewise, chalk on a board, ink on paper, graphics on a monitor are all technology. Unless we are to abandon millennia of civilization and technology, the question for educators is not whether they will utilize technology or not, but rather what sort of technology they will use. A second example is found in Cormode (1999, 104) who draws attention to those who believe that computer technology “may actually hinder a student’s learning process.” Assertions like these are common enough, yet as often as they are made there is rarely, if ever, any data

or argument presented to support the assertions. It could well be that when presented the hard evidence to the contrary (see below) some opponents of online education may be relieved of their prejudices, but this author fears that technophobia may remain an intransigent ideology for some time to come.

As Heinemann (2005, 184) notes, traditional, residential education is generally conceived as the standard for excellence in theological education. Likewise, Cannell (1999, 4-5) observes that oral instruction is conceived of as the superior model of education in theology. Furthermore, this viewpoint leads to accreditation issues, such as the ATS allowing only one third of a program to be taught by distance education (Cannell 1999, 10). Those viewpoints and policies seem less founded upon prejudice and more upon a lack of understanding or familiarity with online education and its benefits. With policy makers and those responsible for decisions having been trained in the oral, onsite mode of instruction, those who advocate online education have the task of convincing such persons of the value of online education.

Another significant challenge to online education is its labour intensiveness. In the first place, online education does foster more interaction between teachers and students. This point is made in Bremner's observation (1998) that students report feeling a greater satisfaction with their value for money spent on education because they experience a greater level of interactivity with their professors.

The second challenge is that while this interactivity is pedagogically helpful, greater interactivity does lend itself to increased faculty workloads. Scheduled preparation and delivery of online courses requires more work than a traditional onsite course. Conventional wisdom holds that online education requires twice the workload of an onsite course. This author's experience would regard that estimate as conservative. At University of Dallas School of Ministry, we teach the same courses online and onsite. The class preparation time is identical, but for a class that would require three contact hours in a traditional setting it has been observed that a professor requires: 4-6 hours for recording and preparing a lecture for delivery online, 1-2 hours for live chat and 3-4 hours for asynchronous discussion. In total, one needs to spend potentially four times as much time conducting an online course as an online course. Some institutions meet that problem by enrolling many students and cutting discussion to a minimum – yet that is pedagogically catastrophic, especially in a

formative field such as theology. Another approach is to have many students enrolled in a course in which the lectures are given by one instructor, but discussion is led by other teachers. However, as noted before in this article, the quality of discussion is compromised when discussion is led by persons other than the one who prepared the materials (cf. Kaye and Rumble 1991). So, rather than diminishing teaching quality or overstressing professors, other solutions need to be found. Ascough (2002, 20) proposes that in response to the extra workload, faculty need compensation, through pay, reduced courseloads or other means. Amos (1999, 130) also notes the importance of ongoing training for educators. This training is all the more important because, as Thompson (2004) notes, work practices in online education can cause professors' workloads to vary greatly, sometimes adversely. This training is also important because of the unrealistic expectations many students put on online education and educators. It is taken for granted by many today that the digital world is an instant world and this leads to expectations that students will receive instant or near-instant feedback from their online professors. If managed poorly, meeting these expectations can result in a professor doing little other than dealing with students and giving constant feedback. With regard to meeting these challenges, this author's school trains its professors, limits the size of classes and pays an extra stipend for professors taking online classes. While this makes online education more manageable and more rewarding, it remains that theological schools embracing online education, and doing it effectively, will face the challenge of significantly increased workloads for faculty involved in this sort of education.

This point brings up the related challenge of the cost of online education. Ascough (2002, 20) puts the point bluntly by saying "[o]nly poorly designed and poorly delivered courses can be done at minimal cost." There is an unfortunate perception that online education can be done at minimum expense (and maximum profit). That perception is not at all helped by exploitative for-profit institutions that place profits before educational quality. Online education in theology can be done cost-effectively and even with a modest profit. But people delivering theological education online can be faced with the challenges of unrealistic expectations of huge cost savings that can never be realized.

Two other challenges worth mentioning are those of library facilities and the “technical divide” between rich and poor. Access to library resources is a great challenge to students who are located off-campus. While this has been a substantial problem in the past, it is becoming less so today. Digital access to journals is commonplace and with a reasonable internet connection most students can access these resources just as easily off-campus as they can access them on-campus. Access to books is also becoming increasingly easy with mass digitalization. Projects such as those conducted by Google and the Library of Congress portend an imminent time when physical libraries may be unnecessary.

The “technological divide,” be that the divide between rich and poor nations or the serviced and unserved parts of a wealthy nation is also a challenge to online education. While effective internet and computer resources are now available in most parts of the world, they are sometimes costly or inconvenient for students. Thus, in delivering online education, we face the challenge of overcoming technological deficiencies in some areas. Having acknowledged that point, it must be said that even when the cost of online technology is great, it is normally far less than the cost of travel or relocating to an onsite campus, so this relative cost advantage would need to be borne in mind when evaluating the relative merits of online education.

Observed Outcomes

Against the preconceived view that “the teacher and the student must be together physically for the student to learn,” Heinemann’s study (2007, 200) reveals overall theological student satisfaction with online learning in terms of their cognitive and affective learning. He notes (2007, 194) in his study that students, on average, “agreed that their instructor facilitated adequate social, organizational, intellectual and overall interaction. They also reported significant cognitive and affective learning gains.”

Similarly, it is noted (Cannell 1999, 38) that, in the past, correspondence students have performed just as well as traditional students in terms of educational outcomes. Again, Caplan (Anderson-Elloumi 2004, 176) highlights the gap between preconceived ideas of inadequacy in online education and the hard research which

reveals that the mode of delivery, be it online or onsite, yields no significant difference among student outcomes. In short, as Pauls concludes (2003, 3), what determines educational effectiveness is not the location or mode of education but rather the quality of the learner-instructor transaction.

One key advantage of online education is its ability to expose poor student performance. While it is possible in the physical classroom for a student to physically attend but not participate or actively learn, the online environment does not allow for such concealment of poor student performance (Cannell 1999, 20). Online technology allows an instructor to monitor constantly the work of all students. This means that poor student performance cannot be disguised, especially when regular written work is an essential element of online education. The pedagogical advantage of this technology is being able to more rapidly identify and hopefully rectify educational difficulties or inattention on the part of students.

In terms of educational efficiencies this author was surprised by what Welch (Byer et al, 115) charitably called increased accountability built into online interactions. In the more direct language of one student, this efficiency is constituted by way of the virtual elimination of “stupid questions” from asynchronous discussions. By way of illustration, instead of interrupting a live lecture to ask what was just said, in the online environment a student has only to hit the rewind button on the lecture video. Likewise, when discussion is asynchronous, students get to think about their contributions. Thus, in this author’s experience, not only are unintelligent questions and comments eliminated, but the quality of contributions is generally higher than spontaneous in-class comments.

The elimination of unhelpful spontaneities and the other efficiencies inherent to online education has meant that more content can be delivered online than in the traditional classroom. This author has observed this trend negatively in adapting old onsite courses to the online environment when, for example, an online lecture containing the same material as an onsite class will take 25-35% of the time to deliver as its onsite equivalent. Positively, after teaching a course on science and theology first delivered online, this author has struggled to deliver the same amount of material onsite and has found that in the online environment one is able to teach twice the content that one could deliver onsite. If this experience is not atypical, then

one can make a case that in circumstances when online education is well-conceived and appropriately delivered, it can be not only equal to, but also superior to onsite education.

It is worth noting again that the online learning environment tends to equalize students. This has been noted in the students' responses and in the research described above as something valued by students. In a value and opinion-laden field like theology, students have stated how much they appreciate that agenda-driven or "loud" students cannot dominate or disrupt the online environment as easily as the onsite classroom. This allows students who may be temperamentally quiet or marginalized for one reason or another to participate more equally in group interactions.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Online education challenges us to pursue a theory of education that is more holistic than previous models. While one can take a negative perspective and complain that "the lecture method of instruction has nullified the impact of Gutenberg for 400 years" (Drucker, quoted in Cannell 1999, 33), one can more positively observe that the lecture model's monopoly over education is yielding to a plurality of teaching modes. It would seem that in the light of new educational technologies, an informed, principled set of pedagogical principles will yield a pluralism of pedagogical methodologies in theology and other fields.

One would concur with Cannell (1999, 3, 8) that instead of viewing them in opposition, distance, traditional and online education should be theorized as modes within a more holistic theory that embraces a rich array of learning outcomes and contexts. That is, instead of online and traditional education being in competition, the two should be brought together under a common frame of reference or theory.

Within a holistic theory of education that accounts for the relative advantages of different modes of education, and given the difference performance levels of instructors and students, the pedagogical challenge will not be a decision as to which medium is better but rather whether individual professors and students are more suited to online or onsite teaching.

This point prompts the question of what sort of students are most suited to online education. There are, as has been mentioned in this paper, different learning personalities. Some students thrive in both the online and onsite environments, while some students cannot cope with one environment or the other. This author's experience of this difference was also formed by a pre-launch trial of his school's online education program. When trialling online education technologies with both graduate and undergraduate students it was found that graduate students were far more successful. It was also found that this success could be ascribed to a higher level of motivation and self-discipline. While undergraduates could benefit from online education, it was found that they needed much more intense instructor support than graduates. Accordingly, a policy decision was made to make online education available only to graduate students.

The online environment demands that students can be active learners. If students have "learned to learn," they will excel in the online environment. This challenges the role that the university has to play, especially in the undergraduate realm. If universities are to prepare students for lifelong learning, and not just for a degree, the traditional aims of a liberal education need be renewed. That is, students must be given the educational resources needed for lifelong learning and be made part of the intellectual tradition of their culture so that they can take part in the future development of that tradition.

Online students of theology need to have "learned to learn," but they also need a certain level of technical skill. Heinemann (2005a, 188) observes that students who succeed online tend to have or develop certain skills such as proficiency with computers. It may be a complaint that not all students are technically proficient. Certainly, centuries of theological tradition show that lack of technical skill is no object to being a good theologian. However, given the rapid advance of technology in our society, the question facing those who dislike technology and exclusively prefer onsite education is whether they can function effectively in the new culture in which online interaction will become the norm?

Turning to some more recommendations for online theological education, one first notes that cognitive outcomes in education are easy to define. However, non-cognitive outcomes, especially those most relevant to theology are hard to define.

These outcomes may be myriad, depending on the field of theology being taught. However, a reliable rule of thumb is not to let the technology dominate, but to ask what outcomes one desires then ask how the technology may be used to fulfil those outcomes. Educators do this in physical classrooms, so it is not that difficult to do the same with online classes.

As far as more concrete suggestions go, a first recommendation would be that online theological education should allow both synchronous and asynchronous interaction. Having both modes would allow for the different learning personalities, be they the more outgoing, spontaneous and extraverted or the more reflective and introverted students.

One would also argue that theological online education should be both media rich but not media dominant, and pedagogically oriented but not media-driven. By this is meant that the full capabilities of contemporary technology should be used, but that the technology should serve the pedagogical goals of theology, rather than dictating the content of our teaching. As mentioned before, these are decisions common to both onsite and online teaching. The decision is more pronounced in a new field like online education in which the temptation to novelty can sometimes get in the way of sound education.

It cannot be stressed enough that online theological education should be consciously and conspicuously interactive – both between students and teachers and between students and each other. Fredericksen et al. (2000 cited in Heinemann 2005a, 196) observe that interaction with the instructor is perceived as the most significant contributor to learning in online courses. Reported student-teacher interaction correlated with perceived learning in those courses. Likewise, Heinemann (2005a, 195) notes that feedback from instructors is vital and that quick feedback is most valuable. Online education is not a monolog or one-way communication of information. It is a two-way (or even three way) formational process and any worthwhile online theological education needs to be interactive in the name of formation.

It is also crucial to set appropriate boundaries and cap student numbers. Boundaries are required so that teachers do not have unreasonable expectations placed upon

them. Students do understand and respond well to the establishment of boundaries. They understand, for example, that teachers will not normally respond to an email sent late at night or on a weekend. Student numbers also need to be capped at a level that allows proper interaction between teachers and students. While this leads to less financial profit from online education this policy actually maximises the intellectual capital of a program and ensures that students are being formed adequately.

This article will end with two points. First, the strict contrast between online education as “non face-to-face” and traditional education as “face-to-face” is a distinction that is rapidly disappearing. With new and improved technologies such as live video chat and video conferencing, online education means that faculty and students may interact face-to-face, in real time, separated only by a monitor. The technological breach of distance that we are seeing will make online education decreasingly like “distance education.” But rather than morphing into a model like traditional education, online education will form its own niche and conceptualisation as real-time, online education.

Secondly, the challenges and opportunities of online education are significant and it seems that online technologies may change many of our assumptions about education. In thinking about the developments of technologies in the early third millennium, one is reminded of the early second millennium, a time when the dominance of small schools was challenged by the genesis of the universities in which were born the learning and academic freedom that we take for granted today. This development was, of course, augmented by Gutenberg’s later invention of the printing press. Based on current developments, this author believes that the early third millennium will see developments in education just as significant as those of a thousand years ago. The freedoms and opportunities afforded by online education are only in their infancy. While there is some resistance to these developments, it seems that just as with the development of universities and the advent of mass-produced books, our choice is not whether we should allow or forbid this educational revolution, but our choice is whether and how we want to be a part of it.

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² I wish to acknowledge and thank for their willingness to respond to the survey the online students of the [University of Dallas School of Ministry](#)

³ A comic but nonetheless enlightening presentation of "How Not to Use Powerpoint" is found in Don McMillan's presentation of the same name. cf. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HLpjrHzgSRM>

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