

Teaching across the Boundaries of Space and Time: Using Distributed Learning Technologies within and beyond Residential Communities

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Distance learning used to be called correspondence coursework, with the interaction primarily between the student and the course materials with the educator's role relegated to assessor of student end product. There was no built-in mechanism for peer critique, response, or feedback. Distance learning was based on an instructor's providing directions for content management rather than on the teacher's developing a viable teaching and learning environment within which students could engage in community formation inside a given discipline of study. Because the seminary or theological institution is, among other things, a community formation program, the new model of distance learning, called distributed learning and based on the formative and communal teaching and learning environment of cyberspace, is a particularly attractive option for seminaries and theological institutions seeking to expand the range of their course offerings and meet the increasingly diverse needs of their student populations.

What marks this kind of distance learning as distributed learning is the fact that the course materials are digitized in various media with opportunities for interaction between the course materials collected from various places online within a single course template, between the course instructor who engages the teaching and learning environment through various media, and between the students who interact with one another textually, orally/aurally, and visually. Distributed learning allows, moreover, for individualized education plans and more flexible course development in terms of project-

based and collaborative learning models. With the increasing availability of and training in educational technologies combined with the rise of andragogical initiatives to help seminaries and theological institutions better meet the needs of adult learners, the use of distributed learning platforms in the online development of future priests and ministers is becoming a more practical idea within community formation programs.

The Kenrick Model

The emphasis in distributed learning is not so much on space as it is on time. Each semester's course offerings, for instance, compete for available classrooms in available time slots. When time becomes a negotiable reality, competition for space ceases to factor into the scheduling decisions of academic deans and registrars. Our concern at Kenrick, though, is not so much the use of this tool to assist in scheduling, but the idea that is provided by asynchronicity (where everyone involved participates at different times within the same course template and is able to maintain a sense of classroom community) to help individualize the instruction to meet the various needs of our adult learners.

Concerning asynchronous teaching, Rev. Gregory Lockwood lives in Cincinnati, Ohio, and teaches a course on Mariology in which he appears on the Kenrick campus for a week at the beginning of the semester and for another week at the end of the semester. This approach to distance learning allows him to build a face-to-face relationship with the class of a sort that can

be extended through digital communication of assignments and commentary in the interim between classroom appearances. Basic areas of information needed as foundational to the rest of the course or essential to the peculiar requirements of the material can therefore be addressed in person. Expectations, passion for the subject matter, and specific focus areas can be communicated in the face-to-face classroom, and this provides the basis for a student's completion of the distance part of the course.

Assignments and evaluations are easily constructed by him in a distance mode once a foundation has been laid in the first classroom session, with feedback or encouragement handled through the class Web site or via e-mail communication. The flexibility of this system is beneficial for both the student, who is called upon to complete many other tasks during this period in a secondary program, as well as for the professor, who also has concurrent responsibilities and cannot be physically on campus throughout the course of the semester. Once the relationship is established in the classroom, it extends into digital space and is renewed during the final period of class time, which allows for personal follow-up, synthesis, and closure.

Of course, the way this works for Rev. Lockwood is for him to interact at a distance with a group of students who live together in community. The experience Kenrick had with the virtual Steve Fowler,¹ a third-year theology student who spent two semesters of his internship beaming himself into his onsite classes through a laptop with a Webcam, illustrates that the principle works both ways. Most often, though, the online teaching and learning environment is one that is regulated by a teacher and students who do not have face-to-face classroom involvement with one another at all. In these environments, the greatest difficulty members of the teaching and learning community face include a sense of boundarylessness and social isolation. By bringing the class together face-to-face at the start of the semester, Rev. Lockwood tried to create a sense of community around the subject matter (that would have complemented the sense of community that already existed within the residential students who were taking the course). By beaming himself into his classrooms, likewise, Steve Fowler was trying to physically engage others in an environment that would otherwise have easily lost track of his active participation. Consequently, what both individuals were attempting to do was to infuse a sense of synchronous presence into their otherwise asynchronous engagement with one another. What they were

hoping to accomplish was the merger of face-to-face with cyberspace.

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In our explorations of the value of mediated communication in residential communities, we at Kenrick have naturally been dealing with this merger of synchronous and asynchronous engagement. Three years of experience using a course template in the classroom has given us a healthy understanding of how mediated communication can facilitate face-to-face classroom interaction. What we are presently exploring through our collaboration with the Paul VI Catechetical Institute is the nature of mediated communication when there is no face-to-face engagement at all. How might we deal with the problems inherent in the lack of a physical communion with one another when our priestly formation program is geared toward face-to-face interpersonal communication? The examples of Rev. Lockwood and Steve Fowler, we have discovered, hold within themselves the answers to that question, for it is only by providing a sense of face-to-face in cyberspace, of synchronous (real-time) engagement with a formation community, that we are able to stave off the sense of facelessness inherent within asynchronicity.

The difficulties we perceive with online teaching, however, are far from being new. Twenty-three hundred years ago, Plato wrote in “The Phaedrus” that writing itself was a harmful technology in part for the reason that it separated the writer from his text and orphaned that text to the unstudied interpretations of anyone who happened upon it. The text could not speak, could not answer questions put to it; instead, it remained mute when queried—a lifeless, disconnected communication. In spite of Plato's reservations, Paul the Apostle found a lot of value in the asynchronous format of text as he used it liberally to maintain contact with the faith communities he had brought together.² In a sense, then, this

issue of the problems inherent in asynchronous communication is as old as writing itself, and the problems associated with it back then are still problems we have with it today. Online courses, for instance, have been known to have high attrition (as much as 60% in some cases) and low participation (with students posting their coursework but not meaningfully interacting with one another).³ A way to deal with this is to consciously embrace what Walter J. Ong, SJ, called "secondary orality,"⁴ or an orality that is predicated upon the culture of literacy in which asynchronous methods are used in interactive and engaging ways. Marshall McLuhan wrote in his *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964) that our technologies are extensions of ourselves in the world, so it would make sense, then, to use those extensions of our physical selves to bring communities of others together in ways that help us achieve Paul's vision of a missionary apostolate, of a distance-seeking-closeness.

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There are several ways to do this, of course, and all of them require not necessarily a greater fluency with the mechanics of the various tools we have available to us but most certainly a greater understanding of the effects the use of these tools has on the social discourse within an online, or virtual, community. If we do not at least understand what the use of interactive, asynchronous video does to a teaching and learning community, then no level of technical ability will enable us to use it very well as a viable extension of ourselves in the online classroom.

At Kenrick, therefore, we have been engaged this year in teaching the faculty both how to create interactive audios and videos and the nature of their use in the classroom. Using a program called Microsoft Producer (which is a free download from Microsoft's Web site provided the user has PowerPoint 2002 or higher), we are in the process of syncing video clips with PowerPoint slideshows within which we have imbedded links to online projects allowing the students to pause

their lectures at any given point and interact with the course materials, with their course instructor, and with their classmates through the links provided.

We have also explored the use of holding virtual office hours within a 3-D, interactive, graphics-based chat room at www.activeworlds.com where students can collaborate with one another in real space re-embodied as digital avatars that provide them with a sense of the presence of others in an otherwise impersonal, text-based medium.

If we are looking for viable ways to extend our presence into the lives of our students for greater interpersonal engagement, then we should not shun the technologies that provide us with methods to do so but redeem these methods for our vocations within the church and for our ministries in teaching and learning.

The St. John's Model

At Saint John's School of Theology, distributed learning primarily augments the regular on-campus curricula. Being able to take several courses online saves commuters a long drive, especially in winter when weather takes on the character of legend. Not surprisingly, some students report appreciation for the convenience but not the format. Their reactions are also in keeping with the reasons for the high degree of attrition nationally in online courses. People sign up with the notion that taking an Internet course is easier, less demanding, and of course convenient.

The only one of those assumptions that is correct is the last. If online learning is going to be successful, students need assistance in recalibrating their role in the teaching-learning exchange. Success does depend in part on the design of the course, the construction of engaging activities, and the friendliness of the platform software. As in a traditional classroom, the ability of the teacher to be present to the learner continues to be an important variable in reducing attrition and stimulating active engagement. The learner, however, *never* has the opportunity to coast. She or he must do all the reading, must log on frequently, must carefully reflect on assigned tasks and post ideas, responses, and summaries, and must be present to fellow learners in ways he or she often does not have to do in a traditional classroom. Ignore any of these mandates and the online course withers on the vine.

In a course I facilitated several years ago, it became clear after several weeks that at least half of the ten students were coasting. Their postings were vapid or barely able to cover one's ankles. They tended to make asser-

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tions and run, seldom returning to the site frequently enough to read and respond thoughtfully to colleagues' postings. My efforts as a fledgling online instructor to stimulate some sort of sustained interaction did not work. My practices of commenting on almost every posting and using each posting to ask a question to extend or critique an idea did little to stir the imagination of the bottom half of the class. They completed the course, assuredly disgruntled that the instructor did not deliver the goods and with a vow never to take another Web-based course.

The lesson from this is one that now has wide acceptance. Students need to be coached prior to enrolling and immediately after enrolling on the changed dynamics and expectations of the Web classroom. When enthusiasts gush that there is no difference between the achieved outcomes of on-land and online courses, they stand on pretty solid ground. That does not mean that the two learning experiences are the same. To make that assertion suggests that the roles of teacher and learner are the same, and that just is not the case.

Richard Nysse, professor of Old Testament at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, discovered this intuitively when he began teaching online ten years ago. He responded by designing into the first weeks of his

courses a sustained exploration with students of distributed learning. They read and analyzed several articles that highlighted the opportunities and the deficits of the cyber-classroom. They then began work on course content well grounded in what efforts would be required for the learning to be successful. Not only did students achieve course outcomes, they also reported having a sense of community formed in the online discussions designed and facilitated by Nysse that became evident when they later were able to meet face-to-face.

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This sort of intentionality in forming the pedagogical imagination is important even with younger students supposedly wired for the new media. What is happening is not just a shift in equipment or even a redefinition of roles. Distance learning requires a reexamina-

tion of the nature of learning itself and how learning occurs when the formula is rewritten. Not everyone should feel disposed to enroll in an online course because they happen to like the computer. A potential user of distance education needs to decide whether she or he has the level of discipline, adaptability, and readiness to enter an environment in which coasting not only does not work, but also simply impedes learning.

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The objection to using the Internet to teach theology centers on the inadequacy of the medium to create the sense of community the content requires. A lot of capital is wasted arguing that point. Human contact always has the *potential* to enrich discussion of ideas. Its potentiality, however, is not guaranteed. On-land theology can be as disembodied as online courses are assumed to be. What Richard Nysse did was to engage the students themselves in thinking about the issue of a community of discourse formed in a foreign environment. That process enabled them to construct a space in which the potential for significant, deep communication could occur despite the absence of physical presence. Was it the same as being in a classroom together? No, but then that wasn't the point. It was a matter of intentionally creating a new way of being in a relationship that offers a different sort of satisfaction.

All this is important if we take access seriously. At Saint John's, we have created the *virtual monastery*,⁵ a Web-based series of courses designed specifically for religious communities around the world interested in theological and spiritual formation for their members who cannot afford the time and expense to travel to Collegeville. There never was an intention of replicating the “Collegeville experience” online, but we are very intentional about providing access to the intellectual re-

sources we represent as a center of theological learning and scholarship. In that service lies the challenge to quality, so we spend little time on wishing everyone could just come to campus.

The Institute for Pastoral Initiatives of the University of Dayton

In 1996, the Institute for Pastoral Initiatives commenced research and development in online courses for adult faith formation via the Internet.⁶ The Institute already had over 20 years experience in alternative forms of distance learning via cable and satellite communication either in collaboration with the Archdiocese of Cincinnati, the Catholic Telecommunications Network of America, or the National Catholic Educational Association's *New Frontiers for Catholic Schools Project*. A fundamental goal of the Institute's e-learning initiatives continues to be exploring new methodologies for teaching and learning within the context of adult faith formation.

The Institute spent two years (1996-1998) exploring various platforms, templates, and models of e-learning and analyzing the existing computer and Internet accessibilities of potential clientele. The outcome of our initial plan was the design and implementation of *The Virtual Learning Community for Faith Formation (VLCFF)*. Our clientele are individuals engaged in catechist and lay ministry leadership formation programs and adults eager to learn more about their faith. We are discovering that an increasing number of deacons in pre- or post-formation are joining us. As three-week seminars on specific church documents are activated, priests are beginning to participate as a means of continuing clerical education.

The VLCFF⁷ operates on 6 cycles each year. Currently there are over 28 courses available with 15 more in various stages of development. There are over 240 course sections to be offered within these 6 cycles in 2004. VLCFF courses run from 4 to 6 weeks. Seminars are 3 weeks. Classes are limited to 15 students to allow for the maximum amount of facilitator (instructor), student, and class interaction. The VLCFF goal is to stimulate a “community of learners” or a “community of faith” in cyberspace. While some faculty or church leaders feel that such a “community” cannot take form, we have learned the opposite in the past four years. Students not only form a community within the course but also continue to maintain relationships once the course is finished. Frequently students even plan to sign up for another course together to continue their theological re-

flections and conversations based on their community experience. When the technology and methodology are transparent, facilitators (course instructors) are well trained, and the academic quality of the course content is high, communities can take shape in cyberspace. E-learning is attractive to individuals for whom time (lifestyles), distance (travel), course availability (asynchronous), and rich course selection (particular interest) are of importance.

What is unique about the VLCFF is that a pre-existing or packaged template has not been applied to our courses and seminars. We designed our own template and methodology based on our research. We realize this is risky but we are interested in designing a template and methodology that is user friendly and easily adaptable as our continual research offers new methodological insights and/or the expertise for e-learning in regards to our clientele. We desire to have the broadest ground for creativity and innovation. This exists and is one of the VLCFF strengths.

VLCFF courses are asynchronous (not in real time). Since our students represent 107 dioceses and 8 countries, the asynchronous approach is most conducive to learning. Several of the VLCFF facilitators have occasionally applied synchronous learning via a chat room within their course; however, this is more effective one-on-one than with an entire group. We have discovered that just as in a traditional class where the extravert may dominate the conversation, so also on the Internet the person who types the fastest can easily dominate the conversation. It is not always easy for a facilitator or teacher to regain control of the conversation—unless that person is also a fast typist.

Students receive 2.5 CEUs for VLCFF courses. It is estimated that students spend a minimum of 5-9 hours per week on course related activities or assignments. Thus, we anticipate students will spend 25-30 hours on the course during a course with five sessions. Frequently students indicate they spend much more. Students are required to complete all the elements (segments) for each course session within a specific time frame. This is imperative in order to keep the community of learners together focusing on the same theological issues or questions.

The facilitator⁸ is crucial in this regard. Let us be clear that not just anyone can facilitate e-learning courses in an effective way. The Institute carefully selects, trains, continually communicates with, and offers ongoing e-formation for our facilitators. This is essential for creating a quality e-learning environment. If facilitators

fall short, the class follows the lead.

As we continue to monitor and study the dynamics of e-learning, it has become very clear that self-discipline and motivation are primary for success. Furthermore, beyond basic computer and Internet skills, adult learners are required to develop or enhance their basic skills in critical theological reading, reflection, and communication (writing or expressing ideas-insights). In many circumstances, adult faith formation has been a passive experience with limited requirements to read, reflect, and communicate. Thus, one of our biggest challenges is designing creative approaches for encouraging and nurturing these skills with our students in cyberspace. We are only at the tip of the iceberg for understanding the potential and future methodological designs for effective e-learning. Those interested in applying e-learning to their curriculum must be willing to venture into a radically new frontier that has limited similarities to our traditional way of teaching and learning.

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E-learning is not for everyone. We need to contemplate e-learning as one of many alternative approaches to learning. It is not an either/or situation but a both/and situation. This mindset can be a relief for colleagues who have no desire to integrate e-learning into their curriculum and supports colleagues who see its vast potential. Yet, we are discovering that current lifestyles and ministries are making it more difficult for people to participate in traditional ways of learning. While face-to-face learning may be the preferred means, e-learning offers a rich alternative in our contemporary culture.

The Institute is also engaged in collaborating with the Department of Religious Studies and Chaminade University⁹ in offering a variety of graduate courses. I have been teaching two courses—*Toward a Theology of Leadership and Theology of Communication*—over the past six years. These courses use a multi-media, Web-enhanced approach. Students meet in the summer for 1 to

2 weeks in a traditional multi-media environment. During this time the fundamentals or ground for the specific course is established. The following four months students meet every four weeks via live two-way video classes¹⁰ between The University of Dayton and Chaminade University. Between video classes, a series of activities and discussion boards based on the readings

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and class activities hold the students together. In December, a return visit to Chaminade University rounds out the course with a synthesis seminar.

In conjunction with the University of Dayton's School of Education's new online Masters Degree in Catholic School Leadership, we have experimented with several approaches to e-learning. I teach one of the introductory courses on Catholic School Leadership. We have offered the course using a spin off of the Chaminade University model above. This approach works very well as long as the video system at the multiple sites has adequate technical support and the system is always operational. Since more two-way video classes were incorporated into the curriculum, the technical cost for this course was much higher. The Internet segments of the course were asynchronous and focused on e-conversations around course readings and students' final projects. These e-conversations were divided into three four-week segments with a break in between. We find that it is a very time consuming and sometimes tiring experience to keep an entire class of 15 students moving along for an entire semester via the Internet. Thus, creating segments offers time to breathe and get reenergized to move forward.

In the fall 2003 semester, the same course was offered as a multi-media, Web-based¹¹ learning experience. We adapted the VLCFF template to the course. Furthermore, we produced CDs with PowerPoint slideshows and voice-over lectures.¹² Students indicated the navigation was seamless with no technological difficulties. Since technical support or service is available within 24

hours, the students, who were all new to e-learning, found comfort and motivation to keep focused through the entire semester. While the School of Education is incorporating WebCT as the foundation for upcoming course design, we are incorporating elements of the VLCFF to the curriculum.

With the Department of Religious Studies, the Institute offers a 3-credit undergraduate Web-based course on Religion and Film in the summer. Currently, we are engaged in preparing to offer the three introductory graduate courses in theology as Web-based and Web-enhanced courses. We are adapting the VLCFF template as the ground for these courses.

During 2004, the Institute's team is focusing on advancing the e-learning methodology, course designs, and facilitator (teacher) formation initiatives. We have gathered significant data to radically enrich our e-learning offerings within the academic and pastoral communities we serve. There is no doubt that once an institution commences on the e-learning journey it must be persistent and consistent in moving forward all the time. This is not an approach or methodology that allows one to take a rest or long break. We know that the world of communication technology is changing every day. We must be on top of these developments. We know that many of our current and for sure future students are and will be more computer and Internet savvy than we are today. We need to think in terms of the future!

Conclusion

Distributed learning in an online environment is both a viable and a valuable tool for modern theological studies programs whether they are based in a residential or non-residential community. The focus, in either case, is on community formation within the theological discourse. While theological professors are still most comfortable with the face-to-face environment for the purposes of community formation, teaching and learning environments that functionally integrate appropriate technologies are going to find themselves most adaptive to the changing demographics and social realities of third millennium theology students.

Notes

1. See "The Catholic Internet: Seminary Technologies Impacting the Teaching and Learning Environment of the Church." *Seminary Journal*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (Winter 2003): 80-7.
2. Concerning the appropriate response to his asynchronous presence, in fact, Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 10:9-11,

- "May I not seem as one frightening you through letters. For someone will say, 'His letters are severe and forceful, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible.' Such a person must understand that what we are in word through letters when absent, that we also are in action when present."
3. Part of these problems stem from a lack of orientation on how to take an online course, so we at Kenrick developed an online, zero-credit-hour course that teaches people how to take online courses. Students who complete the class for the catechetical institute have a much-enriched course experience in other online courses.
 4. See *Orality and Literacy* (1982).
 5. Located online at <http://www.users.csbsju.edu/~virpro>.
 6. The Institute for Pastoral Initiatives is engaged in a diversity of related projects, which attempt to mobilize the resources of the University of Dayton for partnerships with the church that create and implement innovative pastoral initiatives designed to meet the needs of the church and to articulate faith within the context of contemporary culture. The five objectives of the Institute are: Education and Formation, Applied Pastoral Research, Consultative Services, Networking, and Publication and Multi-media Productions. The Institute is funded by the Marianist Community and The University of Dayton.
 7. www.udayton.edu/~vlc is the location for the Virtual Learning Community for Faith Formation. Complete background, explanation, and course listings are identified here. For more specific information contact angela.zukowski@notes.udayton.edu.
 8. The term "facilitator" has been selected to identify what we traditionally would have called the teacher or instructor of the course. The person in this role is required to facilitate the learning experience in such a way that a community of learners is formed and individuals exercise the critical skills of theological reading, reflection, and communication (writing). While the course content is already prepared, facilitators are encouraged to bring new and additional resources or references to the learning experience. Facilitators belong to a theme cluster. These clusters meet twice a year via audio conferencing. The goal is to network and to review the course content, methodology, profile, and experience of students and facilitators. Courses are refreshed every 18 months. Three times a year, select facilitators are invited to the University of Dayton for a two-day e-learning enrichment seminar.
 9. Chaminade University is a Catholic Marianist University in Honolulu, Hawaii. In the past six years the University of Dayton and Chaminade University have been collaborating to support Chaminade's Master Degree in Pastoral Theological Studies.
 10. Picturetel ISDN System is in place for the two-way video classes. We are currently working on upgrading the video system.

11. There was no traditional learning element to the course. Students never physically encountered one another other than via the Internet. Students were scattered across the USA in six different states.
12. We are now working on incorporating video segments with PowerPoints on CDs and DVDs highlighting the professor and visiting guest presenters. We are opting to placing these on CDs or DVDs to ease up on the amount of downloading time that may be required via the Internet at our students' end.



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Victor Klimoski is currently director of lifelong learning for the School of Theology at St. John's University, Collegeville. Previously, he was academic dean at The Saint Paul Seminary in St. Paul for seventeen years. He is a national consultant to theological schools and seminaries.



Rev. Gregory J. Lockwood, a priest of the Archdiocese of St. Louis, is adjunct professor of dogma at Kenrick-Glennon School of Theology. He has done graduate work in church history and systematic theology, and is educated in several engineering disciplines.



Angela Ann Zukowski, MSHS, D.Min., is a professor in the Department of Religious Studies and the director of the Institute for Pastoral Initiatives of the University of Dayton. She served as the international president for Catholic Radio and Television (UNDA) from 1994 to 2001.