

Teaching Church History through Interactive Technologies: Engaging Cyberspace for Face-to-Face

Rev. Michael John Witt and Sebastian Mahfood



Our Concept

In doing history, the context is as important as the content. History, as it is usually taught, relates an intricate web of human interaction unfolding in a very linear direction: from the past, through the present, and into the future. It has been passed down, moreover, through both oral tradition and written media, depending on the availability and the appropriateness of the medium being used. Today, however, we are in a culture that is termed hyperliterate, what Walter J. Ong has called “secondary orality.” If in an age of orality the historian would traditionally enter into a synchronous dialogue with his audience, and in an age of literacy the historian would traditionally engage an audience asynchronously, that is, through texts which are available any time even when their authors are not, then in the age of hyperliteracy the historian has a wonderful opportunity to combine the gifts of these former ages in the development of a stronger and more meaningful structure for student engagement, one that does not rely so much on linearity as it does on polyvalency or on knowledge transmission as it does on the ability to meaningfully interact with that knowledge.

The merger of orality and literacy, that is to say, is really a merger of time considerations within the teaching and learning environment, which means that we can engage orally and asynchronously (through the posting of audio and video files), and we can engage textually and synchronously (through the use of chatroom office hours) (Mahfood, “Secondary Orality”). The reader can read the word and speak to the word, and the word can respond—and this kind of interactive potential has significant implications for us all in teaching and learning

environments in which the major pedagogical issues include differing levels of background knowledge, of content interest, and of research and writing ability.

As a result of this new age of possibilities and challenges, there is a realignment presently happening throughout theological programs that runs parallel to the realignment happening throughout all of higher and continuing education, which has brought about a paradigm shift from transmission-based teaching practices to transaction-based teaching practices (Olliges and Mahfood, *The Shifting Paradigm*). It is important to all professors of church history to realize these shifts mean us, too, and to develop interactive media for the packag-

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ing of course content that may appropriately respond to the changing social realities of modern theological schools.

Interactive media helps engage our teaching and learning environments through a process called distributed learning, where the various media that we use in our online or onland classrooms come to us “distributed” across a variety of outlets and are collected by us within a single course template. Distributed learning has a great many applications for teaching and learning beyond the technical aspects of developing multimedia projects. It is a way of engagement with others that is grounded in andragogical (adult learning) theory, which Malcolm Knowles in *The Adult Learner* writes is highly self-directed, experiential, needs-based, and situationally contexted. As such, andragogy is not a theory of teaching, like pedagogy, but a theory of learning and how learning happens. For that reason, andragogy does not compete with pedagogy, rather, it complements it. As teachers, we are already quite familiar with theories of teaching—we know our craft. It is now, more than at any time in the past, when admissions trends have increasingly moved in the direction of non-traditional learners (older and without a useful background in theological or philosophical studies), that we must develop a better understanding of theories of learning.

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For this reason, Knowles is quite helpful to us, for he demonstrates how learning for the adult is different from learning for the child and why the adult learner who pursues specific needs ought to have instructional methods that cater to his or her particular learning styles. Unlike children who find themselves in generalized and compulsory educational environments, adult learners consciously choose their educational needs. They have, according to Knowles, a practical necessity, a sense of their own presence and vocation in the world, a

background already rich in experiences already meaningful to their vocation, a certain readiness to grasp new concepts, a particular proclivity towards learning, and an intrinsic motivation to do so. As a result, adult learners have little use for teaching and learning based on the transmission model of information transfer, and they require a teaching and learning environment developed around the more practical and more pastorally focused transaction model of information management. If our ultimate goal is to develop students who can actually make use of the knowledge we are giving them, then what better time than when they are in our presence for them to demonstrate that for us.

It is difficult to use class time for interactive engagement in the form of small group discussions, plenary panel discussions and presentations, theatrical role play, field trips, and the like, when all of that class time has to be taken up with information transfer; however, to qualify, we are not advocating that teachers who have a strong lecture method give it up altogether. As Rev. John Paul Heil said in a presentation at the Catholic Biblical Association in Halifax, Nova Scotia, “We haven’t come to destroy transmission-based pedagogies, but to fulfill their original promise of providing students with the tools they need to engage the discourse they’re studying” (Heil, Kitz, and Mahfood, *Face-to-Face in Cyberspace*). Like teachers of Scripture, teachers of history also have a passion for interacting with the text and of finding ways to strengthen a student’s understanding of the relationships between texts (between, say, Henry II’s argument with Thomas Beckett over ecclesiastical authority in matters of civil administration and the recent unpleasantness in the Catholic Church concerning its civic responsibility in handling sexual abuse allegations).

In the meeting place of learner and learned, then, otherwise known as the classroom (in whatever form that might take), we want to both fill our students with appropriate content to provide a knowledge base and provide them with opportunities to work through that content to strengthen their reasoning abilities so that they will have practice working through the problems we pose while we still have the opportunity to guide them along that journey. Interactive media help us to fulfill both these roles because they extend the range of options students have to engage their course instructor, their classmates, and their course materials. If we fail to engage our adult learners through whatever level of ability they bring to the class, then they are likely to leave at the end of a given course with a notebook filled with

material with which they have failed to adequately come to terms.

Those of us who attempt only to fill our students with knowledge through recitation must remember that the cognitive domain in Bloom's Taxonomy demonstrates for us that knowledge alone is the lowest level of learning, preceding comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. No doubt, any history teacher of a secondary, collegiate, or graduate school can submit examples of students who have mislearned content that was directly relayed to them through a class lecture, as a January 2, 2002, article in the *Washington Post* illustrates. Professor Andres Henriksson learned from his student essays that the German victory in 1940 resulted from the Wehrmacht's taking a bypass around France's Marginal Line in a strategy dubbed "The Blintz Krieg," that pre-Reformation abuses in the Catholic Church included "unoccupied Bishop Bricks," and that "Roman girls who did not marry and could become Vestigal Virgins, women who were dedicated to burning the internal flame."

Convoluting factoids like these develop not because we are bad teachers, rather, they are the results of students at any age absorbing information in a myriad of ways inappropriate to their particular learning styles—as teachers, we mishear new statements and come to remember what we have heard through the prism of what we have accustomed ourselves to hear; we misperceive new images and come to remember what we have seen through the prism of what we have accustomed ourselves to see; we misunderstand new ideas and come to remember them through the prism of what we have accustomed ourselves to understand. If this is true for us, then it is all the more true for students new to the discipline who have not had the training we take for granted.

For these reasons, we need to develop new containers (and new structures) within which we might more meaningfully engage and assess our students over time. History is a discipline suited to this purpose in that its textual nature makes it malleable enough to, say, database learning modules around a Boolean structure allowing for inclusive and exclusive searches (Mahfood, *Databasing*). Like all containers and structures, though, each teacher has different needs derived from the uniqueness of his or her teaching and learning environment, so what is chosen at any given time and for any given group ought to be appropriate for the context in which it is used—durable enough to work well and versatile enough to adapt to changing needs.

In developing these new containers, moreover, we do not have to reinvent what has already been developed—we can lease structures created by others like WebCT, Blackboard, or Moodle so that all we have to worry about is creating the content modules we plan to use through Web-building programs like DreamWeaver or FrontPage or content-packaging programs like Microsoft Producer or Macromedia Robodemo (Mahfood, Olliges, Porterfield, and Kitz, *Textual Intercourse*). In most cases, we can get by with just using Web cameras and desktop microphones to create interactive PowerPoints (slideshowes that have embedded links to course activities or to other slideshowes) saved as Web pages and uploaded to our course templates. Packaging our materials through these media, we are not only able to provide students with content-oriented resources to which they can return as often as they like, but we are also able to build communicative bridges across theological disciplines and offer options for student exploration based on individual needs or interests.

Regardless of how we package ourselves, we are really only engaging in a single activity—the modulation of our course materials into easily digestible project-based units—and this activity actually grows out of what we are already used to doing whenever we prepare 75 minutes worth of material and parse our knowledge of a particular course requirement into 32 sessions of that. In doing it through interactive multimedia, however, we are also giving ourselves the flexibility of better negotiating the use of our class time by moving our recurring lecture material into a medium that allows us the leisure of not having to repeat ourselves every semester.

To realize the capacity of this medium for engaging in relational distribution of modulated materials, then, we need only digitize the lecture material we already have apportioned for each of the face-to-face class

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meetings we might have over a given semester. Digitizing those lectures, then, is the first step in making them polyvalent, and the reality is that if the lecture material already exists on a teacher's computer in the form of Microsoft Word or Corel WordPerfect, then that material is already digitized (Harris, Klimoski, Lane, and Mahfood, *The Catholic Internet*). A six dollar desk microphone and a twenty-five dollar Web camera can complete the task of turning it into a multimedia experience.

Regardless of which containers for learning are used (and it is better to use multiple containers at the same time in ways that appropriately support various kinds of learning modules), they ought to provide the student with choice-making opportunities that assist particular learning needs. Once the student completes his coursework in history, he should not only have developed an understanding of the process of the church as an historical entity, but he should also have developed the tools necessary for the further pursuit of that historical understanding. It does no good for a priest to digest a lot of information if he never learns how to make use of it as a tool in his ministry or in his research.

Our Practice

Both authors of this article teach at a small Midwestern Catholic seminary. We serve over 15 dioceses that send men with various backgrounds and experiences. Few of these seminarians have much undergraduate exposure to history, and even fewer of them have an interest in studying history in a professional way. In the curricular structure, only two semesters of church history are required for first year theology, the clear purpose of which is to give a form and framework for other theological studies. Aside from one other required history class in the student's final year in the program, no theological student is required to pursue the history of his faith, though some elective courses are available and students can request independent study.

Within these rather limited parameters one finds teaching, to paraphrase Bismarck, as the art of the possible. We have to answer, though, questions concerning how we can assure a basic body of knowledge so that seminarians can navigate their way through the developments in practical theology, in ecclesial structure, and in dogma. Corollary to this are the following: How can we instill a sense of historical development? How can we lead students to grasp the interplay of culture and gospel message, of powerful personalities, the force of ideas, the movement of the Spirit?

The task is made more complex by the diversity of the students who show up at our door step each year. Sister Zoe Glenski, who teaches early church history to incoming students during their first semester, told us of an encounter with a student in which she quoted briefly from Saint Augustine and asked if he knew the quote. He not only described the source of the quote, but he also gave it back to her in Latin and explained its relevance to the theological point being discussed. It is likely that others in his class could not have identified Saint Augustine as bishop of Hippo. The ability of one student to understand the relationships between history and theology while others have difficulty grasping the facts of history is a disparity on Bloom's scale not of knowledge but of analysis. We can generalize with empirical certainty, then, that some students are not as naturally oriented to theological studies as are others, and as teachers, our vocation is to discover the learning orientations of our students and teach toward them.

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In approaching classes of such diversity, the question is not simply how a teacher ensures that the brightest or most knowledgeable student is challenged while those who find history a foreign experience can find the effort to study history fruitful, but the more complicated one of how a teacher ensures that the teaching and learning environment as it currently exists is viable in the first place, and that means developing appropriate structures so that the energy and talent of the brightest is able to be channeled back into the life of the classroom in ways that encourage the tentative footsteps of those who struggle. Otherwise, why keep them in the same class?

In this context, we have developed a few methods for measuring a student's historical background in prepa-

ration for taking an introductory course in modern church history and for using this data in the development of course materials. For two years, a diagnostic test has been provided to first-year students of modern church history with an aggregate average score of 46%. As the distribution was a sort of bell curve, it was a reminder that for many students history is foreign territory. A solution presented itself when, in March of 2003, a local Catholic radio station, Covenant Network, expressed interest in producing a series of programs on modern church history for its listening audience. *Carte blanche* was given regarding the topics and format, so the basic outline of the first-year theology class was used as a skeleton. Topics far beyond the range of a survey course were explored, and the radio station was delighted with the response from the public, receiving many phone inquiries and e-mails. Each week, an historical topic was covered in a didactic-dialogic style with a member of the radio staff, and, slowly, a corpus of material grew. We ended the series late in 2004 with eighty hours of programming, covering topics from the death of Thomas Aquinas to contemporary Vatican policy in the Middle East, and all this lecture material, far more comprehensive than what classroom time allows, is now available online at www.michaeljohnwitt.com for student consumption.

Being involved with the radio program was a great opportunity to just have fun while teaching history. In the first-year theology survey, barely half an hour could be spent on the 70-plus years the papacy resided at Avignon. In the radio format, this was expanded to five hours to explore material on which Alan Schreck spent only three pages in his *Compact History of the Catholic Church* and on which Thomas Bokenkotter used only 13 pages in *A Concise History of the Catholic Church*. Not only was the work fruitful for radio audiences who will now be able to interact online in future rebroadcasts, but also it carried itself over quite well into classroom audiences who have interactive opportunities to engage the materials. As the recorded materials become an institutionalized part of their course experience, teachers can replace classroom lecture in favor of classroom discussion, which is where the art of the teacher should be most apparent.

Naturally, this kind of work takes a great deal of time to accomplish and requires, also, the support of the institution for which one is working, not only in the flexibility an academic dean will provide as new pedagogical methods upset traditional teaching practices, but also in the institutional provision of technical support

and expertise to establish oneself in cyberspace. The past three summers have been spent by this course instructor listening to the audio recordings in an effort to construct an electronic, activity-based workbook to accompany the programs. First, a Flash-based timeline was developed to help the listener see the flow of events. Next, many of the names and phrases that were foreign to the listener's ear were listed in order of their appearance in the program, accompanied by an outline of the program and any particularly important quotes, a series of questions one might ask about the topic, and finally a bibliography of both popular and scholarly works in case the listener wants to pursue the subject in greater depth. These elements will likely evolve over time as activities are added by the instructor and by the students, who will contribute to the development of activity-based learning modules as part of their course assignments. While this project has been underway for only two years, we feel this evolutionary process is happening at a good pace.

In the spring of 2004, when the recording was only two-thirds complete and the workbook was a mere one-third accomplished, we piloted the project with the first-year students in the theology program. At the time, we did not have the ability to compress our dozen hours of programming into a size that would easily stream through cyberspace, so we made available in the seminary library CDs of the programs and a photocopy of the workbook sections to parallel the CDs. We were not able to break out of hard-disk media dependence until April of 2004, when Luke Dysinger, the keynote speaker at the Theology and Pedagogy in Cyberspace conference in Evanston, Illinois, co-hosted by Garret-Evangelical, Seabury-Western, and Kenrick-Glennon seminaries, suggested a solution of compressing our 40 megabyte mp3 files to 6 megabyte Windows Media Format files. The hard disks were sufficient, though, for our piloting purposes as they gave us the data we needed to offer an online class in the fall of 2004 through the Paul VI Catechetical Institute administered by the Archdiocese of St. Louis.

What we learned during that pilot test is that students who prove resistant to the sage advice to read the assigned materials *before* coming to class and who seem unmoved by the argument that knowing something about the topic beforehand could enrich the learning experience in the classroom had less resistance to the idea of listening to materials that are meant to supplement their textbook reading. Since the topics covered both in the syllabus and in the radio program were similar, the

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students welcomed the idea to listen to the CD programs either before attending class as a way to prepare or following class for the fuller story. Pages from the workbook were copied and distributed in class as the *dispensi* that promoted the development of active listening skills, and students who found themselves unable to come to class for whatever reason were able to catch up on the content, if not also some classroom interaction through the online discussion board, prior to their resuming attendance.

With the project nearing relative completion by the spring of 2005, we reintroduced the method in the seminary classroom. The 80 hours that have been recorded and placed on the Web site are accompanied by the workbook outlines described above, which are presently linked to newadvent.org to enable the listener to explore links for relevant information while the audio is playing. Other sites we have found helpful include catholicresources.net/church_history, catholicencyclopedia.com; christianhistory.net; historychannel.com; and historyinternational.com. A further step will be to more meaningfully weave these Web sites into the online workbooks through split-screened activities (see www.kentrickparish.com/tpcii for concrete methods on how these are created) so that students can

move easily between the acoustic and visual texts and the Web-based activities we provide (Mahfood, *Various Ideas*). This will better enable us to modify the site activities in order to respond quickly to the social realities of succeeding generations of students.

We learned as well that assessment strategies naturally shift a little when using these technologies. If we assign our students at one part of an interactive audio to click on a link within the accompanying slideshow in order to contribute to a discussion board conversation concerning their thoughts over something they have just heard, then we are assessing not only their posted responses, but also their ability to engage others in discussion over their posted responses. We are assessing, therefore, the strength of the dialogue itself, like we would do during a class discussion, but with the added dynamic of everyone's speaking rather than just the five or six that usually provide good discussion points during the time allowed in class. This kind of assessment lets us know the facility with which a student can interact with the materials in dialogue with others.

Moreover, digitizing our course materials in this way lends itself to moving the students through process-oriented, or graduated, research projects rather than product-oriented, or completion-driven, research projects (Olliges and Mahfood, *Online, Project-based Learning*, 2004). In the past, we would assign students term papers due at the end of the semester and provide them with no time to internalize our comments through a drafting process after receiving their grades. They would also not benefit from the peer-critique dynamic nor would they benefit from publishing incrementally for an audience larger than the teacher. Two of our colleagues, Rev. John Paul Heil and Dr. Anne Marie Kitz, do this with their Scripture students and have received stronger papers ever since, if only for the reason that their students are constantly in the process of reviewing and revising their own work before submitting it for evaluation.

Adding to this dynamic of regulated interactivity, we also envision the day when more standard resources could be made available through this Web site. Eugen Weber's *The Western Tradition*, produced by Annenberg/PBS, or the older BBC series by Kenneth Clark, or even the rather off-the-wall programs by the provocative James Burke with his *The Day the Universe Changed* and his earlier *Connections* series could be made available on DVD or video servers located within our office of instructional technology and made accessible only to students registered in the course. While these professionally

produced programs are expensive (their licenses would have to be purchased institutionally), when integrated with the overall syllabus they can bring valuable background material to students whose history knowledge is deficient. A less costly alternative is to begin production ourselves of a series of historical background video CDs that will support both in-class discussions via the living text of the classroom professor and online discussions via the audio files already uploaded to the site. Were a consortium of history professors such as those already in existence at the American Catholic Historical Association to take on a task like this, we would eventually have a strong database of materials useful for all teachers of church history worldwide.

To ensure that methods are sustainable, which means that teachers are able to deal with the growth and the maintenance of their course packages as new materials are introduced into the discourse and as links break on their Web sites rendering the activities unusable, teachers will want to integrate the process of developing these modulations into their routine course preparations. Because teachers will want to find ways to make what they are doing a normal and habitual part of the teaching experience, their entering into consortial relationships will make a great deal of sense to them. Teachers who collaborate with other professors in their disciplines, moreover, can tap into their areas of expertise and cross-reference their modulated materials. There is, after all, no sense in doing all of this alone. However the teacher manages the process, he or she should know that a brave new world of teaching and learning is being entered and that digital interactivity really is the direction education is heading in both on-land and online courses.

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Doing history, as we noted at the beginning of this article, is context dependent, but it no longer has to be constrained by time and space limitations. As educational initiatives become more successful in the area of distributed learning, more and more non-pastoral-based courses (among the affected disciplines will be church history) are going to be offered online to reach a greater audience of students than those physically present in the institution and to improve classroom scheduling dilemmas in order to cater more readily to field education initiatives in the areas of counseling and supervised ministry. History professors who have already begun to digitize their course materials will have an easier transition into online teaching not only for classes at the seminaries where they teach but also for classes at their diocesan catechetical institutes and diaconate programs. While it is natural to be leery of changes in the teaching and learning environment brought about by new technologies, it is helpful to know how quickly teachers become avid supporters of meaningful change when they realize it poses solutions to long-standing pedagogical issues. If this is hyperliteracy, then bring it on! Specifically, bring it on to www.michaeljohnwitt.com!



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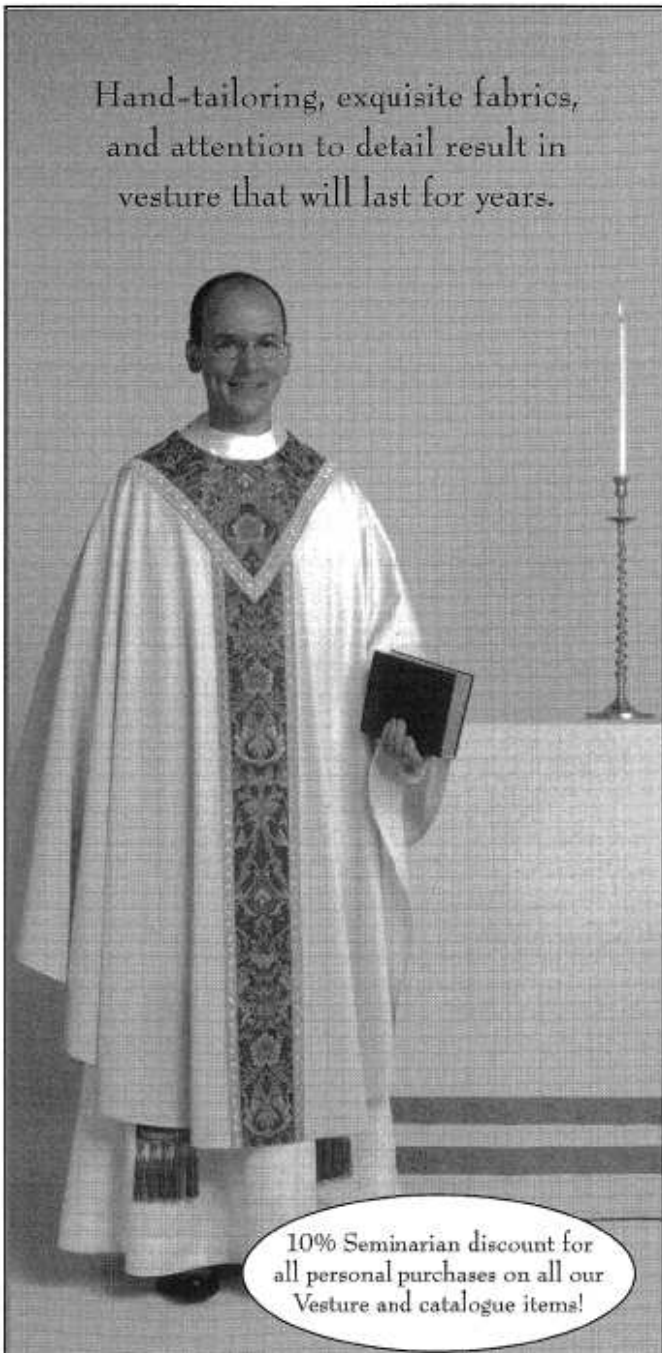
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