


To Cyberspace and Beyond: Creating the NCEA Seminary Department's Catholic Distance Learning Network

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While the online programs at International Catholic University (ICU) and Holy Apostles College and Seminary exist to support Catholic education, no structure is presently in place to functionally integrate online coursework in theological studies within a distributive learning framework that meets the needs of the member schools of the NCEA. At present, in fact, the Association of Theological Schools, which provides accrediting standards for almost all of our member seminaries, does not accredit either ICU or Holy Apostles, and this is problematic for member schools that would otherwise be asked to accept transfer credits from these institutions. While many of our schools have developed educational technology initiatives in the past decade, no coordinated effort has been made to shift hybrid classrooms into entirely online teaching and learning environments that can serve students beyond the schools in which these courses are being taught. Our proposal to create a Catholic Distance Learning Network (CDLN) (available online at www.catholicdistance.org) that would join the academic programs of the five dozen National Catholic Educational Association seminaries and theological schools through for-credit courses freely offered online between member institutions, therefore, is both necessary and timely as it will enable us to fill a need for diversifying the kinds of courses any one institution can offer and will offer us opportunities to help direct the pedagogical discussions each seminary's faculty will be having in the years ahead.

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To address the growing need for a network like this, the Seminary Department hosted on September 27, 2006, a pre-convocation workshop on pedagogy in cyberspace, funded in part by the Wabash Center, at its annual convocation. Twenty-three academic deans, rectors, and technology administrators gathered to discuss the viability of online teaching and learning environments and the feasibility of developing a network to facilitate interaction between the seminaries and theo-

logical institutes belonging to NCEA. To facilitate the workshop, we used a developmental model proposed by Dr. Victor Klimoski in a recent issue of *Theological Education* published by ATS.¹ Based on insights from working with the 72 schools that received Lilly Technology grants, Klimoski's developmental model identifies four stages for strategic planning and meaningful change. He details characteristics and appropriate questions for each stage but knows this kind of strategic planning is not a straight line—what can seem like a completed step suddenly changes with the departure of key people or the arrival of a new academic dean or president. The developmental model helps seminaries explore how they wish to relate to an innovation like CDLN.

Stage I – Discerning

- What are the pedagogical assumptions and attitudes?
- Are the students ready and competent to do this?
- What are the experiences of other schools that have tried this?
- Do you have models in mind?
- Do you have the talent and resources to do this?

Stage II – Structuring

- How are we going to develop our strategic educational technology plan?
- What are the assessment outcomes?
- What's the plan to train the faculty, staff, and students?
- How are we going to provide adequate technology expertise?
- What's the plan for purchasing or leasing needed hardware and software?

Stage III – Institutionalizing

- What are the appropriate leadership roles on this?
- How do we regularize faculty discussion of teaching and learning?
- What's the impact on faculty development?
- How are we going to fund the refresh/upgrade cycle?

Stage IV – Sustaining

- How do we align institutional planning and planning for educational technology?
- How will we generate new money for innovation?
- How will we monitor this change in the field and keep abreast of what's out there?
- How will we share these insights and practices with others?

Our reflections on these kinds of questions at the start of the workshop set the tone for what it is we are trying to accomplish within this initiative—a systematic process to strengthen teaching and learning without which no systemic effort would be possible. By the conclusion of the workshop, the attendees were unanimous in the decision that a distance learning network be founded and that it be made to serve the purpose of enabling any Catholic seminary or theological institute within the member schools of NCEA to offer online courses into which any students in the member schools could register for credit at their own institutions.

To provide a framework for establishing the CDLN, a steering committee was formed under the direction of the Seminary Department's executive director, Bernard Stratman, SM, and through the coordination of Sebastian Mahfood, associate professor of intercultural studies at Kenrick School of Theology in Saint Louis, Missouri. Seven of the 23 attendees (representing four of the six regional accrediting areas and including Dick Benson, academic dean at St. John's School of Theology in Camarillo, California; Lawrence Brennan, academic dean at Kenrick School of Theology in Saint Louis, Missouri; Robert Gotcher, associate professor of systematic studies at Sacred Heart School of Theology in Hales Corners, Wisconsin; Mark Latkovich, academic dean at St. Mary Seminary and School of Theology in Cleveland, Ohio; Sandra Magie, academic dean at St. Thomas School of Theology in Houston, Texas; Richard Siepka, president-rector at Christ the King School of Theology in East Aurora, New York; and Tom Walters, academic dean at St. Meinrad's School of Theology in St. Meinrad, Indiana) volunteered to serve on the steering committee to ensure that a developing Catholic Distance Learning Network would receive sufficient support and oversight to be successful. Following the workshop, Sergius Halvorsen, who has invaluable experience administering two distance learning masters of arts degree programs at Holy Apostles College and Seminary in Cromwell, Connecticut (a fifth accrediting region), also volunteered to serve on the committee. To make certain that we can maintain ATS standards where applicable, Jeremiah McCarthy, the director of accreditation and institutional evaluation at ATS, has volunteered to serve ex-officio, and Jim Rafferty, a project manager for the ATS Technology and Educational Practices initiative, has offered to teach to participating faculty an online course on how to teach online courses in the summers of 2007, 2008, and 2009.

Once the steering committee was formed, a mis-

sion statement was drafted that reads as follows:

The Catholic Distance Learning Network is sponsored by the Seminary Department of the National Catholic Educational Association for the purpose of advancing the education of future priests and lay ministers within a distributed learning framework shared by all member schools. We sponsor courses that foster excellence in human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral formation within seminaries and theological institutes through the sharing of resources between them.

The mission statement will be initially advanced by the committee's pursuit of the following goals:

1. Survey all the schools within NCEA as to the state of their own technology initiatives and identify those that have already developed online or hybrid courses for their own students.
2. Develop a program by which to train 30 professors over the next three years in the pedagogical realities of offering online courses.
3. Ensure that a reasonable diversity of courses is available to be offered online each semester and that these courses are promoted widely throughout NCEA.
4. Develop a program by which to offer training and support in the use of appropriate technologies in teaching and learning to those schools within the association that have not yet advanced either in the use of the technologies or in the development of a transactive learning environment.
5. Ensure that courses offered through CDLN address one or more of the Catholic formation areas—intellectual, human, spiritual, or pastoral—alongside global vision issues concerning evangelization/inculturation, ecumenism/unity, interfaith dialogue, and authentic human development.
6. Promote within the faculty whose institutions are members of NCEA a *habit* for the process of ongoing pedagogical reflection via cyberspace to achieve an active online community of scholars, both disciplinary and interdisciplinary.
7. Host nine online workshops over the next three years that will be available to everyone in the network and draw the topics for these nine conferences from a survey of the member schools.
8. Promote within the students attending these online

courses a *habit* for the process of ongoing education via cyberspace to nurture a mentality of lifelong learning so that our future ministers will continue to be producers of their own learning throughout their ministries.

While this list of goals may seem ambitious, we are well on our way to realizing it. In early February of 2007, the Seminary Department received a \$70,000 grant from the Wabash Center to develop the summer program by which to qualify faculty to teach online and to strengthen the skill sets of all faculty within the association through the development of online workshops.

Concerning the first point, if we are to have a distance learning initiative, we need to establish a means by which to qualify professors to teach within it so that the courses they offer are pedagogically sound and reasonably consistent in their delivery through cyberspace. Professors who participate in the program will, therefore, experience an online course in the teaching of online courses that will focus on the creation and adaptation of a syllabus for online teaching and learning, differences between transmissive and transactive methodologies (the latter of which includes synchronous and asynchronous interactions in cyberspace and activity development), online course assessment (how to do a discursive analysis on a class discussion and how to appropriately use survey tools to harvest data from the learning community) and student evaluation (how to create online exams that best measure student learning and how to oversee student portfolio development as both processes and products).

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While the professors are attending the course, an onsite instructional designer will be assigned to provide hands-on tutoring for three hours each week on the translation of the course that has been targeted for online development so that it can be offered through the network the following spring or fall semester. This instructional designer will work alongside the professor in a teaching capacity in order to enable the professor to develop other classes without direct assistance. Without these elements built into the design of the NCEA initiative, we expose ourselves to the danger of having our faculty merely place their lecture notes online without knowing how to focus on the creation, maintenance, and advancement of an interactive learning community.

Concurrent with this process will be the task of inventorying the skill sets the faculties at our member schools already possess and establish a means by which to strengthen them. The second thing we need to do, then, is develop a series of online workshops open to all faculty members in all 60 schools to bring people together around a common topic several times a year. The first workshop, held in March of 2007 and still online at catholicdistance.org, focused on the creation of short, interactive video presentations using Microsoft Producer. The workshop takes the viewer through the creation of a PowerPoint slideshow using the principles of Edgar Allan Poe's "Philosophy of Composition," the development of a Producer video presentation, and the uploading of the presentation to the Internet for the purposes of dissemination. Workshops like these not only will offer learning opportunities not currently available to students, but also will improve the quality of teaching through a combination of the principles of adult learning and the use of appropriate technologies to establish student-oriented learning environments.

In training the professorate to make courses like these available through distance learning, we expect, furthermore, to build stronger ties between our member institutions while providing a valuable service to students who want to expand their education in ways their own institutions have limited or no resources to allow. The faculty who teach within the network, moreover, will be encouraged to collaborate with one another to improve their teaching methods and strengthen their online teaching and learning environments.

Contributions to Catholic Education and Formation

The pedagogical issues that are at stake in Catholic seminaries involve transforming the means by which

instruction is delivered. While not unique to Catholic seminaries, there is a method of content delivery called lecture/discussion that is used by faculty within them in replication of the Roman model. What this entails is an instructor's oral transmission of his or her written lecture material to a classroom of students who each reproduce that lecture (to varying degrees of accuracy) in their notebooks. The discussion portion comes at certain pauses in the already canned lecture where the instructor will invite the students to answer or ask a question before moving back to the lecture outline. The mentality that supports this method comes from the fact that most of the professors themselves thrived in that kind of an atmosphere. Today, however, our professors are confronted with students who are unlike themselves in many respects—and they are either older students who are not entering the seminary or theological institute directly from an undergraduate program in philosophy or theological studies or younger students who are products of a multimedia generation that is much more hands-on about the way it engages its own learning, thriving in project-based and collaborative learning environments.

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One of the ways in which this initiative will contribute to transforming the teaching and learning environment, then, will be in challenging the lecture/discussion method at its base—in helping to reshape the idea of “transmission of content” into “transaction with content.” This will happen on and between two levels. The first is in the potential this kind of collaborative interaction has for both intercultural and interdisciplinary studies as students from different regions engage one another and ongoing courses within CDLN begin to support one another. Another lies in the conversations

on pedagogy and adult learning that will be encouraged as faculties begin to respond to the changing social realities of the third millennium. Giving professors the opportunity to offer courses entirely online and to diverse learning communities will cause them to rethink their pedagogical strategies to meet the various learning needs of their audiences. This is why transactive methodology, which focuses both on the adult learning principles (dealing with a student's need to know, self-concept, prior experiences, readiness to learn, orientation, and motivation) and on constructivist teaching theories (engaging students as co-producers of the teaching and learning environment), is necessary.

This program will, in addition, help to establish meaningful teaching standards within the NCEA member schools as concerns online course offerings. According to the ATS guidelines on distance learning, 10.3.3.3:

Programs of distance education shall demonstrate the collaborative nature and research dimensions of theological scholarship that fosters critical thinking skills. According to the degree program requirements, distance education programs shall seek to enhance personal and spiritual formation appropriate to the school's mission and ecclesiastical tradition and identity, be sensitive to individual learning styles, and recognize diversity within the community of learners. Courses shall provide sufficient interaction between teachers and learners and among learners to ensure a community of learning and to promote global awareness and sensitivity to local settings.

That means, of course, that we will expect of each course we offer a meaningful and interactive learning experience in which the teacher is very much present to the students and the students are very much encouraged to engage one another.

The project also will contribute to ongoing critical reflection on the issue of online teaching and learning through its continuous reinvention of itself to adapt to the changing needs of its learning community. In doing something like this, for instance, NCEA opens itself to a whole new collection of scholarly and practical articles on the developments happening within the intellectual formation areas of seminaries and theological institutions. The conversations and presentations at the seminary convocations will increasingly deal with how transformative pedagogies developed for online

teaching and learning are filtering into the face-to-face classrooms supported by course templates and vice versa. As professors work with their counterparts in other institutions, moreover, intercultural and interdisciplinary considerations will necessarily be considered as a factor in pedagogical development rather than an occurrence consequent to it.

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What Participation Will Mean for the Member Schools

The member schools of NCEA (a list of which is supplied at the end of this article) will likely participate within this initiative to varying degrees. While we hope to achieve a significant relationship between all member schools over time, the only real way to meaningfully involve everyone will be in NCEA's developing a program that not only will directly facilitate discussions on the use of appropriate technologies in teaching and learning within and between its member schools, but also will help these member schools receive the funding they need to retrofit their classrooms, purchase network equipment or faculty and student lab computers, and provide onsite training workshops for all stakeholders within each system.

The CDLN, to this effect, will work with the participating faculties in the 60 schools through the sponsoring of educational technology workshops that focus on strengthening teaching and learning. This goal

will likely be achieved through a series of small grant and faculty development workshop requests that can be made to the Wabash Center on a case-by-case basis. The reason for our doing this is both to raise the ability of the school to more meaningfully participate with each passing year and to demonstrate our desire to comply with ATS guidelines that state full-time faculty should “have significant participation in and responsibility for academic development, teaching, and oversight of distance education. They shall ensure that the institution’s goals and ethos are evident, the program is rigorous, and the instruction is of a high quality” (10.3.7.3). It is because “the variety and diversity of the faculty shall be appropriate to the specific program, and a sufficient number of full-time faculty shall be available to provide leadership” (10.3.7.1) that we believe our training just one faculty member in each school will not be enough over time. Our coming together as a network means that the burden of leadership in this area ought not to fall entirely on any one faculty member. All faculty members within every institution, rather, ought to move in this direction.

Assessment and Sustainability

In seeking feedback from our initial meeting at NCEA on September 27, 2006, we learned that those who attended our session found the prospect we were offering to be of profound interest for themselves and their schools. We believe that this showing of academic deans and rectors, and the enthusiastic support they gave for the development of a Catholic Distance Learning Network—not only at the meeting but in the commitment many of them made to serving on a steering committee—is indicative of the current desire on the part of Catholic seminaries to engage the possibilities that online teaching and learning offers. One attendee wrote of the effort, “distance learning will enable us to reach a larger student base, help develop new dynamics for teaching that will meet the younger students’ needs, and reinvigorate the faculty in the area of pedagogy.” We believe that these are among the very things that we ought to be pursuing as we continue in the direction of improving (even through reshaping into cyberspace) our teaching and learning environments.

For purposes of evaluating this initiative, we know that our goals are a means by which to measure our success. We intend to engage a four-fold level of assessment, beginning with formative assessment in which we design our work as an articulation of our intentions, engaging in continuous assessment where we adapt

that work according to the changing social realities we encounter in our teaching and learning environment, following through with summative assessment where we look at what we end up with at the end of the first year of the program and compare it without our intentions to better frame the second year of the program, and concluding with recursive assessment where we reexamine the entire three years at the conclusion of the grant to look for the trends in our process that best meted out the success of our intentions. At that point, we will be in a position to determine whether this pilot program is worth continuing or whether it needs to be adapted in some significant way.

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As concerns sustainability efforts, we believe that qualifying 30 professors to serve within the network will establish a strong precedent for others to follow over time. Since this work will be concurrent with our seeking to train all faculty in the 60-school consortium (either through the conferences or through direct faculty workshops supported by other Wabash small project and faculty consultant grants), we expect that at the end of the grant period, new faculty will have presented themselves as already qualified to teach online courses. Largely, though, the first three years of this initiative are meant to accustom all schools within the network not only to the viability of a project like this but also to its reality. We expect that all participating schools will incorporate the possibilities that a collaborative network like ours offers for registration and come to rely upon it as a means of sharing human and material resources between institutions. Since the academic deans themselves will be responsible for incorporating the initiative into

the regular workload of their professors, there will be no additional real expenses to NCEA beyond the pilot period, unless we decide to continue the training program and distribute the cost between all participating institutions.

“What we expect to glean from all the data that comes back to us, then, is that we actually have developed a mechanism that not only improves student learning, but also provides students with the experience that will be necessary for them to continue their education on their own after graduation or ordination.”

The audience who will help us address these assessment and sustainability concerns will largely consist of the member institutions who are represented both by the steering committee and by their individual members who participate in our online course and conferences. We hope to strengthen the pedagogical awareness of our entire faculty so that they develop the habit of engaging students as co-producers of their teaching and learning environments. The key questions to be asked include both the comfort level with the pedagogical training designed for online courses and the actual ability a professor has to engage the real course he or she will offer following the training. We will be able to perform both direct and indirect means of assessment on their participation with us, in the first case on the actual work they generate in their time with us (including the courses they produce and the discussions they have on the online conference blogs), and in the second case through surveys conducted among themselves and their instructional support people and course evaluations submitted by their students. We will also perform follow-up interviews with each professor after the summer online courses and after completion of the first teaching experience in the spring following completion of the summer course.

Aside from a professor's comfort level and ability, other means of assessment include an evaluation of our graduating students following their exposure to this kind of learning. We would want to know whether they are comfortable in online learning communities and whether they will continue to turn to them in the future to satisfy their learning needs. This is important to the idea of continuing formation where, in a previous article,² we insisted that it is the role of the academic dean to tie the intellectual formation program to the offices of continuing formation in those dioceses and archdioceses in which minister alumni of the institution. We ought, while we are at it, to extend the point to include an institution's use of cyberspace to facilitate continuing education in all four formation areas. What we expect to glean from all the data that comes back to us, then, is that we actually have developed a mechanism that not only improves student learning, but also provides students with the experience that will be necessary for them to continue their education on their own after graduation or ordination.

What we are learning as part of our continuous assessment plan, for it to be of any use to us, ought to be constantly fed back into the system so that our learning might improve our work over time. The means by which to do this will be the direct submission of specific evaluation data to the professors who are affected by it and the indirect submission of generalized evaluation data on our Web site. Whenever we come upon a problem for which we do not have the best answer, we will ask for help from our stakeholders. Because we are doing this for the benefit of the students, who are our largest group of stakeholders, we will make a point to seek their opinions among those of our professors and our steering committee.

Conclusion

We hope this innovative online learning strategy will foster meaningful discussion of the role of technology in the formation and training of future priests. Now that a grant that will allow us to begin is in hand, each seminary will need to decide how it wishes to participate. While the Catholic Distance Learning Network is an ambitious project with many facets, we would argue with President John F. Kennedy, who, while promoting the space program at Rice University in September of 1962, said, “We choose to go to the moon, and to do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard.” We, likewise, choose to go to cyberspace not because it is an easy fix for our pedagogical dif-

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ficulties—it is a hard fix—but because it is the sensible thing to do in a third millennial society that has these options open to it. It is an exciting time for Catholic seminaries to work together for the good of the church, and for the National Catholic Educational Association to be a participant in that work.

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James Rafferty is a member of the Project Management Team for Educational Practices and Technology for ATS (The Association of Theological Schools). In this role he has been charged to assist all the ATS accredited seminaries in their use of technology and to help establish technology requirements for accreditation of theological schools.

Endnotes

1. Victor Klimoski, "Planning for Innovation: A Framework for Reflective Practice," *Theological Education*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (2005).
2. Ackerman, Eva-Maria, FSGM, Sherry Kennedy Brownrigg, Sebastian Mahfood, and Rev. Michael John Witt, "Continuing Formation: Embracing the Future by Reaching Back to the Past," *Seminary Journal*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (Fall 2006): 47-56.

The National Catholic Educational Association Seminary Department Member Schools

1. The American College in Louvain, Belgium
2. Aquinas Institute of Theology
3. Archbishop Quigley Prep Seminary
4. Assumption Seminary
5. Athenaeum of Ohio Mount St. Mary's of the West
6. Blessed John XXIII National Seminary
7. Borromeo Seminary College
8. Byzantine Catholic Seminary of SS Cyril-Methodius
9. Catholic Theological Union Chicago
10. Christ the King Seminary
11. Conception Seminary College
12. Divine Word College Seminary
13. Dominican House of Studies
14. Franciscan School of Theology
15. Holy Apostles College and Seminary
16. Holy Trinity Seminary
17. Immaculate Conception Seminary
18. Immaculate Heart of Mary Seminary
19. Jesuit School of Theology At Berkeley
20. Kenrick School of Theology
21. Oblate School of Theology
22. Marist College
23. Moreau Seminary
24. Mount Angel Seminary-College Division
25. Mount St. Mary's Seminary
26. Mundelein Seminary-St. Mary of the Lake
27. Notre Dame Seminary
28. Pontifical College Josephinum
29. Sacred Heart Major Seminary
30. Sacred Heart School of Theology
31. Seminary of the Immaculate Conception
32. Seminary of Our Lady of Providence
33. S.S. Cyril & Methodius Seminary
34. St. Basil College Seminary
35. St. Charles Seminary College
36. St. Charles Borromeo Seminary
37. St. Francis Seminary
38. St. John's Seminary -- Boston
39. St. John's Seminary -- Camarillo
40. St. John's School of Theology
41. St. John Vianney Seminary
42. St. John Vianney College and Seminary
43. St. John Vianney Theological Seminary
44. St. Josaphat Ukrainian Seminary
45. St. Joseph College Seminary
46. St. Joseph Seminary College
47. St. Joseph's Seminary
48. St. Lawrence Seminary
49. St. Mary's Seminary
50. St. Mary Seminary and Graduate School of Theology
51. St. Mary's Seminary and University
52. St. Meinrad School of Theology
53. St. Paul Seminary
54. St. Paul Seminary School of Divinity
55. St. Patrick's Seminary and University
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