

## **Challenges and Opportunities in Online Instruction**

### ***The Power of humility and ministry***

**By Rick Roof**

The growing trend toward online and hybrid educational offerings presents both challenges and opportunities for higher education instructors. While many traditional professors initially approached this new media with skepticism, many have discovered that not only is online learning just as effective as traditional classroom learning (Bates & Watson, 2008), but there are some distinct advantages. This brief article will contrast traditional and online characteristics, identify some key principles in online effectiveness, and offer essential strategies for instructors new to the online learning environment.

#### **Online teaching is fundamentally different**

An advantage of online learning is that it offers flexibility and efficiency to students, allowing them to overcome time and space conflicts to pursue learning. The new methodology also offers the ability to deliver rich media demonstrations or graphics, embed references to relevant materials, provide immediate feedback to the student, and efficiently track progress. Online learning is essentially discovery learning where students, guided by the curriculum and instructors, are responsible for their learning efforts. While important in all learning, if proper guidance and expectations are not established in the online environment, energy can be wasted, misunderstandings develop, and frustrations result (Tallent-Runnels, et al., 2006). With expanding new media, online learning still does not offer the richness of face-to-face communication so participants must be aware of the limitations and make conscious efforts at robust, thoughtful, sensitive electronic communications.

An online professor in this new environment functions more as a facilitator or coach, since curriculum typically do not require the instructor to directly instruct. The lack of face-to-face interaction also tends to reduce the authority perception of the professor, which may threaten some instructors, but can be quite helpful in encouraging debate and challenge (Smith, Ferguson, & Caris, 2002). The online environment also allows more one-on-one time between students and professors than is typical in a traditional classroom (Smith, Ferguson, & Caris, 2002).

### **Online Dialogues are the classroom relationship**

As is true both online and in traditional instruction, dialogue is critical for understanding concepts and exploring vague, complex, unresolved dilemmas, for encouraging social cohesion, and for creating effective learning communities (Bates & Watson, 2008). In the online learning environment, interaction may be even more essential due to the otherwise isolated learning environment. Asynchronous discussions are commonly used online and offer a number of benefits. Studies found that the opportunity to contemplate between interactions resulted in deeper, higher quality discussions (Tallent-Runnels, et al., 2006). Smith, Ferguson, and Caris (2002) also suggested that often stronger relationships developed in the online environment, and the democracy of the media encourage the shy, reserved, uncertain, and less gregarious to participate more fully, challenge more readily, and engage more equally than in traditional classrooms (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005). Brookfield and Preskill (2005) also posit that more robust dialogue reduces tendencies toward Groupthink, the phenomena where tendencies toward conformity overcome divergent views. Engaging the class in effective asynchronous

discussions can be challenging, so the following are strategies drawn from Biblical principles, current research, and the author's personal experience as a student and professor.

### **Strategies for effective pedagogy and ministry**

Online teaching can be aided through effective teaching and personal strategies, but before adapting particular strategies, it is important to consider self-preparation.

#### **Self-Preparation**

As Paul reminds in 1 Corinthians 13, Spiritual gifts without love are worthless. The Christian professor should consider Spiritual preparation and practice prayer for the students that have been entrusted to them, for wisdom in the assigned subject, for the Spiritual development of the students, and for a sincere, compassionate, graceful heart that seeks first the Kingdom. Also, teaching can tempt the fleshly pride and the instructor should remember that "Humility comes before honor" (Proverbs 15:33b, ESV), and as Philippians 2:3 reminds, "Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves." The Beatitudes in Matthew 5 can also offer perspectives for teaching that are contrary to the world yet effective in teaching. For further insight into the application of the Beatitudes in all forms of Christian leadership including as preparation for the call to teach, professors should reference "Be a Leader for God's Sake" (Winston, 2002).

#### **Guiding Online Discussions – The Importance of Balance**

The intent of dialogues is not to document the learning of facts, but to explore ideas (Dennen & Wieland, 2007) so guidelines should encourage participation, etiquette and interaction. and inquiry. Also, the dialogues will be more effective when guidelines and grading practices are integrated (Suler, 2004). The Socratic approach is particularly effective in

encouraging students to inquire more deeply into the dialogue subject. Instructors should participate but not dominate discussions since research indicates that less, more focused instructor postings result in better student postings (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005). Little interaction will occur without any instructor presence so guiding and modeling are critical to reduce student frustration and misdirection (Dennen, 2005)..

Instructors should be aware of tendencies for students to focus their dialogue toward the instructor, and divert such focus by using brief posts that redirect the discussion toward peer engagement (Dennen & Wieland, 2007). A suggested, balanced strategy is to post a response to each student in the initial stages of the discussion period, limiting the post to a brief word of encouragement with a pithy Socratic query (Tallent-Runnels, et al., 2006) and more sparingly as the discussion progresses.

### **Online Persona – Creating a Personal Connection**

It is useful to remember that interactions, both content and style, will create a psychological perception that the instructor is present, and such online presence can significantly impact the effectiveness of the dialogues (Smith, Ferguson, & Caris, 2002). Because of the communication limits of electronic media, instructors must be especially attentive to providing a lot of affirmation and avoid what may be interpreted as demeaning or embarrassing commentary (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005). Adopting a less academic, more personal tone in communications will assist in creating the richness and connectedness necessary (Diekelmann & Mendias, 2005).

Instructors like students have some flexibility as to when they engage in the instructional process so they should select a time that corresponds with personal effectiveness,

when energy, sensitivity, and patience are at their peak (Young, 2002). When possible instructors should respond to email or phone inquiries promptly. The more rapid the response, the more effective are communication in reducing feelings of isolation and frustration that can occur in online educational environments.

### **Conclusion – Hope for a Global Leader?**

While many fear the loss of instructor-student relationships, online instructing can offer some distinct advantages not only practically, but through more democratic and deeper learning (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005). The online environment also offers unique opportunities to bless students in new and encouraging ways. As with all work instructors should remember, “Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ” (Colossians 3:23-24). If diligent work is the task, a humble heart is the foundation, and as Paul wrote “Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.” (Philippians 2:3) Prayerfully seek ways to work with excellence, unto the Lord, with divine empowerment as the Holy Spirit offers wisdom and fruits necessary for an effective, God honoring teaching ministry.

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