



What Difference Does It Make? E-Learning and Faith Community

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When Paul writes to the community at Corinth, he offers support and care, as well as challenge, to a community facing great uncertainty. Christians today also face challenges and uncertainty, so we can be reassured by Paul's words:

When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God. (1 Cor 2:1–5)

This text offers me reassurance because of its reminder, in the midst of rapidly changing media, that Jesus Christ—and him crucified—is at the heart of what we need to know. Yet that claim is a central one, and one that, as a religious educator, I have a heart for sharing. I am often asked to do precisely that, talk about how Christian faith claims can be shared in the world in which we live, how emerging digital media might help—or hinder—that participation in the *missio dei*.

One of the most fruitful entry points into this discussion has been to ask what real difference digital technologies might make for learning within communities of faith. The primary issue will not be *how* to use such technologies, but whether—

By adopting a relational model of teaching and learning we can better align our programs of Christian education with our fundamental understandings of the faith. Digital technologies can help us do this more fully and more effectively.

and in what ways—to use them at all. And to answer that question, I need first to ask a deeper question, namely: What difference does our underlying theory of learning make in a community of faith?

MODELS FOR LEARNING AND TEACHING

Consider for a moment Parker Palmer’s two models for teaching and learning, as found in his book *The Courage to Teach*:

FIGURE 1: “THE OBJECTIVIST MYTH OF KNOWING”¹

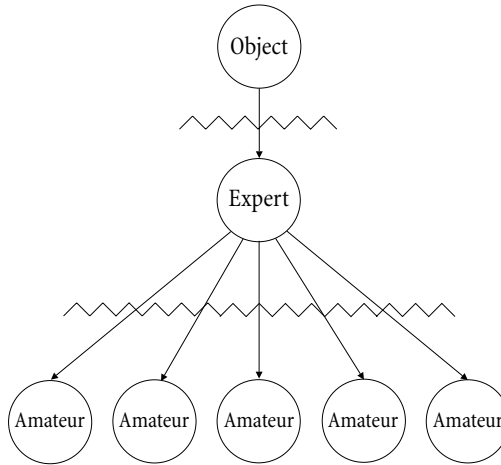
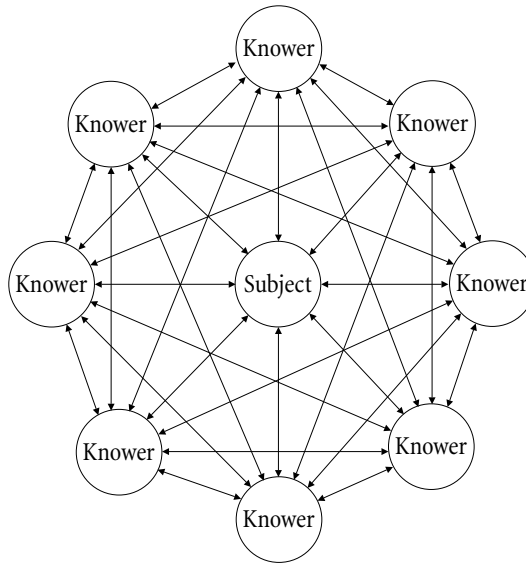


FIGURE 2: “THE COMMUNITY OF TRUTH”²



¹Adapted from Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher’s Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998) 100.

²Ibid., 102.

The model in figure 1 depicts a process in which the responsibility for learning is clear: the expert shares information that the amateurs take in. This is a model for teaching and learning that privileges a “transfer of information” paradigm. The benefits to such a model are obvious: teacher and student roles are clearly defined, authority is directly linked to an expert’s connection to the topic, it is relatively easy to measure the effectiveness of the teacher (did the information indeed get transferred?), the one-way nature of the process avoids the potential dilemma of situational or contextual factors contradicting the teacher, and so on.

This model of teaching and learning shares some striking similarities with assumptions that many religious institutions hold about the ways in which mass media function. Adán Medrano points to four such assumptions: (1) “that media and church are distinct, bounded, separate realities”; (2) “that media are instruments of transmission...necessary to the church so that we can deliver a message”; (3) “that the voice of the church commands attention because of its traditionally strong moral authority both in the family and in society”; and (4) “that the meaning of media messages is determined by the producer, and the practice of media use and consumption is predictable. That is, one can more or less determine the effects of media and their messages upon people.”³

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Given the easy match between this prevalent understanding of media and Palmer’s first model of teaching and learning, it is not surprising that many people advocate for the use of digital technologies in faith communities by pointing to the many ways in which they can enhance the transmission of information—making it faster, moving it farther geographically, and so on. This use of digital technology in teaching has captured many people’s imagination, with “digital technology + teaching = distance learning” or “e-learning.” There are certainly ways in which digital technologies can engage distance and time effectively. I’ll get to some concrete examples in a moment, but the easy equation of digital technology with distance learning obscures a bigger challenge: an understanding of the teaching/learning process that is fundamentally not a good match with Christian belief and practice.

The Trinitarian nature of Christian belief is irrefutable, but the systematic theological exploration of that framework has been particularly robust and interesting in the last three decades.⁴ At the heart of much of that exploration has been a

³Adán Medrano, “Making Religious Media, Notes from the Field,” in *Belief and Media: Cultural Perspectives on Media and Christianity*, ed. Mary Hess, Peter Horsfield, Adán Medrano (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004) 146–148.

⁴Here I am thinking of the writings of Catherine Mowry LaCugna, Elizabeth Johnson, Roberto Goizueta, Stanley Grenz, and others.

renewed and energetic defense of the essential relationality of Christian belief and of Christian community. A map for teaching and learning that depicts learning as a process of transmission of information from an expert to an amateur does not align well with this fundamental confession of relationality. A mapping that demonstrates the multidirectional nature of communication and sharing, however, provides a rich medium for such learning to take place.

We can see this understanding at work in the ways in which Jesus taught. Over and over again he drew on notions of relationship to carry meaning—siblings, parents, communities, and so on. He is most often depicted as teaching in the midst of communities, not in didactic, transmissive patterns of practice.

God gave God's only Son that all might have life eternal—a self-giving that is the very definition of *kenosis*—of “pouring oneself out”—a form of teaching that points not to the expertise of the teacher, but rather to the truth of the “great thing” around which we gather (to use another of Palmer's terms).⁵ While Palmer's first model clearly defines the role of the teacher—as expert—and makes specific claims about the authority of a teacher, it is easy to miss the way in which learners have no direct connection to the thing about which they desire to learn. They have no relationship with the subject except as mediated through the teacher.

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Christ's entry into our lives is what must be kept at the heart of our learning. Palmer's second model provides a map for doing this. We can put that saving event at the heart of the map, as the “great thing” around which we gather as we seek to know and to learn. There is no obvious role for a teacher in this map, but that does not mean that teachers are not present. It simply points to the reality in Palmer's vision that *all* are knowers in some way, making as us all teachers as well as learners—we *all* know as we are known (1 Cor 13:12). Indeed, the primary task of a teacher in this model is to get out of the way sufficiently to allow learners to engage the central topic. The role of teacher is to create an environment in which direct relationship, direct engagement with the subject is possible. It is fundamentally a *kenotic* posture for a teacher, not an expert one.

In *kenosis*, one must first “have a self” to “give a self.” In other words, this description is not a recipe for pastoral leaders simply to tell learners whatever they want to hear, or for people with varying amounts of ignorance to share that ignorance with each other; it is a way for people to create learning environments in which differing knowledges can be tested, brought into relationship, and affirmed or discarded. In this model, teachers must be so deeply attentive to the subject they are teaching that they are able to be at once clearly loyal to a specific interpretation and yet demonstrably open to new insights.

⁵See in particular his discussion of the “grace of great things” in *Courage to Teach*, 107–108.

From this brief reflection it is fair to assert that Palmer's second model is more adequately descriptive of teaching and learning within communities of faith than his first, no matter how often the first model may be utilized in more typical educational contexts. Let's take this second model, and use it to think through the question of what difference digital technologies might make for learning in communities of faith.

QUESTIONING LEARNING, QUESTIONING TECHNOLOGY

One of the more interesting outcomes emerging from the ELCA's *Book of Faith* initiative, at least for me as a religious educator, is the deep sense that far too many of our church education programs have been focused on "teaching the Bible" the way pastors learned it in seminary, and not enough of these programs have invited congregational members to *learn* the Bible in a way that shapes their imagination, that matters in daily ways, that gives them the tools and the experience—indeed, the interest—to return to the Bible over and over again. To the extent that pastors believe their Bible study programs have been effective, they often speak of the relationships that grow out of ongoing, small-group Bible study, but rarely do they offer similar assessments of the standard forty-five minute adult learning forum.

It is not a coincidence that at the same time as more and more adults are involved in active learning via a myriad of web-based projects and programs, fewer and fewer adults are involved in church-based learning. I would argue that this is the result of adults coming to have a taste for learning that is more directly responsive to their questions, more adequately suited to inquiry-based learning, and more engaging and imaginative than much that passes for adult education in church contexts.

As Medrano noted, there are, to be sure, understandings of mass media that describe such technologies in instrumental ways, which, therefore, map very well onto the information-transfer model of teaching and learning. Clearly, however, the instrumental understanding of digital technologies does not work well with a more relational understanding of teaching and learning. Yet, just as there are other models for conceiving of how teaching and learning work, there are multiple models for understanding media. Let me return to Medrano to outline the four assumptions he believes are more descriptive of how mass media function in our religious contexts than the earlier four he noted: (1) the two worlds (media and church) "are conflated and share the same space. By this I mean that we are encountering religious experience in everyday media culture, and it is in media culture that our religious myths and symbols are alive"; (2) media technology has become "the material with which we form and inform our habits, relationships, conversation and identities"; (3) "the church must recognize that it is one voice among many....[A]s we search more deeply and thoroughly to find our appropriate voice, as a church we are operating from strength. That strength is a prophetic

voice, a witness of community, and a storehouse of symbolic, narrative and sacramental voices”; and (4) “the meaning of media messages is constantly being created, negotiated, constructed *between* the producer of the text and the receiver of the text. The locus of meaning is the viewing experience.”⁶

His is an argument that works from a cultural turn, that is, recognizing media as a fundamental element of our cultural contexts, providing vast pools of meaning, or databases, upon which we draw as we make sense of ourselves—not to mention our relationships with each other and, ultimately, with God.

For the rest of this essay, I’d like to work with this understanding of media and to probe the difference digital technologies might make within faith community learning contexts if understood in this way and if embedded in a model for learning that takes seriously Palmer’s “community of truth.”

Making Possible a More Multiply Intelligent Learning Environment

One of the first digital technologies that pastoral leaders have begun to experiment with in faith community classrooms is presentation software (for example, Keynote, PowerPoint, and so on). These software programs make it relatively easy to bring images and sound into a classroom, whether that classroom is located in a church building or online. A pastoral leader does not need to be an expert in the manipulation of digital images or audio sound files, but simply needs to use standard interface commands (“insert file,” “copy and paste,” and so on) to import such files into a presentation. In doing so, leaders can provide support for learning that engages more senses and that expands and layers the interpretations they are constructing. Of course, even here the information-transfer model can rear its ugly head, with presentation programs becoming merely snazzier forms of the traditional overhead presentation, long lists of bullet points simply reiterating a teacher’s (or preacher’s!) main points.⁷ Still, to the extent that such software programs enhance a teacher’s ability to connect students with the main topic around which they are gathered, such digital tools can have a significant impact by creating an environment in which more than one form of learning is supported.

Providing More Opportunities for Collaborative Learning

Digital technologies can make the web of connection depicted in Palmer’s second figure much more visible and tangible. Learners can use e-mail to exchange ideas in advance of gathering (imagine a text study that begins online but also meets every week in person) and in doing so refine and hone their thinking. The collaboration need not end at the boundaries of a gathering, however situated, because the Internet makes it possible to share materials and collaboration across much larger contexts. Learners can point to pertinent news articles they have come across; they can share weblogs on topics that interest them; they can evalu-

⁶Medrano, “Making Religious Media,” 147–148.

⁷Tom Creed’s classic essay, “PowerPoint, No! Cyberspace, Yes,” on the reasons why not to use such programs is illustrative of this problem. His essay is available online at: http://www.ntlf.com/html/pi/9705/creed_1.htm (accessed 12 May 2010).

ate religious education materials found on the web for use in specific settings; they can create such materials themselves and post them for sharing with others; they can work with other people scattered across the globe on topics of shared concern.

These examples have been centered on ways in which people in typical faith community settings can utilize these technologies, but such examples point to much broader and more potentially transformative uses as well. What if communities of faith across the globe were more directly involved together in the teaching and learning process? So that “learners” was a category that included not only those in a specific church, but also those worshiping in a community far away who decided to participate in the learning as well? Many congregations have relationships with partners abroad, and more and more of these partners have some degree of access to the Internet. Why not continue learning together over a year and not simply during focused “mission events”?

*Giving Pastoral Leaders a Better Angle of Vision on Their
Congregations’ Thinking*

Digital technologies make it possible to create spaces in which most if not all learners can find a way to participate that also shows their thinking *in process*. There are ways to do this without using digital technologies, of course, but digital technologies can make the process much easier and can contribute to helping such work to feel in some ways safer for learners. Dividing people into small discussion groups is a venerable practice in most churches, but no leader can possibly “overhear” all of the groups. Doing the same division but hosting the groups online in an asynchronous manner provides a way for a pastoral leader to overhear what is going on, while at the same time easing the pressure to “perform” that often attends such groups when run in real time.

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This kind of small-group work has perhaps an even stronger benefit for pastoral leaders in that it can help them to be more in touch with a broad range of their members quite quickly and easily. “Lurking” in the midst of digital forums set up to facilitate communication among members can also facilitate communication with pastoral leaders, as long as there is no assumed intent always to be present or always to respond.

The rich kinds of learning through mentoring that can take place in committee work can be extended through digital tools as well. As our congregations grow through consolidation, with multiple small parishes forming larger single parishes,

the need for providing transparency around specific decision-making processes, as well as helping people to stay “caught up” with changes, becomes ever more pressing. It is not very difficult to take documents that a church is creating already—worship bulletins, committee meeting notes, schedules of upcoming learning events, budget updates—and place them on the Internet for easy access. In a world in which that kind of transparency is becoming ever more the norm in civil society organizations, it is that much more crucial that communities of faith pay attention to giving people access to the materials that document their shared lives.

Providing Access to Rich Primary Sources

It used to be that only people who had been trained in seminary contexts had access to the Bible in its original languages. Even then, the length of time required to acquire a minimal grasp of Greek or Hebrew prevented many pastoral leaders from ever using the languages in their daily preparation. The advent of such web-based tools as Enter the Bible, Working Preacher, TextWeek, and even the professional Bible programs such as Accordance and BibleWorks, has made engaging biblical texts in their original languages a much more accessible task.

Indeed, one of the more fruitful elements of this easy access to primary documents is that our congregations are now able to begin to learn something of their neighbors and the multiple faiths they inhabit, prior to encountering them in person. For many people, it is much easier to access information about experiences and ideas that are new, and perhaps even unsettling, in ways that allow them to do so at an individualized pace than it is to encounter such ideas or people without any mediation. The Internet is full of opportunities to learn about other faith traditions, to learn about other cultures, to inquire into the neighborhoods in which churches are rooted, and so on. Of course, learning in this way—learning that reaches out beyond our immediate stories, that invites us into the world beyond the church doors—requires a change in perspective. There is much focus on “missional church” these days, but perhaps the best short introduction I’ve found is a two-minute video posted at YouTube, in the genre of the “common craft” show, a form of introduction that uses paper drawings and narration to explain complex concepts.⁸ This video conveys, in a pointed and simple way, that missional church is about turning a community around to face the world, bringing our relationship with Christ into all of our daily lives, rather than simply inviting people to “come to church” for such an encounter.

It is this shift, from a focus on “passing on faith” to one on “living faith,” a shift from “transmitting doctrine” to “living into a biblical imagination,” that is at the heart of the real benefits that can emerge from engaging digital tools in congregational learning.

⁸http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=arxfLK_sd68 (accessed 12 May 2010).

Overcoming Constraints of Geography and Time

Perhaps one of the most palpable differences digital technology can make within congregational learning is that of overcoming the constraints of geography and time that many of our churches face. Far too many of our congregations are “Sunday morning only” places, where people drive quite a distance to gather for worship and fellowship. Finding time and ways to gather apart from Sunday morning is becoming increasingly difficult in a world where people no longer live within easy walking distance of their church and where raising a family can mean transporting children all over town to various sporting and music events. Yet, at the same time, digital tools such as Facebook and Twitter are inviting people back into the daily minutiae of each other’s lives. The haphazard, random encounters in the neighborhood as one walks the dog or watches children playing on a playground are still possible, but so, too, are the brief encounters via Facebook status update or Twitter feed that elicit a smile or a prayer of support. These latter encounters are no longer bound by the geographic constraints of a neighborhood, but can extend across town and even across continents. Congregations whose members have access to these tools are finding that relationships begun in church can be sustained and even deepened via the serendipity of such tools.

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Such tools are also beginning to amplify or intensify relationships begun through mission outreach and development trips, work/service trips, and other kinds of profound learning encounters that in the past were often relegated to intensive bursts of work, but then devolved into distant, forgotten relationships in the interim periods between mission trips. While it is vital to be aware of the technology access and levels of use in your community of faith, do not let fears of a “digital divide” prevent your community from accessing these tools. Rather than fearing that divide, communities of faith across the globe are beginning to take their role as justice seekers in this realm quite seriously, ensuring that people who are poor or illiterate have access to the wealth of information and community being built on the Internet.

Digital technologies can make a huge difference in helping us, as religious educators, to align our Christian convictions and our pedagogical strategies more effectively. They can do so in at least these five ways that I have described: (1) providing a richer, more multiply intelligent environment within which to learn; (2) providing more opportunities for real collaboration; (3) giving pastoral leaders a better angle of vision on the challenges their congregations are facing and the specific assumptions with which they enter learning; (4) providing better access to primary-source materials; and (5) overcoming constraints of geography and time.

Each of these differences plays a role in making more visible and tangible the deep and enduring ways in which we know as we are known by the One who creates, redeems, and sanctifies. To the extent that we embody the community of truth, then our teaching and learning will make a huge difference. To the extent that religious education can support that community using digital technologies, then digital technologies can multiply that difference. ⊕

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