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# Blended Learning: Curriculum Design for Effective Learning

*Rhonda McEwen*

This chapter examines the integration of technology to support and enhance global theological education with a focus on the principles and practices of effective learning design in an online and blended context. It begins with a critical perspective of the influence that technology has had on the contemporary global context of education, as well as the possibilities which it offers. Then it explains how technology has launched a renewed focus on learning, with particular implications for online and blended educational contexts. Next it describes the roles of both community and culture in online curriculum design, and then follows with a discussion of best practices to enhance student learning. Finally, it concludes with institutional considerations for implementation.

## **Technology and Education Today**

Welcome to the digital age! Education is not what it used to be in the ever-dynamic world in which we live. Learning is no longer confined to an institutional space, but can be engaged in “anytime, anyplace and [in] any

subject.”<sup>1</sup> Never before have we been as pressed to restructure and reframe the ways and means in which education is delivered than in our current social context. “Technology has changed students and professors, how we access knowledge, the nature of community, the habits of learning, our understanding of patience, and virtually everything about our education.”<sup>2</sup>

It is almost impossible to escape the ubiquitous impact that technology has on our world today. De Zengotita,<sup>3</sup> anthropologist-turned-cultural critic, argues that the media plays an almost god-like role in how it parcels reality for our daily consumption – providing an exclusively human interpretation without reference to an omniscient, omnipotent Creator God. Shuurman asserts that “technology is value-laden.”<sup>4</sup> It calls into question the source of ultimate authority and what, or whom, we should trust. Of most concern to educators, the Internet “encourages us to ‘surf’ rather than dive down deeply into reflective reading. In a sea of hyperlinks, we tend to scan text and images and flutter from one link to another.”<sup>5</sup> To cite Carr, “Dozens of studies by psychologists, neurobiologists, educators, and web designers point to the same conclusion: when we go online, we enter an environment that promotes cursory reading, hurried and distracted thinking, and superficial learning.”<sup>6</sup> Bowen laments that reflection is “a casualty of the digital age, and one of the primary goals of higher education should be to reclaim this time.”<sup>7</sup>

Besides discouraging reflection, an uncritical stance toward technology for its own sake embraces a worldview of technique and efficiency, as Jacques Ellul once warned.<sup>8</sup> And while improved “techniques” can certainly strengthen and support effective teaching strategies, nevertheless a note of caution is warranted,

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1. Qiuyun Lin, ed., *Advancement in Online Education: Exploring the Best Practices*, vols. 1 and 2 (New York: Nova Science, 2012), 12.

2. Jose Antonio Bowen, *Teaching Naked: How Moving Technology Out of Your College Classroom Will Improve Student Learning* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2012), ix.

3. Thomas de Zengotita, *Mediated: How the Media Shapes Your World and the Way You Live in It* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2005).

4. Derek C. Shuurman, *Shaping a Digital World: Faith, Culture, and Computer Technology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 15.

5. *Ibid.*, 18.

6. Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010), 115–116; quoted in Shuurman, *Shaping*, 18.

7. Bowen, *Teaching*, 27.

8. Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society* (New York: Vintage, 1964), xxv; quoted in Shuurman, *Shaping*, 20–21.

lest the “means” becomes the “end” – perhaps not unlike the teacher’s warning in Ecclesiastes, where all is meaningless without an orientation around God’s purposes in this world. As Ostrander concludes, “So what’s a Christian educator to do amid such portentous changes? How do we use technology without being used by technology?”<sup>9</sup>

Thomas and Brown remind us that “change forces us to *learn differently*”<sup>10</sup> and that the twenty-first century is all about embracing change – viewing the future as “a set of new possibilities rather than something that forces us to adjust.”<sup>11</sup> As we consider theological education in the twenty-first century in light of a rapidly changing world, what shifts might we need to make in our understanding of learning? What strategies can we employ to steward the increased connectedness with others that technology enables? What are the implications for curriculum development? How does technology inform and even alter our understanding of teaching and the role of the professor? How do we equip the faculty? How do we equip students? How can blended and online learning modalities serve to foster the transformative impact to which we aspire as we serve the church in mission to the world? This chapter invites us to consider such questions.

## New Challenges and Possibilities

The introduction of online and blended learning modalities invites new possibilities for those engaged in global theological education, whether in administrative leadership or in faculty roles. “Global online theological education is on the rise around the world, and multicultural online communities are having a transformative impact on students.”<sup>12</sup> The potential for increased access may open doors for outreach, affordability, and networking

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9. Dr Rick Ostrander, “Christian Learning in the Digital Age,” *The Colossian Forum*, 15 November 2012, accessed 6 December 2016, <http://www.colossianforum.org/2012/11/15/article-christian-learning-in-the-digital-age/>.

10. Douglas Thomas and John Seely Brown, *A New Culture of Learning: Cultivating the Imagination in a World of Constant Change* (Lexington, KY: CreateSpace, 2011), 43.

11. *Ibid.*

12. Melinda Thompson and Meri MacLeod, “To the Ends of the Earth: Cultural Considerations for Global Online Theological Education,” *Theological Education* 49, no. 2 (2015): 113–125, here 124.

as never before; however, some scholars suggest a cautious discernment in our application and implementation of technology.

In Carr-Chellman's edited work on online education in Asia, Europe, North America, Africa, and Australia/New Zealand, she asserts that "By opening access to populations which have not had access either because of geographical location, job status, or physical handicap, the rhetoric of online education suggests that this new technology will democratize education, breaking down the elitist walls of the ivory tower."<sup>13</sup> Yet, from a global perspective, not everyone has the same opportunity to benefit from these advances. And there are many who are still skeptical as to whether merely providing "open access" truly meets the needs of those populations who need it most.<sup>14</sup>

Further, online education as a "one size fits all" import is often linked to globalization: "Making a single course that is available around the world for anyone interested in it is efficient, but culturally and contextually bankrupt."<sup>15</sup> Even in theological education, Western ways may be viewed as superior – and this concern is also present within online education. Far from being "value-neutral," as technology is often purported to be, it often reflects very Western views of knowledge, language, time, and the autonomous individual,<sup>16</sup> with little regard to indigenous knowledge already present within the community. Moreover, as Selwyn suggests, educational technology can "reinforce or challenge dominant global and local beliefs about teaching and learning . . . language or religion."<sup>17</sup> Without attention paid to cultural differences, at worst educational technology may be seen as "the imposition of a dominant culture – be it a homogenous 'global culture,' commercial culture or 'Americanised' culture."<sup>18</sup>

Even with these words of caution, Christian educators now have the opportunity to learn from one another within the broader global context. Advances in technology afford greater opportunity for intercultural connections

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13. Alison A. Carr-Chellman, ed., *Global Perspectives on E-Learning: Rhetoric and Reality* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2005), 1.

14. *Ibid.*, 9.

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Ibid.*

17. Neil Selwyn, *Education in a Digital World: Global Perspectives on Technology and Education* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 20.

18. *Ibid.*

and to explore new and innovative ways in which to cultivate educational environments most conducive to both formative and transformative learning. Far from fostering “disembodied teaching,” the use of technology in online and blended learning contexts can actually serve to deepen and enrich the quality of learning by fostering dialogue and collaboration within learning communities.

## Blended Learning

A blended, or hybrid, learning environment draws upon the “best of both worlds,” utilizing both face-to-face and online modalities. It affirms the value of a face-to-face community, while still providing flexibility and accessibility – and continuing the learning in a way that the rigidity of classroom structure cannot accomplish. “Blended instruction is not threatening to established teaching roles or to the authority of the classroom instructor. It can incorporate resources and practices that have proven effective in fully online applications while still leaving room for human instructors to do what they do best.”<sup>19</sup>

Morrison observes that the reduced time that students spend in the traditional classroom can benefit institutions by fostering greater efficiency in managing instructional and facility resources. Further, students can benefit from the added convenience and flexibility of online learning, allowing more time for ministry engagement and family responsibilities.<sup>20</sup>

Blended instruction respects a variety of learning styles – including those of oral cultures, which may find a solely text-dependent online modality to be especially challenging. In-class discussions may be restricted by “time limitations, too many people in a class at once, and domination by a few highly verbal students at the expense of quieter, more reflective types,”<sup>21</sup> and thus blended learning can deepen engagement for the learner by extending the learning outside the classroom in an online environment. The online format can allow greater personalization, varied pacing, added preparation time, and

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19. Barbara Means, Marianne Bakia, and Robert Murph, *Learning Online: What Research Tells Us about Whether, When and How* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 180.

20. Debbie Morrison, “Is Blended Learning the Best of Both Worlds?” *Online Learning Insights*, 17 January 2013, accessed 24 July 2015, <https://onlinelearninginsights.wordpress.com/2013/01/17/is-blended-learning-the-best-of-both-worlds/>.

21. Michelle D. Miller, *Minds Online: Teaching Effectively with Technology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 144.

greater participation from all students.<sup>22</sup> Also, it opens up access to a broader variety of content and instructional media. Rather than passive listening, class time can be used for more active engagement, analyzing and synthesizing content in an intentionally transformative learning environment.<sup>23</sup> Research studies have found that blended courses improve both student performance and retention in comparison with fully online or fully face-to-face courses.<sup>24</sup>

Adapting to a blended learning mode of teaching can be a little unsettling at the beginning as it demands greater interaction with and among learners. It may even become a transformative experience for instructors as they shed entrenched and even isolated ways of teaching, and embrace a more collaborative learning-centered paradigm.<sup>25</sup> The following discussion applies to both blended (a combination of online and face-to-face) as well as wholly online modalities.

## Learning Anew

Amid all the discussion of technology and higher education, one exciting development has been the renewed focus on learning. A learning-centered orientation enables institutions to be adaptable and responsive to the ever-changing landscape of higher education and global realities. As Cannell forecast almost a decade ago, “a shift from an instructional paradigm to a learning paradigm may be the next sea of change in the historical development of theological education.”<sup>26</sup> Rather than simply “integrate technology into traditional ways of teaching,” the time has come to reconsider how we understand and practice education.<sup>27</sup> In other words, how do we cultivate environments that are most conducive to learning – whether online or face-to-face? While the emphasis on learning may sound like “common sense” for

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22. Jared Stein and Charles R. Graham, *Essentials for Blended Learning: A Standards-Based Guide* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 61.

23. This point is Bowen’s central emphasis.

24. *Blended Learning*, EDUCAUSE Center for Applied Research.

25. Sheryl Nussbaum-Beach and Lani Ritter Hall, *The Connected Educator: Leading and Learning in a Digital Age* (Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree, 2012).

26. Linda Cannell, *Theological Education Matters: Leadership Education for the Church* (Newburgh, IN: EDCOT, 2006), 271.

27. Linda Harasim, *Learning Theory and Online Technologies* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 2.

educators, nevertheless this renewed emphasis has profound implications for higher education.

Learning is far more than technique. Learning engages the mind, soul, spirit, and body; it involves knowledge, emotion, skill, disposition, and posture. And while the tools, strategies, and even contexts for teaching may look different in this digital age, nevertheless the emphasis on learning is needed more than ever. As Dewey affirmed a century ago, “As societies become more complex in structure and resources, the need of formal or intentional teaching and learning increases.”<sup>28</sup>

In Thomas and Brown’s groundbreaking work, they suggest that a new type of learning is needed to cope with the profound changes that technology has brought to the twenty-first century.<sup>29</sup> Whereas “the teaching-based approach focuses on teaching us *about* the world . . . the new culture of learning focuses on learning through engagement *within* the world.”<sup>30</sup> This view affirms a more “constructive” understanding of learning as “a cultural and social process of engaging with the constantly changing world around us.”<sup>31</sup>

From a Christian perspective, a learning orientation acknowledges that, as learners created in God’s image, we are continually on a journey of discovery – seeking to better understand God’s work in and through the world. Learning is not only what happens in a person’s head – it is a process that is deeply grounded in the sociocultural context of the learners. Moreover, learning is deeply relational. It is through dialogue and purposeful interaction with other learners that new ideas, actions, and ways of being in God’s world can be discovered. A learning-centered approach implies mutual accountability: teacher and learners, and learners with one another.

Bowen suggests that “The job of faculty needs to become more focused on designing learning experiences and interacting with students . . . Now that technology has created a cheaper way to deliver content, faculty should spend more time finding the right entry point, creating a supportive environment, communicating high standards, and guiding student learning.”<sup>32</sup>

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28. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (1916; New York: MacMillan, 1990), 255; quoted in Louise Starkey, *Teaching and Learning in the Digital Age* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 10.

29. Thomas and Brown, *A New Culture*, 17.

30. *Ibid.*, 38.

31. *Ibid.*, 47.

32. Bowen, *Teaching*, 246.

Research in cognition can contribute to an understanding of effective practice in online teaching and learning – in other words, it “aligns our teaching with the way the mind works.”<sup>33</sup> Miller suggests that technology can facilitate a number of ways to encourage effective learning, although she is careful to point out that it does not promote learning simply “by its mere presence . . . . Rather, what technology allows us to do is amplify and expand the repertoire of techniques that effective teachers use to elicit the attention, effort, and engagement that are the basis for learning.”<sup>34</sup> Teaching methods which use problem solving, collaboration, digital product creation, case studies, adaptive learning, and even games utilize both sides of the brain, and therefore learning outcomes should reflect this holistic approach to teaching.<sup>35</sup>

The increased diversity of ways and means of learning has prompted some scholars to suggest that we need a new theory of learning.<sup>36</sup> Traditional learning theories locate learning solely in cognition or brain science, yet even with the addition of more psycho-social theories of learning, most of these are still highly individualistic. A holistic approach to learning engages all learning domains: cognitive, psychomotor, and affective. Moreover, this approach views learning as grounded in communities and “the interrelationship of those communities” with the potential for transformation at both individual and corporate (i.e. social and political) levels.<sup>37</sup> People learn, and new knowledge is generated, through their interaction with one another in the context of community.

### ***Focus on Community***

With the introduction of technology, more than ever before learning becomes a deeply social endeavor, and technology can serve to enhance the collective and collaborative nature of learning. Concepts such as collaborative learning, communities of inquiry, and communities of practice have come to the forefront of contemporary curricular discussions. Rather than being defined,

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33. Miller, *Minds*, xii.

34. *Ibid.*

35. Rosemary Lehman and Simone Conceicao, *Motivating and Retaining Online Students: Research-Based Strategies That Work* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2014).

36. For example, Carolyn Haythornthwaite and Richard N. Andrews, *E-Learning Theory and Practice* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2011).

37. *Ibid.*, 224.

and thus limited, by geographical location, technology can instead support and extend the learning together in community.<sup>38</sup>

For example, *communities of practice*<sup>39</sup> can be utilized not only among learners, but also among faculty colleagues, in order to foster interdisciplinary dialogue around pressing issues and innovative practices. “The potential to form networks of digital learners has barely been tapped. Virtual learning communities have the potential to transform professional learning to produce progress and innovation on behalf of our students and ourselves.”<sup>40</sup> Further, utilizing communities of practice in more formal contexts, like theological education, can foster interdisciplinary dialogue, collaborative research, and teaching innovation. Such an approach requires both interpersonal and intercultural competencies. “What is implied by a discussion of communities in e-learning is that becoming a good e-learner is partly about being able to move between different kinds of communities with technical ease and with social familiarity and confidence.”<sup>41</sup>

Nevertheless, for many students and faculty in theological education, interaction and collaboration are not necessarily intuitive skills – especially as many of us come from competitive models of education which emphasized individual success.<sup>42</sup> Therefore, an essential skill for educators in utilizing online and blended learning is that of facilitation: helping students to make connections, to collaborate, and interact together toward the purpose of learning. Faculty can promote connections between student experience and outside knowledge, among the students themselves, with other learners, subject-matter experts, and within local, global, and virtual communities.<sup>43</sup>

A blended learning environment can wed the virtual with the actual. Relationships which are formed in a face-to-face classroom can then be further strengthened through continued discussion in an online community. Ostrander explains: “After a particularly lively discussion in class, I can follow up with

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38. Etienne Wenger, Nancy White, and John D. Smith, *Digital Habitats: Stewarding Technology for Communities* (Portland, OR: CP Square, 2009).

39. See Wenger, White, and Smith, *Digital*.

40. Nussbaum-Beach and Hall, *The Connected*, 4.

41. Haythornthwaite and Andrews, *E-Learning*, 200.

42. Rita-Marie Conrad and J. Ana Donaldson, *Engaging the Online Learner: Activities and Resources for Creative Instruction* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011), 6.

43. Starkey, *Teaching*.

an email on Blackboard that keeps the conversation going. The class can use the social network to create study groups and share ideas on the assignments. A professor can develop an online course for his or her students to take over the summer to keep making progress toward their degree. These are just some of the valuable ways that technology can strengthen the learning process.”<sup>44</sup>

The essential role of the learning community in online and blended environments reflects a theological conviction that as humans created in the image of God – women and men of all cultures and ethnicities – we are therefore relational beings. Moreover, our singular apprehension of God’s revelation will always be partial and finite, and deeply impacted by our epistemological, cultural, and worldview perspectives. Thus, we are in need of other image-bearers to provide a clarified vision in order to gain a richer, more truth-filled understanding of God’s work in and for the world. And when this community comprises diverse learners and educators from varied global perspectives, it can serve to deepen, and enrich the discovery process.

### ***Focus on Culture***

Learning is about people and relationships: between the instructor and learners, as well as within the learning community. And people are different. These differences are heightened when the learning is done in community, utilizing collaborative and cooperative methods in online contexts. Virtual learning environments are void of the visual cues that we usually depend upon to facilitate communication. Cross-cultural issues are often amplified in an online learning environment “because the physical lack of proximity in e-learning is more dependent on verbal and two-dimensional visual communication (images, either still or moving, but not sculptural, plus sound) and thus more open to misinterpretation and misunderstanding because communication lacks the three-dimensionality of physical communication and gestures, local context, and other cues that aid mutual understanding.”<sup>45</sup>

Moreover, in our increasingly interconnected personal networks, “it is only natural that important social and cultural issues and tensions migrate from

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44. Ostrander, “Christian Learning.”

45. Haythornthwaite and Andrews, *E-Learning*, 192.

the larger society into online environments.”<sup>46</sup> In the multicultural learning environments that are often found in online classes, Haythornthwaite and Andrews suggest that “becoming a good e-learner in a world of various cultures means being able to understand and adapt to different learning cultures, and specifically to the different ways in which e-communities mediate with real-world communities in specific contexts.”<sup>47</sup>

While technology has removed barriers and opened access to learning in unprecedented ways, technology itself is far from value-neutral, as noted in the introduction to this chapter. Cultural differences are experienced when whole systems of education, such as an online curriculum designed in one country, are “imposed inappropriately” in another country: “What is seen as a ‘global solution’ to learning may well impose upon cultures an inappropriate model of learning.”<sup>48</sup> Thus, the inclusion of technology into educational settings requires sensitivity by educators to the diversity represented in cultural values and “even the cultural assumptions embedded within the curriculum.”<sup>49</sup>

In order to develop strategies to address challenges which arise from cultural variations, educators must first be aware of the influences and impact of culture as reflected in course design, interactions between students and instructor, and the varied backgrounds of students. These factors may contribute to differing expectations and add “substantial complexity to online education.”<sup>50</sup> For example, “students from other cultures or educational systems bring different assumptions about how learning works, when it is appropriate to talk to the teacher, and what constitutes appropriate course content.”<sup>51</sup> Carroll references three facets related to diversity which may influence teaching and learning in blended contexts: educational mobility (movement across national boundaries); pedagogic variation (differing values, beliefs, and preferences in

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46. Kjeli Erik Rudestam and Judith Schoenholtz-Read, eds., *Handbook of Online Learning*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2010), 67.

47. Haythornthwaite and Andrews, *E-Learning*, 201.

48. *Ibid.*, 205. See also Thompson and MacLeod, “To the Ends.”

49. Colin Latchem, “Towards Borderless Virtual Learning in Higher Education,” in *Global Perspectives on E-Learning: Rhetoric and Reality*, ed. Alison A. Carr-Chellman (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2005), 52–65.

50. Thompson and MacLeod, “To the Ends,” 116.

51. Bowen, *Teaching*, 235.

learning); and learning in English.<sup>52</sup> In addition, power dynamics, the hidden curriculum, and differing assumptions for course participation and assessment can lead to frustration for both instructors and students if these variations are not taken into consideration in the design of curriculum for blended and online learning contexts.

A holistic and comprehensive approach to curriculum design considers the particular group of learners that are in the class – their background, expectations, learning preferences, relationship with the subject, their classmates, the instructor, and anything else that will impact the design. In addition, the type of content (knowledge, attitudes, and skills) that will be most relevant and applicable to a particular group of learners, and how they will engage with this content in order to learn it, are all essential factors which inform the learning design.

Educators in a wholly online environment will need to make the extra effort to become acquainted with their students, recognizing that variations in gender, age, ethnic background, sociocultural context, previous online experience, and religious affiliation will inform and shape student assumptions about learning, and also impact their interactions with and contribution to the learning community. Teachers can serve an important role as mediators<sup>53</sup> between such variations by providing explicit guidelines for interaction, actively participating in and facilitating online discussion, and providing a hospitable and inclusive learning space where all voices are welcome. Thompson and MacLeod suggest that the *Community of Inquiry* (COI) course design model may be productive in multicultural and global online teaching environments in its three-part use of social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence.<sup>54</sup>

While models of cultural values differ, and with the recognition that cultures are rapidly changing, it may be helpful to identify the types of dimensions which do exist, even implicitly, among both learners and instructors. They include the following.<sup>55</sup>

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52. Jude Carroll, *Tools for Teaching in an Educationally Mobile World* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 17.

53. Ibid.

54. Thompson and MacLeod, "To the Ends," 123; See D. R. Garrison, "Online Community of Inquiry Review: Social, Cognitive, and Teaching Presence Issues," <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ842688.pdf>.

55. Adapted from Rudestam and Schoenholtz-Read, *Handbook*, 65.

- hierarchy/equality
- community/competition
- engagement/detachment
- dependence/independence
- risk-taking/risk-avoidance
- masculine/feminine
- emotionality/emotional neutrality
- short-term/long-term orientation
- universalism/particularism
- majority/minority
- task orientation/process orientation
- self-disclosure/self-concealment
- structure/structurelessness

Education in culturally diverse contexts, and with culturally diverse learners and educators, requires a deep commitment to learning. Moreover, learning together with and from those who may have differing viewpoints requires patience, authenticity, respect, and humility in our interactions. Yet the extra effort to cultivate engaging learning environments that are hospitable to all learners is well worth the investment. Since our singular apprehension of God's revelation will always be partial, finite, and deeply impacted by our epistemological, cultural, and worldview perspectives, we need a hermeneutical community in order to gain a richer, more truth-filled understanding of God's work in and for the world.

Thus, online learning environments provide opportunity to engage with an increasingly diverse group of learners in our ever-changing global context. The next section examines some key principles and practices to foster student engagement.

## **Best Practices to Enhance Student Learning**

An essential prerequisite for effective teaching is curriculum design which intentionally cultivates student learning. With the focus on learning, instructors are no longer the primary dispensers of content, but rather the “designers

of learning experiences.”<sup>56</sup> Rather than relying on lectures to disseminate information, with the advent of the Internet, and with the rich wealth of knowledge that can be gleaned from a variety of sources, the responsibility is now on educators to utilize a variety of techniques and practices to engage students with the content. “Pedagogy, not technology, is what is critical to the success of an online course.”<sup>57</sup>

A key predictor in learning is student engagement. Curriculum design which facilitates learner engagement requires that the instructors envision how they will incorporate both classroom learning and computer learning, in the case of a blended course, or whether the course will be held entirely online. In either case, organization, planning, and preparation are key – it is more difficult to let the syllabus “emerge” in online contexts. “Determine the vision and envision the process.”<sup>58</sup> Best practices in design include the following:

- Vary the assignments: use a combination of intensive and less intensive, personal reflection, and more scholarly work.
- Build upon interaction and not just content.
- Search out and use a variety of content resources, applications, links to current events, and examples that can be easily accessed from learners’ computers.
- Combine core concept learning with customized and personalized learning.
- Plan a good closing and wrap activity (i.e. a “signature assignment”).<sup>59</sup>

Regardless of modality, best practices which foster engagement include peer-to-peer interaction, emphasis on practice/application, variety, grounding in students’ knowledge, and emphasis on higher thought processes.<sup>60</sup> With the dependence on written text, an online context demands that students take a more active and interactive role in learning, rather than passively absorbing the teacher’s wisdom. In turn, the instructor’s role may require a more facilitative

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56. Miller, *Minds*, 87.

57. Rena M. Palloff and Keith Pratt, *Lessons from the Virtual Classroom: The Realities of Online Teaching*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2013), 190. See also Stein and Graham, *Essentials*, 1–3.

58. Judith V. Boettcher and Rita Conrad, *Online Teaching Survival Guide: Simple and Practical Pedagogical Tips* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010); Palloff and Pratt, *Lessons*.

59. Boettcher and Conrad, *Online*; Palloff and Pratt, *Lessons*.

60. Miller, *Minds*, 20–24.

rather than directive stance, giving up some control in order to help foster a learning community.<sup>61</sup> The tone, timing, and totality of interactions all contribute to a collaborative learning environment.

Online education experts Palloff and Pratt recommend that to maximize student participation, instructors should articulate clear expectations concerning how much time is required; model engagement by logging in frequently and contributing to the discussion; further the discussion by building on students' postings and asking probing questions; redirect the discussion if it goes off track; and create a warm and hospitable atmosphere by including appropriate supplemental information to personalize the learning – such as videos, photos, and other artifacts, and real-life examples that may be relevant and useful to the particular group of learners.<sup>62</sup> Indeed, the learning is in the doing – actively engaging with the content by interacting within a learning community.

Discussion forums are a practical outworking of learning in community. Instructors can design learning activities that foster interaction and connect to life experience by preparing discussion prompts that invite questions, responses, and reflection. Student participation can be incorporated into evaluation and grading via required postings. Group assignments and online dialogue can promote collaborative learning, as can peer-feedback on assignments. And discussion can be done in both synchronous and asynchronous formats.<sup>63</sup> Good discussion releases control to the learners: “The success of collaborative assignments in an online course rests with the instructor’s willingness to empower students to take on the work with clear expectations for completion and then step out of the way.”<sup>64</sup>

The concept of “social presence” refers to “the ability to present oneself well in text.”<sup>65</sup> Without the usual nonverbal cues such as gestures, facial expressions, tone of voice, or physical stance, frequent communication is of paramount

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61. Palloff and Pratt, *Lessons*, 24.

62. Palloff and Pratt, *Lessons*; cf. Bowen, *Teaching*.

63. Adapted from Palloff and Pratt, *Lessons*, 43–44; Mark A. Maddix, James R. Estep, and Mary Lowe, eds., *Best Practices of Online Education: A Guide for Christian Higher Education* (Charlotte, NC: Information Age, 2012), 35–36; Boettcher and Conrad, *Online*; and Tisha Bender, *Discussion-Based Online Teaching to Enhance Student Learning: Theory, Practice, and Assessment* (Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, 2012).

64. Palloff and Pratt, *Lessons*, 99.

65. Bowen, *Teaching*, 192.

importance in an online educational context. Even in a virtual environment, instructors can provide “office hours” – allowing opportunity for synchronous discussion via Live Chat, Skype, or other means.

Providing clear expectations, not only for the assessment of course-learning outcomes but also for guiding the interaction and process of learning, is helpful in both face-to-face and online learning contexts; however, it is especially critical at the beginning of an online course. “The guidelines can be the first discussion time in a new class. Doing this enables students to take responsibility for the way they will engage in the course, and with one another, and it serves to promote collaboration in the learning process.”<sup>66</sup> Guidelines and the use of rubrics give parameters to the discussion, providing structure with flexibility.

In Palloff and Pratt’s helpful resource *The Excellent Online Instructor*, they suggest that to be effective in an online environment, an educator must demonstrate visibility, compassion, communication, commitment, and organization,<sup>67</sup> as evidenced in the following best practices. Effective online educators will:

- understand the *differences* between face-to-face and online;
- establish *presence* early in the course, and encourage students to do the same;
- understand the importance of *community building*, and devote time at the start of the class to that function;
- promote *interactivity* between students through development of good discussion questions that engage and encourage them to seek out response material on their own;
- incorporate *collaborative work* into the design and delivery of an online class;
- respect *students as partners* in the learning process;
- be *active and engaged* through the course, providing timely, constructive feedback throughout;
- be *open, flexible, compassionate and responsive*, and lead by example.

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66. Palloff and Pratt, *Lessons*, 35.

67. Rena M. Palloff and Keith Pratt, *The Excellent Online Instructor: Strategies for Professional Development* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011), 19.

In many ways, these qualities should characterize any instructor, but in an online environment these practices must be executed through the use of technology.<sup>68</sup>

Thus, while blended or online education may appear to be an attractive option to save expenses for an institution, from a curricular standpoint, these learning modalities require both intentionality and planning in order to be done well. Given the abundance of content in this information-saturated world, educators must develop facilitation skills to foster effective interaction and application with the content, particularly in an online setting.

## Institutional Implications

From the preceding discussion, it should be evident that the transition from a traditional residential curriculum to one that incorporates online and blended learning modalities requires careful thought and planning. As Latchem reminds us, “Such a vision demands leadership, organizational envisioning and strategic thinking, course design and delivery that educates, empowers, and respects cultural diversity and the pursuit of excellence.”<sup>69</sup>

For the institution, it can be a big undertaking, and to be successful, it requires commitment from a variety of stakeholders.<sup>70</sup> Thus, it may be wise to start small with one program or a grouping of courses that begin to incorporate technology to facilitate student learning. In this way, it allows time for the infrastructural changes which are needed when transitioning from a wholly face-to-face to a wholly online and blended learning curriculum. These changes may require “more collaboration, innovation, [and] greater focus on student mentoring,” and the “courses and subject matter may move to a modular format” in order to develop a “greater capacity to accept different kinds of learners.”<sup>71</sup> And, while not without challenge and adjustment, such a transition can open up new opportunities for theological institutions in their outreach to laity, both locally and globally. Also, it can offer greater flexibility

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68. Ibid.

69. Latchem, “Towards Borderless,” 195.

70. Elliot King and Neil Alperstein, *Best Practices in Online Program Development: Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 131.

71. Clayton M. Christensen and Henry J. Eyring, *The Innovative University: Changing the DNA of Higher Education from the Inside Out* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011), 386–387.

in for-credit programs for clergy and those students pursuing vocational ministry certification.

It is also essential to consider faculty perspectives – recognizing that for many, this represents a radical departure from their assumptions about teaching and learning. Institutional leadership, including deans, can model the renewed focus on learning that blended and online modalities can facilitate by creating time and space for faculty training. Strategies may include promotion of the scholarship of teaching and learning, improving learning outcomes, requiring evidence-based pedagogy, creating robust teaching reviews, providing incentives such as grants and redesign time, and developing a resource center for teaching excellence.<sup>72</sup>

Palloff and Pratt suggest that in addition to training, faculty should be given “a voice in the selection of technology and in policy-making around course ownership, governance, compensation, course loads and class size, and intellectual property.”<sup>73</sup> Further, they recommend that an institution’s strategic plan include the infrastructure needs to support online teaching, such as “course development, purchase of technology, faculty compensation for course development and delivery, and training.”<sup>74</sup>

These suggestions may not always be feasible for a single institution, yet there is much potential for resource sharing, and collaboration among like-minded institutions, such as members of ICETE. Developing Communities of Practice and Communities of Inquiry within global theological education may allow opportunities to connect and dialogue with colleagues from other institutions worldwide.

Theological institutions around the globe will vary in how much and to what extent they adopt technology in the curriculum through online and blended learning. However, academic leaders need not feel isolated in this task. Thanks to the information age in which we live, there is an increasing abundance of resources, including research-based best practices and strategies, from which administrators and faculty can glean to aid in their implementation plans. (See the resources section at the end of the chapter as a sample.)

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72. Adapted from Bowen, *Teaching*, 247–252.

73. Palloff and Pratt, *Lessons*, 202.

74. *Ibid.*

## Conclusion

Grounded in well-crafted curricula and teaching methods which encourage dialogue and critical thinking, the use of technology within educational environments can promote deep learning for both students and faculty. Further, it can provide bridge-building opportunities for theological educators to learn from and in which to share perspectives in collaboration with other educational institutions, communities, and individuals which we may never encounter in a more localized traditional mode of education. These new modes of learning “can be a means of forming international networks and partnerships, internationalizing the curriculum, promoting virtual staff and student mobility, and generally encouraging higher education to become more international in its outlook.”<sup>75</sup>

In our increasingly globalized world, God has opened up doors of possibility for expanding the outreach of global theological education through technology. With careful consideration given to the roles of culture and community, and best practices for faculty and institutional engagement, online and blended learning modalities can invite new potentialities for learning within global theological education.

## Reflection and Action Points

1. Why are online learning communities important for institutions of Christian higher education? What are the essential characteristics? How might they contribute to Christian formation?<sup>76</sup>
2. How can you determine if effective interaction is taking place in an online course? In a face-to-face course? What are some essential practices necessary to ensure faculty presence in an online course? In what ways can the instructor foster a learning community in an online course?<sup>77</sup>
3. Consider your own institution. What is going well in your implementation of technology within the curriculum? Where do you need to grow?

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75. Latchem, “Towards Borderless,” 179.

76. Adapted from Maddix, Estep, and Lowe, *Best Practices*, 39.

77. Ibid.

4. What are the most essential competencies of an effective learner in a blended/online course (i.e. what does the learner need to know, do, be)?
5. What are the most essential competencies of an instructor in a blended/online learning environment (i.e. knowledge, skills, attitudes)? What should professional development look like?
6. How can you facilitate innovation and learning within your institution? Consider the policies/procedures that help to foster/enhance innovation (such as the use of technology within the curriculum) vs. hinder/impede innovation. How can you design systems that better facilitate effective learning?

## Resources for Further Study

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