

Promoting Spiritual Formation in Distance Education

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Abstract. For many in Christian higher education modeling Christ-likeness in the classroom is considered a primary means and evidence of integrating faith and learning. But when the face-to-face relational dimension is removed in an Internet-based course, how will Christian distinctives be realized? This paper considers issues related to personally connecting with students in online course environments and facilitating faith development by promoting the affective and relational dimensions of distance education instruction. Although Christ and computer at first seem incompatible, spiritual formation can be nurtured in distance education through the creative ways in which faculty and students interact.

Introduction

Spiritual formation is the process where believers grow in their relationship to God in Christ. According to Dallas Willard (2002), it is a “Spirit-driven process of forming the inner world of the human self in such a way that it becomes like the inner being of Christ himself” (p. 22). Members of the body of Christ are called to assist each other in this growth through various educational and nurturing activities. Those pursuing this educational ministry of the church are to follow after the will of God, align their activities with those of the Holy Spirit, and exhibit a corresponding love for their neighbor. While Christian educators can facilitate spiritual formation, it is ultimately God who causes the growth (1 Corinthians 3:6).

The Internet is currently being advocated as one means for promoting spiritual formation. Educational activities offered in an online environment have grown in popularity and many schools are increasing their involvement in this nontraditional way of delivering courses. This trend is referred to broadly as distance education, distributed learning, or e-learning. Its promoters point to the benefits of accessibility for distance sites, facility cost savings, and scheduling convenience.

While the amount of skepticism about this mode of education is declining as more students, teachers, and schools actually become involved in the process, concern remains regarding the viability of certain aspects of this delivery method. Criticism usually centers on the lack of student-to-student interaction, student-teacher interaction, and academic soundness (Lumsden, Ray, Lowe, & Newsom, 1999). A growing number of church-related colleges and universities that offer professional and liberal arts education are particularly concerned about the extent to which spiritual formation, a component of their stated mission, can be achieved via the Internet (Headley, 1999).

For many in Christian higher education, relationally modeling Christ-likeness in the classroom is considered a primary means and evidence of integrating faith and learning (Hughes, 2005; Palmer, 1999). This important relational dimension, potentiated by more intimate one-on-one contact between students and teachers, creates a context for transformation to occur. But when the face-to-face personal dimension is removed in an Internet-based course and when the campus ethos is absent, the importance of which has been noted by Carrol, Wheeler, Aleshire & Marler (1997) and Sasse (1998), how will Christian distinctives regarding transformation through relationship be realized? In particular, how can the spiritual formation of students be promoted?

This paper suggests that spiritual formation can be facilitated through distance education learning opportunities by giving greater attention to the affective and relational components of instruction in the online learning environment. These relational values include attention to individual factors within instructors such as vulnerability, authenticity, and integrity as well as community values created in the on-line context including safety, transparency, boundaries, and intimacy. These individual and

community values have been noted as important for excellence in teaching (Palmer, 1997) and their application in the on-line context is particularly important given the unique learning venue.

Theological Background

Christian theology, particularly with respect to God's relationship with humankind, speaks profoundly of how the painful distance between God and humanity was healed and bridged through the incarnation and atoning work of Christ. From a creaturely perspective, this distance (sometimes experienced even in a spatial sense) is bridged and humanity has access to understanding and experiencing God through the person of Christ (the incarnation) and through the indwelling Holy Spirit. A distant God becomes a human being and lives on the earth (John 1:1,14), identifying with and atoning for, human brokenness (Hebrews 4:15). In the incarnation we see God coming to earth communicating and fellowshiping with humanity. We see Christ, Emmanuel, who is God with us (Matthew 1:23) and as believers we are to reflect a related Emmanuel principle. Paul writes:

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. (Philippians 2:5-7 NIV)

All Christian education regardless of its delivery method should be characterized by an incarnational mindset (Groothius, 1998), an agape motivation expressed in a willingness to reduce transactional distance between persons. Parker Palmer (1983, 1997) alludes to this dimension when he suggests that learning communities be characterized by hospitality, safety, integrity, vulnerability, and intimacy. This perspective should permeate our ministries for we are to be like letters from Christ (2

Corinthians 3:3) or as one of my students has suggested, we should be known as E-manuel-mail.

The distinctives of the Christian educational mission are the same online as they are in any setting. They are based on and grow out of foundational life instructions and related responsibilities required of all believers (White, 1999). The follower of Christ is to be in a right relationship with God, reflect his image to others, and steward the creation. By the good pleasure and grace of God, faithfulness to these themes and accompanying spiritual disciplines yield spiritual growth (Foster, 1978; Ortberg, 1997; Whitney, 1991; Willard, 1988). Regardless of the human efforts used in the pursuit of this growth, spiritual formation is ultimately a work of God's Spirit. Activities designed to promote it must follow the way of all Christian education endeavors and be aligned with biblical guidelines regarding the means and ends of the Christian life. Teachers have the opportunity to align themselves with the Holy Spirit and serve as midwife and gardener as God develops the spiritual life of a person.

Working with unseen students at the other end of a distance education experience and connecting with them is a walk of faith. In working with distance education students and seeking to nurture their spiritual growth, the teacher does well to keep in mind the often-quoted words of C. S. Lewis.

It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature which if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and the circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all law, all politics. (Lewis, 1980, pp. 18-19)

Distance educators have opportunity to view students as created in the image of God and work with them in authentic ways that nurture the whole person. The Bible speaks of the heart as the center of a person's being and the "wellspring of life" (Proverbs 4:23). It is how a person thinks *in his or her heart*, one's whole being, that dictates life, not just how one *thinks* cognitively (Proverbs 23:7; Romans 6:17; Ephesians 1:18; Willard, 2002). While all dimensions of our humanity should be addressed in spiritual formation pursuits, the teaching suggestions to follow feature the importance of the affective dimension in the teacher-student relationship.

As fallen and finite creatures people feel removed from God's comforting presence and difficult times seem to increase this perceived distance. The Psalmist writes:

Why, O LORD, do you stand far off?
Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble? (Psalm 10:1 NIV)

Do not be far from me, for trouble is near and there is no one to help. (Psalm 22:11 NIV)

But you, O LORD, be not far off; O my Strength, come quickly to help me.
(Psalm 22:19 NIV)

Yet in the scriptures a promise of God's nearness is extended to believers.

Come near to God and he will come near to you. (James 4:8 NIV)

The distance educator, aware that his or her students may be experiencing this disconnect from God, has an opportunity to proclaim the message of God's nearness and model that truth incarnationally in relationships with students. As Palmer (1997) has noted, the vulnerability, integrity, and emotional accessibility of the teacher creates a learning community that will open the heart of both instructor and student to transformational encounters. These encounters occur and are transformational because the connection has

been I-Thou rather than I-It (Buber, 1970). By connecting at a level deeper than merely getting acquainted, the teacher conveys experientially Christ's incarnation by displaying the spiritual riches of connection with God, self and others, and manifesting the presence of divine life and power, crucial resources used by God for advancing spiritual formation (Willard, 2002). Making the extra effort to meaningfully connect with students in spite of geographic distance models the lengths to which God will go to demonstrate love and care to us. The Kingdom of God is at hand.

Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. (Philippians 4:5 NIV)

A Case Study: The Pauline Letters

The letters of Paul illustrate that spiritual formation can be promoted even when extended geographical distance separates teacher and student. On his missionary journeys Paul initiated and nurtured numerous relationships that provided the intimate connections for ongoing communication through his letters and the relational support through designated leaders within the community. His initial investment in people's lives paved the way for further nurturing of their spiritual growth. Converts could respond more fully to his messages through letters because they could connect it to their relational experiences with him and with those who were explaining his teaching in the local context. Correspondence to early believers and churches was directed and superintended by the Holy Spirit, and Christians grew in the wisdom and knowledge of God through reading and hearing the letters (cf. 2 Timothy 3:16-17). Even those who never met Paul were able to profit spiritually from his writings by having the relational witness of individuals who had known him. Throughout history, as these New Testament

documents have continued to be distributed, taught, and modeled in community, one of the accompanying results has been spiritual growth.

Paul on occasion specifically refers to the distance that separated him from his reader. Consider the following (bold emphasis added):

For though **I am absent from you in body, I am present with you in spirit** and delight to see how orderly you are and how firm your faith in Christ is. (Colossians. 2:5 NIV)

Even though **I am not physically present, I am with you in spirit**. And I have already passed judgment on the one who did this, just as if I were present. When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus and **I am with you in spirit**, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present. (1 Corinthians 5:3-4 NIV)

When we were torn away from you for a short time (**in person, not in thought**), out of our intense longing we made every effort to see you. (1 Thessalonians 2:17 NIV)

What does he mean when he says to the Colossians that he is absent in body but present in spirit? Even though Paul is physically distant there appears to be a unique closeness of communion evident. F. F. Bruce (1984) offers the following observation:

Paul's sense of being spiritually present with his absent friends could be extraordinarily strong and vivid. Perhaps the most remarkable example is found in 1 Cor. 5:3-5, where he speaks of himself as present in spirit at a church meeting in Corinth (at a time when he was resident in Ephesus), in order to take a decisive part in a solemn act of discipline. Here he speaks of himself as spiritually present with a distant church for a much happier purpose. Whereas in the case of Corinth his spiritual presence was promised to a church with which he was well acquainted, here he gives the same assurance to a church in whose midst he had never been present in body. The contemplation of the Colossians' faith and conduct gives him the utmost pleasure: so vivid, we may infer, was the picture of their life and character which he had received from Epaphras. (p. 92)

Although we cannot replicate the life or ministry of Paul, we can follow his model and glean from his writings insights into how he planted seeds and trusted God to produce growth (1 Corinthians 3:6). Consider how Paul connected with his readers, some whom he knew and some he didn't. Note particularly the numerous personalizing

strategies he used to connect emotionally and relationally with his readers. The following is a list developed and expanded based on the work of Zuck (1998):

1. Some readers addressed by name
2. Expressions of concern for well-being of readers
3. Declaration of writer desiring to be with readers

I pray that now at last by God's will the way may be opened for me to come to you. I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong--that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith. (Romans 1:10-11).

4. Inclusion of references to everyday activities (bringing the cloak, parchments)
5. Greetings to friends
6. Personal encouragements
7. Group commendations on spiritual progress

- 1 Corinthians 1:4-5; 2 Corinthians 8:7; 9:2; Ephesians 1:15-16; Colossians 1:4-5; 2:5; Philippians 1:5; 1 Thessalonians 1:3,8; 4:10)

8. Inclusion of prayers on behalf of readers (Colossians 1:9-12).
9. Requests for readers to pray for writer

- Romans 15:30-31; Ephesians 6:19-20; Colossians 4:3-4; 1 Thessalonians 5:25; 2 Thessalonians 3:1-2

10. Purposes of writing identified and goals for the learners are communicated
11. Questions used to generate personal reflection

- Some 240 questions can be found in the writings of Paul (Zuck, 1998, p. 183)

12. The use of teaching assistants

Tychicus will tell you all the news about me. He is a dear brother, a faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord. I am sending him to you for the express purpose that you may know about our circumstances and that he may encourage your hearts. He is coming with Onesimus, our faithful and dear brother, who is one of you. They will tell you everything that is happening here. (Colossians. 4:7-9 NIV)

13. The use of co-teachers (co-senders?)

- Timothy (2 Corinthians, Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians, Philemon)

- Silas (Thessalonians)
- Sosthenes (1 Corinthians)

14. Exhortation to be diligent when he is away

Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed —not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence —continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose. (Philippians 2:12 NIV)

15. Inner motives communicated

16. Personal struggles expressed

I want you to know how much I am struggling for you and for those at Laodicea, and for all who have not met me personally. (Colossians 2:1 NIV)

17. The use of contemporary illustrations

18. Specific problems related to readers are addressed

19. Personal illustrations used

20. A reliance on the Holy Spirit for spiritual power

Preliminary Assumptions About Online Teaching

Before proceeding to specific suggestions for promoting spiritual formation by emphasizing affective and relational components in distance education there are some important basic assumptions about online teaching to emphasize.

1. *Sound pedagogical methods, skills, and strategies established in traditional classrooms can translate to the online classroom.* True quality teaching transcends setting. Viable process and structural approaches to promoting student-to-student, student-to-teacher, and student-to-course content interaction can continue. For example, asking good questions, having well-designed content presentations, assigning meaningful projects, and providing prompt feedback are just a few of the structural essentials that may be included. However, as Palmer (1997) has noted, it is essential in the educational context that process factors such as safety, emotional accessibility between members of

the learning community, integrity, and authenticity be established and nurtured as core values or the structural factors will be only minimally (if at all) effective. These process factors are especially needed in the on-line venue because of the absence of face-to-face contact. Intimacy, care, trust, and connection are vital for transformation to occur and the spatial distance must be bridged through meaningful interpersonal encounter.

A broad selection of learning styles (visual, auditory, kinesthetic) should be addressed in online course design as well, especially those relating to the affective dimension and related modalities. The visual dimension of the course can have a major influence in this area through the use of colors, text styles, sounds, images, animations, and video and audio clips. Variety can add spice to academic life in this regard.

2. *Motivational issues and involvement levels are important variables to online course success.* Students have a responsibility to be active self-directed learners who fully engage as participants in the classroom environment and associate with others in the learning experience. The nature of the online student population can have an important bearing on the degree of spiritual formation realized and the initial potential for spiritual growth. For example, adult learners tend to be more self-directed. Andragogy research suggests reflection, experiential learning, collaboration, discovery, and learning how to learn have a strong bearing on adult learning (Knowles, 1990).

3. *A sense of community can and does occur on the Internet* (Rheingold, 1993). Consider how much time people use the Internet particularly in chat rooms and blogs. Many young people now spend more time on the Internet than watching television. The good news is that many in this Internet savvy generation place a high value on

relationships and community and are naturally attracted to the combination of technology and the potential for learning in an online community.

Some advocates of distance education like to point out that it may be a romantic idealization to think that community always happens in a live classroom (Cook, 1995). There may be some merit to this critique when we consider how some students come into a classroom, sit down, and remain virtually unnoticed for an entire period only to slip quickly out the door, avoiding all social interactions when the class is over. How connected are students in a face-to-face class? Do they socialize outside class? Do they share common interests, ideas, and activities? (Eastmond, 1995). In live classrooms, group discussions are often limited to those who are in close proximity to one another. Therefore, face-to-face interaction does not guarantee meaningful dialogue and learning (Palmer, 1997).

A dynamic learning environment (face-to-face or online) facilitates growth; and the online teacher has to take particular care in creating a transformational environment online because in some respects it may be easier for students to hide. However, in online discussions, although students are not face-to-face, they can enter into the experience at multiple points and dialogue with everyone in the class. The trust, care, vulnerability, and openness to the I-Thou encounter (Buber, 1970) that are needed for transformation can be established as core values of the online learning community and the interactions facilitated accordingly.

For example, socialized role patterns that are based on external characteristics or other diversity variables may also tend to be reduced in the realm of online learning since the participants are not face-to-face with the attendant (often biased) responses that may

be evoked in that type of setting. Students who are marginalized for various reasons in traditional classrooms may discover a whole new acceptance and freedom to communicate online. The shy student finds a voice. The handicapped student can relate the same in online discussions as every other student. Without externals as a barrier to connecting, the true soul of the student may actually be more easily communicated to others facilitating the eventual disclosure of all aspects of the person. In this way, holistic relating is nurtured and facilitated. Therefore, it should not be immediately concluded that the Internet is anti-relational; meaningful connection is possible if appropriate conditions of safety, trust, vulnerability, integrity, transparency and connection are established and maintained.

Practical Ideas for Promoting Spiritual Formation Through the Affective and Relational Dimension of the Internet-based Classroom

Elizabeth Patterson (1996), former Associate Dean of Ministry Development at Fuller Theological Seminary, noted the instructional difficulties with pursuing moral development, formation, spiritual maturity, or character as educational goals, but concludes “most educators agree that ‘deep learning’ involving values, attitudes and beliefs does not occur unless the affective domain is also involved” (p. 66). The following instructional strategies are designed to enhance spiritual formation by focusing on the affective domain, especially encouraging relational interaction and promoting a sense of community. As illustrated in the case study of Paul’s letters, these are critical factors in promoting spiritual formation in distance education. Following his example, one can begin to connect with the distant learner through process factors such as modeling transparency, establishing boundaries that create safety in online community

relating, having frequent individual online contact with students in an effort to nurture them one-on-one, encouraging shy or withdrawn students to connect with the rest of the learning community and help them overcome their barriers to doing so, including frequent personal references to oneself and the lives of the learners in order to bridge the spatial distance with personal encounter, and overtly expressing interest in students' spiritual lives throughout the online interactions. Many of the suggestions echo those made by Zuck (1998) regarding the sound teaching strategies of Paul. They also incorporate the important arenas of interactive learning: student-to-student, student-to-teacher, and student-to-content.

In reviewing the list the reader will note that most of the suggestions require no special technology beyond standard email and web pages. Popular course management systems like Blackboard and eCollege currently used by many schools will easily accommodate these strategies. Moodle, an open source software product, does the same and is available as a free download.

1. FEATURE SPIRITUAL FORMATION AS A COURSE GOAL

- Include in syllabus a statement about course purposes and spiritual formation
- Provide written and recorded prayers for students, and solicit prayers and prayer requests from them
- Refer directly to spiritual formation issues in online discussions
- Provide a web-based chapel or prayer room and arrange for occasional live worship opportunities (this can be accomplished with a single static page using minimal interactivity or streaming videos of devotionals and worship music complete with live instant messaging for sharing prayers)

2. MODEL A REDEEMED PERSONALITY

- Be yourself. Let your personality show through online while being mindful of impression management. Watch your words, humor, tone and style.

- Value individuals more than the technology
- Express feelings. Exhibit care and concern. Use empathetic and informal writing style.
- Personalize communications
- Incorporate humor
- Be responsive
- Allow for self disclosure
- Employ therapeutic learning approaches
- Promote reflectivity (online discussions should promote reflection prior to responding.)
- Reflect a contemplative attitude

3. PERSONALIZE EXPERIENCE FOR STUDENTS

- Address students by name
- Build on student's backgrounds
- Incorporate experiential components into class
- Share personal examples
- Probe with non-threatening questions
- Invite expression of feelings
- Use portfolio development to promote self-directed learning

4. ENCOURAGE INTERACTION

- Establish communication early and maintain it. Incorporate email (private and group), phone calls, and personal letters
- Learn about the students and use their names regularly
- Provide frequent, regular, and prompt feedback

- Assign a student moderator or teacher helper to facilitate discussions
- Encourage non-responsive students to participate more
- Caution those who make caustic comments or dominate conversations and ask them to practice greater civility towards other students
- Incorporate guided conversation
- Get students involved and engaged in active learning
- Use interactive formats: debates, group work, presentations, etc.
- Discourage disjointed soliloquies, tangents, passivity, and wooden responses in threaded discussions
- Communicate with students as if they were in the same room

5. PROMOTE A SAFE AND NURTURING COMMUNITY

- Start class with introductions. Allow for students to get to know other students and students to get to know teacher.
- Create a Web directory of class participants that includes brief biographies
- Communicate with each participant before the class starts or as soon as possible after it begins
- Assign learning partners (Proverbs. 27:17 NIV “As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another.”)
- Encourage cooperation
- Expect collaboration on projects
- Set up multi-group discussions (small and large group)
- Employ experiential learning through service learning and local community-based assignments
- Meet occasionally with small groups of students
- Talk with students outside of “classroom”
- Use mentors and coaches on and offline (peers or other graduate assistants)

- Incorporate co-teachers
- Have cohorts of students proceed through online curriculum together
- Provide tutorial support

Final Thoughts

God's incarnational initiative provides an example for Christian teachers to pursue personal connections with online students. His grace and calling to Christian teachers provide the motivation to work toward the spiritual formation of students, especially those who are geographically distant. Consideration of the approach and manner of Paul in his distance education experience yields several ideas on how to connect with contemporary online students and promote the development of their faith by using affective and relational strategies, thus creating a vibrant dynamic learning community. Creative application of these principles can facilitate greater class interaction, promote community building, and further the spiritual formation of the participants. When circumstances limit face-to-face learning encounters, distance education can be a meaningful alternative where the advancement of spiritual growth may indeed occur.

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