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Can A True Faith-Based Education Be Delivered Online?

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Abstract

Can a faith-based education be as effective when delivered online as when it is delivered face-to-face? An in-depth look at the early adopters of the online technology reveals that it can if the Christian university commits itself to developing an online learning community and to interweaving faith principles into crucial areas of its online program. The three key areas of faith integration upon which hinges the success of such programs are the integration of faith into course material, faith integration in the relationships among students, and faith integration in the faculty student relationships. Consistent attention to these three areas validates the online Christian education model, complements the missions of Christian institutions, supports the integration of faith and learning, and enables institutions to reach audiences that may not be currently accessible.

Can A True Faith-Based Education Be Delivered Online?

Since the introduction of delivering education via the Internet more than a decade ago, colleges and universities throughout the world have had to determine if online education was right for them. Some universities have embraced this new opportunity whole-heartedly while others have been reluctant to change their existing patterns of distributing education. This possible paradigm shift has been particularly important to distinctively Christian educational institutions, many of which have wondered whether online education fits within the context of the Christian university mission. The early success of faith-based, higher education institutions such as Regent University, Dallas Baptist University and Letourneau University, provide some indication that online education may be a feasible method for delivering faith-based education. However, other institutions are reluctant to adopt this delivery method because of their long-standing commitment to delivering quality Christian education in a traditional setting.

Christianity and education have an interwoven history. From the very beginnings of Christianity some 2000 years ago, "education has been of overriding concern to the Christian community" (Vikner 2003, p. 1). In fact, historical research demonstrates that in much of the last twenty centuries, Christianity was the major driver of education in the western world (Spickard, 2001). Furthermore, the very idea of a formal higher education has a distinctively Christian past, even though in most instances, this idea has been heavily secularized (Hull, 1992). Even so, the last several decades have witnessed a rebirth of interest in Christian higher education and many dedicated institutions have attempted to return to their Christian origins (Hamilton, 2005). In this return, the interweaving of faith with learning remains a core value. Because of the commitment to this core value, many Christian institutions in higher education

have struggled with the idea of educating students at a distance using Internet delivery or what many call *online education*.

Cagney (1997) recognized early on that “one of the major stumbling blocks to implementing distance education in Christian colleges is the belief that Christian community cannot be created as effectively in a distance-education course as on a college campus” (p. 68). Additionally, institutions may feel their core values are lessened, (Tonkin, 2004), and Christian community cannot occur virtually, because a physical campus is necessary (Kopf, 2003). Hueth (2004) found a tendency for “faculty and administrators (in journals, at conferences, and in casual academic and social meetings) toward making blanket judgments (either positive or negative) about e-learning and technology, without really identifying/knowing what technology(s) are included” (p. 527). It is argued that online education (a subset of distance education) may not fit within the context of a Christian university mission, especially if the use of technological means is put ahead of educational ends (Roels, 2004).

Interestingly though, distance education has had an unquestioned Christian application since the very beginnings of Christianity. The letters to the Church in the New Testament are good examples of distance education as some are specifically identified by theologians as "circular letters" intended for use and readership of many churches and believers separated by vast geographical distances (Harris, 1980). These letters are examples of writing and instruction of a teacher intended to encourage and educate many audiences. Throughout history, the need to educate and inform has exceeded man’s ability to deliver the message in person. Christian educators have struggled collectively with the logistics of how to reach a broader audience without compromising the academic and Christian ideals that are so strongly valued at their

institutions. However, the necessity to increase that reach to a broader audience has grown with college degrees becoming more and more available online. According to Roels (2004), “if the mission of Christian higher education is to disciple the Christian of this world and their cultures, then e-learning [online education] provides our best avenue to create global access to deeper Christian learning” (p. 461).

Within the last ten years, online education has become an accepted instructional method at many higher education institutions. Recent research indicates that in Fall 2003, 1.9 million students in the U. S. studied online with a predicted increase to 2.6 million in Fall 2004 (Allen & Seaman, 2004). The researchers also show that “the nearly 20% growth rate expected in online enrollments far exceeds the overall rate of growth for the entire higher education student population” (Allen & Seaman, 2004, p. 1). Such an increase in student demand for online education raises an important question for many faith-based institutions: Can a true faith-based education be delivered online?

Research and Online Education

The question of the validity of the faith-based online education model has not yet been answered conclusively in the literature. While much has been written regarding general (secular) trends regarding overall online education, formal research regarding distinctively Christian practices in this field is sparse. The few studies that have been done such as Ma (2002), Weigel (2002), Grooms (2003), Browning (2004), Hueth (2004), Roels (2004), Rovai and Baker (2004), and Tonkin (2004), support the possibility of Christian online education; we have extended this research by interviewing faculty, administrators, and students of Christian institutions. Based upon this evidence, there is a strong indication that online education is an effective and feasible

method for delivering a faith-based education to a wider and more diverse audience and complements institutional missions and supports the integration of faith and learning. However, without a conscious development of the learning community, attempting to integrate faith may be more difficult. We believe that with a focused development of an online learning community, online education provides an effective method for integrating faith into course content, building Christian community among students, and offering exceptional opportunities for students to interact and bond with Christian faculty.

Integration of Faith and Learning in Online Learning Community

An effective Christian campus integrates faith at every opportunity and at every level. Many institutions have placed joint emphasis on the classroom experience and co-curricular activities (educational activities outside the classroom). This focus of resources toward faith integration is primarily designed to build upon and enhance a student's personal relationship with Jesus Christ and develop a strong Christian community within the campus.

In both the online and traditional campus environments, the integration of faith, through the curricula and co-curricula, can be categorized into three distinct elements: student interaction with course content, interaction with other students, and interaction with faculty. Online learning community—a community that “consists of learners who support and assist each other, make decisions synergistically, and communicate with peers on a variety of topics beyond those assigned” (Boettcher & Conrad, 1999, p. 88)—stimulates interaction among these same three elements.

Gopez-Sindac (2004) shows that “online education makes possible the building of an effective, highly interactive learning community that offers exceptional value to students,

teachers, and institutions” (p. 47). The development of the online learning community emphasizes student-to-faculty, as well as student-to-student interaction. This emphasis on those interactions within the practices of the online learning community is the institution’s greatest tool for providing a faith-based education online. Palloff and Pratt (1999) discovered that throughout the online learning community, it is “the relationships and interactions among people through which knowledge is primarily generated” (p. 15). Furthermore, Rovai and Baker’s (2004) research suggests that a clear sense of learning community is positively correlated to educational outcomes such as increased student retention. Furthermore, Palloff and Pratt (1999) find that a successful online learning community may also generate the following outcomes:

- Active interaction involving both course content and personal communication
- Collaborative learning evidenced by comments directed primarily student-to-student rather than student to instructor
- Socially constructed meaning evidenced by agreement or questioning, with the intent to achieve agreement on issues of meaning
- Sharing of resources among students
- Expressions of support and encouragement exchanged between students, as well as willingness to critically evaluate the work of others. (p. 32)

Thus, the conscious continuous development of the learning community is essential for integrating faith into online education. While at first online instruction may appear to be no more than a 1950s correspondence course reborn through email; in reality, it is far more than just the delivery of course content through a computer-mediated environment. The rich interaction of participants and discussion of the course material in the learning community gives it significance beyond the correspondence course model. However, instructors should remember that a successful online learning community, which allows students to feel comfortable enough to share

and develop relationships, does not form on its own. It takes dedication, planning, and effort from both the course instructor and the institution. Instructors must plan for faith integration as well as look for spontaneous opportunities, just like they do in the traditional classroom. After this learning community is formed, instructors must also focus on the threefold faith integration into their online courses: integration of faith into the course content, student-to-student community, and student-to-faculty relationships.

Integration of Faith into the Course Content

Christian institutions endeavor to provide a curriculum that is focused both upon engaging content within the discipline and upon integrating Christian faith and values into each discipline. Experts in their disciplines and mature in their faith, instructors incorporate the Christian worldview in their courses and impact students' lives. Faculty members, at Christian colleges and universities offering online classes, have shown that faith can be integrated into their online course content, just as in their traditional courses. This integration has been accomplished, at least in some part, by the creation of topical devotionals, reflective thinking exercises within the lesson, and the interweaving of Christian principles within the course lecture content.

The development of topical devotionals appropriate for the teaching objectives is a practice already used by both traditional instructors and online instructors. For example, Indiana Wesleyan University's online courses offer devotionals correlated to the lecture topics (Gaide, 2004). This can be done by adding Bible verses, worshipful hymns, or reflective passages that suggest a direct correlation between a biblical concept and the course content, and providing reflective opportunities for the student during the comprehension of that lesson's content. This

method is quite useful where the bulk of the course material may have been written from a secular worldview, such as is often the case of textbooks or commercially purchased content.

Additionally, instructors can develop personal devotionals that not only support the content being taught but also reveal their own thoughts on a topic, such as lessons learned from personal experiences. For example, Dallas Baptist University adjunct professor Dr. JoAnn Bowman shares the following:

As semesters advance, I see more and more that students (and the professor) come to rely on each other in several ways. We give each other encouragement, support, and strength to carry on from day to day. One student emailed me that she often opens the sessions just to read and respond to the devotionals every day. Some students are hesitant in the beginning to join in, and we make that okay. As the semester continues, I see more and more that students feel safe to join in and respond. A perfect example is our online course for this spring semester in multi-cultural education. The course lends itself so well to sharing in our threaded discussions on the devotionals. In every session, I begin with a devotional. It always includes a song and most always a verse from the Bible or quotes. I also close each session with something else thought provoking. There is plenty of ideas for a response for every student no matter what their beliefs are. (Personal communication, April 25, 2005)

Furthermore, many instructors reference or link to devotional websites within an online course, such as Salt on the Net (<http://www.saltnet.org/snetnew/>) to reinforce Christian worldview concepts. Other good devotional sites used include C. H. Spurgeon's *Morning and Evening* devotions (<http://www.daily-devotional.com/>), Heartlight Daily Devotionals (<http://www.heartlight.org>), and Oswald Chambers' *My Utmost for His Highest* (<http://www.gospelcom.net/rbc/utmost>).

Reflective thinking exercises represent an integral part of student participation in the online learning community and further enhance student interaction with course content. Instructors create thought-provoking exercises that encourage students to make cognitive

associations between course content and biblical principles. Observation suggests that the creation of these cognitive associations within the course may predispose the student to recreate those associations when dealing with that content later in real-life situations. In these exercises, students are free to respond from their personal convictions and are encouraged not to parrot the instructor's thoughts. The online learning community is especially effective in this practice as students comfortably share their thoughts, ideas, and experiences that can contribute to the common purpose of the course. This learning approach is rich in examples and firsthand experiences that provide students with associative links to draw upon at a later date.

Many institutions create online course materials by either contracting with the instructor or a team of instructors. Since faculty have integrated faith in traditional classrooms for many years by working examples and illustrations into their courses, the construction of online course materials offers an excellent opportunity to intertwine the Christian worldview into the very core of each course. Dr. Ron Smiles, Professor of Economics at Dallas Baptist University, shares the following illustration for integrating faith into his online course material:

Textbooks, like the Bible, contain many value judgments, and it is easy to compare and contrast those that are faith-based to those that are based on business theories or secular ethics. In this respect, the parables and letters of the New Testament are particularly useful in posing questions such as how Christian faith, as described in Hebrews, may conflict with behavior modification theories; how the Parable of the Vineyards may conflict with secular definitions of equity; or how Paul's letters may set parameters for appropriate business ethics. It is most important to illustrate to the students that Christ did not condemn free enterprise in order to express concern for the poor and oppressed although, on a number of occasions, he did warn ("woe unto") the most fortunate that good stewardship becomes more difficult for those people who are blessed with power, wealth, and popularity. We are also warned that under no circumstances can you take it with you and that there are more important things in life than the acquisition of wealth. The Bible is replete with examples of faith-based business ethics and strategies

that can be held up as the foundation for most worthwhile texts produced today.
(Personal communication, August 19, 2003)

As this example demonstrates, faith can be successfully integrated into the development of online course materials. When combined with reflective thinking exercises and topical devotions, instructors have sufficient opportunity to place faith building elements for students to be exposed to the Christian worldview by the integration of real-life application within the academic discipline. As a result, students not only successfully interact with the course content, but they also participate in a distinctively Christian learning experience.

Creation of Christian Student Community

Building a campus community that produces, encourages, and enlightens Christian scholars is a goal that most Christian institutions strive to realize. This growth environment is created both in and out of the classroom, and is one of the greatest assets of a Christian institution. Friendships, ministry, and testimony among fellow students are important for the overall successful development of our students. The question that must be answered is whether this environment can be provided for online students who may complete a degree program without ever attending the institution's physical campus. By working together, online students, faculty, and institutions have been increasingly successful in their ability to create, or perhaps extend, the institution's Christian community far beyond the boundaries of the physical campus. This extension of community is accomplished by utilizing the relationship building nature of the online learning community and the intentional strategies of the institution's faculty and students to care for and nurture their fellow learners.

In order to achieve faith-integration in the online classroom, it is essential to create an environment where Christian ideas and practices can be safely exchanged. One simple but highly effective way to foster such a community is to create a place where online students can post or email prayer requests. Another way is to provide spiritual resources in a web portal just as institutions do with academic resources. To further extend this community, institutions may appoint an individual to organize and encourage spiritual growth for online students.

The vast archives of the Internet provide endless opportunities for institutions to gather resources that they can use to evangelize, minister, and help grow online students in their spiritual walk. Institutions should seek innovative ways to use these resources to provide extracurricular opportunities for spiritual growth. For example, a student of the Dallas Baptist University online program experienced the tragic loss of his son, who had been deployed to Iraq to fight in the war. The DBU community, the majority of which had never met either the student or his son, rallied around the online student and offered prayer and support during this difficult time utilizing a group email prayer list (K. Shelton, personal communication, September 12, 2004).

The effort an institution puts into the creation of an online learning community is reflected in increased opportunities for students to build meaningful relationships. The relationships that are built within an academic course by utilizing the learning community concept often carry on long after that course is over. Many students at Abilene Christian University reported in post-course evaluations of online classes, they felt they knew their fellow online students better than fellow students in a traditional course (G. Saltsman, personal communication, September 6, 2004). Many of these students continue to have relationships with

each other outside the class in many ways, supporting, encouraging, and ministering to each other via electronic communication such as email, instant messenger, and cell phones.

Friendships begun in an online class appear to have the same potential of developing into lifelong friendships as do the relationships from the traditional classroom sometimes do.

The question regarding the *quality* of online classroom relationships is a valid one. To our knowledge, no significant research has been conducted on this matter so we are left with simple observation and instructor feedback. By creating an online discussion board-based community where all students participate in posting both academic discussions and personal beliefs, many instructors are surprisingly successful in creating an intimate and open environment where students share, sometimes anonymously, their greatest life struggles.

Students began to nurture and minister to each other—something that is almost non-existent in identical courses offered without the online learning community approach. For example, Dr. Dan Crawford teaches online at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and shares the following:

In an online course at SWBTS entitled "Discipleship for Ministry" with thirteen students enrolled, I developed a separate link entitled, "Prayer Room." Both in the Syllabus and in each weekly assignment, students were required to go the "Prayer Room" and post either a prayer request or reply to the prayer request of another student. While this began rather slowly, as the semester went on, more personal needs were shared and more response was posted. Often a student would post a request and six to eight students would reply to it. I personally posted occasional prayer requests and replied to most of the student requests. Toward the end of the semester, one student posted the following, "You guys are my best prayer partners. In fact, you are my only real prayer partners. I hate to see this semester end. Would anyone be interested in continuing to pray for each other beyond this class?" There followed twelve positive responses. To my knowledge, they are still e-mailing each other with prayer requests and replies. While this class was composed of all Christians, a non-Christian would not necessarily feel uncomfortable posting in the "Prayer Room" since they too have needs. Their replies could simply be a thanks expressed to the student who shared a request and a promise to remember them. They might even develop a greater interest in and/or appreciation for Christianity through this exercise. (Email communication, September 29, 2005)

Examples such as this provide strong indications that the concept of online relationship building has merit in establishing relationships that are more than superficial.

Bonding Between Students and Faculty

Assembling a talented group of qualified persons from numerous disciplines who can serve as both Christian role models and scholarly experts is a remarkable accomplishment. The quality of education at any institution rests, in large part, on the quality of its faculty. Fisher (1989) recognized that “the determining factor in the nature and effectiveness of a Christian university is the faith and commitment of the teacher” (p. 119). Christian colleges and universities strive to provide students with expert instructors who have the ability not only to deliver the course content but also to challenge students to consider that knowledge in the context of a Christian worldview. Fostering an environment where students can have faithful mentors is at the very heart of a faith-based education and directly supports the institutional mission. Integration of faith can be accomplished in the relationships that are built between students and faculty inside the course and outside the classroom.

Relationships within the online learning community are created among students and faculty just as they are between students themselves. Many Christian online instructors take the time to mentor their students. That mentoring relationship embodies the spirit of Socratic education and is one of the models upon which our institutions were founded. Joy Alvarez, a distance education student at Eastern University, recognized the importance of a Christian mentor in her education. In an interview in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, she remarked, “Eastern has committed Christian faculty who are able to model Christianity in their life. You can teach how to balance

sheets, but you cannot teach honesty” (Carnevale, 2002, p. A51). The experiential nature of online education lends itself to disclosure where faculty have an excellent opportunity to use their life experiences as examples for students. Many online instructors at Dallas Baptist University place their personal testimony in the faculty information section of the online course. In fact, Stricklin (2005) observed that “by opening a window into our own lives, we invite people to know us—the good and the bad along with the happy and sad. Telling an honest story about ourselves makes us vulnerable” (p. 3). This disclosure creates a bonding and connection that is stronger than some faculty have ever had the opportunity to develop with traditional instructional practices. And according to Stricklin (2005), that “bond of mutual trust is an important step in sharing the Gospel effectively” (p. 3).

The informal nature of email has also increased faculty communication with students. Students often report that they think nothing of sending a quick email to their professor but would never consider stopping by the professor’s office in person to ask such a “trivial question.” Online courses rely heavily upon email as a primary communication method. Relying on a form of communication that is used frequently helps foster increased day-to-day contact between professor and student, again establishing a stronger bond between student and teacher. The depth of relationships that have developed between online faculty and online students can be great, yet the primary mode of contact, email, is rigid and lacking in context. Therein the paradox exists. How can a faculty member leverage the relationship developed in the online course to minister to a student in need? The answer may not be fully evident yet but it is possible. It may well be reliance upon the Holy Spirit to provide the connection between these individuals to provide the response to such dilemmas.

Conclusion

Can a true faith-based education be delivered online? Evidence indicates that online education can be used to deliver faith-based education when it is provided within a context that maintains an elevated level of interaction between participants and steadfastly adheres to the fundamentals of a Christian worldview in the online course. The development and use of the online learning community is an effective approach for integrating faith into course content, building Christian community among students, and providing opportunities for bonding with faculty and students. In fact, online education may be one of the most viable means to deliver faith-based instruction to broader and more diverse audiences due to its inherent capacity to reach beyond geographical confines and into the global classroom.

Faith-based institutions such as Dallas Baptist University, Liberty University, Indiana Wesleyan, Regent University and others have experienced tremendous growth and success with this new delivery method in serving the needs of students since “access [to higher education] has increased the choices people can make about when, where, and how they will get some form of higher education” (Goral, 2005, p. 44). The body of Christian scholars must understand that a failure to meet the needs of the students will contribute to a decreasing relevance to our audience. Roels (2004) poses an important question, “If the future is not one in which this model can provide effective access to Christian higher education for global populations what is the alternative” (p. 460)? The risk of complacency outweighs the risk of action. Christian institutions of higher education must let go of the complacent mindset of thinking there is only one way to deliver faith-based education. Dwayne Matlock (2003) observed that “institutions of Christian higher education face the same changing society that secular institutions confront, but with an

added twist. In the secular setting where rampant change may be welcomed, the Christian community often holds to a desire for the status quo” (p. 91). Christian higher education cannot afford to lose its relevance by holding onto the status quo within a world whose need for Christian education has never been greater.

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