

Attending to embodiedness in online, theologically focused learning

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For the last several years I have worked in a variety of contexts trying to support theological educators who are attempting to integrate emerging technologies into their pedagogical strategies. I have also taught a number of full credit, graduate level, semester length courses in an asynchronous, online, distance learning format. I give you this context primarily for two reasons. First, to situate what I have to say. It's important to note, for instance, that I have not been working with these technologies in the business world (where they are used much more often, and with much more immediacy and connection to daily work). Nor have I had the opportunity yet (or created it), to work with students who by virtue of their age and location are fluent in media culture. Instead, my students resemble the majority of the students ATS has identified in the U.S. context - namely, students whose mean age is [45?] (Note the reference here) and who are still primarily a text-based group. The second reason connects to the first: I am very conscious of how limited my experience is in many ways, and of how rapidly the contexts in which I teach and the technologies permeating those contexts, are changing. While I think what I have prepared is interesting, it is also relevant primarily to the moment, to the contexts in which I teach, and to the kind of technologies available in those contexts in the year 2000.

Given this location, I am continually struck - sometimes with amusement and more often with frustration - by the singular intensity with which I am confronted by the same question over and over again. Whether I am working with local religious educators, seminary faculty, or faculty at research institutions, the primary question is always the same: is it even possible, let alone appropriate, to be using electronic technologies in the context of theological education? There are many versions of this question, and they arise from within these varied contexts with different degrees of intensity, but the question

most often also comes attached to two underlying assumptions. First, the assumption is made that that phrase - "electronic technologies" -- is synonymous with desktop computers that are linked to the internet, and second, that the only pedagogical strategy implied is online distance education. Having made these two assumptions, people find it very difficult to consider the integration of electronic technologies into theological classrooms with anything other than anxiety.

I have argued in other papers and presentations for an understanding of "electronic technologies" that sees that phrase as encompassing what I call "digital culture." I have also argued that it is crucial to engage digital culture in theological education in our "typical" contexts even more than in online, distance learning frames. But in this paper, while I suppose there will be echoes of my earlier arguments, I would like to address the concerns raised by this combination of assumptions directly. Let me begin by giving you a bald, and probably exaggerated version of the argument. The most common articulation I've heard is a flat statement that we cannot possibly put theological education into the context of online distance learning because theologically focused learning has something uniquely and integrally relational about it to which we cannot attend in a disembodied context.

This argument has two pieces to it that I would like to reflect upon. The first is the assertion that online distance learning is by definition disembodied learning; and second, that theological learning is uniquely and integrally relational. If both of these are accurate, then the conclusion is inescapable: theological education cannot be done in an online, distance focused way. On the other hand, if either or both of these are not wholly descriptive, then perhaps there is room for emerging technologies -- even understood in this narrow sense -- within our theological classrooms.

Indeed, it should probably already be obvious from my brief introduction of myself, that I will argue in this paper that neither of these assertions is precisely accurate. Further, I believe there are ways in which online, distance implemented learning actually forces us to attend to these questions more directly, and perhaps at the moment at least, more creatively; ways that even provide insight into our more typically classroom based forms of teaching and learning.

To do so, I must first work my way through each of these objections. Let me start with the question of whether or not online learning, particularly that which occurs in asynchronous, distance programs, is by definition disembodied learning.

*is online learning disembodied?*

I think this concern has a number of obvious roots to it. We live in a cultural space, at least in the United States and in the middle class, academic settings in which I work, that is increasingly a space of disconnection. Families are spread over larger and larger geographic distances, there is less and less public space available in most of our towns and cities (when was the last time you went to a public rally or even spent an hour in a noncommercial public space?). The mass media have become our most common form of "shared" communication. Yet there is an increasing sense of isolation and loneliness growing out of a "commons" that is electronically produced by an ever narrower number of multinational corporations.

Media literacy activists and communications scholars have pointed to the narrowness of representation and the channeling of attention that the square boxes with glowing screens in our living rooms and dens seem to call us to. And communities of faith have, for decades now, engaged television in particular with a skeptical, if not downright cynical, attitude toward any meaning-making engendered there.

Desktop computers have something very physical in common with television -- that glowing, not quite square, screen across which race millions of electrons painting sharp pictures and sharing intense sounds. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that the underlying sense of disconnection and increasing loneliness that so many people feel in our contemporary context -- and further, have identified as growing out of a televisual world -- should be extended towards desktop computers and any worlds they might be responsible for engendering.

On a strictly physical or material level "online" distance learning which is structured through such a screen seems only the most blatant and obvious example of the decreasing amount of social relational space in our contexts. Now you don't even have to pick yourself up and move away from your home to come to a class. Now you don't even have to venture outdoors on your way to learning. Such

learning seems only to contribute to the increasing marginalization of social relational community - particularly that defined by historically grounded communities of faith.

These are important concerns, and I would be the last to suggest that we should not worry about the isolation and lack of complex and messy community in our midst. But if you listen to these common complaints, which on the surface at least, seem to be so obvious and intuitive, there is much that we as theological educators ought to question. Those of us who work on faith formation, for instance, recognize that the deepest and most lasting religious formation occurs at home, in the midst of the family (however that is defined). There is no requirement that such formation be positive, but research suggests that it is lasting and deep irregardless of its contours.

Why should we automatically assume that the leaving of home or work and the entering of a physical space labeled "classroom" should in some way automatically enhance learning? There is more and more attention being paid to the ways in which we have lost, in religious community, the sense of the "daily" and the "ordinary" - all those ways in which we identify and honor the Holy in our midst. I believe that the question we ought to be asking is how we can nurture and attend to learning that

Similarly, given the extent to which in the middle class, hegemonic U.S. context we cushion our sense of relatedness to nature by running from our air conditioned or heated homes to our air conditioned or heated individual automobiles on our way to our air conditioned or heated schools, why should we assume that venturing outdoors on our way to a classroom has any explicit learning component to it?

Beyond these material or physical observations of what we might be giving up, comes the felt sense that sitting in front of computer screens and communicating only, or at least primarily in our current technology, via written textual forms, has a distinctly disembodied aspect to it. We can't yet see the people with whom we are communicating, and they cannot see us. The internet joke that "on the internet, they don't know I'm a dog!" suggests that it is a process

that is not only incidentally disembodied, but essentially disembodied.

But perhaps that objection is too broad and vague. Perhaps the underlying anxiety comes from our ability, when we are in front of these square, glowing screens, to be so drawn into what is occurring there that we forget about our embodiedness. We emerge, after an hour or two of intense computer work, with aching arms and an aching back, and grumble in a confused way about the dangers of ergonomically inadequate computer workstations. But we don't stop to consider what was so compelling about the engagement that our attention was sufficiently refocused away from our embodiedness that we acquire physical aches and pains that we only notice when we get up and try to move. "Disembodied" learning would be learning that is incorporeal, that physically removes us from our bodies. Perhaps instead what we are noticing is that this kind of screen focused learning has an intensity that requires a new kind of attention, if we are to continue to honor our embodiedness.

In any event these concerns, far from suggesting that online learning is disembodied, or unrelational, actually suggest, instead, that this emerging space for learning can call into question our previous understandings of learning, and of teaching and learning processes and spaces. In doing so, this new space compels us to consider anew what we mean by learning, and by embodiedness.

*is theological learning inherently relational and embodied?*

The other common assumption that I noted early in this essay about online learning and theological education, is that theologically focused learning is in some way uniquely and inherently relational and embodied, and thus resists being put into a disembodied, "un-relational" environment such as the Net.

Here again religious educators have something useful to add to the discussion. Mary Boys, in her authoritative history of religious education in the U.S., *Educating in Faith: Maps and Visions*, points to a number of different modes in which communities of faith over time have sought to educate their members. She notes four distinct practices

in particular that she labels "classic expressions": evangelism, religious education, Christian education, and Catholic education (catechetics). More than anything her map of the field suggests that we have, in the U.S. at least, conceived of religious education as everything from personal conversion in the context of affective revivals, to transmissive, class-room based didactic lectures aimed at uniformity of belief. Clearly some of these modes are highly relational, but not all of them are.

The recent surge of interest in the shape and structure of theological education in the academy, a much more narrow arena than that which lies under the term "religious education," particularly in seminary or university contexts, is more narrow in its approach. With the exception of some feminist voices and voices coming from communities traditionally marginalized in higher education, the shape and structure of theological education has been assumed to take place within traditional classrooms in traditional academic settings (albeit with lip service to worship and prayer life as essential). While there has been some criticism of the fragmentation that that setting has created, the criticism has remained largely on the abstract level of theory and rarely found ways into new visions for the actual practice of theological education. As Chopp notes:

"The ideas of *theologia* in Farley's work and of 'schooling' in Kelsey's provide us with a kind of vision of what we lack and to which we aspire. But for both of these authors the constructive positions are formal, mediated neither through symbolic construction of faith nor through the particular structures of theological education. The strategies of most of the work on theological education thus far are ideational, formulating an abstract ideal to offer some vantage point of unity amid the fragmentation and pluralism." (p. 10-11)

In most of the contexts in which I have taught, theological education was something primarily and ordinarily done in classrooms, with various kinds of texts, and engaging in various kinds of argument and textual evidential work. It has not been at all clear to me how "embodiedness" figured into that setting, in any other than trivial or marginal ways. (Here I should note a major exception being work done within feminist theologies in feminist classrooms.) The primary

educational technologies in use included not only chalk boards and overhead projectors, but the even more insidious technology of "hours," whereby classes met for a specified number of hours at certain times each week, and teachers and students had to fit their learning into that framework, rather than the framework evolving out of the necessary needs of the learning process.

Where subject matter under consideration had obvious physical components to it -- worship, for instance, or pastoral care -- such courses were relegated to the so-called "practical arts" (a phrase I have often heard is that practical theology is "practically theology"). Students who required support for physical differences had "adaptations" built into the learning process, but these adaptations were never considered to be potentially liberating for all students, but rather necessary changes just for these somehow "disadvantaged" students. (Please note: being the parent of a child with physical challenges, I am very conscious of the ways in which those challenges are posed by an environment that assumes we are all capable of certain kinds of range and ease of motion. This context does indeed "disadvantage" my son, but it is the context that does so, not something innate to him.)

Discussion of ideas that had obvious embodied dynamics and consequences to them -- sexuality, for instance, or hunger and homelessness -- were either discussed in quite "safe" abstract ways that had to do with overarching frameworks of moral reasoning, or were, again, relegated to courses that were considered somehow marginal to the curriculum.

These practices have shaped a context in which it is with some impatience and frustration that I hear colleagues talking about the damaging "disembodied" nature of online learning. Although I rarely say this publicly (I am, to be sure, trying to create change from within institutions), I think we actually have more to fear and critique in our current classroom practices of disembodied learning than we do from our experimentation with online learning. What does it mean, for instance, to work on scripture narratives that call us to discipleship through justice, and not attend to the oppressive systems of power in which our own bodies are embedded?

Indeed, as I suggested earlier, I believe that emerging learning technologies, even most narrowly and specifically construed as desktop-

based asynchronous online distance learning, have much to offer us by the way in which they call into question our current modes of teaching and learning.

*Given these conclusions, how might we consider theological education constructively in an online context?*

There are many ways to answer this question. I have, in other contexts, written and spoken at length about the ways in which we need to teach with technology by teaching about technology and its cultural resonances and impact. (Here note the following:) Here I would like to retain my narrow focus on specific ideas for use in asynchronous, online distance learning that is theologically focused.

First, and perhaps foremost, we need to recognize how embodied a form of education this kind of learning is -- and help our students to attend to that embodiment.

For example, what kinds of code produce what kinds of conversation? That is to say, what are the mechanisms we are using to facilitate learning in online, asynchronous environments? Two of the most frequently used mechanisms currently in place -- listservs, and web-based bulletin boards -- actually construct quite different conditions for conversation. (Note here the definitions of different kinds of software.) To what extent are we as teachers choosing the mechanism because of the kind of learning it engenders, and to what extent are we choosing it because it happens to be what is available? Think about the ways in which a conversation works via listserv, for instance.

On a basic, material level, students do not need access to anything other than an e-mail account through which they can receive and send e-mail to participate in such a conversation. They can choose for themselves what e-mail client they will use, and they can organize messages in whatever manner seems most appropriate to their own learning. Course messages come into their mail boxes along with all the other mail that they receive, and can be accessed at the same time. In other words, the course conversation enters their own context -- they do not have to go out and enter it. The course conversation is also to a much greater extent than is true with a web-based board, under their control. They can compose messages in the manner in which they are most

comfortable and familiar (in their own e-mail program, for instance, or cut and pasted from a different program; online while reading, or off-line with queueing and sending at a later time). They can access and manage course mail just as they access and manage their other mail, filing it into whatever folders they might create.

As a teacher, I have the same kinds of options. I can use whatever kind of machine I might have access to, and whatever e-mail program I prefer. I can have individual conversations with students just as easily as I have group conversations with the class. I am someone who is privileged to work in an institution where my computer is connected to an ethernet, and thus I access my mail several times a day without blocking my phone. In doing so, I have a good sense of when students are participating in the conversation without having to pay a lot of sustained attention to that question. I just gather that information as a side effect of flicking my eyes down my list of incoming messages.

A web-based bulletin board, on the other hand, provides a different set of benefits and challenges. A tool like Blackboard.com, for instance, (also known as CourseInfo), creates a course conversation that is posted on the web. To access that conversation students and teachers must actively direct a browser to that site, enter it, and access the messages. Most such tools require quite up-to-date browser software, which in turn requires up-to-date hardware upon which to run, and more often than not, speedy network connections. These requirements exert their own pressures. It is much more difficult, for instance, to download course conversation and work "off-line" in a web-based bulletin board environment than in an e-mail environment. For students (and teachers!) who depend on dial-up modem access and only one phone line, the decision to "go to class" is in some ways just as limiting as that found in the more traditional classroom space.

The constrictions of the code -- that is, the way in which the bulletin-board space is enabled via software coding to exist -- narrow not only the choice of tools you can use to access the conversation, but also what you can do with it once you find it. Most such bulletin boards have pre-defined spaces within which you can write and respond to messages. If you find the space too small, you must either cut and paste into several such spaces, fragmenting your message, or even

truncating it. It is also often quite difficult to download messages into one's own local computer for filing and management.

Yet, by the same coding, a web-based bulletin board generally provides a "threaded" graphic access to the conversation, allowing students and teachers to see at a glance how messages are connected to each other, thereby providing a ready history of the conversation and easy ways to check back on issues you want to revisit. In many of these programs it is possible for teachers to find out at what time, or for how long, students are accessing the conversation. But doing so requires digging more deeply into the software, and is often neither intuitive or well displayed.

In different kinds of learning contexts, the benefits and challenges of these two very different tools will serve different pedagogical goals. Far too often, however, it has been my experience that teachers do not even consider these very embodied consequences of the code, and simply use whatever an institution makes most readily available to them.

Another example of the embodied nature of learning, and of how online, asynchronous learning makes that nature more clearly apparent, concerns what kinds of authority we are invoking and utilizing in our learning spaces. I frequently hear from other teachers -- and struggle with myself -- how much they miss having the body language clues they are used to in the typical classroom. Many of us believe that good teaching flows from the integrity of the teacher (cf. Palmer), and that authority is constructed in the "in-between" space between the resources the teacher brings to bear in a learning space, and the questions that students use with those resources. One of our most frequently used gauges of that "in-between-ness" comes through body language clues. Our my students engaged in the ideas we're struggling with? Are they present in the room? Is there some energy and excitement brewing? In a typical classroom I use body language clues such as body posture, eye contact, breath rate, and others to help me sense the answers to these questions. In an online environment I do not have those clues (at least, not yet).

I think that good teachers in the traditional theological curriculum rely on these same kinds of clues, using them even in lecture formats, to help them bring materials alive for their students.

These teachers are so familiar with the process that they do not attend self-consciously or reflectively to those clues, they simply take them in along with everything else they are working with, and teach accordingly. But when those clues are absent, rather than reflecting on other ways to get that information, other ways to answer these pedagogical questions, they are simply at a loss. They recognize that they have "lost a sense" of what is going on, but because they were not self-conscious and reflective about that sense in the first place, they don't have any idea of how to replace it.

I believe this dilemma poses an interesting set of challenges to the authority not just of teachers in a learning setting, but also to students. Early on in my online, distance teaching I was struck by how apologetic students felt they had to be for not fully assimilating the materials we were reading before participating in a conversation. As we "talked" about the concerns they had, we realized that part of the problem was that in a typical classroom it was "OK" to show up not having done the reading, because you could always "show" by your body posture that you were engaged in the conversation. You could even "pretend" that you had done the reading by the way in which you piggybacked on other people's comments, or sighed or giggled at appropriate times. While in an online learning space you can "piggy back" on comments, it is much more difficult to figure out how to sigh or giggle or simply have good "eye contact" so that other people know you're there.

That makes the assigning of reading, for instance, an interesting challenge in this kind of setting. What kind of reading will be engaging enough to be done so that it sparks questions and learning in itself? Given the vast amount of reading that is created by holding a conversation wholly in a textual format, what amount of "outside" assigned reading is really appropriate and manageable? What kinds of reading strategies do we want to model and support in our students? How can we be self-conscious about such modelling and support?

These questions ought not to be limited, however, to online settings. I am often struck by how many of my colleagues are frustrated by the degree to which their students "aren't doing the reading," or "don't know how to read," or "refuse to engage the issues." Yet rarely have I heard these same colleagues question whether or not their reading assignments were really all that appropriate. I think that we,

as theology faculty, have been so caught up in the modernist educational paradigm of "covering the field" that we are afraid to remember that all we can do is support our students' learning, we can not control it. And we certainly will never be able in this current context -- if we ever could in the past -- to ensure that anyone "masters" a field of content. I think that a more realistic and appropriate goal is one of helping our students learn how to learn, how to sense the contours of a field, and how to use its central tools.

My students' concern, however, was not so much about whether they were "mastering the content," but instead whether I understood that they were really trying to do the work. Rather than coming to the materials I was offering with the sense that they would engage them to see how they could be challenged and grow, how these materials might have an immediacy and appropriate sequence for them (crucial pedagogical questions), they were worried about how they were appearing to me, and what impact that appearance might have on their grades. When learning is driven solely, or even just primarily, by such concerns -- I do not believe it is learning that honors who we are and who we are becoming.

It was an online class, however, that created a new enough, or perhaps alien enough, atmosphere, that this kind of discussion could emerge as part of the course content. Since then I have always named as one of the learning goals of any online course I teach, raising the self conscious educational questions. What does it mean to learn in this kind of environment? How do you assess what you are learning? How do you demonstrate that learning? How do participate in a conversation managed this way? and so on and on.

Recently I have moved to an institution, a seminary faculty, where questions of learning and teaching are very lively and at the heart of what we are about. In this context I am beginning to try to bring these questions that first became so pressing to me in the online environment, into the more typical classrooms of my new home.

The second major component, then, I would suggest as we move into more asynchronous, online environments, is that we need to allow what we're learning and experimenting with in that environment, these new awarenesses, we need to allow them to permeate our more 'traditional' modes of graduate theological education. If, instead, those of us who are working with online distance education cling to our new contexts as

a new form of expertise, we will seriously impoverish more traditional classrooms, and lose the opportunity presented by emerging technologies to reshape and improve our more typical classrooms and other learning spaces.

My first example of how to do this comes from my renewed appreciation of the need to support all three kinds of learning in an online environment -- cognitive, psychomotor and affective. The cognitive is perhaps that element least difficult to continue to work with, given the extent to which text-based processes work well with certain kinds of cognitive modes. But what about the psychomotor and the affective? In typical classrooms I suppose I have tended to rely on small group work and presentations as means of engaging students in these modes. But in the online environment I have had to be more intentional and reflective. In the past I have used a web based description of the Lord's Prayer dance anthem to help urge my distance ed students to get up out of their computer chairs and try an embodied form of prayer as a way to prepare to enter our class. The exercise also helped them find a useful web site that engages issues of welcoming children to worship, and supported a discussion in which we talked about how to help people learn something physical using just flat, two dimensional images. This year, however, I decided that that exercise was not useful simply in the online environment, but that it actually was equally appropriate in my more typical classroom settings. I doubt that I would have even begun to question what I needed to do for psychomotor engagement in the typical classroom, except that I had already thought about it in the online classroom.

Another example pertains to how I started to engage affective issues in the online learning space. Trying to find a way to help my students create an affective sense of community, to have a shared experience that had affective components to it, I asked them to watch a film as the assignment for the week, and then enter into a discussion about it. Although each of them watched that film separately from their classmates (although not necessarily alone, in fact most watched the film with friends and family), the film still provided enough of a shared experience that we entered into a passionate and lively discussion about it that created enough sense of "group" that it carried over well into our other conversations. I was very pleased by how that assignment worked, and have begun this year to think about how

to create similar kinds of deliberate experiences in my more typical classrooms. Again, the online learning experience led me to rethink my typical classroom experience.

Yet another way in which online teaching has helped me rethink and reshape my typical teaching has been the desire to utilize the best of what the web offers in terms of easy publishing. From the beginning of my online teaching I was concerned that we find ways to share each other's ideas, and the projects upon which students were working. Part of what I did was require that assignments be sent to me in a form that I could publish on the web site for the class. In this way students could engage each other's work. But in this way we soon discovered that a larger public could engage their work, too. Indeed, an online learning space can be a much more public space than a typical classroom, opening up resources and making them available far beyond the usual reach of a teacher. Such a space can also bring opinions and ideas from widely varied contexts into what is otherwise a more narrow space. Publishing student papers on the web with a space that allows for comment and response builds in a level of interactivity that we have to work hard to create in a typical classroom.

Indeed, in my new institution the faculty is working hard to contextualize our work in the communities of faith from which our students come and to which they will return. We are experimenting with "teaching congregations" and other kinds of models that enable us to move teaching and learning out of static classroom models and into more organically connected spaces. The web is very useful here, as it is just as easy to publish student papers coming from a typical classroom on the web, as it is from online classrooms. But the web also creates enormous opportunities for us to solicit conversation and reflection from the communities of faith for whom we hope we are preparing our students to lead. I doubt that I, at least, would have even considered doing so had I not first seen how well it worked in the online environment. Having done so there, I was eager to make the same richness of conversation and direct link to worshipping communities present in the more typical classroom settings within which I work.

There are numerous other examples I could offer, but at this point I will leave those to my web site and other dynamic environments. Here I will simply reiterate that I am convinced that online, asynchronous distance learning, far from being incompatible with

relationally-focussed, embodied theological learning, actually is a crucial resource for invigorating and refreshing the more typical modes in which such learning is occurring in higher education in the United States.