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Envisioning Christian Presence and Practice in Online Teaching Contexts

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Abstract

Sweeping changes across the landscape of higher education have made colleges and universities around the country and around the world reassess their mission and reevaluate their priorities. One paradigm shift that is affecting both Christian and non-Christian institutions alike is adjusting to how new technological platforms for course offerings are changing the way curriculum content is shared and interactions with others is mediated. This shift can be seen most readily in the almost universal trend toward offering more courses online either through blended learning or completely online program models. As this trend continues, Christian educators (especially those in ELT training or teaching) need to wrestle with how this change in the mode of instruction can open up new opportunities to teach in ways that are distinctly Christian and reflect the presence of Christ into a now virtual classroom. This article seeks to contribute to this conversation and prompt further discussion and shared reflection on this topic.

Key words: online education, Christian education, English language teaching, educational technology, blended learning

Introduction

Online teaching is making its presence felt in nearly every institution of higher learning around the world. In the U.S. alone, the Babson Survey Research Group reported that the number of students taking online courses in the year 2015 had risen to over 6 million—that is, to one in every four students taking a course in higher education (Allen & Seaman, 2017). That number has been increasing steadily for the past 13 years and is on track to continue increasing for the foreseeable future (Allen & Seaman, 2017). Many students are routinely choosing online courses as a part of their undergraduate education and even more are selecting graduate programs that are entirely online. Along with this surge in demand for online classes, the survey also charts a precipitous drop in students attending classes only on campus—a drop of nearly one million students from 2012 to 2015 (Allen & Seaman, 2017).

In another more recent survey (2018) of major universities in the U.S. (“2018 Online Education Trends,” 2019), 99% of the schools reported that the demand for their online course offerings were either staying the same or were increasing, and about 40% of those universities

said they had plans to increase the budget for online education to keep up with the demand of students seeking to enroll (“Online Education Trends,” 2019). Kathleen S. Ives, the executive director of the Online Learning Consortium, commented on the larger impact that the growing demand for online education was having more globally: “The trend of increasing distance education enrollments in the face of declining overall higher ed enrollments suggests an important shift in the American higher education landscape, with contemporary learners leaning in to online options” (“Report: One in Four Students,” 2016).

The transition to this new paradigm of education, however, has not been a smooth and effortless one. For all its popularity among undergraduate students, university faculty have been hesitant to embrace online teaching with open arms. Some object to online education on the grounds that its true quality and effectiveness has not been well documented and others object to it on the basis of it being seen as a time-consuming and isolating experience for both students and instructors (King, 2002; Carnevale, 2004; Gudea, 2008).

My own experience with online education gave me an opportunity to assess these objections firsthand. I had been hearing about online courses for several years, but it wasn’t until about six years ago that I taught online for the first time. The course I taught was “Language Assessment” for an MA TESOL program at a Christian university. This experience allowed me to see the potential of online teaching as a platform for engaging students at a more personalized level than I was used to from my classroom experience. Instead of being an isolating experience, I found that online teaching could be both a quality experience and a bonding one between me and my students.

Lessons Learned through Online Teaching

In that first experience of teaching online, I had inherited a course that was already fully designed and the cohort of the students in my class were more experienced with online learning than I was. This cohort was an intense group of high achievers who had a low tolerance for delayed communication, technological issues, or confusing organization of course content. In short, they had high expectations and taught me a great deal about the potential of online education. They typically wrote long, thought-provoking group discussion posts—analyzing each topic in careful detail, asking sharp questions, and including insightful and reflective (sometimes sarcastic) comments. Almost all of them asked for specific feedback on their

assignments on how they could improve their skills for the future and stayed very engaged throughout the course.

Even though I experienced a substantial learning curve and could understand why my colleagues in academia shied away from online teaching because of the extra effort and time it required, I found online teaching to be invigoratingly democratic. In a typical classroom setting, there are those students who engage with you readily and there are others who tend to hide in the background. In online teaching, however, I had a chance to know each student individually at a depth I did not typically enjoy in the classroom setting. I found that this new direct relationship with my students was worth the extra effort it took to learn a new rhythm of teaching and establishing “presence” in an online platform. This first demanding cohort won me over to the conviction that genuine learning and teaching were not only possible through a completely online program, but in many ways opened new avenues for learning and engaging with students. As Garrison (2017) points out, “The value of e-learning is as a catalyst to rethink its capacity to stimulate and guide the quest to personally construct meaning and collaboratively confirm knowledge” (p. 5).

The Question of Christian Practice

Recognizing the potential embedded in online teaching contexts, I began to wrestle with the question of which practices would best utilize that potential for aims which were distinctively Christian. There are several secular studies related to how comfortable teachers feel with teaching online and what are potential “best practices” in online teaching (Gudea, 2008; Johnson, 2017; Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2018; Garrison, 2017). However, I have not seen any studies or thoughtful inquiries into the question that would most concern Christian educators—namely, what specific Christian practices and approaches would translate well into an online context. I was teaching online courses for Christian universities that took seriously the integration of faith as an essential part of learning. While I didn’t have specific guidelines for how this integration of faith translated from my face-to-face classroom experience into the radically different context framed by the online interface, I did have an online teaching mentor who supported me with both faith integration options and online teaching advice.

This question of what Christian presence could look like in an online context gained in urgency after reading the book *Desiring the Kingdom* by James K. A. Smith (2009) in which he

argues that all of our decisions (conscious and unconscious) as educators—from syllabus design to furniture arrangement—communicate underlying assumptions and have a formative effect on students. Bruner (1996) also points out that there are implications for each pedagogical choice made by the instructor:

Any choice of pedagogical practice implies a conception of the learner and may, in time, be adopted by him or her as the appropriate way of thinking about the learning process. For a choice of pedagogy inevitably communicates a conception of the learning process and the learner. Pedagogy is never innocent. (p. 63)

Envisioning the Formation of an Online Christian Environment

A quote that has been famously attributed to Aristotle says, “We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit.” Examining the first half of this quote, it becomes obvious that almost any descriptive character trait could replace “excellence” and the quote would still hold true. It is not only “excellence” that is formed by habit but also every other facet of our character. The principle of establishing a new habit means that one must first break away from the old habits already in full force. The field of education in general and language teaching in particular is full of these habits—both good and bad—that have become so ingrained in the *modus operandi* that they no longer appear as unique structures or practices that could be changed or improved upon.

In his book, Smith (2009) discusses how higher education is formative in many profound ways that often go unnoticed or unexamined because they are embodied practices that have been inherited without much conscious thought or evaluation. He writes:

[E]ducation is not something that traffics primarily in abstract, disembodied ideas; rather, education is a holistic endeavor that involves the whole person, including our bodies, in a process of formation that aims our desires, primes our imagination, and orients us to the world – all before we ever start *thinking* about it. (Smith, 2009, pp. 39-40)

This is something that, as an educator in the field of TESOL, I need to wrestle with on a regular basis, sifting through classroom practices and interaction structures to assess what habits of formation of heart and mind and body am I cultivating through the course I design. As the arbiter over the desired outcomes in the class, I make countless decisions (many of them unconscious decisions) about the timing of course material and student engagement, about setting and atmosphere, about types and quality of feedback and assignments, about the rubric of excellence

and expectations, about what is primarily important and what is the measure of “success” in the course. All of these decisions have profound and inherently formative impact on the students who experience the trajectory of my course.

Upon consideration of these factors, one question that inevitably arises is, “On what basis am I making these choices?” In other words, what are my guiding principles as I choose to structure my course in a certain way or choose to cultivate a certain atmosphere in my classroom? How much of my Christian understanding of how I relate to others as whole persons has informed my expectations of how I relate to my students or how I expect my students to relate to one another and their wider community? Smith (2009) argues that our template in higher education is often borrowed more from secular sources than explicitly Christian ones: “Many Christian schools, colleges, and universities—particularly in the Protestant tradition—have taken on board a picture of the human person that owes more to modernity and the Enlightenment than it does to the holistic vision of human persons” (p. 31).

So, it would seem that my first step toward truly envisioning what Christian presence and practice could look like in an online teaching context would be to take time to define what we mean by Christian presence and practice. What are the characteristics that set a Christian (or Christ-indwelling) approach to teaching apart from a secular one? What specific Christian practices or postures could be incorporated or emphasized which would increase the likelihood of the online students experiencing formation informed by the Christian truth embedded in these practices? Asking the question itself is a formative practice for Christian educators. There is no exhaustive answer, but it is a question to return to perennially.

While there is little published on this topic for specifically online contexts, there is a substantial body of literature which has mined this question when it comes to teaching in a traditional classroom. Two scholars who helped me think through this topic were David I. Smith and James K. A. Smith (2011), the editors of *Teaching and Christian Practices*. Thinking along with them there were several themes that began to emerge that were both relevant and translatable to online teaching. I will discuss these themes in broad terms and then discuss what these themes might look like in the particularity of teaching an online course. I have organized them into five themes which can be conceptualized as topics for ongoing conversation about the potential domains and intentional choices Christian online educators can make within those domains for communicating Christian presence and developing Christian practices in this

emerging field. The five themes are: Communicating Christian Presence, Cultivating Hospitality, Considering the Curriculum as Formative Practice, Creating Space for Community, and Connecting Personally.

Questions of the Heart

Before delving into each of these themes in more detail, I want to address a few relevant questions as to the efficacy of this proposed endeavor. My aim in this article is not to write the final word on this topic of envisioning Christian presence in online education contexts. Indeed, so little is currently published on the topic that my hope is to encourage a robust conversation among Christian educators who see the opportunities this trend toward online education affords. Secondly, I recognize that some of the practices or recommendations I will discuss are not unique to a faith integration approach to online education, however, once we consider these practices from a Christian perspective, we can approach them in a uniquely Christian way. Lastly, I think it is important to consider that regardless of the practices we choose to integrate into our *modus operandi* when teaching online, I think the most important preparation is that of our heart attitude before God, which expresses an explicit reliance on the Holy Spirit to guide us as we prayerfully enter into the act of teaching online. This willingness to come to God empty with a dependent heart to be filled anew day by day is the heart of Christian presence, which will permeate every other interaction and decision that is made online. Without this, all the practices in the world will have little Christian presence or power. If we put our faith in “practices” rather than in God, we find ourselves suffering from the ailment that Paul diagnosed as having the form of godliness, but lacking the true essence of God’s presence and power (2 Timothy 3:5). As Gallagher (2017) points out in his own article on what it means to approach teaching from a Christian vantage point: “The creative act of the Spirit of illumination has lost its hold on intellect and heart... We give too much attention to method and machinery and resources and too little to the source of power” (pp. 139-140).

1. Communicating Christian Presence

When researching what are the “best practices” recommended for online instructors in the current literature, the theme of “presence” comes up again and again. According to the Community of Inquiry (CoI) model (Garrison, 2017; Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2001) of online education, this aspect of presence is broken down into three main categories: 1) social

presence, 2) cognitive presence, and 3) teacher presence. Each of these is defined in terms of what each type of presence brings to the online learning experience and what needs to be “present” in order for it to effectively contribute to the course as a whole. For this theme, I want to unpack what Garrison (2017) refers to as “teacher presence.” He defines this as “the role and responsibility...to monitor and manage the transactional balance, and by engaging the learners, collaboratively guide the process of achieving worthwhile and intended learning outcomes in a timely manner” (p. 69).

Presence is a profound concept which can be framed in uniquely Christian terms (the deepest one being the Incarnation itself), but you don’t have to be a Christian to recognize that with all the conveniences that come with online education, one of the major detractions is the absence of a physical presence within the learning environment. There is a great deal of attention in the literature to overcoming this absence through a virtual sense of presence which allows for open communication, relationship-building, the establishment of rapport, and common purpose (Garrison, 2017). All of these are key aspects that make education what it is. Education without “presence” ceases to be education at all.

With all this emphasis put on presence the question arises, what would it mean for an online instructor to understand and communicate presence in a way that is uniquely Christian? One thing I believe that a Christian understanding of presence can contribute is the notion of purpose—that there is a reason for the ordering of things and there is a higher purpose being accomplished through our presence in the lives of our students and vice-versa. In the CoI framework, there is no category for “spiritual presence” or a concern for the soul or transcendental aims. As Smith and Carvill (2000) relate: “In his book *The End of Education*, Neil Postman laments the absence of direction and meaning in many schools today and stresses the importance of a ‘transcendental, spiritual idea that gives purpose and clarity to learning.’ Without an overarching teleology or narrative shaping education, Postman argues we lack ideals, purpose, continuity and hope for the future” (p. 102).

A Christian understanding of presence takes God’s sovereign presence in our lives as one of the first principles from which we operate. As Proverbs 19:21 says, “Many are the plans in a person’s heart, but it is the Lord’s purpose that prevails.” This deeper sense of presence can have implications for every aspect of the course—from what is included in curriculum to how students are welcomed and responded to, to the level of choice and autonomy that is given to the students

throughout the course—since it allows us to continually view our presence online as an opportunity to encounter one another within the narrative of God’s ongoing care and love for us. C. S. Lewis (2001) once said, “There are no *ordinary* people. You have never talked to a mere mortal” (p. 46).

Christian presence is always aware of the spiritual dimensions which run parallel to the physical. I think this is even more crucial to keep in mind for online teaching since the learner can feel cut off from the support of others when they lack the physicality of a classroom. When I make the introduction video for my class, I indicate that I will be praying for them and I invite prayer requests throughout the course. One of the reasons I do this is because even though I cannot be physically present with them, I want to establish from the beginning (as a part of the narrative within which we will be operating) that they are not alone in this endeavor. God is present with them and I affirm that truth through prayer.

This sacredness of presence is expressed as we prayerfully receive the unique gift of a student’s presence in the class and respond with the recognition that our online mediated interactions are not on a merely temporal plane but engaging with the souls of those whose story and journey the Holy Spirit is intimately acquainted with and can use the unique platform of online learning to engage us in heart and intellectual discussions that are personally relevant to each person present.

2. Cultivating Hospitality

Another theme that emerged was the Christian virtue of hospitality. This theme can be found in both Christian and secular sources discussing “best practices” for teaching online. Garrison (2017) uses the term “open communication” to refer to hospitable practices in online environments: “Open communication requires a climate of trust and acceptance that allows questioning while protecting self-esteem and acceptance in the community. Open communication is built through a process of recognizing, complimenting and responding to the question and contributions of others, thereby encouraging reflective participation and discourse” (p. 45). While there are some obvious differences between Christian hospitality and this description of open communication, there are several parallels here that can be practiced from a Christian perspective. Hospitality is mentioned several times in the New Testament as an expectation for all Christians to practice (Romans 12:13; 1 Peter 4:9; Hebrews 13:2). Christian

hospitality is based on the truth that we receive not only the opportunity to serve another as a gift from God, but also simply receive one another's presence as a unique (and sometimes surprising) gift from God.

Hospitality reaches out with goodwill to bless the other without expecting something in return. It is the gift of recognizing the other and our need for one another. As Smith and Carvill (2000) describe: "If we in these ways truly embrace the stranger, we will both rejoice and lament with him or her, and in so doing will become aware that we are part of a common, broken humanity. At the heart of hospitality is the embrace" (p. 102). Whether you are teaching for a Christian university or not, students immediately pick up on whether you have a genuine care for them as a student and have taken time to see them as a person or whether you are interacting with them in instrumental ways which simply check off the expected transactions within the structure of the course.

Some practical ways to practice hospitality in online courses are to provide a welcoming atmosphere in which the students have a forum to both get to know you and to know one another. This is sometimes done with a personal video or PowerPoint presentation of introduction. While most of the online course content is text-based, my students often commented on how important it was to hear my voice (either in audio or video format) or meeting others through videos posted near the start of the course. This willingness to go beyond the basics of a "text-only" medium to make our "teacher presence" felt through an audible word of welcome goes a long way to initiating and modeling the kind of community which supports student learning and grows us as people in caring relationship with one another.

Other ways an instructor can support a hospitable environment online include: investing time in responding to online forum discussion posts in a way that affirms student participation and encourages them to stay fully engaged; being thoughtful and supportive in feedback on various assignments; and responding to students' concerns or frustrations with a calm and understanding attitude, recognizing that the transition to online learning is usually a cultural as well as technical and logistical adjustment. One of the best ways to demonstrate hospitality is to have a clear and welcoming course design where expectations and assignments are detailed, easy to find, and thoughtfully put together. Also, one benefit to teaching online is the time the instructor has to prayerfully prepare responses to issues that come up during the class. Despite hours invested in course preparation, almost every online class will have its hiccups along the

way (technological or otherwise). However, when that happens I don't have to respond in the moment as I would in a face-to-face teaching context. I can use the often asynchronous nature of the online platform to ask for wisdom in my responses to students' difficulties or frustrations. In season and out of season, we are called to be godly hosts anticipating our students' needs and smoothing the way ahead of them.

3. Considering the Curriculum as Formative Practice

Teaching online requires an incredible amount of planning before the students ever show up for the course. This is true of most teaching, but it is particularly true in online teaching where there is ample opportunity for confusion or misunderstanding when students are trying for the first time to negotiate a new way of learning within an online course platform. Many students feel overwhelmed taking their first course online. Once the students get acclimated to their online environment, many of them begin to shift into a posture of ownership of the learning process and the curricular content with their individual goals in mind.

The content and design of the curriculum has been crafted with certain learning outcomes and aims in mind. These learning outcomes will vary depending on the institution offering the course, and online instructors have varying degrees of control over the content in the course they are teaching. Keeping these variations in mind, there are distinctly Christian ways of thinking about the curriculum that can be applied across the board.

One aspect of this is encapsulated in how we see our students. Envisioning a Christian perspective of our students would involve seeing them as people who make active choices within a context of social relationships, as creators who create and are made in the image of the Creator, and as formative spiritual beings whose hearts are shaped by what they love and what they practice. Each of these Christian ways of seeing students has implications for how the course content and requisite assignments can be defined and designed. For example, when we see students as active, relational beings rather than passive recipients of knowledge, then it becomes clear that there needs to be opportunities for relational engagement within a social forum. Another implication would be including options for student choice and co-creation in the assignments or other aspects of the course design. This again may not be a specifically "Christian" pedagogical principle, but honors the student as a person created in God's image to be a co-creator. Considering why we design our curriculum in a given way is just as important as

the resulting outcome. Smith (2009) defines education in these terms: “An education, then, is a constellation of practices, rituals, and routines that inculcates a particular vision of the good life by inscribing or infusing that vision into the heart (the gut) by means of material, embodied practices” (p. 26). He goes on to describe how this is not unique to Christian education, but all education is essentially formative—the question is simply what kind of formation? What is the overarching vision of success, wholeness or flourishing?

If this is the case, then the designing of what the students will “practice” over the duration of the course has rich potential for reflecting priorities that come from a Christian understanding of what would promote flourishing in our students’ lives as well as the worlds they inhabit. What I am suggesting here are not simple techniques that can be applied easily or quickly integrated into a course, but they are opportunities for thinking deeply about what kinds of assignments and practices the students are routinely asked to complete and questioning whether the design is informed by desired outcomes grounded in a Christian framework.

Both Smith and Smith (2011) have done a lot of thinking about this very question in their edited volume on *Teaching and Christian Practices: Reshaping Faith and Learning*. In this volume there are several examples of Christian educators wrestling with this very question and discovering different answers. In a case study presented by Smith (2011), he presents intentional ways in which he shaped the design of the task for the course content in ways that were simultaneously embedded within Christian reflective practices. One example he gives is of an assignment in which he tells his students: “Find an undisturbed spot and, notebook in hand, meditate in silence for at least an hour on one of the texts studied. Then meet with two other students, discuss the insights gained, and write up a summary of the conversation” (p. 56). Another example was, “Think of a thoughtful Christian friend and write him or her a five-page letter explaining how a close reading of one the texts studied could positively impact his or her life” (p. 56).

Several of Smith’s examples, in that chapter and in other works (e.g., Smith & Osborn, 2007), include assignments in which students are expected to interact with someone in their community or their family and involve them in the learning process. This element of including the students’ community in their learning process has its basis in recognizing a Christian truth that we learn best when we serve and edify others with our knowledge.

This is a paradigmatic shift away from the individual-focused models that Western education tends to bring to curriculum design, assessment options, and assignment descriptions. While it may take time to sift through our own educational norms of reference, it is worth taking inventory of our default structures and assignments to see whether or not they reflect a Christian way of viewing the world. These embedded priorities are not unique to Christian education. Smith (2009) argues that all educators' choices communicate a set of priorities and beliefs: "Behind the veneer of a 'value-free' education concerned with providing skills, knowledge, and information is an educational vision that remains formative. There is no neutral, nonformative education; in short, there is no such thing as a 'secular' education" (p. 26).

One example from my own experience when teaching an online course about English as an International Language (EIL) was to design a reflection paper in which the students had to find a place in their city where they would be "the stranger" (the one who didn't fit in or didn't know the rules or expectations of that particular community) and try to join the community and see what response they received. The assignment asks questions about whether they were welcomed or not, about what actually happened during the interaction and what they wished would have happened, and about how this experience changed their own perspective of those deemed "outsiders" from their own community's perspective. This embodied experience always provides rich food for thought for the students and it is often commented on as their favorite assignment throughout the course. However, asking students to be this vulnerable with their lives and their experiences requires a level of trust—not only between the student and instructor, but also within the larger community of the class.

4. Creating Space for Community

We are made for community. Social community is God's intentional design for us to learn truth and grow into maturity within a relationally rich and meaningful context. This relational aspect of online learning may not be high on the students' list of priorities when they initially choose an online course, but it is an essential component to the students' success. A biblical understanding of community emphasizes not only the need for social network and support, but also the recognition that we are responsible to and for one another (Hebrews 10:22-25; Galatians 6:2; 1 Corinthians 12:12-27). This is a key component needed for success in online education since it can often be a lonely journey if you do not have the support of your peers

cheering you on. Establishing relational ties with peers who are pursuing similar goals helps the individual student stay engaged and motivated in an otherwise solitary activity that may or may not have direct application to the rest of their daily life. This understanding of the optimal conditions for learning is reiterated by Garrison (2017) describing the CoI model of online learning: “We never learn in isolation. It is an illusion, a mistaken belief, which makes us think that we are self-directed learners—that we think and learn as individuals. The reality is that we cannot avoid being influenced by our environment” (p. 11).

When I started teaching online, I soon realized that my students did not have the same opportunities for a sense of community to naturally develop as they would in face-to-face contexts since they were often logging into the course from five different time zones and coming into the course with specific cultural expectations, daily schedules, and life pressures. With all of these inherent differences the students need a common sense of purpose and membership to help create a natural bond to one another. Garrison (2017) refers to this critical bond in e-learning: “Group cohesion and association is taken to the next level by using the inclusive pronouns such as ‘we and ‘our.’ It is cohesion that helps sustain the commitment and focus of a community of inquiry, particularly in an online learning group” (p. 46). He goes on to describe how this formation of a group identity is key to developing a sense of belonging and shared purpose for online students.

One way that we can promote a sense of group cohesion is to encourage the students to form their own Facebook group (or similar social media closed group) where they can get to know one another outside of the confines of the online platform. Another way to promote a sense of community is to provide for an opportunity near the start of the course for personal introductions and ask them to choose a group leader to be in communication with the instructor when there are issues that arise with the course. Once students have a strong sense of being a stakeholder within the larger learning community then they begin to take ownership not only for their own learning, but also for the learning of others within the group.

I try to have at least one consistent practice or assignment which the students have to complete in collaborative ways each week. I also encourage authentic communication between the group members so that once the bonds of trust and familiarity are established they can practice speaking truth to one another in love and checking in with each other when they notice an individual’s absence that week.

One advantage that Gudea (2008) noted about group dynamics online is that the distance between the participants can give space and protection in ways that can embolden shy students to engage in a discussion they might have opted out of had it been in a classroom setting which favors the more extraverted student. One fascinating thing about any cohort is that you have students engaging together who would not likely be friends or peers in any other setting. However, when they are bonded together through a common goal it can become a powerful incentive to “not let the group down.” In one cohort of online learners who really took this principle to heart and formed their own Facebook page to stay connected beyond the borders of the online platform, I saw them live out this picture of community. They all faced personal struggles as they went through the MA online program, but through weekly meetings together as a cohort, prayers for one another, encouragement not to quit (they even formulated a cohort motto: “Start together. Finish together.”), this cohesive group of students from very different ages and ethnic and educational backgrounds became a community with the goal of caring for one another until they could all graduate together.

5. Connecting Personally with Students’ Needs, Goals, and Expectations

The last theme I will address is probably the best and most logical place for envisioning Christian presence and practice within the context of personal relationships with students. One practical application of offering this in an online context rather than in a face-to-face context is that the individualized instruction also allows for a more personal interaction between student and instructor in which they don’t have to voice their concerns or struggles in a public arena or in front of strangers. This individualized communication allows me to respond to their needs in a timely and personal manner and gives me an opportunity to build rapport and relationship with each student at the point of their felt need—both academically as well as emotionally and spiritually.

The Scriptures have much to say on the topic of caring for your neighbor, but the metaphor that I find most helpful from the instructor’s point of view is that of the good shepherd. The scriptural image of a shepherd for teachers is found in both the Old Testament and the New. The shepherd takes an interest in each sheep and takes note if any sheep are missing or ailing or heading in the wrong direction. Some of the most wide-open doors I have had for sharing my faith during my time as an online instructor have been through continual personal care and

connection for individual students. This is obviously harder to do when you have a large class size, but there still seem to be those particular students who need a little extra attention, extra words of encouragement, or extra time to listen to their struggles or concerns. This willingness to be available above and beyond my contractual duties builds trust between me and my students and their initial defenses begin to lower as they share more about their lives and their particular goals and struggles. Though these students also often take extra emotional and physical energy throughout the course, I find that they are the ones who make my online teaching experience richer and more worthwhile when I see the transformation that God is doing in their lives and my own through this experience of sharing connection and vulnerability together. I include this as a Christian distinctive because I know I could not engage (and probably would not choose to engage) with these students in the same compassionate and healthy way if I did not recognize my own frailties and dependence on God first. I know it is only by the Holy Spirit's leading and the love and life of Christ through me that meet these students' needs in deeply transformative ways, and it is the online platform that allows me the extra space to focus on each one individually and engage them on a personal level.

Conclusion

After reviewing these five themes, I am very aware that this article merely brushes the surface of all that could be discussed on this topic, but I hope that these preliminary thoughts will engender much needed discussion and dialogue for what our vision as Christian educators should include when teaching online. Some questions that should be addressed in future conversations are: 1) What are ways that teaching online within Christian institutions could be different from non-Christian institutions? 2) In what ways can assessment and feedback play a role in communicating Christian presence and practices? and 3) In what ways is the current model of online education at odds with a Christian understanding of growth and learning and are there ways to transform the current template of online learning?

In closing, I would say that I believe online education is here to stay for the foreseeable future. Someone will be given the responsibility for teaching this growing number of online students. I believe we can teach online in ways that set us apart as Christian educators and instructors, but thoughtful discussion is needed to design online courses that truly reflect Christian principles and priorities rather than taking as a given the default template handed to us.

As we continue to wrestle with how can we be salt and light through this new medium of education, I believe that we can take the educational tools that are being utilized in today's technologically saturated world and use them in ways that bring glory to God and encounters of God's grace to our students.

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