

## Forum

**Teaching Biblical Studies Online****Stephen Delamarter, *George Fox Evangelical Seminary*****Sandra L. Gravett, *Appalachian State University*****Daniel W. Ulrich, *Bethany Theological Seminary*****Richard W. Nysse, *Luther Seminary*****Sandra Hack Polaski, *Union Presbyterian Seminary***

**Abstract.** *In this edited transcript of a panel at the Society of Biblical Literature (November 23, 2009, Boston, Massachusetts), five Bible scholars give brief presentations on various challenges and opportunities encountered when teaching academic biblical studies courses online in both undergraduate and theological education contexts. Each presentation is followed by questions from the audience and discussion. Topics include: a typology of different approaches to online teaching, advantages and disadvantages of online compared to face-to-face classrooms (for both students and faculty), opportunities for imaginative exercises online, the advantages of online threaded discussions, and the joys and pitfalls of bringing your course into an online environment for the first time.*

**A Typology of Approaches to Online Teaching and Learning in Theological Education: A Discussion Starter****Steve Delamarter, *George Fox Evangelical Seminary***

When the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) was setting the standards for accreditation of doctor of ministry programs, they envisioned two paths. One path would be for students who take a break from pastoral ministry, move to a seminary, and immerse themselves in an onsite program for a number of years – much as they did for their masters programs. A second path envisioned students visiting the seminary for a couple of intensive weeks of study (having completed assigned readings ahead of time) and then returning to their parish ministry. ATS expected that the former path would be the one most doctoral students would take. However, it hasn't typically worked out that way. The reality has differed from what the ATS standards first conceived and embodied in doctor of ministry programs.

I think something similar is happening with online distance education today. ATS and its member schools imagined that theological schools using technology would simply produce an increasing number of online courses. If a professor successfully taught an initial course, then permission would be requested for additional courses. ATS was prepared to approve up to six online courses in a single degree program, and eventually up to a third of the curriculum could be offered online. ATS imagined a scenario in which the percentage of online courses relative to face-to-face courses might continue to increase. However, the development of hybrid delivery systems that combine

face-to-face with online elements has confounded expectations of how online theological education would evolve.

My goal is to be intentionally provocative to help us think creatively about the future of theological education online. I will present here a typology of approaches to distance learning, wherein each successive type has an increasing possibility of becoming more effective over time.

For each of us, our primary frame of reference is what we have done in the past. This pertains to technology and education as well: you do what you know. Our primary frame of reference in education has been the lecture-based ideal: a face-to-face course in which the professor consistently delivers a stimulating lecture that is brimming with content, which all the students find totally absorbing. Students come prepared, ready to contribute to discussions, and engage other students with respect and humility. Every day professors and students bring their “full authentic selves” to the teaching and learning process. Time spent for quizzes and exams is always completely justified, of course, because students learn so much by taking them. And students are confident that the grading system used to assess their work provides an accurate picture of their knowledge and learning. Obviously, this is an idealized and somewhat ironic account of face-to-face courses, but it is the image that people have in mind when they question whether online education is as effective as face-to-face education.

Our second frame of reference for teaching online is the correspondence course. Prior to the Web, distance education was conducted via correspondence courses. Course content was built into a set of materials that was mailed to students. They would do their work individually and send it back to the professor to have it graded.

The correspondence course has always been considered the dregs of theological education, the last resort, the method you adopted if you couldn't do it any other way. Nevertheless, it provided a framework for some of us when we thought about providing theological education online. But as we began to gain experience, we discovered there were several different kinds of online courses. I will sketch a typology of approaches here.

### ***Approach #1: The Online Course, designed as an imitation of a face-to-face course.***

The first approach is designed to be an imitation of a face-to-face course: the professor translates what he or she does with the students in the classroom into an online delivery system. In order to present a lecture the professor types up the lecture notes for the students to read online. If it gets really high tech, perhaps the lecture will be rendered as an audio stream – or even better, a webcam can present the lecture as a video stream. (We might think that these are three profoundly different levels of pedagogy, but actually there is not a whit of difference between them; all three are meant to simply deliver a lecture). The content is built into the course materials. Students read assignments and write papers, just as in face-to-face classes. There is little or no side-to-side interaction between the students. Quizzes and exams taken are online, and the work is passed back and forth to and from the professor electronically. Interaction with the professor is limited to feedback on completed work.

Students typically rate these courses as very poor experiences. This shouldn't be a surprise. We have taken something that was created for a face-to-face environment and expected it to work the same way in an entirely different environment. Some institutions have turned their back on distance education, having taken the poor experience of these

sorts of translated classes as proof that online courses can't handle their topics or curriculum. One particularly unfortunate result is that some institutions not only won't provide online education themselves, but also will not even allow transfer of credits earned through online courses – because they have so little faith in the medium of online education.

### ***Approach #2: The Online Course, designed as an electronically mediated correspondence course.***

A second type of online course might be thought of as an electronically mediated correspondence course. In terms of the medium there is more in common with a correspondence course than there is with a face-to-face experience. Again, the content is thought to be built into the course materials, like a programmed learning guide. Students read the material, turn in assignments, and receive grades. A student might have some interaction with the professor when the grade is returned, but essentially the student works in isolation. There is no learning community because there is no side-to-side interaction between the students. The only interaction for the student is in the form of feedback from the professor on completed work.

These two approaches reflect our pre-existing frame of reference when we think of education and technology: the ideal of the face-to-face classroom, and the inadequacies of the traditional correspondence course. A third reference that we naturally refer to when we think about online or distance education is video conferencing. But I won't spend time on that here because the success of video conferencing is completely dependent on the infrastructure and technology at the end point location. This makes it impractical for most institutions.

### ***Approach #3: The Online Course, designed with the focus on student-centered, constructivist learning processes.***

The best online courses are designed to be student-centered constructivist learning environments, in which we re-conceive the teaching-learning process from the ground up. Parker Palmer's description of a community of inquiry is a helpful guide: students start by doing their own work individually, and then come together in a discussion environment, where learning is constructed.

In an online environment, the learning experience is built in a somewhat unique way. We must make strategic decisions about which materials to present in which medium. One example might be to spend part of the weekly cycle doing individual work. The professor might provide a streaming video, but its function is not to deliver a lecture but to frame an issue for students so they know what to look for as they're doing their work. Then, after students have viewed the orienting streaming video and completed their own work, everyone comes together in an online discussion area (that "workhorse" of online education).

There is an art and science to conducting a good discussion. It does not just happen; it must be choreographed. Intentional thought must be given to the integration of online with face-to-face experiences. Both the teacher and the students have to re-socialize themselves as a group. Questions should be integrative, requiring students to bring their own individual work into interaction with other students in a side-to-side environment. It can be effective to require a final post at the end of the process where students are asked to analyze how their thinking has changed as a result of the discussion.

The online discussion is like a dance. The teacher must be careful not to impede the process. Many discover that the moment the professor steps into the discussion and starts pontificating, the students step back and conform to a more traditional and passive teaching-learning process: the discussion environment in which constructive learning takes place disappears. One might think that this is just a convenient way to avoid having to read all those student posts, but in fact it is still important for the professor to be present in the discussion, to read all the posts – but to make only very few comments, at opportune moments.

### ***Approach #4: The Stand-alone Hybrid Course (in all of its various forms).***

The next approach in my proposed typology is the individual stand-alone hybrid course. This can come in various forms. Originally, hybrid courses were designed to free up more physical classroom space at an institution. (By meeting alternating weeks in the classroom and online, an institution could significantly increase its classroom space.) However, to be effective, a hybrid course has to be reconceived from the ground up. There are many strategic decisions to be made about which material ought to be provided face-to-face, and which material can be handled best in the online environment. Then, intentional decisions have to be made in order to effectively integrate these two parts of the course. When this is done poorly students are left wondering how the various parts relate to one another.

The alternating-week format (one week online and the next week face-to-face) still requires most students to live in close proximity to the institution. New options are created when you decide to put a face-to-face section at the beginning of the course and another at the end. Experience is showing that courses need to have this second face-to-face section in order to keep the back end of the course alive for students. An online course with face-to-face sections at the beginning and the end is probably the second most prominent way of providing a stand-alone hybrid course (after the alternating weeks model).

### ***Approach #5: The Hybrid Course embedded diachronically in a program.***

As their online experience increased, institutions began to think about hybrid *programs* rather than simply individual hybrid courses. Institutions began to offer programs in which hybrid courses would be embedded diachronically in a cohort-based program (the same group of people sharing an expanding pool of learning experiences and building community with one another from semester to semester). Still based in constructivist learning theory, this approach embeds individual hybrid courses into the context of a string of courses, which a single cohort group of people would take together. The first task in any online course is to build community. In a hybrid program you do that in the first course at the beginning of the program, and every course that follows will already have an established community, a socialization process, a sense of roles, and so forth. In addition, the cohort carries into each course a huge body of shared experience that will be available for integration in subsequent experiences, especially if faculty collaborate to enhance that integration.

These are possibilities that are not available for the free-standing hybrid or online course. In a very significant way, the cohort group becomes more than a set of personalities. As a cohort, students learn how to self-organize for more effective learning, and that ability increases from semester to semester. This is an advantage that rarely occurs in traditional approaches to theological education.

***Approach #6: The Hybrid Course embedded diachronically and synchronically in a cohort-based hybrid program.***

Finally, in the sixth approach in my typology a hybrid course is embedded not only diachronically, but also synchronically in a cohort-based hybrid program. In this scenario the same group of people share, not only the same expanding pool of community and learning experiences from semester to semester, but also share other courses side by side which they are encouraged to integrate intentionally. Instead of thinking about what material needs to be done face-to-face in each course, the questions become focused on what aspects of the whole program need to be done face-to-face. Then it is designed both diachronically and synchronically, so that side-to-side learning takes place. For example, if people are taking eight hours of coursework, this could be composed of two three-hour courses and two one-hour courses. Then there would be an opportunity for intentional side-to-side learning between materials (which happens whether you the faculty member plans for it or not).

It's a glorious thing when students keep their brains going across one course to the next in this student-centered learning environment. They have a responsibility to take an active part in thinking about what makes their own education work. Some of these groups develop their own personality – a collective personality – that thinks through how to make the learning experience better.

This sixth approach has all the advantages of the previous models, plus the additional opportunities for intentional integration that aren't available in any of the previous approaches. Thus, what I am suggesting here is a typology of steadily increasing opportunities for learning. "Emergence" is the idea that something extraordinary begins to happen when you have the same small experiences repeated multiple times, so that, at some point their number becomes such that a new set of properties begins to exist. (The swarm mentality demonstrated by flocks of birds is an example of an emergent activity). Something like that could happen in theological education if we created more common material and more levels of interactions. Something happens in theological education when we create more common material and more levels of interaction between students. At some point the experience crosses a threshold and the community begins to become something quite different, with new characteristics and capacities for integration that have not been characteristic of the traditional face-to-face course. Nor are these characteristics present in the stand-alone online course, or even the stand-alone hybrid course. The typology suggests that certain forms of delivery have an inherently greater potential to create an effective learning environment than others do.

-----  
**Discussion**

**Brent Laytham (North Park Theological Seminary):** This is exciting, but I wonder to what extent the benefits you observe are due to being a cohort group rather than to being online. Hence, constructive learning with a cohort group in a non-campus based face-to-face program would have similar benefits.

**Delamarter:** Yes, I agree. And I would also add that what makes a face-to-face course good has nothing to do with the fact that it's face-to-face, and everything to do with its pedagogical strategies.

**Laytham:** Yet I wonder if the “the hybrid course embedded diachronically and synchronically in a cohort-based hybrid program” is just as idealized and difficult to actualize as the perfect face-to-face course that you noted was the unrealistic gold standard against which we measure the effectiveness of online learning. The life situations that prevent people from relocating to a seminary campus and therefore being potential recruits for the perfect fact-to-face lecture, might also prevent them from being able to join a cohort group and participate in this perfect hybrid cohort approach. Scenario six envisions people whose lives are arranged in such a way that they can move through the program as a cohort.

**Delamarter:** The traditional model has been for students to pick up their lives and family, disconnect themselves from support structures and connections, and move into a student ghetto where they live while they go through a radical transformation of their thinking over a three year period. It is no wonder it becomes difficult for them to return to their original home and church environments and be effective. In contrast, the form of delivery I’m advocating for in approach #6 would make participation possible for people who otherwise won’t or can’t disconnect themselves from their contexts to pursue theological education. Because they do not have to move, they can keep their economic and other support structures. They remain embedded in their ministry environments, and apply their learning immediately to the context with which they are familiar. Whether we like it or not, the rise of this new option for taking theological education is going to be one of the most powerful engines driving the variegation of how theological education gets offered in the future.

**Troy Miller (Victory University):** I teach undergraduates. Is anyone doing a cohort-based program that is online only? I am curious as to whether you can create online the same type of cohort community that can be created in a face-to-face environment.

**Delamarter:** There are a few who are doing it face-to-face, but it is unusual for programs that are entirely online to value the side-to-side interaction that is characteristic of a cohort group. I call it “stage-one thinking.” To draw an analogy with the development of ATM bank tellers: when they were first invented, they were located at the bank, inside the lobby, and they were available only during banking hours. That says a lot about our experience with technology. At first we use the new technology according to old paradigms. It’s not until we use it for a while that we can see the possibilities. So the ATM is eventually placed outside the building, and then the sociology begins to change.

**Alvin Thompson (Central American Theological Seminary):** We offer a Masters degree online, but the classes offered are limited to those that are required for the degree. Students end up creating cohorts as they go along, with a lot of interaction among students in various classes, simply because of the way the program is structured. The cohort happens to a degree just because of the limitations of the program.

**Laura Hunt (unaffiliated scholar):** Another model I’m hearing about is where the seminary hires someone to put together the courses and then employs adjuncts to actually do the teaching. I wonder how much freedom there is in that model for an adjunct to implement some of these creative ideas given their situation and their relation to the institution that has hired them to teach the class.

## Delamarter, Gravett, Ulrich, Nysse, and Polaski

**Delamarter:** Again, I think that's only going to happen in the transitional period of the first generation. We've got a lot of faculty members who would rather not be bothered with everything that is necessary to change your approach to pedagogy. I count myself among them. It is hard work and it involves giving up some power and changing our roles and this can be painful. So some institutions have simply added another staff of people to develop these online curricula. Forward-looking institutions are not going to allow the creation of these dual track curricula in the first place.

**Earl Johnson (First Presbyterian Church, Johnstown, N.Y.):** Many denominations are finding that they can't produce enough ordained pastors, so they have developed a curriculum to certify lay pastors. Many of their courses are online, but it's a different type of learning. And it's also harder to establish widespread acceptance of the learning and the degrees thus obtained.

**Delamarter:** We can evaluate the pedagogical effectiveness of an approach that gives students a course here and a course there. I think it would be a little bit lower on the spectrum of effective teaching and learning than an integrative program with shared experiences like I've discussed here. But this is certainly one of the ways to address this problem that communities are trying.

**Dick Nysse (Luther Seminary):** Courses and disciplines are accountable to an over-arching set of goals for the curriculum as a whole. We don't depend entirely on social connections for learning. The lateral social connections created by students carry some intellectual exchange, but curricular goals also operate so that you get a kind of looping that binds together different types of learning. That's of great value.

**Delamarter:** You cross another threshold when you begin to think about the delivery of these by a module facilitating team that sits together intentionally to think about this cross fertilization of material and ideas.

**Peter Perry (Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago):** You said that one of the benefits of these models is that students do not need to relocate. They can continue to interact with their ministry environment. How might that be integrated structurally as a significant characteristic of this model rather than something expected to happen organically?

**Delamarter:** An example might be to engage the student's ministry supervisor or a laity/community panel to work with the student on some of the structured assignments that would apply the material in a ministry setting. This is similar to service learning.

**Perry:** I think this is where pastoral leaders are formed, and that this crucial interaction is more possible in the distance learning model than it is for a residential student.

**Gary T. Meadors (Grand Rapids Theological Seminary):** When I use Blackboard, I have discussion groups in which I set the questions and do a post mortem at the end of the week. I try to stay out of the way as much as I can so that my presence does not intimidate student discussion. Perhaps I just communicate with individuals using specific observations. However, I have found that the greatest challenge is that critical

thinking requires resources. E-books and online articles are getting better, but it is difficult to find a textbook that serves the course. How do we shorten the distance between the library and the students? I am allowed to assign three to five texts, but that's still not adequate for the students to create a critical thinking environment. We have students who are challenged by the reading. The discussion boards show that they do not always understand what they read.

**Delamarter:** This is undoubtedly one of the greatest concerns, particularly when you consider an online masters in theological studies (MATS). This degree is traditionally considered preparation for a PhD program, where information resources become much more central. Information in books, articles, and internet resources form three quite disparate worlds that are available very differently. Usually institutions can provide access to huge data bases of online full-text journals, but access to actual books can be a problem. Most institutions rely on students to connect with other institutions near to them by themselves. Students are finding institutions near where they live to get access to books. To the extent that we're willing to service other institution's students as well as our own, I think it's probably going to be okay.

---

### **Online Learning: An Exercise in Biblical Criticism** **Sandra Gravett, *Appalachian State University***

I am the odd duck in this room because I am an undergraduate educator who teaches an online biblical studies course at a public university. So I want to start by giving you a little portrait of where I teach.

At Appalachian State University, most students are the traditional age, eighteen to twenty-two years old. Courses that are taught entirely online are new to them. My course is a stand alone course in the general education curriculum, and it is extremely popular. Most of the students I teach are middle class white protestant Christians, and average academic performers. Ours is a comprehensive state university. I am a little unusual at Appalachian State University because I am a tenured full professor and the only person assigned to teach one hundred percent online. I don't live in Boone, North Carolina, where the college is located. My students understand that they can't come to my office to talk to me; our communication is primarily through email – and Skype (a software application that allows users to make voice calls and chats over the Internet, <http://www.skype.com/intl/en-us/home>) for those who want to interact face-to-face.

Online learning is very new to our university. We are late adopters, unlike some other schools in the University of North Carolina system. Stand-alone courses like mine are still a bit unusual. They attract more adult returning students who, as we say, live “off the mountain.” I also have a number of pregnant women and young mothers. We've had two babies born this semester, and I had four students deliver last spring. Sometime in the middle of the semester a student might stop posting online, and then they come back and finish the course without a problem. I have a lot of students doing internships, student teaching, or having to be off campus for some other reason. I've had students deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan on a fairly consistent basis. It is a quite diverse student population. They think that online learning is going to be easier for them than face-to-face classrooms, and that's why they enroll very rapidly in these courses. They expect open book tests, working at their own pace, and not much demand on their time.

## Delamarter, Gravett, Ulrich, Nysse, and Polaski

They don't understand that, even though they don't have to go to class on a regular basis, they're going to have to keep a schedule and be disciplined. I do have to teach discipline.

I am teaching three lower level courses simultaneously this semester. I have taught some smaller upper level courses, but the lower level courses are capped at fifty, although I typically let more students in. Summer school courses typically enroll no more than twenty, but I had fifty-seven in my world religions course because they had to stay at home and work during the summer. I think we're going to see more of that. The large classes are important because we are still trying to convince the administration that this is a good thing, especially in the current economy.

Biblical studies is attractive to our Christian students, and New Testament courses more so than Hebrew Bible. As you know, students expect it to be like Sunday school. Their resistance to academic biblical criticism, especially when it diverges from their beliefs, is profound. The key question for me with these courses concerns learning goals. We have a lot of material to cover because students know very little Bible content, in spite of lifelong church attendance. They don't know the historical, social, or cultural background, and they know very little about how interpretation is done. It is a conundrum: how do I design exercises that will ensure they cover the content and keep them accountable to the material, especially when they can look it up in an open book. So I try to design exercises that hold them accountable but also encourage interaction. One thing I really like about the online format is that not only do they get to know one another better, but I also know them better than I knew the students in my face-to-face classes.

I'm going to share a specific exercise I use online: Biblical interpretation using a wiki. The challenge is to design an exercise in biblical interpretation that holds them accountable for content, but also encourages some of the side-to-side learning that we have seen is particularly significant in online courses. It is a three-stage experiment.

- Students are put into groups of no less than six (because student participation is unreliable) and no more than ten (or it gets unwieldy).
- I set a forty-eight or seventy-two hour window for posting. It is crucial that students have sufficient time to post because of their various life circumstances, but it is also important that they have clear deadlines.
- I give explicit instructions. I make little MP3's or short videos to give them instructions and frame the assignment so that they know exactly what I want. I include in my instructions information about how many times they are to post and how many times they should edit. I describe what kinds of material and documentation are permitted.

### *First assignment*

For the first task, I post a biblical passage on the Wiki verse by verse in the New Revised Standard Version (which is what we use for the course). We have already worked on close reading and interpretive strategies when we do this assignment. Each person has to contribute to the Wiki a minimum of three and a maximum of five original contributions, which sets helpful boundaries for under- and over-active participants. Then they have to edit the work of others at least two times.

For example, I post the second creation story in Genesis. I tell them they can put an introduction at the beginning or comment on a verse or a series of verses. They can comment at certain places in it, or they can hyperlink to something else. They can use other resources, but they have to cite whatever they use. All of these are acceptable, and

the Wiki environment provides wonderful options for making contributions. Their commentary, which is inserted so that it appears right with the passage, can include art, literature or music (because for undergraduates it's not just about the technical biblical material, they love discovering how it's been carried out through time).

Then they have to edit to make sure the entire entry reads logically and flows well. I have found that they begin to disagree with each other when they edit. For example, somebody will interpret the story one way. Then somebody else will say, "Well contrary to what Steve just said, here's what I think is going on" – and now they've learned about competing versions of a text. I do not intervene unless something really inappropriate is posted. Even when they post something egregiously wrong, I don't correct it in the first class. I try to let other students correct them, and they do. It takes them a while to become comfortable with saying, "That's not right." But they get better at that.

### *Second assignment*

I grade that first assignment by going back through the history to see all the contributions, which takes a while. Then I give the Wiki to one of their peer groups, and they have a forty-eight to seventy-two hour window to determine what kinds of biblical criticism the first group was using and to make their own comments on it. If they want to say that the comment Jane made is a text critical comment, they have to define textual criticism, point directly to where they see it, and explain how it conforms to the criteria.

This is a second level of learning. Instead of simply talking about the passage they are talking about how interpretation happens. They're commenting on their colleagues' work, but they're also discussing how well it performs the criticism in question. Did they do it? Did they leave something out? Where does it fall short?

Then the second peer group makes contributions to discussion threads about this. After I grade that specific part, I send it back to the first group, who then discuss the other group's reactions.

What I've described here is a three-stage process in which students perform biblical criticism and continue to reflect on it. It's time consuming and intensive, but they learn what text and cultural criticisms are because they're doing them and they're doing them well.

I wanted students to work collaboratively to engage in interpretation of a biblical text. One of the strengths of online learning is that there is no shirking in the back of the room. I know every time they have been online. I'm like a big sister telling them they have to do the work so they will understand biblical criticism and learn about their own strengths and weaknesses through peer review. They are very reticent to do peer review at first, but once they get into the process and realize they're not going to step on anybody's toes too severely, they become better writers and better editors. They improve because they are able to see when they've done poor work, and maybe they are a little embarrassed about it.

Student outcomes have been outstanding. They enjoy working together. Steve Delamarter's concept about cohorts is pertinent because in these stand-alone courses my students get very friendly with each other in a short span of time. They address each other very directly. They build relationships. Very often their discussions keep going after the window for posting to that assignment has closed and they know it's not being graded. I have a large number of repeat students in my courses. They take Hebrew Bible, New Testament, and Religions of the World, and then want to know why there is nothing else to take. I have seen far more improvement in their writing skills with the

editing assignment than from sending them to a writing center or from my correcting them. Instead of my providing edits that they simply incorporate into their paper, they actually learn the process. The test scores on the biblical criticisms exam, an exam where they were typically scoring an average of sixty-five, have soared to eighty-five and ninety. That tells me that they're learning.

I continue to have concerns that they don't understand that every interpretive correction might not be a valid one. As you know, undergraduates find it difficult to distinguish what makes their opinion any better or worse than someone else's. I've been working to help students to incorporate more scholarly reference material rather than only refer to online material. The majority of students are Protestant Christians, but this semester I have a Hindu woman in the class who has really rocked their world in some profound ways because of how differently she's reading the texts. Nevertheless, it's a very difficult environment in which to challenge them, particularly to access more minority readings of the texts from folks that are quite different from them.

-----

### Discussion

**Unidentified Scholar:** At what point in the course do you give this particular exercise? Have they learned some of the methods already, or do you give that material to them as you give them this exercise?

**Gravett:** When I give them the assignment we've completed our reading of different methods and had a discussion of this material. I would have already made some presentation of the material. I put the assignment up about the third week of September. We start early and do it in cycles. The evaluations I'm getting back request more and more Wiki.

**Unidentified Scholar:** Do you end discussions at ten postings, or do you go beyond that? I have found with Wikis that you need to keep it small. Inevitably, one group has a great discussion going and you want the other group to see it, while the other group just falls flat, despite your efforts to stimulate it.

**Gravett:** I've usually done long discussions. Now I'm averaging about twelve because if I go bigger the discussion gets too unwieldy. Students can't keep up, so they won't read other people's posts. Of course, I can log in and see what they are reading and not reading. They don't know I can do that. Another thing I do when discussions are decreasing is change the groups every three weeks. After a while I know who the strong and weak performers are, and I form groups so that every group has several strong performers in it to elevate the discussions.

**Unidentified Scholar:** Have you worked with shorter time frames than semester courses? I think all the literature says that eight weeks is the ideal, but I'm not convinced.

**Gravett:** I've done summer school courses that are five weeks long. I'm trying to get our department to think about shorter modules that are one and two hour courses instead of three hour full-semester courses. But this is a structural issue for undergraduates.

The North Carolina system has something called UNC Online that allows students from any of the seventeen schools in the system to take my courses for credit. I'm one of a very few offering online courses in religious studies, which is not a discipline that

has been a quick adopter of online teaching. I think there's one other course offered at Chapel Hill. We are seeing more students asking for it, but my classes fill with Appalachian students quickly.

**Gary Meadors (Grand Rapids Theological Seminary):** Teaching a full load means you have three or four courses a semester, which means you have 150 to 250 students. Could you give me an overview of your average day?

**Gravett:** I'm very particular about the way I schedule the students. I'm an early riser and am usually online by 5:00 a.m. I promise them that I will answer any of their questions or respond to their posts (which were made, typically for undergraduates, at 1:00 or 2:00 a.m.).

So I start the day online, before I go to the gym. Then I usually spend most of the morning doing my own writing and thinking. I spend the afternoon grading, and then I monitor. I know when their discussion activity is hot and I'll be online part of that time. But I typically will start online at five in the morning and turn it off at ten or eleven at night. Many of my colleagues would not think of this as work. I don't think they understand the level of interaction you have with students. On the other hand, my scholarly production has gone up enormously because I am on the computer all day.

**Unidentified Scholar:** Do you follow this pattern five or seven days a week?

**Gravett:** I follow this pattern seven days a week because I've discovered that my students prefer to have assignment and test deadlines over the weekend.

**Troy Miller (Victory University):** What is the number of assignments in a semester, and the breakdown by percentage for how much each assignment counts toward the final grade?

**Gravett:** It depends on the course. A test never counts more than ten percent. Participation in the discussions and related assignments, the Wikis, are always at least thirty to forty percent of the grade. Usually there's a peer review paper as well. There are a lot of assignments because undergraduates need lots of different opportunities.

**Brent Laytham (North Park Theological Seminary):** You suggest that the Wiki textual commentary assignment and the threaded discussion are two separate components. Is the same group doing both over a three-week period, or are there two different groups at the same time?

**Gravett:** When I do the three part Wiki assignment, students remain in consistent groups and they're also doing threaded discussion. For the next cycle, I'll switch the groups so they're not working with the same people.

**Laytham:** Will you give us a couple of examples of threaded discussion topics and prompts?

**Gravett:** Almost every week we will have assigned reading and threaded discussion on that topic. Usually there is an integrative question that makes them ponder the reading.

## Delamarter, Gravett, Ulrich, Nysse, and Polaski

It's their favorite part. A new thing I've done is to have them blog. I've asked them to blog on their ideas about the text and what it's bringing up for them. I am getting these massively long blogs at the end of the week in which they are sharing a lot about who they are, their upbringings, how they read the text, and how this integrates into their lives. It's been one of the most successful things this semester.

**David Howell (Ferrum College):** I wonder how one could bring in more minority voices and experiences. With the online experience, you actually have some opportunity to be partnered with HBCU institutions (Historically Black Colleges and Universities) or to use Skype to connect people around the world. Assignments could connect them in order to talk about what this text means in the South African context or in someplace like a HBCU in New Orleans. It's difficult to make those connections, but they might be fruitful to think about and pursue.

**Gravett:** One of the things I'm starting to do is make contacts with my colleagues at other University of North Carolina schools, particularly the minority serving institutions. I need to be looking for somebody who is structuring a course how I structure mine. So I think over time we'll be able to work out opportunities for them to interact with students on different campuses with other experiences.

**Unidentified Scholar:** Have you had any feedback about how students perceive the workload of doing Wiki, threaded discussions, blogging and peer review papers?

**Gravett:** Yes, but it's similar to what I heard when I was a traditional face-to-face instructor. They say it is a lot more than they thought it would be. It's a demanding load, but I try to limit the number of things they have to do each week. For example, if they are working on the Wiki that week, I would have them blog but not do a threaded discussion. My standard for pacing the course is what we could accomplish if I had them for an hour and a half of standard face-to-face class time. If I had them for three hours in a class that day, what could we accomplish in terms of group interaction? I have cut down some things and expanded others because this is a generation very different from mine. For them, blogging is almost second nature. They have the ability to do this really fast. An increasing number of them are posting from their Blackberries so I have no idea where they are or what they're doing. I ask them not to post while they are driving. It's a different world.

---

### Encouraging Imagination in an Online Biblical Studies Course Dan Ulrich, *Bethany Theological Seminary*

The questions I want to raise are relevant for many subject areas and educational environments, but I began to consider them more deliberately as I accepted the challenge of teaching New Testament studies online beginning early in this decade. One of my questions is, "How can a biblical studies course encourage adults to use their imaginations in ways that are both playful and productive for learning?" Before discussing the "how" question, however, I would like briefly to discuss why it is important for biblical studies courses to encourage imagination.

I agree with Sandra Schneiders that imagination is key for revitalizing biblical interpretation.<sup>1</sup> Stories from the past become more meaningful as we enter those stories with our imaginations active. We need analogical imagination, to use William Spohn's term, in order to see connections between ancient and current situations addressed by a text.<sup>2</sup> Imagination is not an alternative to information gained through disciplined research, but a necessary complement. We need information to guide and stimulate imagination; we need imagination in order to construct meaning out of information. Without imagination, our data would be as dry and disconnected as the bones in Ezekiel's vision before the Spirit led him to see them differently.<sup>3</sup>

We need imagination not only to find meaning in the past but also to gain new perspectives on the present and future. Imagination in the form of empathy can help us understand the perspectives that other contemporary readers bring to a text. In addition, many biblical texts invite readers to envision the world differently. Without prophetic imagination, interpreters would not be able to see or live the visions that those texts offer.

Given the importance of imagination for biblical hermeneutics, I would love to report that I have solved the problem of how to teach it. But I doubt that I can even define imagination. I can usually recognize it when students are being imaginative – or not – but I cannot claim much, if any, credit for it when they are. Fortunately, adults still have imagination. We mostly just need permission to use it when studying the Bible.

One way to answer the “how” question is to share some examples from an online course that I teach every year. It's a survey course titled “Introduction to New Testament History and Literature.” I hope the beginning seminary students in that course will use their imaginations to read New Testament texts with growing empathy for the texts' earliest audiences. I also hope to lay a foundation for subsequent courses that put more emphasis on contemporary hermeneutics. The required reading includes the fourth edition of David Barr's textbook, *New Testament Story: An Introduction*, and the New Testament articles in *The Global Bible Commentary*, edited by Daniel Patte.<sup>4</sup>

After students have read Barr's opening chapters on first-century contexts, I invite them to “play” with that information in conversation with a character named Simeon bar Yeshua, whom I introduce as a virtual guest instructor. I can log on to the course site as either Simeon or myself.

Prior to the war in 66–70, Simeon was the head of a household that produced and traded textiles in Jerusalem. During the siege of Jerusalem he lost his wife to starvation and fever, and his two sons died trying to defend the city. After Jerusalem fell, Simeon was taken on a ship to Ostia, the port west of Rome, where he was sold to an elite Roman by the name of Lucretius. Ten years have passed since then. Simeon still doesn't know what happened to the rest of his household, but believes his daughter may also have

---

<sup>1</sup> Sandra M. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (Collegeville: Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1999), 102–8.

<sup>2</sup> William C. Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise: Jesus and Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 1999), esp. chapter 3.

<sup>3</sup> Donald E. Miller, Graydon F. Snyder, and Robert W. Neff commended playful imagination for biblical interpretation in *Using Biblical Simulations* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Judson, 1973), 11–12.

<sup>4</sup> David Barr, *New Testament Story: An Introduction*, 4th ed. (Belmont, Ca.: Wadsworth, 2009); Daniel Patte, ed. *Global Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2004), 329–570.

## Delamarter, Gravett, Ulrich, Nysse, and Polaski

survived and been sold as a slave. He is secretly saving money with the hope that he can buy his freedom and search for her. This scenario allows Simeon to discuss a wide range of experiences in Jerusalem and in Rome, as a slave owner and as a slave, and as a Pharisee with an apocalyptic worldview. By asking Simeon questions, students have an opportunity to learn his story, probe his feelings and beliefs, and imagine life in his sandals. When students try to convert Simeon to Christianity he steadfastly resists. His response in a nutshell is, "If Jesus is the messiah, then why is Israel still enslaved to Rome?"

Although my use of Simeon began online, I now portray him in costume for students in the classroom section of the course. Online students don't get to see my scintillating performances, but they do have the advantage of interacting with Simeon throughout the course, and I have the advantage of time to research his answers.

Another activity that encourages imagination is writing a letter back to Paul. I divide students into groups, typically representing the Galatians, the Philippians, the church in the house of Philemon, and the Corinthians (after they have received 1 Corinthians but not any of 2 Corinthians). Since online groups usually need help getting started, I appoint a student facilitator for each group. The group's assignment is to collaborate on writing a letter that would be in character for their church. So, for example, the Galatians have to decide whether they will take offense at Paul's stern letter. They might decide instead that the first-century audience would have been confused, defensive, conciliatory, or some combination of the above.

My students vary widely in their personal attitudes toward Paul, and their reading indicates that he was at least as controversial in the first century as he is today. It's normal and usually helpful for students to draw on their own feelings about Paul as they imagine how a first-century church might have responded to him. They are processing those feelings as well as the historical information they have read. After each group has posted its letter back to Paul, I ask everyone to debrief, with questions such as these: What feelings did you experience or express during this simulation? What did you learn about the first century? What did you learn that is relevant for us today?

A different kind of small group assignment is what I call "a hermeneutical picnic." I choose a passage that has been interpreted differently in publications by authors from different social locations. This fall it was the healing of the Syro-Phoenician woman's daughter in Mark. Again with the help of student facilitators, I instruct group members to describe their social locations and also share what the passage means to them. After comparing their own interpretations, the group's next task is to find and compare interpretations that come from four people with social locations very different from any represented in the group. Both publications and personal interviews are acceptable. Finally I ask the groups to reflect on what they learned about the relationship between social location and interpretation.

Each of the preceding activities helps prepare students for a final simulation in which I ask them to develop and portray individual characters as part of a first-century house church that is hearing Luke-Acts. During the first week of the simulation, students imagine the character that they will portray, including a name and a story.<sup>5</sup> I ask the groups to check their mix of characters to be sure that they have different levels of

---

<sup>5</sup> Reta Halteman Finger has envisioned a simulation with individual characters lasting an entire face-to-face course. See *Paul and the Roman House Churches: A Simulation* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1993), revised as *Roman House Churches for Today: A Practical Guide for Small Groups* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).

wealth and power, with most of them on the lower end of the social hierarchy of the host household or the house church. After agreeing on their characters, students read Luke-Acts from their characters' perspectives. They then engage in a discussion with the other characters in the church about how the community should respond to the new teachings they have heard about wealth and social status. The third week of this assignment includes time for writing a report and debriefing.

I never know exactly what a group will do with this assignment. This fall, one of the house churches surprised me by inviting Simeon bar Yeshua into its deliberations. They asked what he thought about them pooling their resources in order to ransom slaves. Simeon warmly praised their generosity, but also wondered what they would do for slaves once their money ran out. Although the Lucan Jesus uses the language of the jubilee in announcing good news for the poor, there was room for students to ponder why Luke is not more explicit in applying jubilarly ethics to slaves.

Simulations like these seem to work well in my context. Students typically rise to the challenge of imagining the first century through role-plays online. Their grasp of ancient cultural backgrounds is, of course, a work in progress, but they grow in their ability to empathize with readers from other times and locations.

Let me end now with some additional questions for your reflection and conversation: Do you agree that imagination is a key to revitalizing biblical interpretation? How does your teaching encourage imagination? What strengths, weaknesses, or dangers do you see in the style of teaching that I have described?

-----

### Discussion

**Brooke Lester (Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary):** Is there some continuity of tools the students use in the different exercises so that they can learn how to do what you're asking of them?

**Ulrich:** I do use a consistent set of tools and a very rudimentary use of Moodle. The Wiki function is one I don't particularly care for and so I use threaded discussions. Each group has its own discussion forum for their work. Unless there's a reason to preserve privacy in a group I typically encourage the groups to keep up with the discussion in their forum and visit other forums if they would like. There is typically an additional public forum for posting the results of a group's work and then for discussing it further with the entire class.

**Troy Miller (Victory University):** Are there books or other resources that you have found very helpful?

**Ulrich:** One helpful book is by Reta Halteman Finger, *Roman House Churches for Today* (William B. Eerdmans, 2007). She develops a scenario for a course-long simulation that details how you can develop characters and discuss roles from the perspective of different house churches.

**Adam Porter (Illinois College):** I use Gerd Theissen's *Shadow of the Galilean* (Augsburg Fortress, 2007) as a way to introduce students to the history and social location of first century Judea. It's a fictionalized account of a man who learns about but never meets Jesus. It's a nice introduction to the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and all these

## Delamarter, Gravett, Ulrich, Nysse, and Polaski

different groups. The students enjoy it far more than any textbook I've used. It's really engaging. I assign students into groups of Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes. Each of the groups is then asked to think about how they would respond to the Gospel writers. Because they gain some understanding from *Shadow of the Galilean*, they are better able to respond as a Pharisee, Sadducee, or Zealot to the text we're discussing.

**Christine Jones (Carson-Newman College):** How do you assess the interactions, and how do you deal with the question of whether imagination can be assessed?

**Ulrich:** That's a good question. I do follow the discussions and forums and provide feedback to students about the way they're imagining things. I suggest other possibilities for imagining first century contexts as well.

The primary strategy for assessment in the course is the students' self-assessment. I invite them to reflect on how they are achieving the course objectives and their own goals. Early in the course, I ask them to post individual goals. At the mid-term and the end of the course I ask them to comment in an email to me privately about how they are achieving both the course objectives and their own goals. And then I respond to them with my own sense of how they are doing.

Bethany Theological Seminary and Earlham School of Religion use a credit/no credit system with narrative evaluations. So I find that self-assessment by adults in a constructive learning environment lends itself well to this type of assignment. In addition to responding to students' self-assessments, I also email each student periodically with my sense of how well they are participating. I give them a rubric with questions like: Have you posted at least x number of discussion messages? Have your posts contributed to the discussion? Do they indicate that you are achieving this objective? and so forth.

**Cynthia Kittredge (Seminary of the Southwest):** There are fascinating implications with this method. Your use of historical role playing and the imagination suggests a lot of implications about how people are going to be reading the text differently from traditional ways. I would imagine that students might have sympathetic appreciation for these groups that have usually been viewed quite negatively. I'm wondering how much self-reflection you see students do on that. And do you see an impact on their preaching and teaching of these texts?

**Ulrich:** I don't have good data about how it's impacting their ministry, but I wish I did. We should look at it in our institutional programs assessment.

**Kittredge:** I wonder if there would be any exercises you could build into the course that would allow you to do this kind of assessment, especially in an online course.

**Ulrich:** That's an excellent suggestion. I do think the implications of using imagination in a constructivist mode is significant. I don't think it's unusual. I think there are others doing similar kinds of things. But it does allow some freedom. However, there is some danger of running wild with the imagination. I don't know if that's a concern for you.

**David Howell (Ferrum College):** I like the use of historical imagination and sympathetic readings. After students have done this assignment, you could pair it with readings from different contemporary social locations to see how they might have contrasting

readings of the same text. Because students are already accustomed to looking at the first century in this way, it would help them understand why different groups develop certain interpretations in this way. It would be a great way to bring contemporary contexts into the discussion.

**Ulrich:** I do that in one of the assignments that I mentioned, called “The Hermeneutical Picnic.” Another place where your suggestion would be helpful is while working on diverse contemporary readings of the same text that they first worked on in its historical context. Doing so might create more continuity in the course..

**Norris Grubbs (New Orleans Seminary):** You mentioned that you’ve used this in your face-to-face class. Are there other techniques that work well in both settings?

**Ulrich:** Each of the assignments I described using in an online course I have also used in face-to-face instruction, and each of them began in the online course and migrated to face-to-face teaching. Perhaps that indicates that classroom instruction is so familiar that I don’t usually do the kind of reflection on my practice of teaching in that environment that online teaching forces me to do. As I worked to think through how to teach online and make it interesting and playful and creative, I found that some of the solutions I came up with worked so well that I wanted to do them in the classroom as well. I have moved away from lecturing in the classroom and now use much more discussion and this type of constructivist pedagogy. I think it has improved my teaching quite a bit.

**Grubbs:** Do you use Moodle or online books outside the classroom, or are you taking classroom time to do these assignments?

**Ulrich:** There are points where I use Moodle in the face-to-face classroom section of the course, but it’s more of an optional resource for students to use when communicating outside the class or for shy students to use when they can’t get a word in edgewise.

**Sandra Gravett (Appalachian State University):** “Second Life” would be an interesting simulation process. In “Second Life” you create a character online and build a world. That could be a really interesting direction to explore.

**Desmond Bell (University of Applied Sciences, Evangelische Fachhochschule, Rheinland-Westfalen-Lippe, Bochum, Germany):** I’m a little uncomfortable with grading an assignment like that because we don’t really have a rubric for grading the imagination, and it’s much more delicate than grading factual accuracy.

**Adam Porter (Illinois College):** I can respond to that. I assign creative projects where students create an art picture or a film or something like that. I use two separate component grades, only one-third of which assesses the art itself. Two-thirds of the grade I base on their description of what they were trying to do and what citations they use to support it. I think I can assign them a fair grade on their academic work even if they can’t actually draw very well.

**Unidentified Scholar:** Do you have students do an imaginary insertion of themselves into the text so that they actually become one of the villagers? It’s not clear whether that is part of your “picnic exercise.”

**Ulrich:** I have some familiarity with that, but I haven't tried it with students yet. I think that's a helpful suggestion.

-----

### Using Threaded Discussions

**Richard Nysse, *Luther Seminary***

The class activity I want to illustrate is the use of threaded discussions in fully online classes. I will start with some background.

I teach in a seminary that is about eighty percent Lutheran and about twenty percent other denominations; about half of the students seek ordination. The others are MA students, and the majority of those are going to work in churches in areas such as youth or family ministry, social work, or sacred music.

I think of our institution's mission statement as a place to start from and to come back to whenever we discuss teaching and learning. The first segment of that mission statement is that we educate leaders for Christian communities. The word "community" is very important. I understand biblical interpretation to be largely a community activity. Interpretation takes place in community. Community centers the conversation, which is always a loose conversation because it implies a conversation with prior interpreters.

I use threaded discussions because the interpretations that students develop are directed to that community. Hence they owe each other their best thinking because they are contributing to a community. An analogy is the interpretation a preacher does when writing a sermon, which is also for a community. My class is directed specifically to the practice of ministry. And consequently I impress on the students that they owe the other students their best work. Interpretation in this context is both personal and public, and it can even be transformative. But I distinguish it from private devotions. It's important to develop a contrast between private reading and personal reading, where the latter is an engaged reading that is offered to a public and the public can respond to it.

To summarize, my commitments are that interpretation is communal, it deserves our best thinking, and it is offered to a community to be engaged. Online threaded discussions facilitate the kinds of exchanges those commitments require.

At Luther Seminary a student is expected to work three hours outside of class for every one hour of class time. A staff person once remarked that seventy-five percent of a student's learning takes place at a distance from the teacher. He then challenged me to work on the last twenty-five percent. I realized that it's essential to think about how and where learning is taking place. To my present embarrassment, it was much later that I came across the contrast between student-centered and teacher-centered pedagogical approaches. When I started, we were doing learner-centered pedagogy by the seat of our pants, but later we were able to give it more theoretical shape.

We began thinking about the social location of the learner, and then about alternative routes to ordination (like certificate programs and such). I noticed that people engaged in concurrent ministry ask different questions. They don't ask, "When would I ever use this?" but start telling how they would use it or where it comes up in their work. They were actually bringing the congregation with them to their exchanges in the course. Their social location made me wonder what difference it makes to be primarily located in the school as your place of learning versus being located primarily in the practice of ministry as your place of learning. Remaining in the ministry context seems to make more sense to me.

There is that old nemesis that keeps coming up regarding online education: what about formation? I think that the site of formation is in the communities of ministry to which the students are deeply attached. From there they engage in an intense personal but public exchange with the readings and with each other. Formation takes place in the church community.

The same staff person who made me want to work on that last twenty-five percent of learning (which takes place in the classroom) told me that the hardest transition for him from seminary to the practice of ministry was the relentless weekly schedule. Once you're a minister, unless you're really sick, you're going to have to preach. You're going to have to do youth education and all the rest – every single week. This insight emboldened me to require weekly threaded discussions in my classes. I decided to discourage and work against the “bloom and bust” effort of cramming before a test or just before a paper. Instead I would require and reward relentless engagement with the course material. That also turns out to be one of the seven learning principles about effective undergraduate teaching and student engagement.

My course objectives include an increased knowledge of the content and context of the biblical text – both historical and literary. I achieve these goals by requiring students to write about different parts of the Pentateuch. I create threaded discussions around provocative and important questions that arise in the text; knowledge-based learning is a derivative of the actual activity in the class.

For example, one objective is to “articulate the significance of the Pentateuch in Christian ministry and witness.” I walk them through the Pentateuch, starting with Genesis 1 to 11, and ask questions that force them to grapple with the complexity of the text. For instance, how is humanity construed here and what are the implications for ministry? How does it alter your understanding of yourself as a human being? What are the differences in human imagination before and after the flood, or the differences in the image of God before and after the flood? These are seminal texts in a long tradition of Christian theology, and we continue to struggle with them. The students begin to articulate their significance. They become familiar with a variety of interpretations, largely through reading different kinds of commentaries, and encounter the varied readings they present to each other.

Here is how I arrange the threaded discussions. I form groups of four to six students. (If the groups are smaller than four, there are not enough comments to really get a discussion going; if the groups are much larger than six, reading the discussion becomes unwieldy for the participants.) I require a minimum of five paragraphs for the initial posting (which could be a single thought with four subsidiary thoughts or it could be five distinct points). Each initial posting goes out to the other students in the group, who need to respond with at least one paragraph each.

This process is analogous to a panel discussion in which one person states an opening position and each of the panelists responds. Steven Brookfield describes an analogous classroom exercise called “circle of voices” which allows everyone to present an initial position.<sup>6</sup> With my online threaded discussion there is an opening statement and then a series of accumulating responses. Thus if there are five students in a group, each student writes a minimum of one opening statement and four responses to the

---

<sup>6</sup> One place where Brookfield presents this exercise is in Stephen D. Brookfield and Stephen Preskill, *Discussion as a Way of Teaching*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005) 78–79.

opening statements of the others in the group. Their initial posting is a public comment on the issue that they have been working on individually. Each student's individual work contributes to the public (that is, the group's) interpretation. These are the minimum requirements. Ideally, students will respond at additional levels to move from a series of hub-and-spoke exchanges to a web of communication.

A pattern for a week goes something like this: initial posts are due on Tuesday nights, which fits nicely into a church's weekly activities; the response period begins Wednesday morning and extends through Friday (I also remind them to start their individual work which will build toward their posting in the subsequent week).

I also want students to reflect individually. What has happened in a week of interchange – both for their own public work and personal formation? Has their view of God changed? Do they understand forgiveness differently? Do they understand humanity in a deepened way? Do they hold to something more clearly than they did before? Whatever has happened, I want them to reflect on that and they are asked periodically to submit such reflections to me via email.

Another example of an assignment is: "Tell yourself the Exodus story. Sit and think about it. Can you get Charlton Heston out of your mind? What's your operative Exodus story? Now read the text. What did you notice in the text for the first time? What had you forgotten?" I require students to develop additional questions based on what they have observed. Then, once they have determined their own questions, they are required to discuss them with somebody. One person they might "talk" with is a commentator. That is one way I setup reading in commentaries. Commentators function as co-readers and discussion partners; they are not merely experts to be ingested.

Questions like these help students to be more active learners. When they articulate the significance they've found, they are writing to a public. They are coming with their interpretation into a public with a variety of interpretations – making them better interpreters and readers of the texts, and better peers in a community of interpretation. From the examples I have provided, I think you can see that discussions are the core activity of the class.

Currently, my seminary's grading system is simply: pass, marginal, or fail. I lay out what I expect for each of those categories. I explain to students that if disruptions occur in their life so that they can't participate, it's important to inform their discussion group as well as the instructor. The point of that requirement to underscore their obligation to the group: if they need to be gone, they should clear it with the group and work out a way to respond to the others. Accountability to one's peers is highly valued in this course.

I also provide students with rubrics to guide their work. In one, the columns are labeled: (1) Drifting, (2) Moving in the Right Direction, (3) Valuable Performance, and (4) Our Goal (with due allowance for finitude). The rows are labeled: Contribution to the Learning Community, Relevance of Post, Expression within the Post, Delivery of Post, and Promptness and Initiative. One example: A "Valuable Performance" (third column) in the category (or row) "Contribution to the Learning Community" might be described as "often presents reflections that become central to the group's discussion; interacts freely and encourages others."

A second rubric is tied to different levels of performance (pass, marginal, fail). One performance level is described in question form: If you didn't participate with your group, would the group actually notice? Would it be a diminished discussion, a diminished exchange if your voice wasn't in there? Admittedly, this example serves more as a prompt for self-reflection than as a grading tool.

When the students ask me how they are doing, I tell them to look at what kind of reaction they're getting to their posts. If they're not getting substantive responses to what they contribute, then perhaps they're not contributing anything that's actually worth somebody really reacting to. I want them to start reading their impact on their audience because again that's a skill for ministry. They have to develop self-reflective work with some degree of accuracy. Over the long haul, I want to start to inculcate these values, even at an early stage in their seminary education.

Discussion is the core activity in the class. I don't have other assignments until the final paper. The final paper addresses how their Christian imagination and goals for Christian ministry have been shaped by their study of, for example, the Pentateuch. Their periodic reflections submitted to me by email can be mileposts along the way. In fact, I've encouraged them to think of these reflections as responses to questions that could arise in a congregational or parish setting. On the way out of church a parishioner might ask what difference their study is making for the student's present or projected ministry. With the final paper, they have more time to respond. Imagine a church picnic. I tell them to write the final paper as if they were talking to someone who is really invested in what they got out of this course, whose eyes won't glaze over after a couple of sentences, who is willing and eager to listen to them explain for a half hour or more the significance of what they have learned. I think this assignment works as part of the formation for ministry, as well.

-----

### Discussion

**David Howell (Ferrum College):** Do they use the rubrics to evaluate each other?

**Nysse:** No, the rubrics are offered as part of how they should start assessing themselves in individual reflections each week. That's one of the advantages of grading as pass, marginal, or fail.

**Mary Hinkle Shore (Luther Seminary):** One of the downsides of credit or no credit grading is that some professors basically make a deal with the students: I'll leave you alone if you leave me alone. That is, students end up wanting more human contact from their professors.

**Nysse:** I want students to feel free to roam. It's pretty easy to see whether they're engaged. They engage with the public of another core of students (which is a good cross section) to determine if they can be constructive and helpful with parishioners later on. This accountability to someone other than the teacher is one of the most satisfying things for me. When you turn on the computer Wednesday morning and people are posting multiple times and talking to each other, that is a sign that the group has taken hold. I learned from composition teachers who say that students write better when they write for each other than they do when they write for the teacher; there's something about that social investment. I want students to develop habits in courses that have a high degree of carry-over into ministry.

**Brent Laytham (North Park Theological Seminary):** It sounds like you keep students in the same discussion groups during the whole course.

## Delamarter, Gravett, Ulrich, Nysse, and Polaski

**Nysse:** I do that because I think their sense of obligation to each other becomes a deeper motivator than if they're scrambled around all the time. Otherwise you have to rely on more extrinsic motivators such as having to post "x" number of times because it's eighty percent of your course grade.

**Laytham:** I was comparing this to Sandie Gravett's practice of moving students between groups every three weeks. Is this due to the difference in contexts?

**Sandra Gravett (Appalachia State University):** I think undergraduates are just a different kettle of fish.

**Nysse:** I do think my teaching choices are deeply influenced by my commitment to the specific mission statement of my seminary. This is a case study. I don't presume it's universally exportable. You may have different commitments relevant to your institution and where your students are going to practice ministry.

**Denise Dombkowski Hopkins (Wesley Theological Seminary):** What's the maximum number of students in your classes?

**Nysse:** Over one two year period the maximum was forty-eight and the minimum was thirty-nine, but I can't do that anymore. It's too many people. I think twenty-five is fully doable. If you start to get over thirty it gets a little hard to read everything. It is important to note that the manuscript that I see of these discussions is not the same as an essay paper that's handed in. I can scan discussions to assess engagement and make some comments. Students tend to correct each other. Sometimes I may have to intervene, but usually that is done privately with the individual student via email. If we divided this room into four groups, you wouldn't expect to respond to everything that was said in each one of the four groups. That's similar to threaded discussions. The threaded discussions are like transcripts of breakout groups. I don't respond to everything that I see.

**Hopkins:** What do you provide as an introduction to a particular topic? Do you tape yourself or use still clips? How do you set up this discussion that they are having?

**Nysse:** The tech department is trying to get me to put my face out there and do video clips. I wonder if I surrender too much of my voice. On the other hand, my prompts for the discussion question are full of my voice. They are often quite long, three or four pages sometimes – full of my musings and questions on the topic, and then circling back around again to the primary central prompt or question. My voice is present in the shaping of these assignments.

**Earl Johnson (First Presbyterian Church, Johnstown, NY):** Are your faculty colleagues looking at each other's courses and making suggestions?

**Nysse:** We have various kinds of workshops where we do that. When I was on sabbatical I gave the whole course to a colleague to teach, using whatever parts of it she wanted. The only condition was that I would be able to use any changes she made to the course. With regard to gaining credibility for online courses, I think the students were the ones that finally endorsed this to the rest of the seminary community. They tell their advisors how much they loved the course.

**Sandra Gravett (Appalachia State University):** I'll answer your question in a different way. In our peer review process, instead of a colleague coming into my classroom once or twice, now they have access to the whole semester. I just enter them as a student in the course, and they have access to everything. It's made the peer review process really interesting.

**Mary Hinkle Shore (Luther Seminary):** I do some things quite well in one course, but I've had challenges around writing good discussion questions. I heard students complaining about my course in the cafeteria, and so I asked my class nicely to raise the level of public discourse a little bit, and one of them wrote me a private email and said have you talked to Dr. Nysse? His questions are really good. So students help us out too.

---

### **How I Stopped Worrying and Learned to Love the Internet** **Sandra Hack Polaski, *Union Presbyterian Seminary***

I was in mid-career when I received the invitation to teach online. I did a Blackboard training course, which seemed to have very little to do with the kinds of things I was supposed to do in biblical studies. I translated a course that I was doing on campus into an online course. It was something between a correspondence course and a face-to-face course just lifted and dropped into the online setting. I hated it. My students hated it. I had done the mechanics of going online without reflecting on the pedagogy. And I fear that happens more often than we would like to think.

I highly recommend the Wabash Center online course for faculty teaching online. I realized that a different pedagogy for teaching online was necessary to make this course work. The Wabash Center's online course about online pedagogy is strange because you're taking a well-constructed course while you're learning how to construct online courses well. You're reflecting on the course content as well as the way the course is being taught. It's an intense experience really, but that's when I started to realize that there is more involved than simply translating a course. And it gets even more complicated when you ask questions about how formation takes place (whether of undergraduates or of ministers). And what about student interaction? I discovered that these things were achieved differently, but maybe even in a richer way than just having the students for an hour and fifty minutes, two days a week, in a face-to-face classroom setting.

Now when I work through the process of changing a course from a face-to-face classroom to an online environment, I start with a face-to-face class syllabus – which for me tends to be highly structured, listing everything the students need to know from course objectives to textbooks. (My syllabus is the backbone of my class.) But the online syllabus works differently. The syllabus that I drafted the first time that I did an online course was still in Word format – partly because many of our students were still using dial up connections (we have to keep in mind what our students can access). When we were able to use hyperlinks, I really had to rethink what has changed and what is still similar to a syllabus in a face-to-face course. In any syllabus, all the information has to be there for the students in one document, so they can go to the information they need when they need it. That's even more crucial for online courses than it is in a face-to-face class. Yet the information in an online syllabus is in diffuse places that are connected through hyperlinks.

## Delamarter, Gravett, Ulrich, Nysse, and Polaski

I find it difficult to have information diffused in this way, but I slowly realized that this is the way the web works. What happens is that students learn by connecting information. In a sense, if you provide everything for them in one place, you short circuit their learning. Inviting them to make the connections among the diffuse pieces of information is very much the model of how students today are accustomed to learning.

In addition to the syllabus, I have a course overview that I invite students to read and respond to at the beginning of the course. (It is their first reading assignment and the basis of our first threaded discussion). There are a couple of major projects for the class that are described in separate documents. I tend to post them when the students need to know where we are going next. I maintain a week-by-week format, allowing students to access material a week or two in advance if they want to, but I don't provide everything at the beginning of the class.

The question for me is how to pace the course so that students have some flexibility if they want to work ahead or if they're excited about seeing what's coming up – yet still maintain the flow of the course to help students make sense through the connections. In a face-to-face course, this pacing is instinctive. But I really had to think differently in order to do it online.

I give students a checklist that I suggest they print out and keep with their papers so that they can see where we are, week by week. It helps students remember the details. It's analogous to telling a face-to-face classroom that we're in the last five minutes of class time, and explaining what I expect them to do for the next class so they can write it at the bottom of their notes.

I realized that I needed some structure that is different from what I do face-to-face. I needed a set of daily and weekly tasks to remind myself what I needed to do or redo. I had to make some changes as I went along. This is analogous to the daily prep for teaching a course, but I had to keep it in writing. Again, it was not as instinctive to me as preparing for a face-to-face class.

There is a learning curve to teaching online, and I found myself spending a lot of time messing with the details of the course. Did I post things in the right place? Do I have the right hyperlinks? Do I have adequate duplication? (If students don't find it here, maybe they need to find it somewhere else, but can they also find it here, or at least find a link to it here). I spent a lot of time typing in Word, cutting and pasting to Blackboard, learning the hard way that if you don't save it the right way in Blackboard it is gone. This sort of activity took a lot of time when I first started teaching online.

There are new ways of thinking that are necessary to make an online class work. I had to alter a course in midstream because I had planned to use Wiki technology to have students make a glossary of facts and dates and then comment and correct each other's work. Before the semester started, I checked with our IT department about the feasibility of this assignment, and they said they could do it. Alas, when the time came, they weren't able to help, so I had to rethink the assignment. I ended up having students choose from a list and post their definitions. It was shared with the class, but it was not what I had wanted to do. This is an important point about teaching online. If you are not particularly tech savvy, you need very good support.

I'm not showing you my course as a model of excellence. It is a work in progress. I think I've done some interesting and exciting things with it. I think I moved this course toward being a true web course. The kinds of things the students did were very interactive. I had interest and energy, and after the Wabash Center course, I had some notions of how to make this work. I had plenty of information about the Blackboard platform.

But there is still a good deal of work and imagination involved, particularly for those of us for whom classroom teaching has become second nature. The most valuable point is to rethink your classroom teaching when you have to put it online. And it does take a lot of time and work.

I've had fun doing this. I firmly believe that online teaching is not only valuable, but offers some opportunities that the face-to-face classroom does not. It's not uncommon for students to continue conversations even after the grading is over. The kind of imagination that can be sparked by good online classes is exciting. It's not limited by the hour and fifty minutes you might have in a face-to-face classroom. But I am also uncomfortably aware that online education is viewed in many places as a shortcut. That is, it is viewed as a strategy to teach more students in less time: we can reach out to a whole new population who were previously inaccessible to our institution. I am concerned that the time and energy that is involved in creating good online courses is not always being considered.

The problem is that institutions expect faculty to do all the extra work required to translate a course from a face-to-face environment into an online environment. You should ask your institution for a course reduction so that you can prepare your course. You need to ask for an extremely tech savvy student assistant and an IT department that can help you. We should encourage our institutions to think about the requirements as well as the opportunities of quality online education. And the quality part is important. You can throw together a course, but that's not quality online education.

Good teaching can be done online. It's fun. It's exciting both for the students and for the faculty, but it takes time, work, imagination, and rethinking. How do we help our institutions understand that?

-----

### Discussion

**Sandra Gravett (Appalachian State University):** One of the things that is really important and often overlooked is the impression created by the web page that students see when they first come to the course. Like any other website, if it's not inviting and easily navigated, then you've lost them before you even start.

So I think you're correct about creating a different kind of syllabus with smaller pieces of information linked with hyperlinks. We have to recognize and work with the attention span of our students. But we also have to recognize how quickly we all can intuitively navigate an effectively designed web page. The front page is very important because it brings the student into the course.

**Brent Laytham (North Park Theological Seminary):** At my institution, the distance learning people have designed a standard front page that they believe facilitates student navigation because students don't have to relearn it every time they take an online course.

**Gravett:** We also have a standard front page, but you still choose what modules you use and where you put them.

**Laytham:** For us, module location is standardized as well. Our students use Blackboard. There's a specific ordering of the buttons. Some are optional. You can delete them if you're not going to use them. Some are mandatory and within those there are

## Delamarter, Gravett, Ulrich, Nysse, and Polaski

specific folders. When you get the blank course module it already has folders set up: insert this here and that there.

**Gravett:** I've found that, because I was one of the early adopters and doing it full-time, my pushing back (along with other faculty pushing also) has changed what the IT department does.

**Laytham:** The question is whether in the long run that was good for our students.

**Polaski:** You may feel in some ways the IT department is being intrusive, but an involved IT department is better than an uninvolved department.

**Dick Nysse (Luther Seminary):** It's worth pondering what the analogies are to our face-to-face teaching. If you're a new hire at a school, there are structural things that are a given: blackboards on the wall, windows, maybe you can move the chairs around, maybe you can't. You figure out how to express your passions and insights on that canvas. The analogy might be that a highly structured tech department has all the architecture already laid out. In such a case it's not going to be possible for my contribution to involve the architecture, anymore than it is my job to redesign the building. However, I realize that the content isn't entirely independent of the environment. Again, it requires complete rethinking of the way we teach. I have found that fiddling around answering tech questions in small ways at the beginning of a course can help create a certain culture for the class. Some of the feedback and evaluations taught me that I was actually creating a social presence by answering these mundane questions (such as how a browser works). It was like telling a new student where the library is on campus.

**Unidentified Scholar:** What would you suggest to us if we were very interested in upgrading our distance education pedagogy but we don't have adequate technical support?

**Polaski:** In part, we need to be a little more obstinate and a little less willing to try it on our own. We need to say this can be done, but it should be done well, so the institution needs to help me. We can reach students who have never been reached before, but we need certain things in place. Simply a platform and training to use it is not enough. We need IT support that understands pedagogy at some level. It's important for us as faculty who are moving into this to say we want to do this well, and we won't move forward until we have the support we need.

**Gravett:** I took all kinds of online courses on a variety of subjects. I learn a lot from how they do things. If I'm interested in a topic then I'll take the course and discover lots of cool things they do in that course.

**Johns:** NC State has a continuing education course for teachers to help them establish online credit.

**Gravett:** I'm not talking about taking education courses, necessarily. I've taken film courses. I was just having a good time with the subject matter, but I learned good pedagogical techniques as well. Online learning is very collaborative like that.

**Steve Delamarter (George Fox Evangelical Seminary):** In 2004, the Wabash Center provided funding for me to survey about half of the institutions involved with theological education in North America. From those interviews I created a typology of the use of technology in theological education.<sup>7</sup> I found that there is a threshold between what I call stage I and stage II experience with technology. This threshold is crossed when an institution makes a decision to mainstream the use of technology to further the pursuit of its mission. Up until that time, everything is optional. There is not that much at stake when the courses are optional and not central to the mission of the institution; it can all remain rather innocuous. There can be all kinds of explorations, many of which are unsustainable if you were to try to mainstream it.

A whole series of decisions have to be made when an institution starts to mainstream their online offerings. At that point, you find out if IT stands for Institutional Technology or *Instructional* Technology. These are two very different things. If your IT department is Institutional Technology and they only set up networks and assign user name accounts, they're not going to help you conceptualize environments that are pedagogically sophisticated, that facilitate the individual nuancing that Dick Nysse was talking about. That kind of environment has to be designed by an instructional technologist, someone who knows about technology and pedagogy. And institutions have to pay the cost for that if they're going to mainstream it. It has to be well conceived. The only thing worse than getting to the market second is getting to the market first with a bad product, an unsustainable product. It will take a lot of time for theological education to variegate itself around the use of technology. There's no way to rush it, but we have to get it right.

---

<sup>7</sup> "A Typology of the Use of Technology in Theological Education," *Teaching Theology and Religion* 7, 3: 134–40 (2004).

Copyright of Teaching Theology & Religion is the property of Wiley-Blackwell and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.