

The case for distance learning in theological education: Six strategic benefits of interactive Web-based distance learning

By Meri MacLeod

To fully appreciate the strategic contributions that distance learning can make, one needs to be clear regarding a *learning* paradigm for twenty-first century graduate distance learning and the *interactive* technology necessary to support it. Jerome Bruner's insight on the nature of learning in light of four decades of research is key for quality distance learning:

Educational encounters, to begin with, should result in understanding, not mere performance. Understanding

consists in grasping the place of an idea or fact in some more general structure of knowledge

Acquired knowledge is most useful to a learner, moreover, when it is "discovered" through the learner's own cognitive efforts, for it is then related to and used in

reference to what one has known before. . . . The teacher, in this version of pedagogy, is a guide to understanding, someone who helps you discover on your own. . . . Making meaning involves situating encounters with the world in their appropriate cultural contexts¹

Distance learning course design provides strategic opportunities for faculty to explore the distinctions between a learning-centered paradigm and an instructional paradigm. This contribution of distance learning can offer a wealth of insight to any teaching, including residential. When graduate faculty embrace distance education within a learning paradigm, they are more likely

to use active learning approaches that involve collaborative communication and that integrate the context and experience of students. Typically, both online and residential teaching is improved as faculty gain experience in fostering learning.

Early generations of distance learning were rooted in correspondence courses of the nineteenth century.² Surprisingly, these models still persist in seminaries today through an individualized instruction format, but these static "captured content" courses should not be confused with contemporary models of distance learning.

Contemporary models of distance or distributed learning offer rich collaborative student learning in a community guided by proactive and engaged faculty who will most often use both online and on-campus components. Fundamental to these contemporary models are (1) a cohesive educational design within courses and degree program, (2) integrated student and faculty interaction rather than impersonal discussion tagged onto a course or virtual individualized instruction, (3) faculty ownership of courses and regular course revisions, (4) faculty leadership and oversight of distance courses and programs, (5) careful selection of interactive Web-based technologies congruent with course and program goals, and (6) appropriate learning outcomes assessment integrated into seminary-wide practices.

Six strategic benefits of interactive Web-based distance learning

Interactive graduate models of distance learning offer numerous benefits. The most obvious is the increased enrollment from seminarians who are no longer limited geographically. Less understood are the following six strategic benefits:

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1 *Learning-centered course design*

Faculty will gain experience with a learning-centered paradigm as the basis of course design and teaching. Learning-centered teaching also allows faculty to draw from research informed models such as “situated learning”³ and “communities of practice.”⁴

2 *Learning-centered student assessment*

Interactive distance learning provides opportunities for faculty to gain experience in a learning-centered outcomes approach to student assessment. Accessible technologies expand the ways students can demonstrate their learning. As faculty develop an understanding of assessing student learning, they will be able to draw upon new models of “authentic” and “educative” assessment practices.⁵

3 *Faculty preparation for the demands of the digital generation*

When faculty experience interactive technology in their distance learning courses, they are better prepared to meet the increasing demands of the digital generation of students now arriving on residential campuses. These digitally immersed young adults⁶ expect schools to give Web-based media and its “participatory culture”⁷ a central role in teaching and learning.

4 *Smoother transitions from academic study to full-time ministry*

The integration of in-depth ministry with theological study over multiple years eases the transition into full-time ministry. Distance learning is suited for a model of vocational formation that is rooted in situated learning research. Most often distance students are established in local communities with a strong network of relationships and are forging their pastoral identity in a real-life ministry with demanding responsibilities. Setting boundaries, applying their studies in difficult and crisis situations, and making decisions with conflicting impact on a broad network of relationships all contribute to significant vocational learning. These seminarians are deeply familiar with what to expect in full-time ministry before ever graduating. These programs might even offer insight regarding new learning designs that may lower the disturbing drop-out rates for pastors within their first five years of ministry.

5 *Greater student body diversity*

Distance learning offers the opportunity for greater diversity in the student body through increased racial/ethnic and international students, who can study while remaining in their local communities. E-learning with a global student body can be an important benefit in a globally networked world.

6 *Graduates with greater capacities to lead in twenty-first century ministry*

Learning in collaboration with interactive technologies offers the potential for seminarians to gain new skills and capacities expected of graduates in a twenty-first century world.⁸ Solving new kinds of problems in creative and collaborative ways within the world’s highly social and participatory culture is now essential for effectiveness, and the outdated baby boomer model of leading by positional authority (i.e., from the top) is being replaced with a new paradigm of leadership by influence.⁹

Scholars believe that three interrelated shifts in society are underway.¹⁰ First, the knowledge and skills graduates will need in a “flat” knowledge-based economy are different from those needed in previous generations. Second, approaches of research, teaching, and learning are changing as interactive technologies support innovative pedagogies. And third, characteristics of students are changing as their use of technology shapes their learning styles and preferences. Combined, these changes will undoubtedly have a significant impact on future forms of theological education. New models of distance learning can substantially contribute to a seminary’s capacity to engage this new educational future.¹¹ ♦

See page 33 for endnotes.

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DIRECT LOAN

The recently enacted U.S. federal legislation has made significant changes in federal student aid programs including those used by many ATS-related schools. Among the changes, which are effective July 1, 2010, is moving all aid programs into the government-operated Direct Loan structure. Individual schools that have been using guaranty agencies and private lenders will need to make a change to the Direct Loan program. Information regarding the program is available at <http://www2.ed.gov/offices/OSFAP/DirectLoan/index.html>.

Commission on Accrediting invites third-party comments

The following member schools are receiving comprehensive evaluation committee visits during the fall semester:

St. John's Seminary (MA)
Knox Theological Seminary
Queen's College Faculty of Theology
Ecumenical Theological Seminary
Baptist Missionary Association Theological Seminary
Canadian Southern Baptist Seminary
Logsdon Seminary of Logsdon School of Theology
Nazarene Theological Seminary
Florida Center for Theological Studies
SS. Cyril & Methodius Seminary
Saint Francis Seminary
Acadia Divinity College
Heritage Theological Seminary
Hazelip School of Theology
Wesley Theological Seminary
Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary
St. John's Seminary (CA)

The ATS Commission on Accrediting invites any member school to submit third-party comments on any school scheduled to receive a visit. Comments should be addressed to the attention of the Commission on Accrediting and sent by mail, fax, or email to Susan Beckerdite, beckerdite@ats.edu by September 1. ♦

Petitions to the ATS Board of Commissioners must be received by **April 1** for consideration in its spring meeting and by **November 1** for consideration in its winter meeting.

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ENDNOTES

1. Jerome Bruner, *The Culture of Education* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), xi-xii, 3.
2. Linda M. Cannell, "A Review of Literature on Distance Education," *Theological Education* 36, no. 1 (Autumn 1999): 1-72.
3. Jan Herrington and Ron Oliver, "Critical Characteristics of Situated Learning: Implications for the Instructional Design of Multimedia," <http://methodenpool.uni-koeln.de/situiereteslernen/herrington.pdf> (accessed March 18, 2010).
4. Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).
5. Grant P. Wiggins, *Educative Assessment: Designing Assessments to Inform and Improve Student Performance* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998).
6. John Palfrey and Urs Gasser, *Born Digital: Understanding the First Generation of Digital Natives* (New York: Basic Books, 2008). Craig S. Watkins, *The Young and the Digital: What the Migration to Social-Network Sites, Games, and Anytime, Anywhere Media Means for Our Future* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2009).
7. Henry Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).
8. Chris Dede, "Reinventing the Role of Information and Communications Technologies in Education," *2007 Yearbook-National Society for the Study of Education* (2007).
9. Ori Brafman and Rod A. Beckstrom, *The Starfish and the Spider* (New York: Penguin Group, 2006).
10. Dede, "Reinventing the Role." Howard Gardner, *Five Minds for the Future* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Press, 2008).
11. Chris Dede, "Planning for Neomillennial Learning Styles: Implications for Investments in Technology and Faculty," in *Educating the Net Generation*, ed. Diana G. Oblinger and James L. Oblinger (Boulder, CO: Educause, 2005), www.educause.edu/educatingthenetgen/ (accessed March 18, 2010).

Remember that Degree Program Standards require that schools measure the percent of graduates who find placement appropriate to their vocational intentions.