

AN EVALUATION OF BEST PRACTICES IN ONLINE CONTINUING
THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

by

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PREVIEW

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ABSTRACT

STEPHEN PAUL RAYBON An evaluation of best practices in online continuing theological education (Under the direction of JOHN A. GRETES)

The principle purpose of this mixed methods case study was to evaluate the extent to which a wholly online continuing theological education program operated by an Association of Theological Schools accredited seminary modeled best practices of online education, as exemplified by the findings of the *Quality On the Line* study and the University of Maryland University College (UMUC) *Best Online Instructional Practices* (BOIP) study. In support of that goal, the research examined the extent to which key themes in the pursuit of theological education; sense of community, transformational learning and transfer of learning, were reported by respondents, and looked for an association between best practices and those themes in four specific courses.

Evidence of best practices as indicated by the QOL benchmarks and the BOIP rubric was found in all sources evaluated for that purpose. Likewise, evidence for the key themes was found in all sources evaluated for that purpose.

Within the four core courses, evidence of best practices and key themes in theological continuing education was found for each course where that data was available. Because all evaluated courses demonstrated evidence of best practices and the presence of the key themes, there is an implied but not an empirical association.

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PREVIEW

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AAHE	American Association for Higher Education, American, (now AAHEA) Association for Higher Education and Accreditation
AIR	Administrative Interview respondent
ATS	Association of Theological Schools
BTSR	Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond
BOIP	Best Online Instructional Practices
FIR	Faculty Interview respondent
FR	Respondent to Faculty Survey
R	Respondent to Student Survey
SACS	Southern Association of Colleges and Schools
SCM	School of Christian Ministry
SIR	Student Interview respondent
TEE	Theological Education by Extension
UMUC	University of Maryland University College

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Setting the Stage

The world has shifted. In almost every area of life rapid advances in technology have changed the way we live. How we engage in commerce, communication, politics, medicine, leisure, even religion and romance, has been radically transformed by the advent and exponential growth of the internet, and broadband and cellular telecommunications.

The field of education has been upended by this revolution as much as other arenas of society. Extending access to knowledge and learning is one of the foundational tenets of the educational mission, so using technology in the furtherance of that goal would seem a foregone conclusion. But saying yes to something new often requires saying no to something old and many educators struggle to accommodate new methods for teaching and learning without compromising long held beliefs about what constitutes a classroom or meaningful interaction. Despite those struggles the revolution has continued and online distance education in particular has undergone explosive growth and transformation.

Distance Education

The modern history of distance education began with correspondence school by mail in the 19th century. As new technologies arose in the 20th, they were appropriated for the purpose of extending access to higher education and professional training. Radio, audio recordings, television and then video recordings provided opportunities for those

separated from physical campuses to study for degrees. Correspondence school was invaluable for students who lacked the resources or time to devote to campus-based learning, but was perceived as the poor relation of “real” education at institutions of higher learning (Seevers, 1993; Tilton, 2010).

This view was even more prevalent in theological education. “Access and equity have been driving principles behind educational reform but those principles have not always been pertinent to theological education.... [which] traditionally has viewed itself as involving the formation of a specific chosen/called population” (Patterson, 1996, p. 62). In other words, since theological education was not intended for everyone, great efforts were not necessary to grant universal access. The road to a degree in theological studies was decidedly narrow.

The democratization of American society and higher education in the mid to late 20th century also opened up new possibilities in theological higher education. While formal academic training for the ministry has always been a part of some religious traditions, for many if not most churches in the United States it was not a prerequisite. As more Americans sought and attained college degrees, more churches and pastors decided that an educated pastorate was going to be the norm. But not all ministers were willing or even able to stop in mid-career and relocate families to attend traditional seminaries or divinity schools (Hess, 2005). Ricciuti points out that “theological study and the practice of ministry are no longer sequential for most students, but simultaneous” (2003, p. 147). One response to this reality was the development of theological education by extension.

Theological Distance Education

Theological education by extension (TEE) began as a missionary effort in the 1960's in Guatemala. It was built around very basic study materials that could be mailed to and from students and evaluated by a qualified educator. That educator would also travel to central locations in country for intensive classroom experiences. The model worked so well there and around the world that schools and denominations in the United States began to consider how it might be adapted to meet the growing need for theological education here (Meyers, 2007).

The Association of Theological Schools (ATS), the primary accrediting body for theological higher education in the United States and Canada began a formal study of the issue in 1974, at which time an ATS official expressed his concerns about “the ‘deschooling’ tendencies” of TEE (Aleshire, 1999, p. vii). The model began to grow in popularity but it was not until 1980 that ATS adopted its first standard regarding extension education. Over the next twenty years ATS would produce four major revisions of its distance education standards in an effort to adjust to the changes in technology. The wording of the 2000 standards reflected many of the shifts that had taken place in the previous decades. “Instruction may be synchronous or asynchronous and usually encompasses a wide range of technologies.” Library requirements included “electronic access to digital resources” for distance education students (ATS, 2000, p. 92). Enrollments in ongoing online courses grew from 7,670 students in 2005 to 14,140 in 2011 (Chris Meinzer, ATS, personal communication, February 27, 2012). At the 2012 Biennial Meeting of ATS, a new set of standards will be proposed to reflect the continued growth of online offerings among member schools.

Theological Distance Education Online

In 1998, the Lilly Endowment began awarding grants to 72 institutions of theological higher education through the Information Technology for Theological Teaching program. Each school received \$300,000 to improve capacity to use computer technologies and online resources more effectively. A further grant was issued to ATS in 2002 to study the results of the effort (“Of wikis, moodle and blogs: technology and educational practices program suggests new directions,” 2008).

The initial grants were focused on technology in the classroom and resulted in the installation of smart classrooms and training of faculty in applications. But as the electronic infrastructure began to develop on campus, including the adoption of course management systems like Blackboard, many began to see new possibilities for distance education.

Theological Continuing Education Online

One institution that received major funding from Lily was The Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond (BTSR). A million dollar grant received in 1999 led to the research and development for a distance education program that became the School of Christian Ministry (SCM) in 2003, offering asynchronous online courses in a non-degree program of study for church leaders. Although originally conceived as a certificate program, demand for individualized courses of study and continuing education for graduates led the program to expand to 26 short term web-based courses offered to hundreds of learners from around the country and the world.

Despite a promising start as the only program of its kind; a wholly online, non-degree program offering unique courses, under the aegis of an ATS accredited graduate

school, SCM fell victim to the economic downturn and was suspended in 2010. The SCM experiment offers an illuminating case for research on the use of online learning to meet the continuing theological education needs of lay leaders in congregations across the globe.

Research Problem

These developments in technology and distance education have come at a critical time for Christian congregations. In the last twenty years, a number of factors, including devaluation of training, decentralization of denominations, time, money, and distance issues, have made it more difficult to gather lay church leaders for concentrated onsite continuing education events. The need for training in education, worship, theology, and ministry for lay leaders is perhaps stronger than ever before because leaders who were so thoroughly trained in the past are retiring from active service. Although the need is great, the time-tested means of meeting that need are no longer working. Simultaneously, schools of theological higher education are looking for ways to build bridges with local congregations both as a function of their mission and as a means to foster relationships that result in future students and financial support (Aleshire, 2010). It appears that if these institutions can use internet technology to meet the training requirements of local congregations, then all parties will benefit: schools, churches and individuals seeking further training.

Significance of this Study

Studies of online learning have prompted careful consideration of pedagogical, social, technological, structural and assessment issues that in turn have led to the development of best practices standards. Theological higher education has been hesitant

to accept the possibilities of online education because of specific concerns about the quality of interaction and the capacity for community, barriers to achieving the affective learning goals of theological education, including transformational learning, and the theological compatibility of a medium that is essentially disembodied. Research that can help build a case for the compatibility, perhaps even the synchronicity, of best practices in online education and the goals of theological education will do much to pave the way for further exploration of the uses of this medium to meet congregational continuing education needs.

The School of Christian Ministry presents a model that may meet these needs and be reproducible in other settings. However, although established in 2003, SCM never underwent a formal program evaluation. Ongoing formative evaluation was done internally through student evaluations and course observations, but there was no objective study of the program's effectiveness. Being able to analyze the efficacy of this medium in the field of theological continuing education could encourage other institutions to explore the possibility of adding online continuing education programs. Schools, larger churches and groups of churches could partner for training which develops church leaders, cultivates ongoing peer relationships, and strengthen congregations and their connections to schools of theological higher education.

Purpose of Research

The principle purpose of this study is to evaluate the extent to which the School of Christian Ministry (SCM) at Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond (BTSR) modeled best practices of online education, as exemplified by the findings of the *Quality On the Line* study and the University of Maryland University College (UMUC) *Best*

Online Instructional Practices (BOIP) study. In support of that goal, the research examines the extent to which key themes in the pursuit of theological education are reported by students, and looks for a connection between the two.

Process of Research

This is a mixed methods case study program evaluation. Program documents, including original proposal, strategic plan, catalog, and training materials for instructors, were examined for awareness and inclusion of best practices of online education using a checklist built from the twenty-four benchmarks from the *Quality On the Line* report (Appendix A).

Next, the key components (syllabi, course schedules, assignments, discussion boards, etc.) of the four core courses of the program: *The Church—A System of Relationships*, *Biblical Basis for Ministry*, *Theological Reflection*, and *Spiritual Formation and Calling* were analyzed for implementation of best practices using the BOIP Online Classroom Observation rubric.

SCM Online Course evaluation data was then analyzed for descriptions of the program participants, and further evidence of the dimensions of best practices from the BOIP rubric. Wrap up comments from discussion boards, student and faculty surveys and follow up interviews with students, faculty and administrators served to fill in gaps of information from previous steps as well as to discover the degree to which students experienced a sense of community and transformational learning in their online courses, and the extent to which transfer of learning has taken place for students in their ministry settings as a measure of changes in behavior influenced by the program. Finally, the

study explored the possibility of an association between implementation of best practices in specific courses and these three desired themes in theological continuing education.

Research Questions

This study undertook to answer five key questions regarding the SCM program:

1. To what extent does SCM model best practices of online curriculum and instruction?
2. To what extent do students report experiencing a sense of community in their courses?
3. To what extent do students report experiencing transformational learning?
4. To what extent do students report transferring their learning into ministry settings?
5. Is there an association between implementation of best practices in specific courses and these three desired themes in theological continuing education?

Delimitations

Study will be focused on one theological continuing education program. No equivalent programs at other institutions were discovered during the literature review.

Limitations

Because the study will be limited to one program with a small student population and a small number of courses, the question of generalizability is legitimate. It is anticipated that the use of accepted standards of best practices supported by research will make the findings helpful in multiple settings.

Definitions

Asynchronous: mode of online learning that does not require teachers and learners to be connected at a given time.

Continuing education: formal plan of study to improve the knowledge and practice of adult learners.

Course management system: software application and electronic superstructure, also known as a platform, for the development, offering and administration of training programs, classes and course content via the internet.

Distance education: The provision of instruction by an institution in which learners and teachers are not usually gathered in the same physical location but are linked by technology that enables shared content and communication. Also “distributed education” and “education by extension.”

Online education: distance education using the internet as the primary technology.

Theological education: The education of individuals in the theological disciplines of religious heritage (scripture, history and doctrine), cultural context, personal spiritual formation, and ministry leadership practices.

Theological higher education: post-baccalaureate education for professional ministerial leadership, offered typically by seminaries and divinity schools that confer the Master of Divinity as the basic degree.

Summary

The world has shifted, and the efforts of institutions of theological higher education to provide continuing education for church leaders must shift as well. The School of Christian Ministry of the Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond

represented one such effort. This study seeks to evaluate the possibility that this effort could be an exemplar for others.

Toward that end, an examination of the current research literature that focuses upon basic issues in online learning, best practices in online education, theological education online and evaluation theory and practice will be presented in Chapter 2. The gaps in research provide more than adequate ground for this study to explore. No evaluation of an online continuing education program connected with an accredited theological institution was found. Chapter 3 then describes in detail the research questions, setting, theoretical approaches and procedure that guided the study. Chapter 4 presents the results of the research and Chapter 5 a discussion of the findings, implications, and recommendations of this study.

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Shifts in the use of computer and internet technology have sent unremitting seismic waves through institutions of higher education for the last ten to fifteen years. Administrators, faculty, and students have been striving to discover new norms in a world where a “class” can consist of students living on three continents, facilitated by an instructor on a fourth, studying content drawn from a collection on a fifth, or all five. Early adopters, who had existed on the fringe of faculties, became e-learning gurus with their own specialized programs and consulting firms. For-profit institutions that had been disdained for less than adequate correspondence courses became leaders in the field of online learning and chief competitors for enrollment with historic “brick and mortar” institutions, a term which is in itself an indicator of the tsunami of change. Before the wave was fully experienced, how many knew there was any other kind of educational institution?

As one indicator of the scope of change, over twenty years ago as an undergraduate history major and then a master of divinity student, I spent many of my waking hours researching in an academic library, scanning the periodical indices for articles and hoping hardcopies could be found in the stacks rather than in the microfilm collection. Freedom from the study carrel came in the expensive form of copying machines and microfilm printers. Interlibrary loan was a time-consuming process that had to be initiated at the beginning of a project or not at all. In contrast, during four years of

doctoral study at a level II research university, I have spent hundreds upon hundreds of hours in reading and research, almost all of it from a recliner in my home.

But there is more than anecdotal evidence for this shift. In 2002 1,602,970 higher education students at public institutions, slightly less than 10 percent of enrollment took at least one online class. The most recent estimate, for fall 2010, indicated 6.1 million online students, slightly more than 31 percent. The compound annual growth rate for online students between 2002 and 2008 was 18 percent, compared to the overall higher education growth rate of 2 percent (Allen & Seaman, 2010, p. 5). In the for-profit sector, Phoenix University, founded in 1976, grew to over 470,800 students, making it one of the largest mega-universities in the world, alongside wholly online institutions Open University in the United Kingdom and Gandhi University in India (De Groote, 2010) (Seok, Meyen, Poggio, Semon, & Tillberg-Webb, 2008).

These developments in technology and distance education have come at a critical time for both theological education and Christian congregations. In the last twenty years, it has become more difficult to gather leaders for concentrated training while at the same time the need for such training in education, worship, theology, and ministry for lay leaders is perhaps stronger than ever before because the highly trained leaders of the past are retiring from active service (Hollon, & Hammon, 2004; Reber, 2010). Today both lay and professional ministry leaders are less able or willing to disrupt their families or their ministries to travel for concentrated educational opportunities (MacLeod, 2008). Many churches are selecting and training paid staff from their volunteer leadership, familiar with the local context, rather than importing highly-educated staff that must spend