Face-to-screen learning: Seminaries go online

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As Douglas Stuart's online survey course on the Old Testament begins, the lecture hall fills with students from a previous year. He himself looks some years younger than he is now. "All right," says the longtime professor at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, "let's talk about Exodus and covenant." One current student watches the video of Stuart's class in her pajamas at 9:00 in the morning, while another views the material and writes responses at 7:00 in the evening. Stuart recorded the lecture in a physical classroom, before a live class that laughed at his jokes, asked questions and made comments. But when students respond to the online lecture today, they do so by e-mail and telephone. Stuart says he has not relaxed his expectations for the course; moreover, the school's standards remain "pretty rigorous."

All this is possible through Semlink, a program that allows Gordon-Conwell students to complete up to a third of their degree online in self-paced courses. Some students choose to try out courses in the M.Div. program online before enrolling at the South

Hamilton, Massachusetts, school. The tuition savings can certainly be significant—up to 50 percent. Online education allows students to stay in their own homes and keep their regular jobs rather than relocate to Gordon-Conwell's campus. As if this weren't convenience enough, students may take six months to complete a course.

Having been with the school for 42 years, Stuart is the senior member of the faculty, and he admits that he was initially skeptical about online teaching. "These methods had to be proven to my satisfaction. I'm a huge believer in residential education."

But he has been won over. Students in the online class receive close proctoring, as well as his lectures, PowerPoint presentations and supplementary materials. He has a graduate student to help with the course, but he does all the grading himself. "This is just about as close as you can come to a classroom," he said.

"I couldn't have completed my master's in education without online classes," said Tommy Lister, who heads the distance learning program at Fuller Theological Seminary in California. Kim Parker, an M.Div. student who lives in Houston with her special-needs daughter, found online classes "critical," because her daughter's circumstances didn't allow her to relocate to Fuller's Pasadena campus. The workload was similar to that on campus, "but we were actually a closer community online," she said. She found this especially true when she took a class about ministry to sexually exploited children. The teacher helped her cope with disturbing cases in Houston even though she led the class from her home in Thailand.

Richard Erickson of Fuller marvels that he has taught New Testament courses online to students from Rwanda, Nigeria, Uganda, South Africa, Kenya, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Spain, Turkey, Albania, Australia, New Zealand, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Mexico, Brazil and Argentina. "This really serves Fuller's mission of bringing theological education to a wider clientele that can't come to campus," he said, "and it brings an exciting, rich dialogue to courses. We had a Rwandan student who had lived through Hutu violence. That was an enriching perspective on what life is really like. It really made a big difference in how we read scripture."

Whether it's to make courses convenient for students, to present material more dynamically or to utilize a cost-cutting measure, theological education is moving online. The move wins high marks from many students and teachers. According to Dale Hale, director of distributed learning at Asbury Theological Seminary, student evaluations and graduate exit interviews confirm a high level of satisfaction. If it

wasn’t for online opportunities, he said, some students would not be at Asbury.

But it’s an unsettling development for some educators and alumni. “If learning is ‘caught’ as well as ‘taught,’ it is easier to catch the spirit of a professor when the student is in his or her immediate presence,” said Jerry Blevins, a retired Presbyterian minister. “Actually being face to face with professors and classmates and the whole campus widened and deepened my appreciation of the field of theology.”

Harold Attridge of Yale Divinity School believes that certain challenges “are most forcefully posed in a community of learners who study together, who pray together, and who support one another. Communities of that sort have formed and shaped me. While distance learning may be a useful tool in an educational strategy for parts of a theological curriculum, and while it may be necessary in circumstances in which resources are scarce and students spread far, it cannot do the job on its own.”

But the idea that students will reside on a campus and be taught by resident faculty, attending classes at specified times, seems increasingly quaint. Many people today are accustomed to getting information anytime they want, on devices they carry everywhere. For two decades, students at small institutions have had access to vast resources online through subscription services like LexisNexis, JSTOR and EBSCOhost. (Students can also find substantial portions of texts for free on Google Books.)

Professors now place course content online, including lectures, and reserve their class time for discussion. This has the advantage of giving students more opportunities to engage the material.

The trends are moving away from ivy-covered halls, dorm rooms, classrooms and high costs. Where higher education once seemed immune to market pressures, it is now undergoing a price revolution. Helped in part by a weak economy, online schools such as Phoenix and Capella universities have enjoyed phenomenal growth—and theological counterparts, such as Andersonville and Rockbridge seminaries, have emerged.

Prestigious traditional institutions may profess not to be concerned, but last fall Harvard and MIT launched a nonprofit collaboration, edX, which allows anyone, anywhere, to enroll in certain courses taught by their faculty members. There is no admissions process nor is there a fee (though there’s no credit for completing a

course either). Open Yale Courses, which are also free (and offer no certification), include Dale Martin's popular Introduction to the New Testament.

This past fall 370,000 students took part in edX. That number is small compared to the 1.9 million who have taken at least one course via Coursera, a for-profit company founded by two professors at Stanford. Coursera pioneered massive open online courses (called MOOCs) and partners with more than 30 of the world's finest universities. Classes range from those easiest to teach online—such as computer science—to the most difficult, such as poetry and philosophy. Coursera hopes to earn a profit by charging students for certifying completion of a course.

This winter, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in North Carolina is offering what it calls a "MOOC in Hermeneutics" with President Daniel Akin. Terming it a MOOC in this case may be an overstatement—it's a way of saying the class is for free and open (unless one wants graduate-level credit for it).

One might think that theological subjects would be harder to teach online than natural sciences, for example, but instructors report that the opposite is true. Ministerial training requires personal engagement, which the online environment fosters.

Distance learning is not new. It has been part of D.Min. programs for some time. Sarah Drummond, dean of the faculty at Andover Newton Theological School, noted that her school has been refining online classes in master's level programs for ten years.

"What we've found is that success depends not on the subject matter, but on teaching style," Drummond said. "I've taught the same class in person and online, and quite often the online students know each other better."

She's convinced that more discussion takes place in an online class than in the classroom. When the class is online, "no one can hide," she said. "Introverts need time to formulate a response; it's hard for them to do [it] on the fly. But in an asynchronous class, where they're posting to discussion threads, the introverts win! Or at least they have equal access to the conversation."

Jeffrey Mahan of Iliff School of Theology in Denver agrees. In online courses, "you can't just show up and smile at the professor," he said. "You have to post, you have to say something." When teaching an online class, he said, he lectures less and his

students have better conversations. Their discussions are lively and their affection for one another palpable as they note one another's verbal tics and characteristic perspectives.

One of the first to teach Fuller's online courses, Erickson said that students in his virtual classes tend to master the material better and show a greater appreciation for community.

"I've learned a great deal from them about how to teach in person," he said. "Even in a physical classroom, I don't lecture now. I post those lectures online, in written format, so our class time may be spent in discussion. This 'flipped' format has been terrifically successful."

What works and what doesn't? That depends on who you ask. Venita Doughty, director of educational technology at Denver Seminary, believes that almost anything can be taught online, especially classes such as systematic theology and biblical studies that emphasize cognitive learning. But in her view, "Preaching and counseling [courses] shouldn't be online."

Stuart at Gordon-Conwell agrees. "You can't do everything," he said. "We will not teach exegesis via Semlink—it can't be done. Things that can be taught by lecture are all right, but if you want to teach method, interactive thinking, problem solving, preaching—they don't work."

At Fuller, however, nothing is off-limits. Kevin Osborn, chief information officer, said that 65 different courses are available currently, and courses in preaching and counseling are coming soon.

"In my experience, preaching is one of the best courses to offer online," he said. Students get feedback "from a greater variety of people, more responses than in the traditional classroom." Erickson said, "I've never found any classes that were inappropriate for teaching online."

Everyone seems to agree that online coursework must be made demanding. If online education is perceived as being too easy or of little value, that's bad for business. Increasingly, schools set standards for participation. Gordon-Conwell specifies that students must take part in discussion forums that integrate their coursework with broader ministerial topics, must keep in touch with a proctor and must submit lengthy written assignments to show that they have absorbed the material.

In response to the rapid growth of online programs, the Association of Theological Schools will consider this summer whether it will accredit M.Div. programs in which more than two-thirds of courses are completed online. The more theologically conservative Association for Biblical Higher Education already does so.

It's notable that some theologically liberal schools seem resistant to the online trends. Union Theological Seminary in New York, for example, has no online classes. And an M.Div. at Union is expensive—$44,000 a year—in large part because residence in New York City is so expensive. Distance learning, one imagines, might be a way to share Union's cosmopolitan strengths more widely.

"I am committed to the importance of formation, through face-to-face contact in a direct, embodied community," said Serene Jones, president of Union, who noted that "none of these new models has yet been tested long enough to be proven pedagogically effective or financially feasible." Yet she added that she has a 16-year-old daughter "who lives online," and she expects the school to explore online resources in partnership with Columbia University.

Harvard Divinity School, Yale Divinity School, Princeton Theological Seminary and Duke Divinity School don't offer online classes. And Yale won't accept them for transfer credit.

"YDS has considered online classes briefly and decided that this is not the direction we wish to proceed in for the foreseeable future," said Emilie Townes, associate dean. "The faculty's high value of person-to-person in-person contact with students would not make us a candidate for online courses." Harvard Divinity does not yet participate in the university's edX project. Perhaps elite institutions sense that they will risk too much, or gain too little, by widening access.

Mahan of Iliff noted a parallel to an earlier technological revolution. "Evangelicals took up television, while the mainline churches were much more cautious, less creative," he observed. "Many people today have a more diverse, more networked religious identity. But we're resistant to that because we have institutions to maintain."

Motivated by financial pressures, Lexington Theological Seminary, the oldest seminary of the Disciples of Christ, has slashed its traditional campus instruction and moved to distance learning. But if schools are looking for a significant financial savings from the move to online classes, they will be disappointed, contended Kevin

Osborn of Fuller. “When you do it right, there are costs for faculty development. It’s not a cash cow.”

Perhaps the next step for seminaries is to deliver academic resources directly to congregations, not just to students. Luther Seminary, for example, offers a number of long-form webinars for congregational leaders that resemble degree programs. Andover Newton partners with the Alban Institute to offer online courses for laity through the Local Education and Renewal Network (LEARN), now in its eighth year. Fuller uses video conferencing technology to bring instruction from Pasadena to a large church in Atlanta.

The revolution that has shaken higher education will one day reach the church. The notion that worship services happen in a physical building, with only local talent, for a given time, one day a week, is itself being tested. Few other transactions in modern life are so limited. When so many people now find “community” online, shouldn’t theological schools prepare students to meet people there?

Mahan said, “I made a choice to create an online course about religion and ministry in the online environment.” He says he won’t teach Media, Religion and Culture in a face-to-face setting. “The old model of face-to-face ministry can’t be the only thing that we do,” he said. “Ministry has to figure out how to move into that space, and it’s our responsibility as theological educators to help students think that through.”

The key, he believes, is for students to think about how they interact with media and how they construct their own religious identities. He asks them to keep a media log over a 48-hour period. If they find that task almost impossible because they jump from one platform to another—well, that’s the point. Each student is asked to follow one lively religious website and share his or her findings with the group.

Nevertheless, despite all the virtual learning, seminaries are still training people to serve actual congregations. In that respect, students even at the most experimental schools are traditionalists. “I was always looking forward to the parish,” says Mike Waddey, a Southeastern Baptist graduate who has published a blog, Rural Route Church. “I still think of ministry as what happens face to face.”