

Online Teaching and Learning: On the Road to Developing Distance Learning Standards for Communities of Learners

Rev. Sergius Halvorsen, Ph.D., Sebastian Mahfood, Ph.D.,
and Mary Beckmann, Ed.D.

Online education has seen tremendous growth over the last several years and continues to expand at a faster rate than originally predicted (Carr, 2000; Royer, 2006; Allen & Seaman, 2007; Mossavar-Rahmani, Larson-Daugherty, 2007). Improved learning in online classes, and in some cases a more profound and higher excellence of instruction in face-to-face classroom teaching, is due to the expansion of online education (Smith, Ferguson, Caris, 2001; National Education Association, 2008).

Studies show that because of the rapid expansion, an interest has been generated in more closely inspecting the value and effectiveness of online instruction. One weakness of online learning is retention of students, which is considerably lower in online courses than in face-to-face courses (Diaz, 2002; Royer, 2006; Allen & Seaman, 2007). Low retention is a concern for online education because high dropout rates could be construed as indicative of the low quality of education (Diaz, 2002). Poor course management; lack of course structure; and student concerns of isolation, belonging, and lack of connectedness are cited as the reasons for low retention (Herbert, 2006).

Standardized instruction for online learning would not only improve retention by offering consistent, high-quality learning for students, but it would also assist learners to become self-directed and self-disciplined. In addition to addressing retention and the above concerns, standardized instruction would benefit faculty by establishing a protocol for high-quality course content and highly effective course management.

Distance Learning Essential Student Rights

The first generation of distance learning courses in the Internet era was comprised of essentially “correspondence courses on steroids” that used email as a faster and cheaper alternative to traditional surface mail. With the marked improvement in digital technologies available to consumers (personal computers, webcams, camcorders, MP3 Players, CD and DVD, and the things that have followed) and the widespread availability of inexpensive, high-speed, broadband Internet access, digital communication became an increasingly multimedia experience. No longer were people limited to text messages as a way to interact with one another, but animations, audio, graphics, Web sites and interactivity combined to produce an experience which in so many ways emulated a face-to-face encounter that the sum total of these virtual interactions has come to be called cyberspace.

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Coined by science fiction author William Gibson in his 1982 story “Burning Chrome,” cyberspace is a rather remarkable term inasmuch as it implies that the sum total of multimedia communication between millions of people worldwide actually constitutes an inhabitable space.¹ As the highly interactive, multi-sensory online experience has become the norm, computer literate students have begun to expect a learning experience more engaging than the first generation of distance learning courses. As educators began to recognize that Internet-based technology could enhance the learning experience, the second generation of distance learning courses emerged. Second generation distance learning courses offer teachers and learners—inhabitants of cyberspace—an opportunity to create and nurture vital communities of teachers and learners.

In every community, whether a town, a nation, or a distance learning course in cyberspace, certain basic rights or conventions for interaction enhance the “quality of life” for everyone in the community. Because teachers and institutions establish the “ground rules” for learning communities, they bear the primary responsibility for maintaining an environment that is conducive to establishing and maintaining their vibrancy. In order to better accomplish the objective of cultivating dynamic and healthy learning communities in cyberspace, we propose that distance learning programs adopt the following Distance Learning Bill of Rights.

Each distance learning student has the right to

1. a syllabus that clearly indicates its expectations for student work, including assignments, papers, exams, and class discussions along with their relative weights;
2. access required reading materials either through books that are in print—preferably in the most current edition—or via download;
3. purchase all reading materials for a course for no more than \$100;
4. receive acknowledgement of all communication within 48 hours (when professors are on vacation, they should have auto-reply);
5. receive narrative evaluations from the professor on each of their major assignments within two weeks of the due date so that they know how they are progressing and can implement critical feedback in subsequent work; and
6. review the syllabus along with a list of required texts, no less than four weeks prior to the beginning of each semester.

Most of these rights may appear to be basic common sense, or common decency, and some may question why they are necessary at all. Yet, most teachers, learners, and administrators of distance learning programs will attest to the fact that such basic rights are not automatically afforded to students. Many reasons exist perhaps as to why this is so, but the most obvious is that students who are not in regular face-to-face contact with professors can be easily ignored, not because of any ill-will on the part of teachers, but as an unfortunate side effect of the fact that students who are “out of sight” can be “out of mind.” The primary objective of these basic rights is to ensure that students benefit from regular, meaningful contact with their instructors. For a learning community to thrive, students should never have the experience of being “lost in cyberspace.” Beyond the primary objective of maintaining contact between teachers and learners, the basic rights ensure that distance learning students are afforded the same level of accessibility to necessary learning materials and academic accountability as their colleagues in the face-to-face learning communities.

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Many distance learning programs consist of many first-generation courses that are little more than correspondence courses conducted via email. Performing substantive revision on existing courses is not the easiest task. Professors who may have grown accustomed to the relative simplicity of first-generation courses also may be reluctant to engage and embrace the new technologies and learning paradigms that characterize second-generation courses. These essential student rights, however, help to establish the basic objectives of the second-generation courses. Once these objectives are established, then the use of new technologies may more easily follow since they allow the professor to provide the second-generation learning experience more easily. In other words, it is our hope that the essential student rights serve as a transformative instrument.

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expectations listed in grids. Each grid is assigned a numeric point value and the criteria within the grid are linked to specific course goals. When presented at the onset of a class, a rubric will make certain of proper communication between instructor and students regarding course objectives, expectations, and criteria.

The word rubric is originally derived from the Latin word, *rubrica*, or red ochre or red chalk. Certain passages in liturgical missals were printed in red to indicate what should be read aloud, thus the origin of the word "rubric." In academia, a rubric refers to a set of rules, procedures, or protocols to establish a manner of conduct or direction. Students may be well aware of course curriculum goals, but students also need direction on how to relate to, or display, those goals. Rubrics offer guidance and direction and assist students with focusing on the end product.

Although creating a rubric is time consuming for instructors, the time spent grading student work is cut significantly if the rubric is an effective rubric. To be effective, a rubric must contain detailed explanations of clearly stated evaluative criteria. Criteria should be easy to read and understand and match course goals so students will understand what they are supposed to be learning and instructors will understand what they are supposed to be grading. Effective rubrics should be comprehensive and contain clear ex-

The Necessity for Rubrics

The purpose of assessing student work is to provide formative feedback and to evaluate and guide student action. In addition, assessment provides instructors with a method to determine if learning is taking place and if the learning is meaningful. A variety of methods to assess student work exists, one of which being the use of a rubric.

Rubrics are basically scoring guides with a set of

expectations. A rubric should clearly state intended course goals and objectives and never leave students confused about outcome directives. A basic rule for creating a rubric is if a learning objective is going to be assessed, it should be an element within a rubric, and the intended outcome should be examined and explained closely. Each grid within a rubric should be appropriate for the goals of each assignment that is to be assessed. An effec-

tive and high-quality rubric should show instructor and student, at a glance, assessment procedures and evaluative criteria.

To assure that both instructors and students benefit from a rubric, an instructor might consider creating two rubrics—one to use for grading and one containing student-friendly wording. For example, an instructor might use the word “participation,” and know exactly to what grading criteria this refers. Students, however, may need a more basic and detailed explanation such as “post at least ten discussions.” The wording an instructor uses in a grading rubric might necessitate creating a more basic rubric for student use. If a student has to take time to decipher the wording of a rubric, the rubric may be thought incomprehensible and will not be used, or the student might require numerous phone calls or emails to the instructor asking for clarification.

A variety of rubric generators and pre-made rubrics are available online. A word of caution when tempted to take the easy route and use a pre-made rubric. The time it takes to edit a pre-made rubric, to assure a perfect match between course goals and rubric criteria, might take longer than creating one from scratch. Often pre-made rubric criteria do not match course goals, and this results in a lack of clarity in student expectations. Unclear expectations will lead to frustrated students and to a frustrated instructor because submitted work will not match grading criteria.

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Learning Communities in Cyberspace

For those just beginning to think about learning communities, it may be helpful to consider three different levels of community: course, institution, and mission. The first level is a community of teachers and learners that is formed in the context of a single course. The course-level community consists of students who

all share a common interest in the subject matter, and have all completed the necessary prerequisites for that course, along with the teacher or teachers who possess expertise in the course material. The second level is a community of learners within a particular institution. The institution-level community could include students at different levels of degree completion, as well as from different degree programs. Additionally, it would include teachers from different disciplines, along with administrative staff who work with the students. The third level is a community of learners who are united by a shared mission. The mission-level community of learners would include teachers, learners, administrators, and professionals of all skill levels who are united in accomplishing a single mission. This is not to say that course or institution level communities do not share a mission; rather, it is to say that there are communities that transcend the formal bounds of a particular course, or a particular institution, and are united by a shared mission. The diverse community of teachers and learners nurtured through the work of the National Catholic Bioethics Center is a good example of a mission-level community. In all of these instances, distance learning and the technology that facilitates it play a vital role in enabling learning communities of all types to exist in ways that were never before possible.

Teaching and learning environments constructed in cyberspace enable participants to engage with one another without being in physical proximity. This is both a blessing and a curse. It is a blessing because persons who otherwise would never have an opportunity to learn from one another form vital learning communities. The depth and influence of online communities is evident in a recent commentary by Ayelet Waldman who tells how members of her online community intervened to save her life during an episode of suicidal depression.² Such a level of community among individuals who otherwise would never interact with one another is certainly a blessing. On the other hand, however, the curse of cyberspace is that the absence of physical proximity can lead to interactions that are hurtful. A particularly notorious example of this is the recent case of cyber-bullying in which a vindictive mother tormented a young girl by posing as a young male admirer, only to cruelly end the bogus relationship by writing, “The world would be a better place without you.” Shortly thereafter the girl took her life.³ As Sebastian Mahfood has written in his recent article “Love and Responsibility: the Personalization Principle in Cyberspace,” cyberspace makes it frighteningly easy to objectify others. Even if the most

egregious forms of abuse never occur, teachers and learners need to be constantly on guard to avoid situations that quickly poison learning communities in cyberspace.

“In a face-to-face learning environment, teachers and learners have at their disposal the wide spectrum of non-verbal forms of communication.”

In a face-to-face learning environment, teachers and learners have at their disposal the wide spectrum of non-verbal forms of communication. This, however, is only rarely the case with distance learning. In a face-to-face environment, a professor might say something that really confuses a student. Usually, extreme confusion is displayed through a distinct look of confusion or frustration. Seeing this, the professor can immediately inquire as to the nature of the confusion and then offer a clarification. In a more extreme instance, a teacher might offer a piece of constructive criticism that touches a nerve of a student, provoking anger or embarrassment. Anger and embarrassment also are easily detected through facial expressions, and in this case the teacher can quickly apologize, clarify, or otherwise make amends. Similar situations can arise between colleagues in a classroom, or in a study group. Yet, teachers and learners in a distance-learning context do not have the benefit of immediate non-verbal responses to gauge how they have been understood. Thus, it is essential that members of learning communities in cyberspace cultivate a heightened sensitivity to how they are perceived by others through digital interactions. Moreover, every effort should be made to nurture open lines of communication so that when misunderstandings arise, they can be quickly identified, addressed, and resolved.

Because of the often faceless character of cyberspace, the formation of learning communities in courses offered entirely online is essential to establishing a sense of *presence* among the participants, who include the course professor and the learners coming together around the materials that comprise the content of the course. In face-to-face teaching and learning environments, learning communities often are formed campus-wide and involve targeted groups of stakeholders within

the institution focusing on a variety of learning goals. Professors of disciplinary content courses pair up with curriculum support professors and residential life advisors to form communities of learners that focus on, for example, research methods specific to, say, anthropology operating within a holistic social context. Clusters like this can exist in conjunction with other clusters so that a given administrator, faculty member, or student may be involved in several learning communities simultaneously.

Each learning community, then, may have a specific purpose, but all of them have a common purpose, which is, according to Nancy Shapiro and Jodi Levine in *Creating Learning Communities: a Practical Guide to Winning Support, Organizing for Change, and Implementing Programs* (1990), to “intentionally seek to transform the learning environment” (180). The transformation that is being pursued is one that engages students as active producers of their teaching and learning environments and inculcates within them a drive for lifelong learning that is reasonably supported by broad-based skill sets that will enable it.

Online teaching and learning, however, is different from face-to-face teaching and learning in the sense that online courses often are offered as self-contained entities rather than as part of a larger communal network more readily apparent to persons required to be in the same place at a common time, and this provides a significant challenge to the formation of learning communities in distance learning programs.

Because of the emphasis on enabling students to become producers of their teaching and learning environments, learning-community formation may be effective in the graduate programs of major seminaries and theological institutes. Learning-community models already exist, in fact, within seminary formation environments even if they are not called by that name. Rev. Paul Rothschild at Kenrick-Glennon Seminary in St. Louis, for instance, facilitates a program of theological reflection that engages transitional deacons in ongoing dialogue with first-, second-, and third-year theologians over critical incidents experienced during their supervised ministry. Rev. Edward James Richard, dean of students at Kenrick-Glennon Seminary, engages in dialogue three times a year the professors involved in teaching each student cohort for the purpose of garnering a comprehensive understanding of each student’s performance within the program. The outcomes of these meetings that identify student strengths and areas for improvement are then provided to the students at their regular

formation meetings through their formation advisors. This process enables goals to be put in place in preparation for advancement within the program, and all faculty responsible for any given student endeavor to assist that student better through a more focused response to the student's activity within the academic courses in which he is enrolled.

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Even some of the courses offered within Kenrick's program, such as marriage preparation, have the foundation for a broad-based learning community through their interdisciplinary character that brings various faculty and guest speakers into contact with the students. The key to realizing the potential of the learning community format, though, lies in pursuing it with greater intentionality than currently may exist within seminary programs. Models have to be discussed and structures put in place through the coordinated efforts of the various administrative, faculty, and student committees that would normally be responsible for diffusing innovation within a given program.

For the seminaries and theological institutes that enjoy stand alone distance learning degree programs, the development of learning communities not only is crucial to the process of accreditation through the Association of Theological Schools (ATS), but also is essential in its own right to the holistic formation of the students who will constitute them. At present, all ATS-accredited schools that administer distance learning degree programs must require a student to be in residence at the seminary or approved extension site for at least one-third of his or her time in the program. The way this has been translated in practice is through a division of course credits so that an institution offering, for instance, a 90-hour Masters of Divinity degree, might make it possible for students to complete their face-to-

face work in short residency bursts of one- or two-week intensive on-campus courses for which student housing might be provided.

If a learning community is to be created within a structure of this kind, however, it has to be actively promoted during the offsite, asynchronous portion of a student's time in the program. Some ways of doing that might involve the nurturing of a student-life association with various student committees and faculty sponsors, the development of a student-managed writing center or technology support service, or the promotion of social or academic fraternities and sororities. The idea to strengthen the teaching and learning environment in this way taps into the rich diversity that any program of study naturally draws to itself in order to meaningfully harness for the collective good the various gifts possessed by each member of the learning community.

For learning communities to be successful, they have to be structured not only by the needs of the program but also through the input of representatives from each program's stake- holding groups. Face-to-face models of effective learning communities may be translated into cyberspace for adult learners with a success ratio that is usually proportionate to the amount of institutional support received through such activities as faculty advising, administrative sponsorship, financial assistance, and the like. The students within the program, though, need to enjoy a formative role within any learning community that seeks to mobilize their participation. Holy Apostles College and Seminary in Cromwell, Connecticut, for instance, has two entirely online master of arts degree programs in philosophy and theology, and it sponsors one student organization, the Dead Philosophers Society, which is entirely student driven. The Society has about four dozen members who assist in providing persons enrolled in those two programs with a sense of community outside the courses that they share in common. Opportunities abound through the Society to help students network with one another across courses for mentoring purposes, project collaboration, and the like, and such opportunities can be intentionally structured within the program through advising schedules that emphasize necessary prerequisites, course clusters that bring complementary courses together for the purpose of sharing keystone or capstone projects among them, and other things.

This is where the institution has a correlative opportunity to facilitate the work of the Society by bringing its members into its academic committees, especially those concerned with programs, policies, and resource

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acquisition. On-campus lectures and workshops should be made available to online students via the media in use to facilitate their courses, and this can be done most easily with a live or recorded video stream adjacent to a live chat room or asynchronous discussion board. By engaging distance learning students as broadly as possible within the active life of the on-campus community, seminaries and theological institutes that have stand-alone online programs demonstrate that they value the gifts their students bring to the community, an event that increases both student retention and academic outcomes.

For the seminaries and theological institutes that participate in online consortia like the Catholic Distance Learning Network (CDLN), which was created in part through a grant from the Wabash Center, an opportunity exists for them to strengthen themselves by working to strengthen others. At present, 14 seminaries and theological institutes are a part of the CDLN, each offering courses open to any fulltime students interested in such topics as theology and science, inter-religious dialogue from a Catholic perspective, early Christian methods and models for spiritual direction, Psalms as Christian prayer, the ethical and religious directives for health care institutions, and liturgy and the art of ritual—to name a few. The kinds of courses the Network has offered, then, are special interest electives themed on the idea of a global vision initiative that takes into

account evangelization/inculturation, ecumenism/unity, interfaith dialogue, and authentic human development.

Each of the courses, therefore, is contextualized within a structure devoted to diversity both in the kinds of content each offers and in the kinds of students each attracts, and this enriches in significant ways the teaching and learning environment each is able to form. While the courses have become a regular part of a given institution's academic program, the tendency may be for the institution to treat them as anomalies within the greater breadth of its institutional focus, which means that they might become islands inhabited by students from two or more seminaries whose only experience of one another is within the context set up through the course template. Were this to happen, the possibility exists that each course could be treated merely as a correspondence course without any real intentionality on the part of the professors to form viable learning communities among the students within them.

The Network guards against this possibility through an introductory training program of its course professors that seeks to be reasonably comprehensive in its covering the importance of community formation in online courses, but it is up to the course professors themselves to establish structures that foster group work, student presentations, and meaningful discussion board interaction. The institutions that sponsor these courses may use the opportunities they provide to collaborate more closely with the institutions from which they are receiving their cross-registered students in order to match their capacities to others' needs and their needs to others' capacities. In short, viable learning communities ought to transcend the individual courses within which they are contextualized for the general amelioration of the larger communities of which they are a part.

Nuts and bolts basics on the formation of learning communities ought to be studied by all administrators and faculty in undergraduate and graduate theology programs, especially since the resources and methods by which to do so are plentiful in a filtering-age society that enables billions of megabytes of information to be sifted through in seconds. Some basic lessons that the authors have learned through their experience in online teaching and learning environments include the following:

- While the primary agenda of first generation online courses often entails fine tuning a given course's development, learning community formation ought to at least be sought so that first

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generation students does not get too short-changed because of a professor’s trying to find his way. Naturally, learning community formation should be the primary agenda of second and subsequent generation online course offerings.

- Students ought to be consulted in a formative way over the duration of an online course offering, and this entails seeking their interests and recognizing their diversity before forming them into groups, providing them opportunities to choose among the kinds of accountability exercises they would like to pursue as demonstrations of their developing mastery of the subject matter, and structuring discussion boards in such a way as to invite not only their reflections on the course materials but also their initiative in introducing new materials to the life of the course.
- Any given learning community in cyberspace ought to serve as a bridge to real-life learning communities. In the case of self-contained distance learning programs like the ones hosted through Holy Apostles College and Seminary, coursework should encourage active community participation on the part of the students in their own affinity groups. In the case of

consortial distance learning programs like the Catholic Distance Learning Network, coursework should encourage active community participation on the part of the students within the seminaries and theological schools from which they come.

Institutions that participate in distance learning initiatives will likely be able to add their own basics to this short list and are invited to do so at www.tteg.org, the Web site of the Technology in Theological Education Group (TTEG), the newest affinity group to form within the Association of Theological Schools. The readers of this short article already have, by virtue of their having arrived at this point in the document, formed what Benedict Anderson has called an “imagined community” comprised of all persons with an interest in this particular topic. To actualize that imagined community, we need only to come together with greater intentionality in the formation of a learning community capable of making use of the kind of synergy that new participants are able to bring to it, which is why TTEG sponsors an open membership policy. The development of viable learning communities is both micro- and macrocosmic, and the best ones are, consequently, both narrowly and broadly conceived.

Conclusion

Online theological learning is convenient and cost effective, but students must identify online studies with quality instruction and not merely take courses for the convenience and flexibility that online learning offers. The impact of having standardized instruction for online theological studies would be improved teaching and learning that would lead to cohesive teaching practices for the online community in general and ultimately improve retention.

Low-cost yet high-quality required reading material, clearly defined and well-written syllabi, and timely meaningful feedback from instructors would comprise standardized instruction. Standardized instruction also may benefit course instructors by offering a protocol for successful course management, thus making teaching online more effective and enjoyable.

With standardized instruction, students will be engaged and focused, interact often with the instructor, and not experience feelings of isolation. Students will build upon knowledge and keep knowledge current and dynamic with a protocol for online learning. In sum, it takes a learning community to make online learning

successful. This is brought about only by instructors who realize that it is not technology alone that makes a quality online course, but its appropriate use within the learning environment.



Rev. Sergius Halvorsen, Ph.D., is director of distance learning at Holy Apostles College and Seminary in Cromwell, Connecticut. He holds a doctorate in liturgical studies from Drew University.



Sebastian Mahfood, Ph.D., is an associate professor of intercultural studies and the coordinator of instructional technology at Kenrick-Glennon Seminary in Saint Louis, Missouri. He has been actively involved since 2000 in the transformation of theological studies programs through the integration of appropriate technologies in the teaching and learning environment. He holds a Ph.D. in postcolonial literature from Saint Louis University.



Mary Beckmann, Ed.D., is an adjunct professor at Webster University in St. Louis, Missouri. She holds a doctorate in distance learning from Walden University.

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Notes

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