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Online Education

AN ASSET IN A PERIOD OF EDUCATIONAL CHANGE

“Sin, death, and the devil will not be banished by the introduction of computers in the process of education. The *eschaton* did not arrive with the World Wide Web. With that said, I’m finished making concessions to naysayers. Web-based technology has already facilitated fundamental change; this is not a fad, and the change is not simply a marginal enhancement or a costly diversion.”

The words above opened a brief opinion piece I wrote six years ago (Nysse 1998, 419). Today I would not change a word, except that I might add several exclamation marks. As was the case six years ago, students continually teach me new possibilities for online learning, and I, unfortunately, discover new shortcomings in my online teaching. Increasingly I recognize the latter to be personal failures, not limitations that an online environment imposes on course design and implementation. The use of online media for the core of teaching and learning continues to unfold. The number of online courses continues to grow, because students continue to enroll in those offered. The dotcom meltdown did not end the more quiet growth in online education.

Faculty and student objections continue to be voiced, but during the past six years I have sensed that a corner has been turned. Increasingly, I hear colleagues express curiosity about online education, not opposition. Most may be no closer to teaching online, but they no longer dismiss the methodology

as a fad. Satisfied students are telling their faculty advisors that they have learned much in their online classes, and such classes are now recognized as a valid option at certain seminaries, including my own. The methodology, however, is not yet part of the mainstream; in many respects it remains an add-on, and there are still days when the pace of progress seems glacial. We have used computers to automate record-keeping functions, and we have adapted to innovations in communication, but we have not transformed the way we work. We still tend to do what we have always done, only faster and in greater volume.

In this essay,¹ I begin by describing the changing educational context in which online education is being introduced. I then compare online education with traditional classroom education—the standard against which online education is typically judged—and try to acknowledge the strengths and weaknesses of each as a means of ensuring student learning. Finally, I describe some of the means of student support that are needed to make online learning most effective.

THE CURRENT CONTEXT OF EDUCATIONAL CHANGE

While vigorous discussion about the nature and quality of online teaching continues,² larger shifts are occurring within higher education. From ominous teaching methodology to learning theories to assessment practice, the focus in higher education is shifting from teaching to learning,³ and the introduction of online capabilities as an educational medium is occurring within this larger shift from teaching to learning.

One concrete manifestation of the change is the assessment practices of accreditation agencies.⁴ They are asking educational institutions what they are intending to do. What is their articulation of their own mission? How do they know whether or not their intentions are actually being accomplished? Responding by citing evidence of a low teacher-to-student ratio with all classes taught by teachers with Ph.D.s is no longer taken as definitive proof that the mission is being accomplished. Such teacher-centered, input-based assessment is no longer the norm. Such indicators of quality are not being jettisoned; they simply are not being granted the same presumptive privilege. The focus is on outcomes. What are students actually learning? When, where, and how are they learning?⁵ Further, the possibility of high-quality learning is assumed to occur in a wider range of educational environments than was acknowledged in the past.⁶ The cocurricular dimensions of a student's learning experience are being given increased visibility (American Association of Higher Education et al. 1998). The cocurricular dimension is not reducible to mere support or enhancement of the classroom experience. It is part of the core that constitutes

a holistic learning experience; the entire seminary is termed a learning community. Online education and traditional classroom education are each but a part of a larger learning environment.

For my institution, Luther Seminary, and for my denomination, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), significant non-classroom-based components have always been present. In one form or another, Luther Seminary has for many years required students to work in congregations while enrolled in degree programs. In addition, the ELCA requires a one-year internship for ordination. Traditionally, internship has been placed after the second year of seminary study, with students returning for a third year of study after internship. Yet even with this tradition, when students return for third-year classes, faculty struggle to integrate or even acknowledge the learning that has occurred during internship. How do we structure differently a class on the Psalms or on the Gospel of John because of the internship experience? We have difficulty stating what the differences should be between students who have and have not participated in the internship experience. Covering content is still a powerful impulse. It is a deeply embedded default switch that inhibits our imaginations. Experiential learning still struggles to find legitimate space at the center.⁷

None of this stirring depends on the existence of the Internet; technology is not driving these changes and transitions. If all online education disappeared tomorrow, the shifts and debates—encapsulated in expressions like “learning-centered, not instruction-centered” or “student-centered, not teacher-centered”—would continue unabated. Nevertheless, frustrations and anxiety over the transitions quickly target online education as a major perpetrator of unwanted change. It is not. It simply makes the changes more evident. The key issue with regard to online education is its role in the transitions, not whether it is itself generating the transitions.

COMPARING ONLINE AND CLASSROOM EDUCATION

Despite the turmoil over traditional classroom contexts, online educators are still challenged by the longstanding question: Is online education as good as classroom education? Despite my desire to avoid a binary construal, the question must be addressed for at least two reasons. First, despite current reevaluation, classroom education has a record of considerable accomplishment that must be acknowledged, even honored. Matching its accomplishments is a significant achievement. Second, the deference to classroom education is so high that it is the assumed benchmark in conversations about online education, even when online education is not portrayed as a concession.

If classroom education is to be the benchmark by which online learning is to be measured—and not all educators concede this point (Kassop 2003)—just what is that benchmark? How do we know what we claim to know about the learning that occurs in the classroom? How much of what is attributed to classroom teaching is actually the result of student reading and writing outside the classroom? For example, if students are expected to put in three hours of preparation time for each hour of classroom time (that is, three-quarters of the total hours spent learning are at a distance from the classroom), how can we justify attributing all the learning that occurs to the classroom environment? More methodologies are at work in what we call traditional teaching and learning than simply person-to-person exchanges in a classroom; more “distance” is involved in classroom education than we generally acknowledge, making the “distance learning” in online education much less novel than it seems at first glance.

The assumption that classroom instruction sets the standard by which online instruction is to be measured raises issues that run deeper than the previous paragraph suggests. Certainly, it does not acknowledge the growing number of guidelines that now define quality in online education. One such set of guidelines was produced by the Institute for Higher Education Policy (2000).⁸ The IHEP promulgated twenty-four benchmarks (from an initial list of over forty) as “measures of quality in internet-based distance learning.” Three of the twenty-four (Nos. 4–6), termed “course development benchmarks,” are listed below.

4. Guidelines regarding minimum standards are used for course development, design, and delivery, while learning outcomes—not the availability of existing technology—determine the technology being used to deliver course content.
5. Instructional materials are reviewed periodically to ensure they meet program standards.
6. Courses are designed to require students to engage themselves in analysis, synthesis, and evaluation as part of their course and program requirements.

I do not suggest that every online course meets these standards, but I do question how many classroom-based courses hold themselves to comparable standards, much less meet them. After twenty-five years at Luther Seminary, I know of no explicit, publicly available, statement of “minimum standards” for course “development, design, and delivery” for classroom courses. (While I suspect that some seminaries are significantly different from the portrait I draw here, I doubt that Luther Seminary is entirely an aberration.) The faculty at

Luther Seminary has worked on statements of learning outcomes (or objectives), but such statements function more as suggestions than standards. Some teachers have embedded these outcomes in their syllabi, and the outcomes are employed to some extent in evaluative activity when tenure and promotion decisions are made. But the faculty as a whole has not held itself accountable to the very objectives it has developed.

Further, the faculty has never systematically examined what constitutes the best match between methodology and learning outcomes. Does lecture provide the best methodology for a given learning objective? Are small groups better than lectures for a given outcome? If, then, we have not addressed correlations between instructional methodology and learning outcomes in the classroom, on what basis do we assume that the classroom is a superior environment to online education?

Other than perhaps a self-study for ATS reaccreditation every ten years, when is classroom instructional material reviewed to ensure that it meets program standards? Would not most faculty regard such a review as an invasion of their educational domain? Do they not shrink from the thought of reviewing their colleagues' instructional material? I have been unable, after repeated invitations, to get my biblical division colleagues to review my online course pages in a systematic, evaluative fashion. It seems so unnatural to critique each other at the level of instructional materials, as if it were a breach of faculty etiquette. But if we cannot routinely work together at that level, how can we extol the communal virtues of the classroom when compared with the supposed isolation of online education?⁹

Finally, how often are courses and programs examined and held accountable for requiring "students to engage themselves in analysis, synthesis, and evaluation" as is called for in IHEP Benchmark No. 6 above? In my experience educational institutions determine which courses are to be required—what subject matter domains are to be engaged by students—but not what analytical, synthesizing, and evaluative abilities students should attain as a result of those courses, especially not in a way that could lead to calling into question a course that fails to be so designed (not to mention actually achieving those outcomes). Many individual faculty members do design for these outcomes and do assist students to meet them, but program directors would be viewed with great suspicion if they were to evaluate each course with those expectations in mind. It would be regarded as a sign of distrust.

The persistent resistance to assessment raises questions about our commitment to community, for such resistance can readily be construed as the assertion of individual prerogative over communal accountability. This may be a perennial debate in the history of academic freedom, but the balance seems tipped too far in the direction of the prerogatives of those with power, in this

case individual faculty. Students are generally not accorded a symmetrical privilege. The character of our educational community is shaped by how we handle the particulars of accountability.

THE MYTH OF THE CHARISMATIC TEACHER

Communal character is also shaped by how we understand the roles of student and teacher. The classroom is often regarded as an ideal community of learning, with ideas freely exchanged and tested. And yet we teachers do so much of the talking! I know things, and I love to inform others about what I know. I think it would be helpful for them to know what I know. And pretty soon, despite my best intentions, I am doing all of the talking and, as a result, the “exchanging and testing” of student ideas drops by the wayside. Online teaching helps to quell my dominating voice.

This is not a small matter, and it is not a caricature. In May 2003, I sat with five colleagues discussing teaching and learning over a pleasantly served lunch. We had just left a session in which we discussed team teaching. As the conversation shifted to what fosters student learning, all five insisted that a charismatic teacher was the *sine qua non* of student learning. I dissented with oblique comments about pedagogical design variables and active student learning principles, but their insistence only grew stronger. And yet, what does such insistence imply about lifelong learning apart from a classroom and a teacher’s presence? What does it say about student effort and motivation? What does it say about all the knowledge faculty (and students) have attained by reading throughout their years of learning? At a minimum we faculty need to recognize how much is learned by reading and writing and then more fully apply that process to assisting the learning of our students. If we sustain our own learning by reading and writing, why do we insist that students learn best by listening? We care deeply about our students’ learning, and most of us do not wish to be so much at the center of the learning experience, but the methodology is so ingrained! Teaching online classes has helped me glimpse another way of being.

DIFFERENT METHODS FOR ACHIEVING LEARNING GOALS

For a significant number of students, classrooms present formidable pedagogical obstacles, and some of these can be overcome by online education. The two key questions are: What type of learning do we need and want? And how do we get there given the circumstance under which we work? The issue in the end is not which mode is better. Both classroom and online education are methodologies for achieving certain ends. Many instances of poorly managed

classroom environments exist, against which a goodly number of online classes would shine in comparison. And the opposite is also true. In each case the key issue is the pedagogical practice. Thus, comparing “delivery systems” is probably wrongheaded from the beginning, for best pedagogical practice may require a different conception of education. It is not about delivery; it is about learning.

By now it is undoubtedly obvious that I would not wish to limit my online classes to what works best in my classroom (assuming, based on the lack of reliable benchmarks, that I even know what the latter is). Some teachers would agree, but at the same time they wish to retain as much of the classroom as possible as they enter the distance education milieu. They would be happier if online connections could transmit more of the classroom experience. With faster digital connections (called “high bandwidth”), we could offer streaming media which would allow instructors to present themselves as talking heads on a computer screen. The advantage of this technology is that it could be done in real time and thus allow students and teacher to speak with each other as the class progressed. But I fear we would quickly attempt to push too many of our existing classroom pedagogies through the faster connections. Relatively slow digital connections impede the replication of the classroom, which can be a distinct advantage in the online environment. Being “restricted” by low bandwidth forces one to rethink pedagogy, stripping down the technological wish list to the pedagogically necessary. If low bandwidth prevents us from replicating what we do routinely in the classroom, we are forced to think anew about what is pedagogically needed to help students maximize their learning.

THREADED DISCUSSIONS AND REACH VS. RICHNESS

As a teacher moves from classroom to online courses, “obvious” answers to pedagogical questions no longer seem so obvious. For example, when lecturing is inhibited by low bandwidth, we can stop to ask how important the teacher’s voice is for maximizing student learning. Is the teacher’s voice actually crucial? If so, at what junctures? It may not be in the quantity or places we have assumed. Perhaps the teacher’s voice might equally serve student learning by merely posing and focusing the questions to be pursued, thus guiding the learning process more than being the source of it. Low bandwidth limits the possibility of effective lecturing, but it also makes possible a high degree of student interaction around engaging, open-ended questions.

I know of classroom-based teachers who have tried to shift toward greater student interaction but have found class discussions too superficial. Some have tried to overcome this obstacle by replacing at least some of the verbal

discussion with the exchange of written work between students, but exchanging the papers soon becomes a logistical nightmare. A threaded discussion (something that does not require high connection speeds) readily solves the logistical problem. A threaded discussion (also called an “electronic bulletin board”) allows students to post their comments in a central online location where an index of all the written exchanges is automatically produced, thus allowing participants to see what has gone before and to add their comments at the appropriate juncture in the conversation rather than only after the most recent comment, as is the case with email. By removing the logistical obstacles, this learning activity can be utilized frequently in a course. In short, technological limitations can lead to productive rethinking of pedagogical practice.¹⁰

But another question waits in the wings. What about the visual, auditory, and tactile richness of a face-to-face classroom? That question tends to drag us back to the impulse to replicate the classroom. The impulse should be resisted. Instead, we need to ask relentlessly, What maximizes student learning? We need to ask this question for every environment in which teaching and learning can be undertaken. When we do so, we may find that educational richness is not limited to the narrow reach of the physical classroom. If low bandwidth and physical and temporal distance from a classroom are givens, we need to ask how we can maximally assist student learning under such circumstances. How can we create richness within the reach provided by online technology? That is the question that comes to the forefront.

This shift in focus is not easily attained. Historically, we have thought of the classroom as offering rich interaction while at the same time conceding its restricted reach. According to this paradigm, only those who can get to the classroom have access to educational richness. Scholarships and grants have been used to ameliorate the problem of restricted reach and limited access. The Internet reopens the debate about a tradeoff between richness and reach because the Internet dramatically increases reach. But does it do so at the expense of richness?¹¹ In the past, most of my colleagues would have immediately answered with a resounding “Yes,” as would most students who had limited experience with online learning. For many teachers and students, the increased reach afforded by the Internet was imagined only as the kind marketed on late-night radio and television—highly isolated, individual learners mastering a batch of data disconnected from meaningful contexts.

The increased reach of online learning, however, does not have to be at the expense of educational richness. And threaded discussions are a prime example of a means to attain both richness and reach. The amount of exchange and interaction between students in a threaded discussion can easily exceed what

is possible with the geographical and temporal restrictions of a classroom. Exchange does not need to end when the period is over. No bell rings at the end of each of the weekly three units of fifty minutes—the standard Carnegie seat-time units for calculating what constitutes the necessary instructional period. Face-to-face, small-group discussions can be deeply engaging, but a transcript of a fifty-minute discussion would reveal how little temporal allotment is available for each student to offer deeply considered comments. In contrast, a threaded discussion allows time for everyone to contribute; everyone can “hear” by reading what everyone else has stated. There is no speaking over each other, and nothing is lost if there is a lapse in attention. If small groups are formed, the teacher can “hear” the contribution of every student. Unlike classroom discussions, there is no need to spend time traveling to one place, and even more significant, the entire exchange is fully retrievable and thus available for later review. Students can contribute to each others’ learning as they formulate for each other what they have learned in their individual preparation for contributing to the threaded discussion.

Further, faculty “censorship” of the discussion by means of their body language or nonverbal cues is limited, students cannot as easily vie for faculty approval, and it is easier to provide “correction” (via private email) should it be deemed necessary, without doing so in front of peers and risking shaming. Students who are having difficulty performing are quickly noticeable, and assistance can be given sooner. Finally, in threaded discussions students have a definable audience for their ideas. They are writing to peers, which removes the artificiality of traditional papers, which are written for a theoretical audience that the professor tries to define for the students. Writing to peers who will be colleagues in ministry is not nearly so artificial. In addition, the writing that is being done is an attempt to communicate with, to learn from, and to sway an actual audience. This can develop a collaborative, collegial practice that is sorely needed in the contemporary church. Thus, richness and reach no longer need be a tradeoff.

The extended reach offered by education is not limited to spanning geographic and temporal obstacles to student-to-student interaction. It includes reaching across learning styles and personality types. That shy students, for example, can more readily enter an online threaded discussion has become nearly legendary, but equally important is the reflective time that is available between comments for students who sometimes respond too quickly in classroom discussions. Students who term themselves as talkative have commented appreciatively in self-evaluations that they had never thought so much before expressing their views. Most importantly, though, the increased richness of a threaded discussion does not reside inherently in the technology. The ques-

tions discussed need to be thought-provoking and life-engaging. Once again, technology facilitates a sound pedagogy; it does not produce the engagement or the learning.

Online teaching and learning is only one more avenue by which we pursue educational transformation. The status quo, as good as it may be, is not good enough to cease the pursuit of improvement; it is not yet the best that we can do.

STUDENT SUPPORT

The traditional classroom learning environment for a program of theological education, even for a single course, exists in a matrix of interlocking support. Teacher and students are surrounded by other participants, who are needed to complete the learning environment. Janitors, librarians, secretaries, registrar, grounds crew, counselors, supportive friends and family members, congregations, and service organizations, among many others, are part of the fabric that constitutes the learning environment. These participants have considerable impact on students and are integral to their success whether or not faculty acknowledge or work closely with them.

If this is the matrix that constitutes the traditional educational environment, what is the matrix that constitutes the online learning environment? Maintenance personnel keep classrooms in good repair. Who keeps the online environment (servers, hard drives, software, etc.) in good repair? Supporting students involves much more than physical space and computer capacities. The social environment is a fundamental component of student support. A concern that most people have who are resistant to online education is that online students are severed from necessary social support. Students, it is claimed, are too isolated in online education. The dynamism and support of the social matrix is assumed to be lost.

For online teachers this is a crucial issue, especially for those who overtly acknowledge the extra-course matrix in which the learning environment exists. They recognize that they cannot single-handedly provide all the support that is needed for online students to flourish. All too often, however, the *de facto* expectation is that teachers can do exactly that, especially when seminaries start tentatively with one or two pilot classes. Either the faculty member personally (and heroically) provides the extra support or students are left largely on their own. In the first scenario, the situation is unsustainable. The faculty member is likely to experience burnout and, if not that, will confirm colleague suspicion that online teaching constitutes much more work than classroom teaching. In the second scenario, the heroic effort is shifted to the student; the

self-driven students will succeed as they do in nearly any environment and the less self-directed will drop out. The latter will report that online education is cold and impersonal. Too frequently the result in both scenarios is that teachers dismiss online education as nothing more than a collection of “electronic correspondence courses.”

A defensive response to the charge that online education leaves students inadequately supported is to question the extent to which faculty teaching in classrooms actually align their efforts with those of the larger matrix. Too often we work in isolation from the larger learning environment, and there is something disingenuous in faculty objections to online education because of the alleged lack of student support when they themselves tend to ignore the larger matrix in relationship to the classroom. In my early years as a teacher, although I regarded the cocurricular dimension of seminary life as a necessary backdrop for education, I did not perceive it as a core component of student learning. It could enhance (or inhibit) good teaching and learning, but it was not a constitutive part of it. Student experience of the learning environment of a school is not as compartmentalized as it often is for faculty. The curriculum and cocurriculum are united in a student’s evaluation of the worth of their seminary education.

Minimally, student support in online education needs to replicate the intensity of the support offered in a traditional context. “Intensity” is the key word; “replication” by itself is not the goal. Students deserve to feel equally supported in both environments. The mechanisms of support—the delivery systems—may change; in fact, they will change. For example, placement services which might have been as minimal as putting notices in a three-ring binder in the dean of students’ office now need to be placed on the institution’s Web site. This will require attention to Web design and navigational principles. Tutoring and assistance with writing skills are other supports that need to be in place. The manner of their availability will be quite different when students do not meet directly with a tutor or writing center personnel. Providing these support services digitally involves a shift in administrative thinking proportionate to the shift in faculty thinking discussed in the previous section.

Chapel services might be a good illustration. The campus pastor (or whoever oversees on-campus worship) needs to imagine ways to connect with the worship life of distance students. Whatever form that “connection” takes need not become a replacement for the local worship community in which the student participates, but it must communicate care for the worship life of students. It might require the campus worship community to connect with local worship communities. It needs to be more than video streaming on-campus chapel services, helpful as that at first may seem. The problem with video streaming on-campus activities such as worship services is that nothing really changes. On-

campus worship leaders continue to do what they have always done, except that they have added a camera. To the distant student it says, "Too bad you couldn't be here." The distance learner is merely allowed to peek in on where the action *really* is taking place. It shouts, "Concession!" Broadcasting the on-campus environment is doing nothing more than trying to make the walls of the campus elastic, stretching them to reach across geographical distances. The Internet is a new "location," a new place of meeting, not simply a new form of broadcasting or delivering across distances. I have added a "place" for praying in my online classes, but that is hardly the limit of what could be done. Others will have to join the exploration for new forms of inhabiting the online environment. More important than a proliferation of training events is gathering support staff, faculty, and students together to explore new ways of interacting in an online environment. Our imaginations have not been exhausted!

As we develop comparable levels of support by new means, we will need to think through the core values that are offered to students in cocurricular interactions. Better, we will need to have students tell us what the core values are. Means and ends need to be distinguished. Do the means of these interactions service the social needs of faculty and staff more than they do the needs of students? For example, having cookies or popcorn available at the registrar's counter may create a delightful, supportive ambiance, but if a student has had to take off three hours from work to drive to and from campus to fill out and sign a form, the value may be irrelevant. The ambiance created by the snacks is better than being gruff, but, in truth, the staff may derive more value from the face-to-face interaction than the student, especially when the latter calculates the overall cost of the interaction (such as time, fuel, energy, and child-care). Better than offering cookies is to offer students the convenience of taking care of more administrative tasks online (such as registering for courses or establishing passwords). Fortunately, such student support is finally being offered on a regular basis, and not just for online students and commuter students but for residential students as well.

Faculty and staff are not the only ones who need to rethink the ways in which student support can be provided. A significant number of seminary students need to alter (not lower) their expectations for support in online education. Seminaries, like all other schools, are highly scripted social environments, and these scripted environments have shaped student expectations. Even though seminary students are generally autonomous adult learners who are able to draw upon their own rich, postcollege learning experience and who, in every other aspect of their lives, no longer act as they did in their early twenties, many of them still tend to carry forward expectations for support that were shaped or scripted by prior school experiences. They fall too easily into passive behavior and too readily defer to authority figures, whether teachers or staff, whom

they expect to tell them what they are allowed to do. That is the way it was in college; why not expect the same in seminary?

Further, because of the “caring” mission of the seminary, students are too ready to let themselves be “taken care of,” with all the latent dimensions of paternalism implied by such care. Despite our best intentions, educational institutions have been scripted toward conformity and compliance, and the product too often is passive learners. After all, such learners are the ones who are rewarded by the social system embedded in the schooling. As a result, even active adult learners are inclined to surrender too much initiative to the institution. Faculty and staff consciously want active learners but unconsciously fail to surrender the prerogatives of the script they have inherited and now replicate. On the other hand, if all scripts are removed entirely, the less self-directed students will feel cut adrift. Finding the right balance between providing necessary support and not discouraging independence is a difficult task that often leads to tensions that were not created by the introduction of online teaching and learning.

RETHINKING STUDENT NEEDS

As educators and students move into an environment that is unfamiliar, seminaries must determine which services are vital, even crucial, and which are nice but not necessary. Students, teachers, administration, and staff need to rethink and reframe standards and expectations and return to a central question: What is the core value in each of the interactions that constitute education—in teaching, learning, and support? Online education forces us to rethink our entire system, rethinking that is, in fact, long overdue. As our student body shifts increasingly to commuting, second-career, part-time adult learners, the need to take up this rethinking and reconfiguration grows more urgent.

My first glimpse of the reframing that should take place occurred in two conferences I attended within two months in 1998. The first was the Distance Teaching and Learning Conference held each August in Madison, Wisconsin. The reframing began with the very first workshop I attended, an introduction to standards for quality in distance education (American Council on Education 1996). While I had gone to this conference to pick ideas to improve the online course in the Pentateuch that I had begun to teach, it was soon evident that my initial interest in the conference was far too atomistic. Improving a free-standing, individual course was not sufficient. Rather the questions were about how the library, counseling services, the registrar’s office, and the business office would be present to the learners in any given course. An online course should not be offered in isolation from the support systems of the institution. But that is exactly what we were doing in my pilot class at Luther Seminary. The school

was not online even though a course was. It is a testament to those early online learners that they achieved as much learning as they did with so few support resources.

Despite the accomplishments of these early students, however, it became immediately clear that we did not have a sustainable system for online education. We could not continue to add courses without addressing the support issues. No single teacher could adequately provide the needed support. The entire seminary had to develop an online presence. In fact, more than a presence was required; the school needed to work in a Web environment. In a sense, the institution needed to create a second seminary, a fully online one.

Placing such emphasis on online education allows an institution to plant its feet firmly in the Internet environment and reduces the likelihood that it will regard online activity as a concession and thus shortchange the online requirements. When the fully online seminary is constructed, the two institutions can flow together. New efficiencies emerge and students in both environments are better served. Robust hybrid possibilities can be developed. During the transition, however, the amount of work involved may certainly feel like a burden to faculty and staff.

That first conference I attended pointed out the need to take a more complete approach to online education. The second conference made it clear that meeting the need would not be easily accomplished. At the October 1998 conference of Educom (now called Educause after a merger with Cause), two University of Minnesota officials (Kvavik and Handberg 2000) described the university's shift to a "one-stop" system for access to student services. Student information at the University of Minnesota was spread over more than twenty different database systems and was very dependent on the movement of paper, but that was only a technical problem. The deeper problem was conceptual.

Too frequently staff regarded their job as guarding and housing data. An immovable counter, real or imagined, was maintained between the staff and the learner. There might be cookies on the counter, but they did not dissolve the obstacles that the counter represented. The staff had to rethink its role, changing from guarding information and bringing it to the counter when requested to presenting information in a form that could be accessed by the student when needed, regardless of where the students were. Organizing information in a navigable, digital form was the key task, not carrying it back and forth between its repository and the counter. Of course, appropriate password protections had to be set up, but again those were technical issues. The chief resistive force was at the conceptual level because of the recasting of traditional roles. In the first month of existence, the system had a few thousand hits (not particularly impressive for a large university), but within a short period of time the

hits reached into the millions. Clearly there was a student desire for information that far exceeded what could be accessed across a counter.

The scale of large universities exposes the compartmentalization of information more quickly than is the case at the average seminary. Students shuffle from one office to the next tracking down the information and forms they need. The movement is almost invisible when the offices are all within one building or when one staff person implements several different steps. At Luther Seminary, staff members often bridge the divides while talking over coffee. Our informality masks our inefficiencies and covers over the frustrations students encounter.

This may seem minor in a small system, and digitizing the process may seem to cost more than could be saved in staff and student time, provided the students are nearby and willing to undergo the inconveniences. But the issues are quickly exacerbated for online and commuting students who do not regularly travel to campus. My contention is that, if a seminary makes its support systems available online for distance learners, it will find that it has greatly added to its service for all other students.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING

Several actions are indispensable if this era of educational change is going to bear fruit.

- To avoid an unproductive debate over whether the traditional classroom is superior to online environments, we need to focus on what learners need to know, which requires a thoughtful analysis of the context and situations in which learners find themselves. What are the questions they bring to their education? What questions do they need to consider? How best can essential questions be explored?
- The effective use of instructional technology depends solely on its pedagogical impact. More is not better even if one has the speed and bandwidth to dazzle the learner.
- Seminary faculties need to take seriously the science of instructional design and the lessons it offers for bridging a concern for disciplinary knowledge and the strategic, purposeful ways of helping learners actively engage that knowledge.
- Teaching reflectively in a variety of settings (weekend courses, course intensives, courses that combine traditional and Web-based components) and paying attention to what one learns from those settings (not simply whether one prefers one setting over the other) provides a

coherent basis for considering the opportunities and challenges of the online environment.

- We need to reflect on the matrix into which our individual courses fit, and we need to develop a collective consciousness as a faculty about what we are learning as we teach, no matter the environment. We squander the insights individual instructors are gaining when we lack a regular practice of talking about our teaching.

CONCLUSION

Online theological education provides a means to address the transitions that are occurring in our institutions and systems. No seminary is immune, and no seminary can wait until everything is in place before engaging those transitions. Faculty cannot wait until support systems and training are perfectly in place. Administrative and support personnel cannot wait until there is money for more staff. Students cannot wait until support systems are perfected. We need to abandon the notion of mastery for a moment and begin thinking together—administration, faculty, and students—about the dynamics of learning and explore how the Internet affords us new ways to learn together for the sake of ministry in communities of faith and service in God’s world.

With all that said, I hope my enthusiasm for online education is obvious. I am fervent about the possibilities but realistic as well. The obstacles have been and will continue to be overcome only by hard work. So why continue to bother? The briefest and most deep-seated reason is the students I have served through online education. They are gifted, and they will be a gift to the church. They have blessed my life, and I want to continue to work with and for them.

NOTES

1. For other valuable articles, see Bellinger (2003), Amos (1999), and Williams (2002b).
2. One place to note the continuous debate is in the pages of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. The articles span the spectrum from wild enthusiasm (fewer of these now appear) to disdainful ill-boding. One notable debate was generated by David Noble (1998), who considered online teaching as fully and only destructive. Responses to his “sky is falling” article quickly appeared (Noble et al. 1998).
3. For a quick introduction to this shift, see the helpful—and frequently cited—article by Barr and Tagg (1995). For more extensive treatments, see Tagg (2003) and Weimer (2002).
4. See the essays regarding accreditation in *Theological Education* published by the Association of Theological Schools (McCarthy 2003). In addition, eight regional agencies recently produced a joint statement on online standards (Regional 2000).

5. “Scholarship of teaching” is a commonly used phrase for research on learning as it is occurring. The class itself becomes a research project for the teacher. The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching [<http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/>] has had a major role in advancing this work. Convenient starting points are their “eLibrary” (Carnegie 2003) and Hutchings, Bjork, and Babb (2002). A seminal book in this movement is Boyer (1997 [1990]). See also *The Journal of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* [<http://www.iusb.edu/~josotl.>].
6. Service learning is one such impetus. See Stanton, Giles, and Cruz (1999) or Jacoby (1996). For someone new to service learning, one place to begin is the National Service Learning Clearinghouse [<http://www.servicelearning.org>]. A significant evaluation of service learning has been conducted by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation (2000).
7. Change has been a major factor in many institutions. Higher education has no grounds for claiming exemption. It is not, in fact, entirely surprising that the work headed by Peter Senge moved from corporate environments in *The Fifth Discipline* (Senge 1990) to educational institutions in *Schools That Learn* (Senge 2000).
8. The study, released March 21, 2000, was commissioned by the National Education Association (NEA) and Blackboard, a course management software vendor. The recourses available for the evaluation of online education are developing rapidly. A fine example is Graham et al. (2000) and (2001). Questions have been raised about the reliability of studies that have shown no significant difference between classroom-based and various distance education modalities (Institute of Higher Education Policy 1999). Interestingly, the latter study was also conducted by the Institute for Higher Education Policy. It was commissioned by the American Federation of Teachers and, again, the NEA.
9. My own practice is to *build* my courses on a publicly available Web and *conduct* my courses in Blackboard. Thus all the course material—its design, assignments, discussion questions, etc.—are available for browsing by prospective students, colleagues, graduates, donors, and congregations. If someone finds the material useful for lifelong learning or continuing education, they are free to use it. Blackboard is used to provide password protection for what students write to each other. Their exchanges are kept private.
10. Thinking about threaded discussions led me to *Discussion as a Way of Teaching* (Brookfield and Preskill 1999). Brookfield and Preskill address classroom-based courses, but there is much that can be applied to online discussions. This is an example of the productive interchange that can occur if we focus on pedagogy before technology. Classroom teachers might benefit from reading *Facilitating Online Learning* (Collison et al. 2000) or *E-Moderating* (Salmon 2000).
11. The interplay of “richness” and “reach” in business are discussed by Evans and Wurster (1999).