Southwestern

JOURNAL OF THEOLOGY

Christian Higher Education
in the Baptist Tradition

Southwestern

JOURNAL OF THEOLOGY

Christian Higher Education
in the Baptist Tradition

FAITHFULLY TRANSITIONING TO ONLINE EDUCATION

Kristen A. Ferguson*

Teaching online is a unique experience. Professors of all ages, experiences, and disciplines approach their first online teaching assignment with much anxiety, some anticipation, and lots of uncertainty. They typically question if online education really is educationally equivalent, if it really can serve the purpose of transformation, and if the technology will be too much of a barrier to teaching.

In normal circumstances, those professors would have the opportunity to work up to that first teaching assignment months ahead of time. They may sit down with an instructional designer or director of online education to talk about their syllabus and consider carefully how to accomplish each learning objective in the online format. Once the professor and online office had a detailed plan for the curriculum, chosen educational technology tools, and developed a schedule to create the course elements, the team would work on the course piece by piece. The course would be assembled before the term, and the online team would assist with adjustments or support during the term as needed. After the first term, special consideration for the evaluation of the newly developed course would help the professor and online team make improvements for the next offering.

When professors complete their first semester teaching online, they are often relieved, encouraged, and excited about what they have learned. They comment about being surprised at the engagement students show online, the quality of work submitted, and the possibilities that they see for their next online course offering. Even more so, professors often consider how to improve their face-to-face courses as a direct result of their engagement in the careful curriculum planning process as they learn how to accomplish their course objectives in new ways. Although they are still learning the online environment and continue to have questions about

---

* Kristen A. Ferguson serves as the director of online education at Gateway Seminary in Ontario, California.

how to do several things online, they are most often optimistic about the experience and their own growth as an instructor.

That typical online teaching experience was not what professors encountered during the coronavirus pandemic. Online education has been well-researched and tracked over the last two decades. Best practices have been fine-tuned to optimize learning and transformation;[1] support systems and development processes have been created so that professors can transition to online education with relative confidence.[2] In the crisis transition to online education, however, professors and online educators lacked something essential to implement all of that research into their courses—time.

I. IN MOTION

LeRoy Ford, in his book *A Curriculum Design Manual for Theological Education,* makes a joke about curriculum adjustments being akin to changing a tire on a moving truck.[3] That seems like a very fitting description for higher education's emergency transition to online education. The semester was already moving along, the syllabus already published, students already working on assignments due later in the semester, and the pace of the course already in an established rhythm. Then, abruptly, all in-person instruction came to a complete stop and moved to the online environment, which would typically require countless adjustments to curriculum, pace, tools, assignments, and communication. With the course already in motion, it was challenging to understand and implement all the necessary adjustments when transitioning to a different delivery method.

The emergency transition resulted in some bad reviews of online education as the entire world endured stress, panic, and isolation at home. Brian Rosenberg observed:

> Finally, and most interesting, will people find the model
> of distance learning that has been forced upon us to be

---

[1] Marjorie Vai and Kristen Sosulski, *Essentials of Online Course Design: A Standards-Based Guide*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2016); Timothy Paul Jones, et al., *Teaching the World: Foundations for Online Theological Education* (Nashville: B&H, 2017); Mark A. Maddix, James R. Estep, and Mary E. Lowe, eds., *Best Practices for Online Education: A Guide for Christian Higher Education* (Charlotte: Information Age Publishing, 2012).

[2] Elliot King and Neil Alperstein, *Best Practices in Online Program Development: Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

[3] LeRoy Ford, *A Curriculum Design Manual for Theological Education* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Pub, 2003), 41–43.

satisfactory? Almost no one will claim, I believe, that it is in most instances as good as the teaching and learning that take place on most college campuses. My own early experience with an exclusively virtual world is that it is serviceable but exhausting and, in some ineffable way, deeply unsatisfying.[4]

That unsatisfying exhaustion was noted elsewhere. Countless professors and students experienced what was labeled as "Zoom fatigue"[5] as they spent hours in front of their webcams attempting to finish the semester strong. With children running in the background and jobs teetering in the balance, an abnormal amount of stress and anxiety accompanied what would be many professors' first experiences with "online education."

Instead of the usual introduction to online learning through a careful and deliberate onboarding development process, professors and students of spring 2020 were thrown into the trenches of the internet to sink or swim. The outcome emerging from the end of the spring 2020 term has been exhaustion, doubt about online education, and discouragement about the future of higher education as it will depend on this delivery method, at least for now.

Knowing the decades of research in favor of online education, the more seasoned online educators, however, may observe that the spring 2020 phenomenon just does not line up with established data. For years, institutions, accreditors, and educational researchers have been carefully determining whether or not online education was a valid delivery method.[6] They have surveyed students, faculty, administrators, and other constituents, explored the quality of work between online and face-to-face students, and identified differences in retention and graduation rates, all in an effort to ensure the online education could be a sustainable and responsible way to educate. Both secular and Christian educational researchers have concluded over the years that online education is indeed an effective delivery method.[7]

If that is the case, then why has this experience with online education

---

[4] Brian Rosenberg, "How Should Colleges Prepare for a Post-Pandemic World?" *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.

[5] Brian Renshaw, "Zoomed Out: Is This Really Online Education?," https://brianrenshaw.com/2020/04/24/zoomed-out-is-this-really-online-education/.

[6] Allen and Seaman, *Online Report Card*; Garrett and Legon, *CHLOE 3 Behind the Numbers*.

[7] Tom Tanner, "Online Learning at ATS Schools: Part 2—Looking Around at Our Present," *Colloquy*, March 2017, https://www.ats.edu/uploads/resources/publications-presentations/colloquy-online/onlinelearning-part-2.pdf; Allen and Seaman, *Online Report Card;* Garrett and Legon, *CHLOE 3 Behind the Numbers*.

been so difficult for so many? Besides the intense stress, fear, and panic brought on by the pandemic itself, one educational reason may be that the *way* institutions decided to transition to online education is not what has been historically considered "online education" at all. Instead of the typical online course designed and adapted entirely for the online environment, many institutions implemented remote teaching in which in-person class periods simply moved to a video conferencing software.[8] Although this choice may have made the transition quick and nimble as uncertainty shrouded every future scenario, teaching remotely in an emergency scenario is not the same as the detailed preparation that typically accompanies moving a course online.

As described in the introduction of this article, online course design and development have become a field of study and profession for many. Integrating the social science of learning with the art of user-experience design, online educators work with professors to accomplish their same learning objective as in their face-to-face course in the online environment through a detailed planning process. As they do so, a myriad of intentional design and delivery choices would ideally accompany the transition to online education:

    a.   Ideally, online educators would recommend rethinking how students demonstrate mastery of the learning objectives in the online environment.

    b.   Ideally, online educators would like professors to follow best practices for video creation and live class meetings (e.g. short and topical rather than a large block of time).

    c.   Ideally, online educators would help professors understand how to create online community through intentional and planned interaction.

    d.   Ideally, online educators would like to design the course in the learning management system with user-experience theory and universal design in mind.

Understanding the difference between the spring 2020 emergency transition to remote teaching and the typical transition to online education can help institutions evaluate their response in crisis more accurately. Professors need not make determined conclusions about online education in

---

[8] Charles Hodges, et al., "The Difference between Emergency Remote Teaching and Online Learning," *Educause Review*, https://er.educause.edu/articles/2020/3/the-difference-between-emergency-remote-teaching-and-online-learning.

general based on this emergency but, instead, appreciate the monumental shift they accomplished in relatively little time. Institutional leaders need not fret poor student evaluations or feedback about online education but instead prepare for an evaluation of how the emergency itself was handled as a whole and plan for future online offerings. Students need not feel defeated in their learning but instead realize that this was a unique situation that they weathered together. Online educators need not be defensive about the quality of what they do normally because it is not a perfect, one-to-one comparison.

II. MAKING THE MOST OF REMOTE TEACHING

Education has experienced a pedagogical whiplash, but remote teaching does not have to be so painful. In fact, remote teaching could be the ideal method for upcoming semesters amid the uncertainties of the coronavirus pandemic. As the crises unfold, states will likely open up access to on-campus learning only to close it down again if another spike in coronavirus cases arises. This on-again, off-again access to the campus has led many institutions to choose remote teaching for their contingency plan. Doing so will allow students to access on-campus instruction whenever possible but also be ready for the video conferencing marathons if a stay-at-home order is issued once again. Although this scenario brings some tension to students and professors, educators who teach remotely can take a few tips from the field of online education to help them transition a bit more smoothly.

1. *Length of the class period.* The first tension between remote teaching and typical online education involves the length of the expected video time. In a face-to-face class, most institutions plan for an hour-and-a-half block twice a week or a three-hour block once a week (or somewhere in between). Spending an hour and a half or even three hours at one time in front of the computer screen is difficult for students and professors alike. Some common-sense explanations for this video fatigue include lag time in the video, anxiety with the technology, or non-technology related distractions.[9]

In an ideal online education situation, research would recommend "chunking" the course content up into topics that result in videos no longer

---

[9]   Manyu Jiang, "The Reason Zoom Calls Drain Your Energy," *BBC Work Life Blog*, April 22, 2020, https://www.bbc.com/worklife article/20200421-why-zoom-video-chats-are-so-exhausting.

than twenty minutes each.[10] Multiple videos could be assigned in a given week, but the limit on the time and topic per video allows the student to remain engaged for longer. Then, the class would have a discussion or activity related to the video to ensure students have appropriately considered and understood the content.

Although professors likely cannot (or should not) change the length of the class period mid-semester for the remote teaching contingency plan, they can attempt to make the class period more engaging by breaking it up into twenty-minute segments. Professors can plan to add a discussion or activity to keep students attentive and allow them to digest the content. Sending them on a quick mission to find articles online, search resources at their disposal, or write up a simple reflection can change the pace just enough to allow everyone to come back more refreshed and ready for the next lecture segment. Alternating between lecture and a short activity or discussion will help students stay alert and attentive through the whole class meeting.

2. *Student engagement.* The next tension that educators face in remote teaching is a lack of engagement from students. In class, professors can see students' facial expressions, perceive the comprehension in the room, and hear from students on a whim with a quick question. Often in a face-to-face course, engagement comes with relative ease because of the shared physical space and time. In emergency remote teaching, professors may ask a question or begin a discussion only to hear crickets through their computer speakers.

In a planned, online course, professors would require intentional and regular engagement every week. Whether it be group work, discussion forums, or peer review opportunities, a large part of the final grade would be centered on engagement frequency and quality. Professors would communicate expectations for engagement early in the semester, even indicating precise criteria for grading participation found in a published course rubric.[11]

In remote teaching, there are actually many ways that professors can enhance student engagement. One way is to prime the pump before the class period by giving them some content and sample questions early in the week. Professors can tell students that they expect them to discuss that

---

[10] C. J. Brame, "Effective Educational Videos," 2015, http://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/effective-educational-videos/.

[11] Linda B. Nilson and Ludwika A. Goodson, *Online Teaching at Its Best: Merging Instructional Design with Teaching and Learning Research* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2018), 131–64.

topic during the live meeting and will be grading them on specific things like critical thinking, understanding of the content, and argumentation. Providing them this sort of warning and structure can enhance their motivation to participate quickly and deeply during the live meeting. Professors can also set up an asynchronous discussion on the learning management system or assign peer review opportunities to align with existing assignments for facilitated student interaction.

3. *The Learning Management System*. The next tension that can frustrate professors and students is the inconsistent use of the online platform that houses online courses, called the learning management system (LMS).[12] Professors who teach in-person most often neglect to learn and use the LMS because they can complete all necessary tasks during the in-person class period, such as receiving papers, holding discussions, and providing general communication about upcoming assignments. In a coronavirus world that is prone to uncertain delivery methods, the misuse or underutilization of the LMS can limit potential learning when forced to move online.

In a purely online course, the LMS is the primary technology used for learning. Professors would use it to organize the course into modules so students could keep track of their completion of materials and assignments. Professors would work with the online office to ensure all necessary course elements—videos, files, assignment instructions, supplemental resources, and activities—were easy to find and available to students at pre-set times. Due dates set in assignments would notify students of work coming due and professors of work needing to be graded. With so many pieces moving around in online education, the LMS is an unquestioned necessity for online educators and students.

In the remote teaching contingency plan, the optimal use of the LMS would attempt to maintain consistency regardless of whether the class period was in-person or online at any given point in the semester. If professors and students are familiar with using the LMS for submitting papers, communication, and material downloads, then the class would have no trouble resuming work and communication in that online format when the need arose to move to remote teaching. The ideal scenario for this contingency plan would be to utilize the LMS consistently during the term to minimize the shift into the online format if remote teaching became necessary.

4. *Assignment variables*. One of the tensions felt near the end of spring

---

[12] The most popular LMS options on the market include Canvas, Blackboard, and Moodle.

2020 was the alteration of certain assignment requirements and submissions to accommodate remote completion and submission. It is impossible to describe the full range of potential assignment changes that are necessary given the remote teaching contingency. However, the most considerable help with the transition of assignments will be an institution's online office and IT department.

When professors move a course online in normal circumstances, determining how they will assess the learning outcomes is the first and most crucial step. The online office can help the professor consider the different tools in the LMS, the particulars of writing clear assignment instructions, the technological support needs, and the various contexts that each student will encounter when accomplishing the assignment. This planning usually generates a good deal of creativity and a concrete plan of how each assignment should be executed.

Likewise, in the coronavirus remote contingency plan, assignments must be designed with the potential of a stay-at-home order in mind. For some assignments, this will pose no threat to student completion; for others, significant issues may occur. For example, if the final assignment requires observations in a context, interviews conducted, ample library research without digital resources, or any sort of group project, professors can anticipate the issues that may occur in a stay-at-home order and overcome them ahead of time with a contingency plan. Professors will need to consider the variables of the students' context, such as access to resources, the ability to secure a proctor if needed, and technical support provided by the institution. Communicating clearly, concisely, and consistently about these changes will help students understand exactly how to earn their grade for the course.

III. PREPARING FOR EXCELLENT ONLINE EDUCATION

Although having a remote teaching contingency plan may be an excellent option for the uncertainties that lie ahead, some institutions have chosen to operate with as much certainty as they can by moving entirely online for the next semester. Although this means no in-person instruction, the advantage of knowing all classes will be online does allow professors to prepare and plan for excellence in online education leading up to that semester. With time being the missing element to excellent online education for the spring 2020 term, institutions can attempt to get ahead of the next semester by taking into consideration some preparation tips to

execute online education on a larger scale.

Some institutions are better prepared for an influx of online courses than others. Larger institutions typically have an online office with instructional designers and videographers to assist professors in their course development. In comparison, smaller institutions may have a few key faculty members who have run point for the online endeavors of the institution. Regardless of the institution's setup, an increase in online courses and students will add to the load of the online support team and faculty. Here are some ways institutions can offload that burden now so that their next semester of online education can be even better.

1. *Establish best practice principles.* If the only people who know what good online education looks like at any given institution are in the online office, then professors are going to experience a bottleneck when they try to access that specialized knowledge. One way to mitigate that bottleneck is by producing a document on the best practices for online education at the institution.[13] The best practices can be a simple document that includes bullet-pointed principles that make online education work well with the institution's context and mission. With those established guidelines, faculty and adjuncts can at least have a starting point on how to begin adjusting for the next semester.

2. *Provide research.* Along with the best practices, faculty would likely appreciate knowing some of the research. They might not have the time or desire to know it all, but it helps among academics to support those best practices with evidence from the field as well as qualitative data from the institution's own online students. Even pulling some data from the LMS analytics can provide faculty with helpful information to design and deliver a better online experience for students. Both quantitative and qualitative data may help give some grounding to the implementation of the best practices.

---

[13] See Timothy Paul Jones, et al., *Teaching the World*; also, Maddix, Estep, and Lowe, *Best Practices for Online Education*; Neal Brian Ledbetter, "Best Practices of Online Undergraduate Spiritual Formation at Select Institutions of Christian Higher Education: A Delphi Study" (Ph.D. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2017) T. R. Baltrip, "Identifying Standards of Quality in Christian Online Theological Education." (Ph.D. diss., University of South Florida, 2015). Additionally, secular research offers best practices based on years of educational data: Vai and Sosulski, *Essentials of Online Course Design;* Robin M. Smith, *Conquering the Content: A Blueprint for Online Course Design and Development*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2014). Also consider consulting Quality Matters (qualitymatters.org) or the Online Learning Consortium (onlinelearningconsortium.org) for formalized quality rubrics and certificates.

3. *Offer synchronous and asynchronous training.* Once professors know how online education should operate from a principled standpoint, it is time to train, train, and train some more. Some institutions have a strong faculty development strategy in place already, which likely means those professors are more prepared for online teaching than others. Nevertheless, offering specific training about technology and pedagogy will be helpful to the faculty as a whole. Since most professors are exhausted from the pandemic in general, institutions may decide to offer both live trainings on a regular schedule as well as recorded training for them to view later.

4. *Foster collaboration.* Institutions can also spread out the burden of helping all the faculty by allowing professors to talk to one another about what works and what does not in online education. Connecting the whole faculty to the most experienced online professors, online educators in the field, and even to online students can help foster a community of learning, attempting, and evaluating online education. It also serves the secondary purpose of supporting buy-in among faculty as well as fine-tuning the best practices with faculty input. Collaboration can take the form of discussion boards in a faculty-only online course, video conference sessions, or even a simple email group (depending on how large the faculty is).

5. *Begin syllabi creation early and give feedback.* Syllabus creation will need to look a bit different if the plan is to move everything online in the future semester. Instead of faculty members reusing their syllabi from previous semesters, academic leaders should encourage them to take a fresh look at their learning objectives to consider the best way to accomplish those online. It is important to understand that learning objectives do not need to change, but they can be accomplished in different ways, given the technology and distance learning. Professors can also request feedback from other professors or the online office about their syllabus if it can be submitted earlier than usual.

6. *Build templates.* The online office can multiply their efforts by creating templates that can be distributed and adapted as needed. For example, perhaps the online course will need a homepage that includes the course information, tech support contact, and other institutional policies. The online office might create something that can be imported into each course and then modified by the professor. Other templates like discussion board instructions, assignment instructions, tech support verbiage, and other commonly used items can help fast-track some of the online course creation.

7. *Streamline tech support.* Without direction, faculty and students will likely bombard the IT and online offices with questions. Instead, institutions can communicate where to access FAQs, video tutorials, and specific information regularly and clearly. Institutions can create a one-stop webpage with that information so that a URL can be the email response for many inquiries. This streamlined process allows the IT and online offices to triage tougher cases instead of spending the majority of time answering the same question repeatedly.

As institutions consider implementing some of these preparation tips for a fully online future semester, they are providing well-researched content, varying their teaching methods, supporting community interaction, setting clear expectations, and communicating consistently. As professors partake in the online training, collaboration, and research, they may even experience for themselves some of the strategic ways to implement excellent online education.

IV. COMMUNITY AND SPIRITUAL FORMATION ONLINE

Christian institutions of higher education have a deep conviction that education is more than merely knowledge transfer. James Riley Estep Jr. states, "In short, something is Christian if it reflects the theological convictions of the Christian community in its content, purpose, message, and life implications; all of these rest on theologically informed criteria."[14] Thus, sharing information with students is only one part of the educator's responsibility if that education is to be Christian. Estep concludes, "Education that glorifies God is one that transforms individuals into mature followers of Jesus Christ."[15] Christian educators have not achieved their mission if their students are simply smarter. Instead, educators aim for whole-person transformation as students engage in a Christian worldview that integrates faith and learning, applies truth to their lives in meaningful ways, and fosters their growth toward Christlikeness as they interact in the educational community.

The theory and practice of facilitating this sort of discipleship-focused transformation in an online course has always been a concern for Christian

---

[14] James Riley Estep Jr., "What Makes Education Christian?," in *A Theology for Christian Education* (ed. James R. Estep Jr., Michael J. Anthony, and Gregg R. Allison; Nashville: B&H, 2008), 40.

[15] Estep, "Toward a Theologically Informed Approach to Christian Education," in *Theology for Christian Education*, 265.

professors even since the earliest days of online education.[16] Those concerns have continued to be expressed over the years[17] and still linger in the minds of many Christian educators as they engage in this emergency transition to online education during the coronavirus pandemic. Thankfully, it is precisely *because* Christian educators have always been concerned about this topic that established research already exists to guide the way educators cultivate spiritual formation in their online courses.

The problem that many professors perceive with spiritual formation in the online environment is what online educators refer to as "transactional distance."[18] This theory was articulated by secular educational theorist M. G. Moore and holds that the physical separation between professor and student results in a psychological distance, causing potential hindrances to learning and relational barriers.[19] Applied to the goal of student spiritual formation, the concern among Christian educators is that the physical distance between professor and student may result in stymied opportunities for spiritual growth that come as a result of interaction with biblical content through meaningful relationships with the student's professor and peers. In other words, the physical distance, can reduce meaningful interactions, which in turn can reduce growth and transformation.

In online course design, educators who are more prone to replicate the traditional course without accounting for the online environment actually amplify transactional distance. Hours upon hours of pre-recorded video lectures with minimal engagement among students leave little opportunity for students to reflect, apply, and grow in community, which are critical activities for transformation. However, as online education research has become more popular, trends, tools, and methods for reducing transactional distance have become standard practice.[20] The key to reducing transactional distance is planned, intentional interaction within the online course.

Research in the field of Christian online education has identified an

---

[16] Steve Delamarter, "Theological Educators and Their Concerns about Technology," *Teaching Theology & Religion* 8, no. 3 (July 2005).

[17] Kristen Ann Ferguson, "Evangelical Faculty Perceptions of Online Learning in Graduate-Level Theological Education" (Ph.D. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2016).

[18] Roger White, "Promoting Spiritual Formation in Distance Education," *Christian Education Journal* 3, no. 2 (2006): 303–15.

[19] M. G. Moore, "Theory of Transactional Distance," in D. Keegan, ed., *Theoretical Principles of Distance Education* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

[20] Stephen Kemp, "Social Presence in Online Learning," in *Best Practices of Online Education,* 41–53; Timothy Paul Jones, et al., "Social Presence and Theological Education," in *Teaching the World,* 37–51.

important curriculum design framework called "the community of inquiry" to reduce the effects of transactional distance.[21] This framework consists of three necessary relationships that are established in the online environment by intentional interaction. Those relationships are between the student and the content of the course, the student and the professor, and the student and other students. When all three are present, the educational experience results in a learning community in which students grow in meaningful ways.

As Christians, the center of our educational community must be Christ. Therefore, although the community of inquiry was developed for a secular learning environment, our Christian convictions will direct specific implementations of the community of inquiry framework.[22] For example, students will not just interact with neutral content; Christian educators will provide them with content that is rich with Scripture and steeped in the Christian worldview. Professors will not just engage with students about their grades and homework instructions but seek every opportunity to point them to Christ. Student interaction with peers will not just pertain to acing the final but will be guided by the professor toward spiritual maturity as they grapple with biblical truth together.

All of that can happen online, and the result is a high potential for spiritual formation. From a Christian education standpoint, the following discussion provides professors with considerations on how to design and deliver an online course with this community interaction in mind.

1. *Student to content.* Content in video, audio, or written format can contain and prioritize the Christian worldview. Christian educators can faithfully integrate the authority of Scripture in the communication of their subject matter regardless of whether that content is given in person or online. This concept is not controversial, but the essential element that is commonly neglected in an online course is the need to create opportunities where students can engage with that content substantively. The passive reception of content is not the same as grappling with new concepts and ideas critically as the professor guides students toward the aim of personal transformation. Engagement with content should include

---

[21] D. R. Garrison, T. Anderson, and W. Archer, "Critical Inquiry in a Text-Based Environment: Computer Conferencing in Higher Education Model," *The Internet and Higher Education*, 2:2–3 (2000): 87–105.

[22] John David Trentham provides a helpful discussion on the integration of observable truth in the social sciences with the priority of Scripture; see "Reading the Social Sciences Theologically: Approaching and Qualifying Models of Human Development," *Christian Education Journal* 16:3 (2019): 458–75.

reflection and application, bringing the Scripture to bear on the student's real-life and context. In this way, the content in the online course is not static but is an interactive force in the course, guiding students toward an intended destination.

2. *Student to professor.* The professor has countless opportunities to foster and cultivate spiritual formation online beyond just providing the content. As a vital participant in the online community, the professor facilitates movement toward the course's aim of transformation by shaping the student through the routine tasks of grading, responding to emails, and engaging in discussion. Interaction must be regular and substantive throughout the length of the course so that the student knows that the professor is present and a participant in the community of learning. The professor can capitalize on these opportunities to build relationships, apply truth, and identify growth areas in students. Through this engagement, the student will see a model of what it looks like to pursue Christlikeness in every interaction.

3. *Student to student.* Even if students have excellent content and strong interaction with the professor, they still need to interact with one another as they reflect, respond, and react to their peers' critical engagement with the course content. Asynchronous discussion, peer review, group work, and a number of other creative activities can provide the opportunity for students to engage with one another and learn from one another as the community online builds. As they build a community centered on the biblical content that the professor provides, students can observe growth in one another, participate in application beyond their own lives, and articulate important ways in which they are being transformed.

4. *Missing missional mobilization.* The community of inquiry can provide a rich learning environment when developed from a Christian worldview through interaction with content, professor, and students. However, it is missing an essential Christian emphasis—mission. Spiritual formation is not complete until it mobilizes students to share the gospel in their context in fulfillment of the Great Commission mandate (Matt 28:19–20). The mission of the Christian is not just to soak up knowledge to be personally transformed, but biblical transformation seeks to replicate itself in others through sharing the gospel. This missing element is where online learning gets really exciting.

In an online course, students are typically scattered all around the country or even the globe. As students become disciples who make disciples,

their professor can design ways to send students into their own context to engage their community for Christ and then bring those experiences back to the online course community for feedback, insight, and growth. The online community can teach students about mission, send them on mission, and support their future missional experiences.

Online activities that facilitate this missional engagement can include interviews, field research, immersion experiences, and relationship building. For example, a course on literature may send students on a missional activity requiring several interviews regarding the impact of Christian literature on the general public. Specific questions regarding biblical themes found in that literature can begin conversations with the interviewee and reveal opportunities for the student to explain the gospel message. A course on graphic design or marketing might send students to the mall to observe and record messaging in the stores. Discussion with store representatives can assist with interpreting the messaging and branding as well as provide opportunities for concepts related to biblical teaching. In a course designed for training ministry leaders, activities that require discipleship relationships or teaching moments in a church context can provide the students with formative experiences and feedback from the course community as they engage their context directly.

Students can bring back summaries, photos, videos, or artifacts about their missional experiences for discussion and advice as they continue to learn how to engage their context with the gospel. In this way, professors can mobilize and equip students to practice what they are learning in class as students apply it in their context. Then, students can interact with one another and the professor about those activities to gain an appreciation of what mission looks like in the variety of contexts represented by the students in the online course.

Spiritual formation is possible in online courses. It happens by intentionally designing a community where content, professor interaction, and peer interaction are all present and heading toward the specific goal of transformation. The content in the course can be focused on a Christian worldview, the professor's interaction can guide students toward maturity in Christ, and the peer interaction can express and encourage growth among students. Online courses can even provide opportunities to further our mission as we seek to reproduce growth in others by applying truth in our own contexts wherever they may be.

Although the coronavirus pandemic has altered the immediate execution

and future plans for higher education in many ways, remote teaching and online education do not have to threaten a uniquely Christian approach to education. Institutions can make the most of remote teaching by applying some online education principles to improve the student experience. If institutions determine to move fully online for the future semester, they can create best practices and train faculty for excellent online teaching. Most importantly, whether teaching remotely or online, professors can establish a rich community where students can grow in Christ and be deployed in their context for faithful and Christ-exalting service.

✧