

CAN ADVENTIST FAITH BE NURTURED IN AN ONLINE CLASS?

Delivering high school, college, or university classes online presents exciting new possibilities for Adventist education . . . But can this type of course nurture Adventist faith to the same extent as a traditional face-to-face classroom?

Technology and online classes have steadily and dramatically transformed secondary and higher education. Over the past decade, online classes have emerged from a radical innovation to a well-accepted and widely used teaching methodology in many colleges and universities worldwide. Looking ahead to the higher education world of 2020, Witherspoon¹ foresees that computer-enhanced learning will become the core modality of many institutions' approach to teaching and learning. Lynch observes that the next 50 years will see a learning revolution unlike anything witnessed since the beginning of the printing press. For Lynch, the reality is that students need career and lifelong learning, and they want to learn wherever it is convenient for them, whether that is at 3:00 a.m. or 10:00 p.m.²

Delivering high school, college, or university classes online presents exciting new possibilities for Adventist education.³ Students who cannot easily access an Adventist academy or college campus have found online classes flexible and convenient. But can this type of course nurture Adventist faith to the same extent as a traditional face-to-face classroom?

Many of my colleagues believe that online classes are necessary to accomplish Christ's commission to "go ye into all the world" and teach the gospel to everyone, not just those who can come to a physical campus. Others argue that the online environment is a poor substitute for the faith-affirming visual, verbal, and non-verbal interactions that occur in a traditional classroom. Without prayer,

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thoughtful devotionals, or the caring face and voice of a Christian teacher, will there still be opportunity to develop and share Adventist faith?

The Growth in Online Learning

In 2002, some 1.6 million students (11 percent of U.S. higher education students) took at least one online course. The overall percentage of U.S. colleges identifying online education as a critical long-term strategy grew from 49 percent in 2003 to 56 percent in 2005. Overall U.S. online enrollment increased from 1.98 million in 2003 to 2.35 million in 2004.⁴ However, private and church-affiliated institutions in the U.S. have moved into this area at a significantly slower rate than public institutions.⁵

Tonkin⁶ notes that Christian colleges have successfully cultivated spiritual and intellectual development in a “high touch,” face-to-face context. Roels⁷ suggests that their reluctance to embrace online learning stems from legitimate concerns about whether online classes can actually accommodate the distinct educational mission of Christian colleges. However, she concludes that online classes may be one of the few options working adults have to finish college or obtain an advanced degree at a Christian institution.

I firmly believe that online classes can be taught in ways that will nurture and affirm faith and develop and support authentic Christian community. But my personal experience over the past 10 years, in both teaching and taking online

classes, suggests that it will not be easy. Teaching online requires that teachers be intentional about developing a positive class atmosphere and achieving faith-related goals.

Online Faith Integration

Integrating faith and learning, and developing “Christian community” have always been the cornerstone of Adventist education. In an article entitled “Nurturing Faith in the Cyber Classroom,” Akers comments that “what we say at this juncture about faith nurture via the Internet is largely theoretical. There are, however, some tried and true premises and procedures that might possibly transfer over from the conventional classroom to this new instructional frontier.”⁸ He further asserts that, “it is the task of the Christian teacher to guide and orchestrate the study—whether it be group or individual—to trace all the linkages back to principles and show that all assertions and knowledge at their root have ethical and spiritual implications.”⁹ This article examines five major approaches to achieving these goals in an online course.

The Teacher Is the Key in Integrating Faith Online

I believe that Christian faith is often more caught than taught. As teachers witness through their lives, their commitment will be contagious. Holmes¹⁰ believes that Christian colleges exist to educate students in a “climate of faith and learning” and that dedicated faculty members are the key to

creating that climate and feeling of community. George Knight¹¹ sees every Adventist teacher as an agent of salvation and Christian teaching as a serious ministry.

From their original research on how faith is best integrated with learning, Burton and Nwosu speak of the “pervasive influence” of teachers on students: “Two of the most valued items students perceived as important for helping them integrate their faith and learning were ‘professor’s caring attitude’ and ‘professor’s exemplary life.’”¹² They note that courses must be designed to integrate faith with specific content knowledge. Korniejczuk suggests that teachers interested in faith integration must discover in their subject matter “the themes and issues that naturally allow for an explicit connection between the curricular content, on the one hand, and Christian faith, beliefs, and values on the other.”¹³ Rasi also emphasized this “intentionality” when he wrote that all teaching and learning must be designed to “ensure that students, by the time they leave school, will have freely internalized biblical values and a view of knowledge, life, and destiny that is Bible-based, Christ-centered, service-oriented, and kingdom-directed.”¹⁴

Laird emphasizes that the integration of Christian principles must be more intentional in the online setting than in face-to-face classes.¹⁵ This is crucial because it is what sets Christian online classes apart from those offered by a public institution. At his private Christian school, all teachers of online courses are required to articulate faith integration strategies for each class assignment, forum exercise, instructor example, online project, and personal learning journal assignment. Because many online students will probably never see each other or their professor, faculty must intentionally transform online exchanges and the online environment into a place where spiritual needs are met and spiritual growth is fostered. But *how* does a professor integrate faith and learning online?

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Perhaps it will be helpful to begin with some widely accepted “best practices” in higher education that apply equally well in online education as in face-to-face instruction. Chickering and Gamson have provided seven basic principles for effective college and university teaching:¹⁶

- Encourage genuine and personal contact between students and instructors;
- Develop reciprocity and cooperation among students;
- Encourage active learning;
- Give prompt feedback;
- Emphasize time on task;
- Communicate high academic expectations; and
- Respect the diverse talents which each individual student has and their unique ways of learning.

These tried and true principles can also serve as reliable guides to interactions with online students. Let’s look now at how to apply them in the online class.

Genuine and Personal Contact Affirms and Nurtures Faith

A well-designed online course allows students to actively participate in many different learning activities, including class discussions, small group activities, and student-to-student and student-to-faculty interaction.

Graham et al¹⁷ have developed a list of “lessons learned” for online instructors using the Chickering and Gamson principles. They consider it extremely important for instructors to give detailed, prompt, and personal feedback to each student. This is the essence of

great online teaching and, I believe, the key to nurturing faith online. From the very first e-mail contact by the instructor, students are making judgments about how compassionate and caring the teacher is, as well as how “user-friendly” the online course will be. It is essential to start with assurances (especially for those who are taking an online class for the first time) that you will help them and always be there for them.

At the beginning of every online class, I write a personal message to each student welcoming him or her to the class with the assurance that I am only an e-mail away. I emphasize that I check e-mails many times per day and that there are no “dumb” questions. I strive to make all communication personal and inviting.

It is impossible to develop a caring Christian relationship without a significant investment of personal time. Graham et al found that neglecting feedback in online courses is common because many faculty members just don’t have—or take—the time to be personal.¹⁸ To avoid this problem, they urge online instructors to include in the syllabus clear timelines for responding to e-mail messages, such as, “I will make every effort to respond to e-mail within two days of receiving it” or “I will respond to e-mails on Tuesdays and Fridays between three and five o’clock.” At these times, they can also encourage participants who are not routinely involved in discussions through personal e-mails or telephone calls.

Shelton and Saltsman in their online article “Tips and Tricks for Teaching Online: How to Teach Like a Pro!”¹⁹ repeatedly stress that learners are “eager for communication” and urge online instructors to communicate regularly with individuals and the class. They suggest that teachers should use class-wide e-mail announcements, group e-mails, and “chat archives to facilitate accessible, public communication in the online course.”²⁰ They warn that a lack of communica-



tion will lead to feelings of isolation and urge the adding of emotion to e-mails using the “emotion expressed in parentheses (*smile*) or to include emoticons, such as :-) for happiness or :-0 for surprise or dismay.”²¹

Obviously, this level of interaction and communication can occur only when class enrollment is limited to a reasonable number of students. Research indicates that the optimal size of an online class is no more than 20 for undergraduate courses and eight to 14 for graduate courses, unless the teacher has assistants to ensure speedy response to student inquiries and posts, and to aid in grading assignments and tests.²²

Threaded Discussions

Online courses must be designed

to allow for significant and active communication between students and from student to teacher. Accessibility to the teacher is crucial to a student's ability to successfully complete an online class.

Online courses are most often delivered through learning management systems (LMS) such as Blackboard, WebCT, and Desire2Learn, which organize learning content in a standard way. Every LMS allows for “threaded” online discussion. A threaded discussion is a chronological listing of class members' comments with the author's name attached to each posting. Threaded discussion comments can be posted anytime, and allow time for reflection and critical thinking.

The teacher needs to regularly monitor threaded discussion com-

ments to provide guidance and ensure that students are responding appropriately and courteously to one another.

In my current online class, I pose one question per week to which all class members must respond. In addition, they must comment on two other posts by fellow class members. This weekly assignment provides a great opportunity for me to pose questions that allow students to reflect and clarify thoughts about God, individual beliefs, and the use of technology. Again, it is crucial that ethical and moral dilemmas or prominent spiritual themes be highlighted. One of the best ways to nurture faith, as Akers states, is “through gentle probing questions and follow-through dialogue.”²³

Collaborative Projects

In my online classes, I require a small group of three to four students to complete a final collaborative project. The project should require all levels of Bloom's taxonomy—application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.²⁴ If planned carefully, the assignment can encourage intercultural understanding, build tolerance, and encourage faith sharing among class members.

During my online class last spring, several student groups worked closely together to complete an assignment. In one group were an Adventist principal from a small school in Indiana and a public school administrator from New York City. They shared their experiences and their faith, and prayed for each other at different times during the class, especially when the husband of one of the women was diagnosed with a serious illness.

Online Chats

During each 15-week online class, I schedule one synchronous (at the same time) meeting every fifth week when all class members are required to “meet” online. Several days before the online class, I post a lesson plan for that night. We always have a devotional reading first, and I then pose a main question related to the assigned

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reading. For example, after the first module, I asked this question: *Why did Bonhoeffer argue that “if persons claim to be persons of faith, there is no room for taking the easy way out”? Why is this so in life? Can you give some personal examples?* This has produced many deep and meaningful dialogues.

Generally, students will share personal issues more readily in the online class than in a face-to-face setting. Because of this, faculty members need to be in tune with and supportive of this interaction. In one of my recent online classes, a non-Adventist doctoral student shared his sorrows associated with his 4-year-old son's struggle with a brain tumor. This young man, his wife, and their son were the subject of many special prayers by the class members when they learned of his situation in an online chat session.

Developing a Christian Faith Community

How can you ensure that your online class develops a sense of Christian community? Can open dialogue, with its connectedness and feeling of belonging, occur without face-to-face classroom interaction? Palloff and Pratt²⁵ caution that those who teach online must be purposeful and intentional in creating a feeling of community. They note five approaches that will facilitate community in an online class: (a) active interaction involving both course content and personal communication with each student; (b) collaborative learning as evidenced by comments directed primarily from student to student rather than from student to instructor; (c) socially constructed meaning (developed by and in the online community); (d) sharing of

resources among students; and finally (e) expressions of encouragement and support exchanged between students, and a further willingness to evaluate critically the work of fellow students.

Meyer and Wessman have discussed the development of Christian community in their online nursing classes.²⁶ In summary, they used the Dietrich Bonhoeffer model of Christian community, intentionally trying to create an online milieu with opportunities for “Christ-like love, ministry and confession.” In planning the coursework, they asked themselves: “How could we experience community worship experiences as prelude to work, and how should we craft learning experiences that blended reflection through both dialog and solitude?”²⁷

Meyer and Wessman believe several things that must be planned for throughout the online class, including intentional, natural, and pervasive integration of Scripture; letting individuals choose their preferred balance between group engagement and solitude; affirmation of self-disclosure; providing feedback (proof) that a faculty member has been listening (reading) to the asynchronous chat responses; affirming helpful behavior; encouraging risk-taking; individually tailoring approaches to different students' needs; and encouraging responses to apologies from group members.

Similarly, Strevey in an article entitled “Is Faith-Based E-Learning Possible?” urges that faith integration be based on the specific mission of the Christian college or university that offers the online course. In her experience, “This is accomplished through building positive student self-image and Christian character, integrating faith with learning and living, and integration of spiritual, educational and leadership development.”²⁸ In her online undergraduate nursing classes, weekly devotionals intentionally relate Scripture to the world of work. An on-

line prayer forum is included in each course, and faculty members intentionally foster student character development through their postings. In short, all faculty are “encouraged and expected to share their faith in the online classroom.”²⁹ This shows that with careful planning, the online experience can be designed so that Christian community with its gifts of faith, hope, and love can develop and flourish.



Conclusion

I firmly believe that Adventist education, undergraduate and graduate, can be effectively delivered online while integrating faith with learning and creating a faith community of teacher and students. For many desiring a faith-based education, the flexibility of online learning means that this may be our only opportunity to provide them with an Adventist educational experience.

As this article has shown, students and teachers in online classes will face several major challenges. They are learning to use a new and challenging

medium with few models to follow. At first, both students and teachers will experience feelings of isolation and frustration. Students will be forced to become independent, active learners who are self-disciplined and take responsibility for their own learning. They will miss the opportunity for verbal and non-verbal faith-affirming interactions that occur in a typical classroom. But by working together in community, they will be able to find that appropriate balance so a successful online learning experience can occur.

The continuing explosion of information, and information sources, necessitates that online students look to Christian faculty mentors to help make sense of it all. To meet this need, Adventist online teachers must intentionally plan for a high level of faith-affirming interaction. By using the five approaches described in this article—personal, encouraging e-mails; threaded discussions; collaborative projects; online chats; and the intentional development of a faith community, along with sensitivity to the spiritual needs of each student, teachers will be able to develop a caring, faith-filled online community that demonstrates love, shares trials and struggles, and affirms the worth of each individual. ☞

This article has been peer reviewed.

Very little has been written by Adventists (or anybody else), about the integration of faith in the online learning environment. To encourage dialogue on successful integration methods currently in use, I appeal to teachers to submit to the JOURNAL OF ADVENTIST EDUCATION articles expounding on methods that have been successful in their online courses as well as research-based articles on the subject so they can be shared with readers worldwide.



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