



## ONLINE TEACHING

Online delivery of nursing education provides learners with access to academic content through a virtual learning environment. Learning experiences also include activities that take place under supervision in clinical settings such as hospitals and clinics. While academic content and clinical experiences provide the foundation for most online nursing curricula, programs offered by Seventh-day Adventist schools build on an additional foundation—the development of faith in Christ. Educators in the Seventh-day Adventist system recognize that integrating faith with learning is a primary goal, a vital consideration when developing online programs and courses. In this article, two universities provide a description of how this primary goal is approached within their nursing programs.

### Reflections From Southern Adventist University (Southern), Collegedale, Tennessee, U.S.A.

The School of Nursing at Southern Adventist University has several fully online programs, including one for BS completion, a Nurse Educator Master's degree, an MSN/MBA, and a Doctor of Nurse Practice. As Seventh-day Adventist educators, regardless of the context or program in which we work, our primary goal is to point learners to Christ and encourage them on their path toward spiritual maturity as members of the body of Christ (Ephesians 4:11-14). Spiritual growth is realized through prayer, daily encounters with Scripture, and the power of the Holy Spirit.<sup>1</sup> The ultimate goal is complete restoration to the image of

our Creator.<sup>2</sup>

We, the authors, believe that: “In the highest sense the work of education and the work of redemption are one, for in education, as in redemption, ‘no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ’ 1 Cor. 3:11.”<sup>3</sup> For this reason, teaching processes should lead students to trust the Author and Finisher of our faith, Jesus Christ. The curriculum, then, must be Christ-centered. This type of curriculum—one based on a biblical foundation—is a critical aspect of planning and instruction that we believe makes our nursing programs unique and valuable. By cooperating with the Holy Spirit, instructors and their learners can become instruments that share heavenly solutions with people and societies that comprise this broken, fallen world. This can be accomplished by inviting the Holy Spirit to influence the planning and teaching of each course. Learning experiences are designed to help learners reflect on big ideas; to recognize, accept, and act on truth; and to invite and welcome others into a relationship with Jesus Christ. Use of this approach in traditional face-to-face education has demonstrated its ability to transform the lives of students.<sup>4</sup> Such a curriculum is based on a biblical worldview that orients instruction to probe questions such as these: *Why am I here? What is my purpose in life? What does the Lord require of me? Where am I going? Who can I help along the way? How can I spread the gospel of Jesus Christ?* To these questions, the Bible provides direction, guidance, and answers: “He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord re-

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quire of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8, ESV).<sup>5</sup>

### Community of Inquiry

Chickering and Gamson<sup>6</sup> outlined seven research-based principles of good practice in higher education. Effective teachers:

1. Interact with their students;
2. Encourage their students to interact and cooperate with one another;
3. Purposely plan for active learning and encourage their students to think and talk as well as to write and question;
4. Accentuate the importance of staying on task;
5. Provide quality and timely feedback;
6. Expect the best from their students and model what that looks like; and
7. Appreciate the diverse talents and learning styles of their students.

When teachers attempt to apply these principles in online education, they face some unique challenges.<sup>7</sup> Research has indicated that learning occurs most effectively within a community of inquiry.<sup>8</sup> Theorists Garrison, Anderson, and Archer<sup>9</sup> created a framework of "presence" (teacher presence, social presence, and cognitive presence) to describe how communities of inquiry can be used to increase learning effectiveness in online learning.

- *Teacher presence* is an umbrella term that refers to the entire learning experience from planning through execution. This includes the design and facilitation of the course and the careful, intentional, and purposeful planning of interactive components.<sup>10</sup> Interaction—the currency of online learning environments—occurs with the content, with other learners, and with the instructor.<sup>11</sup>

- *Social presence* in an online course provides a way for learners to concretely identify with the instructor and one another in ways that empower all participants to feel known and significant.<sup>12</sup> Because people are social beings, the development of social presence allows the learners to work together as actual human beings rather than as a collection of usernames or e-mail addresses.<sup>13</sup>

- *Cognitive presence* in online courses refers to the teaching methods used in the online classroom to intellectually engage the learner in ways that encourage understanding and the creation of meaning.<sup>14</sup> Garrison, Anderson, and Archer<sup>15</sup> pointed out that this is done through sustained reflection and discourse—an absolute necessity in online learning. Through the mental processes of inquiry, deep thinking, and reflection, learners maintain engagement and strengthen their intellectual ability.<sup>16</sup>

### The Living Faith Presence

In faith-based institutions, where both curriculum and instruction are rooted in a biblical worldview, a fourth presence can be considered foundational to course development. At Southern Adventist University's Online Campus, we call

that presence the "*living faith*" presence. According to Ellen White: "A living faith means an increase of vigor, a confiding trust, by which, through the grace of Christ, the soul becomes a conquering power."<sup>17</sup>

Professors at Southern Adventist University are trained by members of the Online Campus team to develop the three presences through university-wide, department/school-level, and individual training sessions. The Online Campus team provides professors with information regarding best practices; and their use of those practices is facilitated by the work of an online coach, one of whom is assigned to each professor. Online coaches are members of the Online Campus team and they provide training and professional development in the use of instructional technologies, academic course planning and creation, academic and technical support for teaching faculty and students, and media and course design assistance. The coaches are trained in online learning, instructional technology, curriculum and instruction, and media and Web design; they also possess years of experience working in their fields of expertise and teaching in their areas of specialty.

Each summer, Southern holds training sessions for professors, which help them develop courses with a biblical foundation. When the university's professors are assigned to develop an online course, they are assisted with all aspects of course development, including the living faith presence.

The experience gained from years of offering fully online courses and programs for nursing learners has enabled Southern's Online Campus to identify a number of best practices for building the living faith presence. First, curriculum developers utilize intentional planning to establish a biblical foundation for the course, and throughout the course assignments, biblical principles relating to the academic discipline are reinforced and developed. Next, weekly devotionals are created that connect to the subject content. Through online video-conferencing, learners are encouraged weekly to regularly connect with God as the Creator and Author of truth through prayer and Bible study. Perspectives from various Christian scholars in the field of nursing are used to shape integrative questions for reflection.

Other intentional practices include active prayer forums and referencing Scripture in projects, assessments, and group work. Throughout the learning experiences, learners are encouraged toward greater civic responsibility with the goal of promoting social justice from a Christian point of view. An example of this type of learning experience occurs in a course in which students work with patients who wish to make lifestyle changes, assessing and coaching them throughout the semester. This work is based on student learning outcomes that include teaching learners to examine biblical themes that support the use of a coaching approach for motivating and educating patients to adopt lifestyle change. During the final week of the course, the learners are encouraged to reflect upon their spiritual growth and ways that the course has influenced their faith, as well as

their plans for implementing truth principles in their current and future practice.

Forum discussions and live virtual meetings encourage learners to reflect, apply, analyze, and/or synthesize content from a biblical point of view. The learning activities in the course encourage them to think deeply and to evaluate sources of information. Students may be asked to critique content resources, comparing and contrasting the information with the Adventist health message. Ellen White stated that “There is nothing more calculated to energize the mind, and strengthen the intellect, than the study of the word of God. No other book is so potent to elevate the thoughts, to give vigor to the faculties, as the broad, ennobling truths of the Bible.”<sup>18</sup>

Recently, the university conducted an informal survey of Southern Adventist University’s online nursing professors to learn how they are establishing the living faith presence in their teaching. They provided the following statements:

- “I honor and value being a Seventh-day Adventist Christian professor and consider it a privilege and a responsibility to promote biblical principles in all of the courses I teach.”
- “We spend significant time with the inspired text. I also make an effort to model a Christlike spirit in the way that I relate to my students. The goal is not simply the accumulation of information, but life transformation.”
- “The discussion questions in my online course relate the content to Christian calling and service. The assignments give opportunity to plan how learners will encourage others to develop a relationship with God through nature and Scripture, and to serve Him as a way of life.”
- “The online video conference each week is a vital component for building and nurturing a community of faith.”
- “Students often comment on the spiritual blessings that they receive from the learning experiences in the online course that I teach. The assignments call for practical methods of creating a Christ-centered curriculum and opportunities for character development and service.”
- “Last week a student mentioned that the online course, more than any of the face-to-face courses she had ever taken, was helping her focus on making Christ the center of her life.”
- “More than anything else, I intend to let students know through all of my interactions that I am a serious and grateful disciple of Jesus.”

Included in each end-of-semester digital course evaluation instrument are several open-response questions that allow students to provide feedback regarding the learning

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experiences and how the course transformed their lives.

- “To everyone involved in this course—Thank you for sharing your hearts. Not only have I learned from the professor and the content, but I have also learned from YOU, my classmates.”

- “This online course gave [me] opportunity to know the Lord more intimately. I am grateful.”

- “Taking this online class has been one of the most rewarding experiences I have ever had. A university with a foundation in Christ makes all the difference in the world.”

- “I have opened my eyes and heart more since taking this course. Little did I know that an online college course could lead to my salvation. That’s priceless tuition.”

- “I cannot begin to tell you how much the assignments in this online

course are challenging not only my worldview but my view as an Adventist Christian. I have never had to give so much thought to my work, to think this deep, or challenge other points of view.”

By partnering with the Holy Spirit, instructors and their learners can be instruments that carry solutions to a broken and fallen world. This can be accomplished by inviting the Holy Spirit to direct the planning and teaching of each course. Learning experiences should be designed to help learners reflect on big ideas; to recognize, accept, and act on truth; and to welcome others into a relationship with Jesus Christ.

#### Reflections From Universidad Peruana Unión (UPeU), Lima, Peru

At UPeU, part of our educational mission is the integration of faith in the teaching-learning process. The Master’s in Nursing program at UPeU, the only such program in the South American Division, was designed for online delivery to make it accessible to the vast territory it serves. Students in this program interact with their instructors and classmates through a synchronous virtual platform. In the multimedia environment of the virtual classroom, where the instructor and students are in different locations, integration of faith and learning (IFL) is more challenging than in the traditional classroom.

Nevertheless, we agree with Korniejczuk<sup>19</sup> that the integration of faith in the teaching-learning process should be evident in all aspects of the curriculum, and involve the entire academic community and beyond. However, achieving this goal in virtual Christian education requires extra effort.

#### Integration of Faith

Each cohort begins with a 15-day face-to-face session during which national and international students are in-

structed on the use of the virtual classroom, practice using the technology, and complete two assignments. They are also introduced to the institution's Adventist philosophy of education, which will be integrated throughout the curriculum. This gives the students an opportunity to share their opinions and ideas with faculty and classmates. During these sessions, students often express gratitude for the institution's attempts to strengthen the spiritual dimension of their education.

A 10-minute devotional based on a Bible text related to the day's topic is presented at the beginning of each online class. Students discuss the application of the text to the topic and share their prayer requests. Students who are not Seventh-day Adventists have the opportunity to observe how the power of prayer and faith in God can help to solve problems. At the beginning of the program, non-Adventist students rarely make prayer requests; however, as they see the fervor of their Adventist classmates, little by little, they also begin to express their requests based on their needs. These devotional and prayer experiences reaffirm the power of prayer and faith in God in all students—Adventist and non-Adventist alike. As the semester progresses, the instructor consistently allows time for the students to comment on some lived experience related to a previous class prayer request.

On one occasion during the prayer request time, a student of another faith commented on her sadness and anguish because of the sudden death of her physician husband due to a cerebral aneurism. Adding to her pain was the attitude of her oldest son, who had become rebellious and angry at God. During each virtual class, the instructors and classmates prayed for her and her family. The nursing team supported her during the grieving process by calling her and praying with her over the phone, e-mailing her inspiring and comforting Bible texts, and mentoring her so she could successfully complete her course work. Later, she expressed her profound gratitude for the prayers and the help received. She reported that her heart was filled with peace, and that her son had asked for forgiveness and promised to improve his behavior. She completed her degree and is now defending her thesis.

It is important to mention that prayer is not only offered by the instructor, but also others participating in the course such as the program coordinator, the informatics engineer, and students, giving the opportunity for all to participate in this privilege.

Throughout the program, as the classes and workshops progress, many occasions arise when it is appropriate to consider God and His Word. For example, students in small groups analyze portions of Scripture along with scientific literature to extrapolate conclusions regarding the topic being studied. The parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) is used to analyze the characteristics of caring of the Christian nurse. The story of Abigail (1 Samuel 25) is used to analyze assertive leadership in nursing, and the relationship between Christ with His disciples exemplifies the management of human resources.

### Participation in the Week of Spiritual Emphasis at UPeU

During the campus week of spiritual emphasis at UPeU, special attention is given to spiritual growth. This special event provides an opportunity to rest from the daily academic activities and to reflect upon personal communion with God. We include our virtual classroom students by inviting them to participate online in the events of the week.

The program coordinator takes time to explain the importance of the week of spiritual emphasis to the online students' lives and provides a link that enables them to access the presentations' live stream. At the end of the week, the students are invited to reflect in writing on the themes that had a major impact on their lives, and some students share their experiences verbally during the virtual class time.

Christian education provides faculty and students with an opportunity to strengthen their faith in God, our Creator and Redeemer. Therefore, we must ensure that neither technological nor pedagogical challenges inhibit this mission. To do so, we must ask for wisdom and claim God's promises. This will enable us to put aside our anxieties and show genuine interest in the problems of our students, as we individually pray with and for them, and strengthen their trust in God.

Christian faculty have the responsibility of leading their students to Christ. Both the bricks-and-mortar and the virtual classroom in an Adventist university can provide this opportunity, so that students will be able to say with John Fowler,<sup>20</sup> "Adventist education made me aware that life has meaning and a destiny," and that prepared them for success in their professional lives both now and throughout eternity.

### Conclusion

As Seventh-day Adventist Christians, we believe Ellen White's assertion that "Every human being, created in the image of God, is endowed with a power akin to that of the Creator—individuality, power to think and to do. . . . It is the work of true education to develop this power, to train young people to be thinkers, and not mere reflectors of other people's thought."<sup>21</sup> Educators who embrace this ideology purposefully and iteratively will examine each aspect of teaching and learning, and build a community of inquiry to capitalize on every method possible to open learners' minds to the influence of the Holy Spirit.

Thus, designing an online course represents both an opportunity and a responsibility because it also allows us to share our faith with people who cannot access face-to-face graduate programs, in addition to offering excellent quality academic instruction. The challenge of teaching other human beings to think, explore, and accept new ideas/values, and to allow their lives to be transformed is great in any educational setting and even greater in the virtual classroom.

Christian faculty, whether in a face-to-face setting or an



online classroom, have the opportunity to lead their learners to Christ. This indeed requires wisdom and creativity. Let us all claim the promise in James 1:5: “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him” (NKJV).<sup>22</sup> ✍

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