

# Nurturing Faith Through Online Learning

## Part 2: Implementing Faith Integration

**F**aced with escalating trends globally in the utilization of online modalities for teaching and learning, perhaps one of the greatest challenges for Adventist educators is this: How can we shape online modalities to nurture the faith of students? How can we provide online experiences that incorporate a clear Seventh-day Adventist identity and mission alignment?

In the previous article of this two-part series (see **Nurturing Faith Through Online Learning, Part 1**), we explored how Adventist teachers can incorporate faith-nurturing experiences while planning online learning. This intentional planning for faith integration begins with determining the instructional design and preparing the course syllabus, which then drive the presentation of the course modules and learning materials. Of equal importance is the personal preparation of the teacher, who must bring a God-centered biblical perspective to the course of study.

We now turn from the design and development of online learning to its implementation. While various delivery strategies can nurture the faith of students enrolled in online courses, we will consider representative teacher-tested strategies that can be grouped within three clusters: Contextual, Conceptual, and Experiential.<sup>1</sup>



### Contextual Strategies—Building Learning Communities That Lead to Communities of Faith

In online learning, building a learning community is a prime goal, the achievement of which will determine the safety and success of the online experience.<sup>2</sup> This can take place in various ways, such as group discussions, collaborative projects, group research, and student mentoring.

One primary goal of Adventist education is to proactively build caring, connected communities of faith. Achieving this goal contributes directly to the spiritual development of students, as belonging often precedes believing. Stephen and Mary Lowe observe, for example, that “a Christian cannot achieve a whole person reflection of the fullness of Christ without vital connections to a vibrant and healthy ecosystem such as the body of Christ.”<sup>3</sup> These communities of faith, which nurture developing Christians, are essential to effecting whole-person transformation into the image of Christ.<sup>4</sup> It is

vital, then, in both face-to-face (FTF) and online classrooms, for educators to create learning communities that lead to the formation of faith communities.

Community building is often best accomplished by strengthening communication among members of the class and by nurturing care for one another. In an online statistics class, for example, the teacher created an activity called “2 a.m. Friends’ Circle.” The students were paired and were asked to encourage each other early each morning for one week. “Two a.m.” was just a symbol of sacrificing one’s time to offer a prayer relating to a friend’s prayer request. Students remarked that they appreciated the time spent, which drew them closer to each other.

Another way to strengthen the online faith community is through worship and devotional experiences. Beginning class with a spiritual activity

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is typical in Adventist schools. Worship or devotional time sets the spiritual atmosphere of the class as students and teachers sing, pray, and read/listen to God's Word together. As classes move to the online environment, the personal touch of fellowshiping together may be more difficult to achieve but, with some adjustments, it is possible. In fact, the separation created by physical distance in a virtual classroom highlights the importance of interactive, engaging, and creative online devotionals.<sup>5</sup>

Various aspects of worship can provide meaningful faith experiences for online students:

1. *Prayer*: Scripture enjoins, "Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the LORD our Maker" (Psalm 95:6, NIV).<sup>6</sup> Paul inquired, "Well then, what shall I do? I will pray in the spirit, and I will also pray in words I understand" (1 Corinthians 14:15, NLT). Invite your online students to share prayer requests, then pray together for those requests and celebrate answered prayers. Also, pray with and for your students. A prayer that you post in a discussion forum or in a private message to a student has an enduring quality.

2. *Praise and Thanksgiving*: We are invited, "Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name" (Psalm 100:4), and "Let us offer through Jesus a continual sacrifice of praise to God, proclaiming our allegiance to his name" (Hebrews 13:15, NLT). Share with students specific reasons for which you praise God, and ask them to share experiences from their lives for which they are grateful.

3. *Music*: A faith-focused life finds expression through music. "Sing to the LORD with grateful praise; make music to our God on the harp" (Psalm 147:7). "Sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves; make music to the Lord from your heart" (Ephesians 5:19, NLT). Spiritual songs, especially if connected to the topic and/or life experiences, are powerful ways of im-

pressing God's truth on the minds of students. While it may be more difficult to sing together in an online space, you can post links to inspirational music. You can also invite students to provide personal recordings, which you can review and then share with the class, as fitting. The goal is to maximize the impact of music with creativity and joy.

When we involve our students in online devotionals and worship experiences, spiritual life develops, and

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faith is strengthened. An online student, for example, stated, "I really like the online devotionals. This is my first time to join an online class and I find the online devotionals a lot better than the classroom devotionals . . . because of the interactions among classmates. We spend enough time to discuss God's Word, we share burdens . . . in the discussion area—something that doesn't

happen in classroom devotionals that last only a few minutes."

As you engage, then, with your online students, ask yourself frequently: What can I do to build and nurture the community of faith in my course?

### Conceptual Strategies—Inviting Students to Think Christianly

One way in which we can engage our online students in thinking Christianly is by designing and implementing rich, faith-strengthening discussions. Maddox, Estep, and Lowe remind us that "the success of effective online courses is dependent on the quality of interaction in online discussion forums."<sup>7</sup> The discussion area of an online course serves as the hub of almost all the learning activities of the class. It is where interactions can contribute to the development of higher-order thinking skills, socialization, and community building.

Whether the discussion is in real-time or asynchronous, the benefit from these interactions can surpass what is read in books or gained through traditional assignments, as it involves connecting course content with one's experience, expressing it, clarifying dissonant ideas, making resolutions, and possibly changing one's course of action. Because spiritual transformation is the goal, students should be given opportunities to talk about their faith, their experiences with God, and biblical principles, not just read about them.

Many of the benefits of online discussions are achieved through well-crafted discussion questions and carefully facilitated interactions. Leading the class to faith-strengthening discussions is an important task of a Christian teacher and a guiding principle in effective facilitation. Through faith-strengthening discussions, online students can:

- *Discover biblical principles in class topics.* A lively interchange of ideas among members of the class can provide students with practical applications for biblical principles,

help clarify unclear areas, and confirm the value of looking at the topics through the lens of Scripture. Jesus modeled the use of questioning to raise important points. He asked, for example, “Who do you say I am?” (Matthew 16:15) to clarify His students’ views and expectations regarding the Messiah.

- *Clarify assumptions, evaluating how they align with a biblical worldview.* Discussion topics can include: the nature of the discipline and how it should be examined; the origin, meaning, the purpose of life; and the nature of truth and reality; as well as our relationship with God, with other human beings, and with the world around us.

- *Trace the Great Controversy.* Every dimension of life is affected by the conflict between good and evil. The Great Controversy theme is, in fact, the sense-making narrative for life. Here we explore the ways that our discipline has been shaped by this cosmic conflict.

- *Create solutions to problems using biblical principles.* Problem-based learning provides direct application of theories and principles. Students can be asked to solve real-life problems using biblical principles and the tools learned in class.

- *Develop awareness and commitment to engage in God’s mission.* Through the discussion forum, we can raise our students’ awareness regarding opportunities to engage in mission as an extension or outcome of the class topic. Participation in and the sharing of missional experiences can lead participants to make a life commitment to participate in the Gospel Commission (Matthew 28:18-20).<sup>8</sup>

Another important way to invite your students to think about life and learning from a Christian frame of reference is to examine real-life issues. Ethical issues exist in every discipline and every subject area. Some of these issues are cross-disciplinary, such the right to privacy, vegetarianism, discrimination, freedom of speech, exploitation of natural re-

sources, and plagiarism. Other issues may be more discipline-specific, such as immigration policies, squatter settlements, foreign aid and national debt, and waste disposal in geography or social studies; global warming, cloning, animal rights, euthanasia, and nuclear energy in science; or piracy, hacking, netiquette, and intellectual property in technology courses.

When we consider an issue, perhaps presented as a case study, the goal is to help our students to develop ethical reasoning from a biblical framework. In this area, there are two primary considerations: (1) What purposes did God intend for this area of human activity? and (2) What biblical response is called for? Throughout our study, we need to seek to identify guiding principles and moral values with the intent to “teach my people the difference between the holy and the common and show them how to distinguish between the unclean and the clean” (Ezekiel 44:23).

As you implement online learning, ask yourself: What are the critical issues in the subjects that I teach? How might I address these issues in such a way as to contribute to the moral development of my students?

### **Experiential Strategies—Encouraging Students to Live a Life of Faith**

Joanne Jung notes that “at the heart of a great teacher is the desire to invest in students, to make an impact toward observable differences in their lives.”<sup>9</sup> As we teach our courses, both FTF and online, learning must connect to life. Faith must link to experience.

One way we can encourage students to live a life of faith is to promote thoughtful reflection. This can take place in various ways, such as: (1) providing time for reflection, (2) posing matters for introspection and contemplation, and then (3) asking students to document these processes.



Reflection, in fact, is a key component in active learning.<sup>10</sup> Active learning occurs when students have the opportunity to reflect on their own learning to clarify their thoughts, confirm their understanding, and eliminate misconceptions. Reflection is even more important when spiritual growth is the goal, as it promotes a deep personal and intimate conversation with God (Psalm 139:23, 24).

In a science class, for example, we might ask students to examine the relationship of faith and science: How does faith inform science? In what ways does science inform faith? What is the Christian to do if faith and science appear to contradict each other? We might also encourage students to explore evidence relating to the processes of creation and restoration in the natural world. To document the contemplative process, students can be asked to record their thoughts in a reflective journal.

In a mathematics class, when studying coefficients, we might ask: “To what would you compare the positive and negative coefficients in your life?” and assign students to “Write in your journal one or more examples of how positive influences have improved your life or how negative influences could reduce the quality of your life.” On the topic of the number line, we might ask our students to consider that there are an infinite number of points between zero and one, yet each of them can be represented by a real number. Then, suggest that they imagine all the people who exist and have existed, pointing out that each is unique and special. Finally, ask them to reflect on this question: “Who am I to others, to myself, to God?” In discussing mathematical symbols, this discussion might lead to the question: “What do I stand for?”

More broadly, we can provide opportunities for students to explore the great questions: Who am I? Where did I come from? Why am I here? Where am I going? How do I know what is right? What is wrong around and/or within me? What are possible solutions?

Regarding an online course in

which students were asked to meditate daily on a set of course-connected Bible passages and record their insights in a reflective journal, a student stated, “One of my most memorable courses taken was the one that asked us to meditate on Bible verses and write our reflections daily. I did it, first as a requirement; but as I relished the Word of God daily, I learned to love it, and eventually it has become part of my daily

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schedule. The course is over now but I continued it and now I’m in the Book of Romans.”

As you teach your online classes, ask yourself: What is something that I can do to help my students reflect on their spiritual life?

#### **Institution-wide Faith Integration**

To achieve its most profound effect, the goal of nurturing the faith of online students must become an institutional commitment. Administrators

and teachers together can develop and implement a variety of faith-affirming activities in connection with online classes.

*Weeks of Prayer.* In organizing an online week of prayer, it is important to highlight participation. Students should not just listen but also talk about their faith journey; not just read the prayers but also be a part of the divine conversation. Through reflection forums and an online prayer garden, an interactive form of worship can be achieved. By carefully selecting the theme of the event, students from other religions can also feel welcome. Students can be given roles such as discussion facilitators and prayer moderators. Most importantly, they must feel that the event is an avenue for them to come close to God’s throne of grace.

Experiencing such an online week of prayer, one student from another faith persuasion said, “I needed a community of prayerful individuals to help me grow out of this infancy stage and really mature in faith. . . . Brothers and sisters in Christ, let us continue to pray, to grow, and to mature in faith.” Another student stated, “I want to praise God for this week of prayer’s blessings. It didn’t only bless me but also my husband who studied the Bible verses with me as well. . . . This not only strengthened our relationship, but most importantly our faith as we both tread our spiritual journey as new couple.” And a student from a non-Christian background wrote, “I feel blessed and privileged to be with you, beloved brothers and sisters. Thank you so much for every single effort that was put for this week of prayer and for sharing our spiritual journey together.”

Because of the faith community that was created, students requested that the week of prayer be extended as a recurring feature of their online learning experience.

*Online Chapel.* Periodically, an institution can organize an online chapel session where students from different grade levels or degree programs can worship together. To make sure everyone can attend the chapel,

it can be linked in the virtual classrooms of all classes and include participation by students from all the groups. While someone may be invited to briefly speak, to make the program unique, reflection questions can be posed, and students can interact in the discussion forum. A student reflected on these events: “I hope we have more online chapels. I love the interaction with more people other than my usual classmates. This makes it extra special.”

*Mission Emphasis Week.* One variation of the week of prayer is to convert it to a mission-emphasis week. Here students share missional activities and projects with which they are involved and are encouraged to adopt a missional project in their own communities. This emphasis on mission is integral to Seventh-day Adventist education. Adventist education, in fact, originated in response to mission and continues to exist to fulfill the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20). As a training ground for mission involvement, Adventist schools must not just promote an awareness of the church’s mission activities but also provide students with actual experiences as they develop the personal commitment to engage in lifelong mission.

### Conclusion

Paul observed, “We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us” (2 Corinthians 5:20). Peter added, “If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God” (1 Peter 4:11). This is the essence of faith integration: providing our students with a God-centered, Bible-based, service-oriented, and Heaven-directed approach in online education that nurtures faith. Only then will spiritual development and the formation of Christian character take place authentically in the lives of our students. And only then will we have provided the best opportunity for our students to view their vocation as a divine calling, to have solid-

ified a life commitment to witness and service, and to have forged a personal relationship with God.

And only then will we, as Christian educators, have fulfilled the ultimate purpose of faith integration: “In all your ways *acknowledge Him*, and He shall direct your path” (Proverbs 3:6, NKJV, italics supplied).<sup>11</sup> ✍

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### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. These faith integration clusters have been described in John Wesley Taylor V, “Instructional Strategies for Integrating Faith and Learning,” *The Journal of Adventist Education* 63:5 (Summer 2001): 5-8, 12-14: <http://circle.adventist.org/files/jae/en/jae20163050507.pdf>.

2. Rena M. Palloff and Keith Pratt, *Building Online Learning Communities: Effective*

*Strategies for the Virtual Classroom* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007).

3. Stephen D. Lowe and Mary E. Lowe, “Spiritual Formation in Theological Distance Education: An Ecosystems Model,” *Christian Education Journal: Research on Educational Ministry* 7:1 (May 2010): 90. doi.10.1177/073989131000700106.

4. Ibid. Lowe and Lowe further note that “one of the mechanisms for fostering whole person transformation into the image of Christ individually and corporately is through sustained reciprocal relationships and mutually beneficial interactions of various sorts within the bond of Christian fellowship” (ibid., 94). This whole-person development—mental, physical, social, emotional, spiritual—is the result of interactions within one’s environment or ecosystem.

5. Principles on how to design online devotionals and examples of faith-nurturing devotional ideas can be found in Leni T. Casimiro, “Creative Online Devotionals,” *The Journal of Adventist Education* 80:1 (January-March 2018): 35-39: <https://jae.adventist.org/en/2018.1.7>.

6. Unless indicated otherwise, all biblical passages in this article are quoted from the *New International Version* (NIV). Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide. Bible texts credited to NLT are quoted from *Holy Bible, New Living Translation*, copyright © 1996, 2004, 2015 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

7. Mark A. Maddix, James R. Estep, and Mary E. Lowe, *Best Practices of Online Education: A Guide for Christian Higher Education* (Charlotte, N.C.: Information Age Publishing, 2012), 107.

8. The missional approach is further developed in Leni T. Casimiro, “Is Mission Possible Online? Exploring Mission-oriented Online Course Designs.” In *Adventist Online Education: Realizing the Potential*, Janine Lim and Anthony Williams, eds. (Coorabong, New South Wales, Australia: Avondale Academic Press, 2018), 19-36.

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11. Proverbs 3:6. The Holy Bible, *New King James Version*, Copyright © 1982 Thomas Nelson. All rights reserved.