To the Ends of the Earth: Cultural Considerations for Global Online Theological Education

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ABSTRACT: *The growing number of theological institutions offering online courses for global audiences raises concerns about potential problems related to culture. Various dimensions of culture are introduced, with specific attention drawn to differences in learning styles for Western and non-Western students. These differences must be taken into consideration when teaching online, where the potential for misunderstanding is higher. The Community of Inquiry instructional design model is suggested as a tool for culturally sensitive online course design.*

Abilene Christian University goes to Ghana

In July 2014, Abilene Christian University's Graduate School of Theology (GST) launched a new initiative to provide theological education for church leaders in West Africa. Using a combination of an educational exception to offer up to 75 percent of the Master of Arts in Christian Ministry (MACM) online[1] and approval of Heritage Christian College in Accra, Ghana, as an ongoing course extension site, the GST created a plan whereby faculty would travel to Ghana twice each year to teach the required residential classes for African students wishing to earn the MACM online. Students begin with a residential intensive in late summer on the Heritage campus that includes new student orientation and a first-year ministry course. They continue in the fall and spring semesters with online classes, participating alongside other GST students. Another residency in late spring or early summer rounds out the academic year with the possibility of a summer online class if it fits with students' schedules. Course materials are provided electronically where possible, with faculty

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1. This educational exception was approved by the ATS Board of Commissioners in August 2013.

or other stakeholders traveling between Abilene and Accra delivering textbooks that are not available in digital form.

Abilene Christian University's (ACU) relationship with Heritage Christian College goes back many decades. Heritage graduates have a long-standing invitation to continue their theological education at the GST. While a few students have taken advantage of this arrangement, the vast majority are unable to meet the financial requirements to qualify for a US student visa. With rising costs and declining university resources to support international students, an increased financial burden has been placed on the few Ghanaian students who are able to come to the university campus. Offering the MACM online with residential intensive classes in Ghana was proposed as a response to these concerns. Additionally, offering online courses allows these students—leaders in their local congregations—to remain in their ministry contexts while continuing their studies.

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The overall proposal seemed to make sense and was straightforward given the relationship between the two schools, but the actual implementation proved to be more difficult than expected. Admissions, student orientation, enrollment, textbooks, access to student email accounts, and the learning management system—practically every aspect of the program—was complicated by unforeseen issues. Some complications were the result of inadequate planning, and others were the result of international logistics, such as shipping textbooks overseas. Still other complications were the result of cultural misunderstandings, such as checking email every day for communication from the school or knowing that it was permissible to contact the professor to seek clarification on assignments.

A growing trend

Numerous factors are converging to make online teaching and learning across international cultures increasingly common. The concomitant factors of rapid penetration of mobile and communication technology

globally,[2] along with the unprecedented growth of the church across the Southern hemisphere, combine to stimulate a renewed vision for international theological education. Distance learning administrators at a number of ATS member schools confirm that their institutions are now offering courses online for an international audience. Joel Carpenter notes,

> Outside North America and Western Europe, higher education is expanding at an astonishing rate, and the main crisis in higher education worldwide is how to meet the huge and growing demand for a university education with anything resembling university-quality teaching and learning.[3]

Another reason to "go global" is in response to requests from international constituencies, such as denominational connections, mission organizations, or other existing relationships as international leaders acknowledge that their educational need far outstrips their available resources. Plus, a growing number of their church leaders are gaining access to the Internet and, with it, access to online education. In some locations, costs are dropping and a more reliable infrastructure is becoming available. Yet disparities in accessible and affordable technology exist across the globe. The Global Technology Revolution 2020 report reminds us that, "While extensive, this technology revolution will play out differently around the globe," and a wide variance of accessibility exists across many countries.[4] As digital theological books become increasingly available, more students will gradually have access to a variety of digital materials. These and other changes provide an opportunity for new forms of global partnerships. ACU's relationship with Heritage Christian College in Ghana looks very different today than it did just a few years ago, primarily due to regular communication made possible by improved Internet connections and more reliable electricity in Accra. Other schools

2. Meri MacLeod, "The Future is Here: Changing the Way People Learn," *Common Ground Journal* 11, no. 2 (Spring 2014): 72–77, http://www.commongroundjournal.org/volnum/v11n02.pdf.

3. Joel A. Carpenter, *Christian Higher Education: A Global Reconnaissance* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2014), 8.

4. Richard Silberglitt, Philip S. Antón, David R. Howell, and Anny Wong, *The Global Technology Revolution 2020: Bio/Nano/Materials/Information Trends, Drivers, Barriers, and Social Implications,* Executive Summary (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 2006), 1.

report similar changes in relationship with new and existing global partners. Making disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19 NRSV) seems much more feasible in the Internet age.

Elements of culture

The influences of culture—reflected in the online course platform and design, the nature of the instructor's expectations, and the background of students—adds substantial complexity to online education. Cross-cultural communication is challenging in a face-to-face context and all the more so in a virtual setting. The potential for misunderstanding is ever present; the high stakes of an academic context add to the potential for misunderstandings and student uncertainty. For example, in high-context cultures where nonverbal cues such as body language are used to interpret meaning, the lack of nonverbal cues in the virtual classroom can pose a challenge for these learners.[5] Students in China, Japan, India, or Arab countries in the Middle East may find the low-context nature of online communication unfamiliar to them and overly direct or impersonal, while students in Germany, Scandinavia, or the United States can find it to be quite comfortable. Understanding the various influences of culture, and increasingly of multiple cultures, that can influence learners has become important for educators concerned with the success of all students in their online global classrooms.

Foundational to many current understandings of culture, with implications for online course design, is the work of social psychologist Geert Hofstede, who identified four dimensions believed to be displayed in every culture: power distance (authority), individualism vs. collectivism, gender, and uncertainty avoidance (vulnerability).[6] Expanding on this, Marvin Mayers proposed six contrasting pairs of basic values: time/event orientation, task/person orientation, dichotomistic/holistic thinking, status/achievement focus, crisis/noncrisis orientation, and concealment/willingness to expose vulnerability.[7] More recently scholars such as Irene

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5.   See Edward T. Hall, *The Silent Language* (New York: Doubleday, 1959).

6.   Geert H. Hofstede, *Culture's Consequences: International Differences in Work-Related Values* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1980).

7.   This material taken from Sherwood G. Lingenfelter and Marvin K. Mayers, *Ministering Cross-Culturally: An Incarnational Model for Personal Relationships*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003).

Sanchez and Charlotte Gunawardena have begun to introduce new forms of cultural analysis. They suggest a contrast of the fundamental dimensions of non-Western versus Western worldviews:[8]

Nonwestern	Western
• emphasize group cooperation	• emphasize individual competition
• achievement as it reflects group	• achievement for the individual
• value harmony with nature	• must master and control nature
• time is relative	• adhere to rigid time schedule
• accept affective expression	• limit affective expression
• extended family	• nuclear family
• holistic thinking	• dualistic thinking
• religion permeates culture	• religion is distinct from other parts of culture
• socially oriented	• task-oriented

Each of these three models highlights how different cultures assign different values to certain modes of thought, expression, or interaction. When differing values are brought to bear on a specific situation, the likelihood for confusion and misunderstanding is present. Add to this the complexity of a classroom setting (performance/grade anxiety), an online classroom setting (anonymous, text-oriented), and especially a theological online classroom setting (religious values, questions of faith), and the potential for misunderstanding increases exponentially.

Culture in an online program

Culture's impact on teaching and learning is a growing focus of scholars. Clint Rogers et al. list four general categories for educators to consider when cultural differences are present: general cultural and social expectations, teaching and learning expectations, differences in the use of

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8. Irene Sanchez and Charlotte Gunawardena, "Understanding and Supporting the Culturally Diverse Distance Learner," in *Distance Learners in Higher Education: Institutional Responses for Quality Outcomes*, ed. Chere Gibson (Madison, WI: Atwood Publishing, 1998), 47–64.

language and symbols, and technological infrastructure and familiarity.[9] In Hofstede's work, the social position of teachers and learners, perceived relevance of the curriculum, profiles of cognitive abilities, and expected patterns of behavior for teacher-to-student and student-to-student interactions all influence cross-cultural learning.[10]

A number of these cultural factors were apparent in a qualitative research study examining students' experiences in a global graduate online program. The program was designed and taught by faculty from a Norwegian university, and students included Norwegian and African students from three different African countries. Researchers clustered the findings around three primary areas: social, technological, and cultural.[11]

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Social adjustments

Interviews suggested that the African students seemed to have wider family networks than did the European students. With little prior experience in online graduate education, these students were surprised at how much time would be required online and the expectations for collaboration.

These academic demands resulted in the need to renegotiate one's many family obligations and expectations in order to have time to participate online. Students identified how difficult this was, and for some Africans, it

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9. P. Clint Rogers, Charles R. Graham, and Clifford T. Mayes, "Cultural Competence and Instructional Design: Exploration Research Into the Delivery of Online Instruction Cross-Culturally," *Education Technology Research Development* 55 (2007): 197–217, http://adlawrence.blogs.wm.edu/files/2011/03/cultural-cometence-and-instructional-design.pdf.

10. Geert H. Hofstede, "Cultural Differences in Teaching and Learning," *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 10 (1986): 301–320.

11. Ståle Angen Rye and Anne Marie Støkken, "The Implications of the Local Context in Global Virtual Education," *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning* 13, no. 1 (January 2012): 191–206, http://www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl/article/view/1010.

even meant the loss of personal friends. Yet, in contrast, several described "how support received from their family was entirely to be expected as the programme was of great importance for the [extended] family as a whole. To be a student was thus a family project."[12]

Technological adjustments

As would be expected, the study found a substantial difference in the ease with which Norwegian and African students accessed the Internet. One African student noted that her greatest challenge in the program was "access to the Internet . . . I'm often spending much time and money looking for a good place to [access the Internet for] study." Of the three locations available—home, school, and Internet cafes—only the school was free, but most African students lived too far away for that to be a meaningful option. Frequent electrical outages were an additional obstacle to their study and program participation. Differences in computer literacy between the Norwegian and African students presented a challenge at the start of the program as African students often had little experience with a laptop or a learning management system. African students noted that the introduction to the online technology at the face-to-face meeting before the start of the online collaboration was "essential in enabling them to participate in the online discussions."

> 66 *Students from historically oral cultures in Asia and Africa pointed to how mobiles, if integrated into a course, could enhance their learning in such ways as by providing an oral means to memorize the Greek alphabet or by listening to their professor's feedback rather than only reading a digital text version of the feedback.*

While Internet technology is developing more slowly across some continents, the rapid penetration of "mobiles" (i.e., cell phones) is pervasive. In a separate study conducted across nine theological schools in the majority world, students requested that other technology complement

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12. Ibid., 197.

the online forums, specifically mobiles or cell phone technology. Students from historically oral cultures in Asia and Africa pointed to how mobiles, if integrated into a course, could enhance their learning in such ways as by providing an oral means to memorize the Greek alphabet or by listening to their professor's feedback rather than only reading a digital text version of the feedback.[13]

Cultural adjustments

During the face-to-face introduction of the Norwegian program, "students confronted for the first time the cultural differences that would accompany them throughout the programme." African students were surprised at how the Norwegian students spoke with their professors. Their directness was seen as disrespectful, and it left the Africans uncertain regarding future course discussions. Respect for authority characterized the educational experiences of the African students, and to be successful online, they would have to revise what it meant to be a student. One student described the change process:

> To begin with, I only read [on the Internet forum] and did not understand how I could become a part of it. . . . I sneaked around and only took a peek at what the others [the Norwegians] did. But then I received a communication from one of the supervisors who both encouraged and required me to participate. I tried, and received a positive response from [one of the professors]. This was an important turning point. I understood then that I too had something to contribute.[14]

Cultural influences in the MACM program

After conducting an analysis of 27 research studies related to teaching online global courses, Sedef Uzuner distilled nine recommendations for faculty.[15] Four of the nine are highlighted here with an example of how each has been experienced through teaching in the global MACM program.

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13. Meri MacLeod, *Unconventional Educational Practices in Majority World Theological Education*, a research study conducted in 2011–2013, commissioned by Overseas Council International, Indianapolis, IN.

14. Rye and Støkken, "The Implications of the Local Context," 200 (see n. 11).

15. Sedef Uzuner, "Questions of Culture in Distance Learning: A Research Review," *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning* 10, no. 3 (2009): 1–19, http://www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl/article/view/690.

Principle #1

Learners from strong uncertainty avoidance cultures are threatened by learning situations that are unstructured and unclear. They expect formal rules to guide their behavior. The Ghanaian students very much want to know what is expected from them. They set high standards for themselves and work hard to please their professors. At the same time, however, the professor needs to pay attention to power issues (principle #2).

Principle #2

Pay attention to power issues. The African students are often hesitant to seek clarification from the professor because they hold different viewpoints on the power distance between professors and students. This often leads to increased anxiety levels or the need for a third party with whom they have an existing relationship—the GST recruiter or their program advisor, for example—to serve as go-between for them.

Principle #3

In distance-learning contexts where active participation in discussions is highly valued, instructors need to make specific efforts to promote critique and divergence and encourage students to create a safe space where opinions, experiences, beliefs, and knowledge can be shared. During the first residency, five American students joined the Ghanaian students in Accra. The American students dominated class conversation on the first day or two of the course. It took some work on the part of the professor to persuade the African students to share their perspectives and to affirm that different viewpoints all contributed to the larger conversation.

Principle #4

Social presence is the key for the success of students from context-dependent cultures. It took several email attempts with limited response before realizing that the students' emails contained lengthy greetings, praises to God, and inquiries about health and family. While these introductory items seemed superfluous to the American recipients—possibly even intrusive into one's personal life—they formed the backbone of relationship building for the Ghanaian students. Caring about one's health and one's family members showed care for the person and the rest of the areas of their life, including their studies. When the Americans began adjusting their email communication to include some of these niceties, the response level increased dramatically. This same approach also helped to improve the communication and relationship building with the administration of Heritage Christian College.

A culturally supportive course design model

Course design can be key to create the online environment that provides the support students of diverse cultures and ethnicities often need. Faculty who teach online courses for a global audience may also teach online for only national students. However, utilizing two different course design models is unrealistic—and no longer necessary. The Community of Inquiry (COI) course design model is a research-grounded framework that has been growing in popularity globally. Foundational to COI is the conviction that "purposeful" interaction online is critical to learning and that conditions for inquiry and quality interaction need to be intentionally created. As a result, the model is based on incorporating three foci together: social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence. "Social presence is described as the ability to project one's self and establish personal and purposeful relationships. . . . Cognitive presence relates to the progressive development of inquiry in an online learning environment," and teaching presence includes the design, facilitation, and direct instruction within a course. "The body of evidence is growing rapidly attesting to the importance of teaching presence for successful online learning . . . Interaction and discourse plays a key role in higher-order learning but not without structure (design) and leadership (facilitation and direction)."[16]

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The COI model lends itself to creating a supportive learning environment for all students by demonstrating the essential contribution social

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16. D. Randy Garrison, "Online Community of Inquiry Review: Social, Cognitive, and Teaching Presence Issues," *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks* 11, no. 1 (April 2007): 61–72, http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ842688.pdf. D. Randy Garrison and Martha Cleveland-Innes, "Facilitating Cognitive Presence in Online Learning: Interaction is Not Enough," *The American Journal of Distance Education* 19, no. 3 (2005): 133–148.

presence makes to fostering online learning. Once faculty discover the importance of social presence online, including more than brief introductions, and how to design for it, their courses become a supportive learning context for all students regardless of their culture or ethnicity. Scholars[17] have noted that the COI framework stimulates a "culturally-responsive pedagogy," with its emphasis on "purposeful" interaction to increase students' cognitive skills, which seems especially pertinent to the graduate-level programs offered by ATS member schools.

The COI model provides useful suggestions for faculty to revise their online courses to better meet the learning needs of multicultural students. To increase the cultural responsiveness of the introductory Old Testament course for the MACM students, the following changes will be made:

Social presence

Guided conversations will be provided in the existing community forum to invite active participation and demonstrate good interaction between students and professor. Students will also be asked in their introductions to describe their ministry context and explain how the Old Testament is viewed/valued in that location. This information can be used throughout the course to think about ways the material in the Old Testament can impact their ministry or help change potentially negative perspectives about the Old Testament.

Teaching presence

Existing video lectures will be completely scrapped, opting instead for short introductory and separate summary videos. A discussion forum rubric will be implemented to provide more specific guidance regarding expectations for initial posts and responses to others. A seldom-used "How's it going?" discussion forum will be replaced with regular email or phone conversations to seek specific feedback on their experience of the course.

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17. Daniel R. Smith and David F. Ayers, "Culturally Responsive Pedagogy and Online Learning: Implications for the Globalized Community College," *Community College Journal of Research and Practice* 30 (2006): 401–415, http://www.tacomacc.edu/upload/files/accreditation/Standard%20Two-Evidence%202-9-12/Standard%201/Culturally%20Responsive%20Pedagogy.pdf.

Cognitive presence

Discussion questions will be revised to facilitate higher order thinking and real-life application. Students will also be invited to pose their own questions or observations about the text as a way to show progression from understanding to application. Certain historical settings in the Old Testament will be set up for students to envision themselves in that situation with specific roles assigned (prophet, king, Samaritan, priest/Levite, etc.) and questions asked about how they would respond in that setting.

Conclusion

Global online theological education is on the rise around the world, and multicultural online communities are having a transformative impact on students. As ATS member schools expand their embrace of culturally diverse online learning, an increasing number of students and faculty will gain a growing awareness of their own, and each other's, cultural contributions. Perhaps online learning might make a contribution to emerging new pedagogies that allow faculty to teach "for a culturally diverse and racially just world."[18]

In a recent collection of essays by ATS member school faculty, Eleazar S. Fernandez notes,

> With the increasing ethnic and cultural diversity of our society brought about by the forces of globalization, greater sensitivity and responsiveness to our diverse student body is a demand of effective, empowering, and transformative teaching and is an act of justice. . . . Are we creating not just a *safe* environment but a *learning community* in which all members are committed to mutual learning and transformation?[19]

Teaching for student transformation doesn't ignore culture or seek to change it but, instead, embodies the courage to name one's own cultural assumptions and the humility to learn from others. It takes both courage and humility to teach online, as technology makes education easier and

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18. Eleazar S. Fernandez, ed., *Teaching for a Culturally Diverse and Racially Just World* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014).

19. Ibid., 10–11.

more complex at the same time. Transformation can happen in a seminary classroom, in an online discussion forum, and with ACU students in Ghana. May it be so for everyone who seeks to take theological education to the ends of the earth.

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