Information Technology

Keys to a New Classroom

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With practical wisdom and skill, the author explores the use of the Internet for theological education and pastoral formation. He walks his readers through the menus of the popular Blackboard program as well as a sampling of online resources for the study of Scripture.

Information Technology, like many other technologies, has become an indispensable part of our daily life. We have computers at home, at work, in our schools and in our parish offices. When we travel there are Internet Cafés almost everywhere in the world where we connect to our e-mail or check online versions of our favorite newspapers. If we go to Starbucks for our morning coffee, we can now stay connected with high speed wireless Internet connections.

This information technology has had a pervasive influence on the process of communication. E-mail has become the de facto standard of ordinary communication with its attendant blessings and curses. The blessing is instantaneous worldwide communication. The curse is the ever growing amount of computer junk mail called “spam.” E-mail is no longer the privileged form of communication among computer geeks and business executives. Parents and even grandparents have apprenticed under their children and grandchildren so that they too can access the information highway.

Since information technology is such an important part of our daily life it has quite naturally migrated over into our religious life and pastoral ministry. Pastoral ministers have put computers and the Internet to use in everything from scheduling and liturgical preparation to adult catechesis and other forms

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of teaching and learning. As the invention of the printing press spawned a communication revolution in its time so the computer and the Internet are now spawning a new communication revolution. The key issue, as with any technology, is not “what are we doing with our technology” but “what are we becoming with our technology” (Hefner, 9; Groothuis, 633–35)? Are we becoming more or less reflective and contemplative? Is this instant communication a cause of unity or a means of divisiveness? Are we becoming more social or more narcissistic?

Information technology has vast implications for teaching and learning since it is changing where, when, and how we learn. This article examines and assesses how this new technology impinges on our formation as pastoral ministers as well as our identity as teachers and learners. First, we look at some of the new online resources for learning which have changed how and where teaching and learning take place. Second, this article looks at some of the programs that are available for self-study. Finally, we examine the new learning community that is emerging from this new technology. Does this technology make us better learners? Does this technology lead us to true wisdom and understanding or are we becoming just collectors of more and more information?

**Online Teaching and Learning**

For many years it seemed the standard model of teaching and learning was the “lecture given, lecture received, lecture given back” model. Students sat together in one classroom and dutifully took notes as their teacher lectured. Students then were required to “give back” those notes in an exam. But this model is really a simplistic view and even a caricature of what happened in this teaching and learning process. The best teachers and lecturers not only gave the students information but also guided them in ways to process, evaluate, and integrate that information. The exam process in turn was a means to encourage and challenge the student to integrate the information and methods they were learning. Most of us, nonetheless, have sat through some classes where we experienced “information overload.” If we are unable to evaluate and integrate this information, then the communication process breaks down and learning does not take place.

When one turns to computer technology and the Internet one encounters a new place and a new way to gain access to information but also a greater attendant danger of information overload. If, for example, one uses the search engine Google (www.google.com) to search the Internet for “pastoral ministry” one comes up with 395,000 hits or references in 0.28 seconds. So while the Internet can serve up a lot of information in a very short time, it does not necessarily lead to wisdom and learning. As with the use of any educational tool, teachers and
students need to remember that “Information itself does not equal knowledge
nor solve problems; it supplies the basis for these” (Soukup et al, 375). So there is
more need then ever for teachers, mentors, and facilitators to guide students in
the gathering and processing of this information to solve problems and gain
knowledge.

A number of programs have been developed to help teachers and students to
deal with the possibilities and problems of online learning. The Wabash Center
for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion provides a helpful Internet
Guide on their website (www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu). While there are a
number of programs available (e.g., eCollege, Jenzabar, Blackboard), we will look
at one program, Blackboard (www.blackboard.com) that is representative and
widely used in colleges, universities, and theology schools. It is the program that I have been
using for the last few years for most of my New Testament graduate courses. The Blackboard
site also provides a free course web site creation service so anyone can get a hands-on, if limited,
experience of the tools that online instruction provides.

Most schools use Blackboard to supplement and expand in-class instruction. As we walk
through some of the features that this program provides, I will point out some of the new learn-
ing possibilities that are opened up as well as the problems that arise in using such a program
for theological education and/or faith formation programs.

Students and faculty access Blackboard through the Internet using a log in
name and password. The instructor can restrict access to students alone or can
allow guests to access some or all of the information. This Internet access means
that the traditional time and place of learning has changed. The walls of the
school and classroom are gone: students can access course information and par-
ticipate in class discussions whenever and wherever they like. As long as a com-
puter and Internet connection are available, they have access. Once students log
in and access their particular course, Blackboard presents them with a series
of menus that are linked to different Content Areas. The standard menus are:
Announcements, Syllabus, Staff Information, Course Documents, Bibliography,
Discussion Board, and External Links. The titles of these menus can be changed
easily or even hidden by the instructor.

The first Content menu is the Announcement menu. I have found that this area
is a very good place to keep the students up to date on due dates for assignments,
changes in course scheduling, or even course cancellations due to inclement
weather. Since students and teachers communicate by e-mail, it is now a lot easier to make changes to the class schedule or course content. It is crucial, therefore, to make sure that every student in the class has access to the Internet, knows how to use Blackboard, and checks the announcements and their e-mail on a regular basis. If not, the student will be out of the loop and, in spite of all this new technology, the communication process will have broken down. Online learning, therefore, places new demands on both teacher and student.

Blackboard also provides a menu to the Syllabus Content Area. The course syllabus can be posted in this section. The challenge of this new technology is to realize the new possibilities that are opened up and not just to view the computer as a super fast typewriter. For example, in this Syllabus Content Area one could upload a copy of the syllabus that a student could either copy directly to his or her computer or print out on their own. But this is not much different than distributing the syllabus on the first day of class. If one considers, however, how to combine the old form of the syllabus with this new information technology, new possibilities suggest themselves. The syllabus can become more than a means of communicating the description, goals, and requirements of a course. Students or even potential students can be provided with this information before the course itself begins. Providing an online version of the syllabus also provides the opportunity to connect students with other resources such as links to purchase the required texts online or connections to online articles and required readings. This early access to the syllabus makes it easy to meet a frequent request of students, particularly those for whom English is their second language, for a list of the required readings so that they can begin reading ahead of time. Finally, early access to the syllabus provides a way to begin a concentrated two-week summer course before the face-to-face classroom time begins.

The syllabus can be used to communicate not only the basic course information but also to connect the student to online libraries and other Internet resources. This means the student not only sees the required readings listed but can also click the link provided, and read this reading from their own computer. So, information technology is not only changing our concept of the classroom but it is also changing the way students go to the library and where and how they read. This possibility of reading texts online is still somewhat restricted...
given the unavailability of online versions of theological works due to copyright restrictions but there are many initiatives underway to make more and more texts available online. The Wabash Center Internet Guide referred to earlier provides a helpful guide to what theological texts are available online.

The next menu on Blackboard is the Course Document Page. Under this section the instructor can place color maps showing, for example, Paul's missionary journeys, or photographs of Corinth, or a schematic drawing of the Jerusalem temple. Microsoft PowerPoint presentations and Adobe Acrobat files can also be placed here so that the student can have a more visual experience of the course material.

The next Blackboard menu is the Discussion Board. This discussion area is the place where the classroom discussion can be extended and supplemented. Students can post and edit messages, reflections, and questions to which others students can respond. This area seems to be a good place to generate discussion on points that could not be raised in class because of time or content restrictions. Given the nature of Internet communication, the discussions tend to be free flowing and imaginative. This area also provides a forum for more reticent students to speak up. The Discussion Board is an excellent place for collaboration and peer instruction. The instructor can become involved in this discussion or, what seems to work better, to monitor this discussion and then bring into class the issues, questions, and insights that have been raised online. This section of Blackboard is also a helpful place for teachers to monitor their own effectiveness: what is it that the students are hearing and taking from the lectures? Their online discussion provides some good and clear insights.

Finally the Discussion Board helps students to work on and develop their communication and writing skills. Knowing that their peers will be reading their reflections seems to improve the quality of their writing. A simple comment from a fellow student such as “I am not clear about what you are saying...” can challenge students to reexamine not only their ideas but also their presentation of those ideas.

Blackboard also provides a Virtual Classroom menu. This section is similar to the live chat rooms found in AOL or MSN. Here students and faculty can communicate in real time exchanging messages with online slides and whiteboards.
The possibilities range from virtual office hours to online instruction. While the teaching possibilities are somewhat limited since there is no face-to-face contact these chat rooms provide a means for real time communication either one-on-one or with the whole class.

The final Blackboard menu is External Links. Through this menu the instructor can point the student to other useful websites. Much as a distributed bibliography enables an instructor to point students to useful resources for reading, this section enables the teacher to help the student separate the good from the bad among the plethora of Internet Websites.

Information Technology and programs such as Blackboard have facilitated the extension of the place where education takes place. No longer is it necessary for all students to sit together in one classroom to receive instruction. While distance education has been common in secular education for a number of years, it is only now coming into its own in theological and ministerial schools. In 1999 the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) devoted an issue of Theological Education to the theme: “Educational Technology and Distance Education: Issues and Implications for Theological Education.” The editors of this issue described distance education as the “learning experience for students who are geographically separated from faculty and other students” (Aleshire, ix). This separation of faculty and students provides the opportunity for more pastoral ministers to have access to theological and ministerial studies even when they do not live in close proximity to a theology school. Most theology schools are just beginning to realize the potential as well as the problems that distance education presents.

One of the most developed distance education programs is run by the Asbury Theological Seminary (www.ats.wilmore.ky.us). The seminary has an impressive array of “smart classrooms” with computer terminals connected to the Internet at each desk, DVD players, and overhead LCD projectors. These classrooms are set up to make the best use of information technology and are linked through the Internet or telephone lines for live connections with other “virtual campuses.” So, while the teacher is lecturing in Kentucky, students in another smart classroom in Florida can not only see and hear the lecture but also join in the discussion and ask questions of the lecturer. Among Roman Catholic schools Aquinas Institute of Theology (www.at.edu) has a well developed Master of Arts in Pastoral Ministry. It combines on-site intensive face-to-face contact between teacher and
students at set intervals in the semester with weekly learning exercises on the Internet. It seems that most of the other major Roman Catholic theology schools either have developed or are in the process of developing distance education programs.

There are clearly advantages to these online education programs. These programs extend the reach of the graduate schools and provide access to graduate theological education for areas that have no school of theology. The separation or lack of face-to-face contact between teacher and students, however, also raises serious issues about the methods, purpose, and means of theological and ministerial education. Most theology schools have adopted a hybrid approach to address these issues: students will come together at particular times in the semester for “face-to-face” contact with the teacher and other students. Between these sessions assignments and class discussions will be carried on using Internet programs such as Blackboard as well as having local core groups that meet face-to-face on a regular basis.

**Online Self-Study**

Computer Software and the Internet offer many tools for the study of Scripture, patristic literature, and theology. The aim of all of these tools is to do away with the drudge work and make the study more profitable and even inspiring. While this article cannot survey all of these tools it will examine some representative ones to give the reader an idea of what is available for self-study.

A number of resources are available for Scripture study. One free resource is provided by the USCCB website (www.usccb.org). While readers are probably aware of this site as a good source of information from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, it also provides resources that can serve as tools for liturgical preparation and Scripture study. This site, for example, provides not only the daily readings from the lectionary but also an online version of the New American Bible (NAB). The links between these pages provide a very useful tool for study. Since the lectionary page for the daily readings provides a link to the biblical book itself the user is encouraged to read the whole text in context and not just the pastiche of verses that at times makes up the lectionary reading. This provides a simple but useful and necessary resource for reader and homilist. The online version of the NAB can be accessed by book and chapter. The introductions to the individual books as well as the footnotes are all hyperlinked. These links make it easy for the reader to jump immediately to the text being discussed. These hyperlinks encourage the reader to study the cross references since it is so easy to jump to the passage being discussed.

There are also a number of good computer study programs available such as Libronix Digital Library System (www.logos.com), Bible Windows (www.silvermnt.
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changing not only our image of classroom and library but even our concept of a
book. A book with hyperlinks to other books allows the user to move seamlessly
between books and to see these books as interconnected. In literary and biblical
studies this interconnection is called intertextuality. These hyperlinked Bibles
graphically illustrate the interconnection between the Old and New Testaments.
These tools all indicate that the way we study, and the means that we use to
study are changing. The change is from the “probative, text-driven, sequentially
contceptual base of the ‘book’ to the associative, imagistic, and nonlinear infor-
mation networks of the Internet” (Soukup et al, 372–72).

Information Technology and the
New Learning Community

If one reflects on the pastoral implications of information technology one
immediately encounters a “disconnect” on the semantic level. A pastoral scene
in the romantic and even root sense refers to a bucolic setting of lush scenery and
quiet disturbed only by the chirping of birds. Or perhaps one thinks of the first
movement of the “Pastoral Symphony” of Ludwig von Beethoven. This scene
seems far removed from the beeps and whistles of the average computer even if
one can now play the “Pastoral Symphony” through the computer’s CD or DVD
player. Yet the pastoral implications of this technology are vast because it makes
possible a new place for teaching and learning and therefore a new learning
community.

The Internet offers the pastoral minister the possibility of setting up new
places for faith formation and learning. As we have seen, information technol-
yogy is changing the image of the classroom, the library, and the book. Instead of
just visiting the local library to do research one can now search online catalogs
from one's room or office. One can search either the exhaustive catalog of the
Library of Congress (http://catalog.loc.gov) or the more specialized theological
catalogs of such schools as the Catholic Theological Union (http://www.ctu.
lib.il.us/) and the Washington Theological Union (http://wtu.library.net/). The
image of the book has changed even more. We can search not only the library
catalogs online but we can read the book or journal article online as well.

The pastoral minister needs be aware of these changing concepts of classroom,
library, and book and the possibilities they hold for setting up new learning
communities. The challenge is to make sure that these new learning centers
are also new learning communities. This means they must not only be new
places for gathering information but at the same time new places for growing in
wisdom and building a sense of community. This requires places for online dis-
tussion and mentoring as well as the need for face-to-face contact between
teacher and students. While this new technology places new demands on the
pastoral minister it also offers keys to a new classroom, one that is not restricted by walls or a schedule. This unrestricted access provides a new means of fulfilling Jesus’ unrestricted mandate to “go . . . and make disciples of all nations . . . teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matt 28:19-20).

References

Aleshire, Daniel et al. “Educational Technology and Distance Education: Issues and Implications for Theological Education.” *Theological Education* 36:1 (Autumn 1999).


