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Online Theological Education: Perspectives from First-Generation Asian American Students

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This essay explores the use of online asynchronous discussions from the perspective of first-generation Asian American seminarians. The pedagogical paradigm implicit in these online forums assumes values that compete and even contradict the values these students bring from their native educational experiences. Combined with the language difficulties, asynchronous discussions can present a serious challenge to the educational goals of both the institution and the student. Despite these barriers, first-generation Asian American students often see the incorporation of the asynchronous discussions as a welcome enhancement to their theological education.

Introduction

Theological institutions are increasingly turning to nontraditional delivery systems for their educational product. Whether out of financial necessity or future vision, these pedagogical innovations have quickly made their presence known in seminary classrooms. As of press time, The Association of Theological Schools lists an astounding ninety-six member schools that offer some sort of distance education, primarily using e-learning.[1] By providing flexibility far beyond the logistical constraints of a face-to-face classroom, these offerings ultimately can serve the seminary in accessing a larger portion of potential students who cannot fit under the traditional educational setting. In addition, proponents of online pedagogical systems point to the ability to harness resources and capacities to maximize learning outcomes.[2]

But as theological institutions embrace these technological advances in education, they also must consider the potential liabilities when implementing such systems across the broad sociocultural enrollment that often composes significant portions of theological institutions. This essay explores the use of online asynchronous discussions from the perspective of the first-generation Asian American student whose native culture embodies honor-shame ideology. For simplicity, this study will analyze the experiences of a focus group of seven first-generation Asian American students at George Fox Evangelical Seminary enrolled in various master's degree programs. These seven students represent four nationalities and varying degrees of English fluency. All immigrated to the United States after completing some amount of postsecondary education in their native lands. Through interviews, these participants described their own involvement in asynchronous discussions across a broad spectrum of theological categories.

Individually, each student had unique personal perspectives on the struggles and triumphs in the online experience. Collectively, they indicated that the pedagogical paradigm implicit in online asynchronous discussion assumes values that compete and even contradict previous educational experiences. Combined with language difficulties, asynchronous discussions can present a serious challenge to the educational goals of the student and the greater institution. Despite these barriers, asynchronous discussions often serve as a welcome modification for Asian students compared to their traditional teacher-student learning paradigm. Hopefully, this examination of a singular component of an online delivery system from a particular cultural vantage point can raise awareness and increase cultural sensitivity as seminaries contemplate future technological innovations in pedagogy.

Asynchronous discussion in a theological environment

The asynchronous discussion is one of the simplest and most popular tools in online pedagogy. Typically, students can access a dedicated course site via a password. In accordance with assignment prompts, students can make online posts and respond to other student postings, using rubrics that regulate the nature and length of the posts. In their most opportune examples, these asynchronous posts can add a certain depth to the theological enterprise. When a professor assigns a complex prompt ("In Romans 13:1–7, how does Paul understand the role of state authorities as serving the purpose of God?") within an allotted space ("post no more than 300 words"), the student must carefully construct a concise response. The open forum ideally serves to help regulate the quality of work, and the multiplicity of readers and venues for response can create a rich discussion beyond the constraints of face-to-face time in class. Most importantly, the asynchronous dimension allows students to carefully craft their contributions to the ongoing dialogue without the pressure of face-to-face interaction.

Because asynchronous discussions are a recent innovation in higher education pedagogy, institutions realize that many students require a formal introduction to the process. In the Virtual Learning Community for distance learners at George Fox Evangelical Seminary, students must physically attend a comprehensive orientation at the campus and invest significant time learning the methods and expectations of the online learning process. This orientation capably serves to acclimate traditional students into a new paradigm of learning. But for standalone hybrid or online courses, the acclimation process is often left entirely to the professor. Not surprisingly, first-generation Asian American students are often slower to adjust to this new paradigm.

To a certain extent, language difficulties serve as the main reason for this impeded adjustment. Linguists have long pointed out the extreme difference between English and the various dialects of Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, and other East Asian languages, both in syntactical structure and in lack of shared lexicography. Although English education is requisite in all the aforementioned cultures from early childhood education, only rarely does any English education come from native speakers. In addition, the online environ-

ment eliminates several crucial elements of communication such as immediate feedback, body language, and tone of voice. The colloquial nature of much of the online dialogue further aggravates these struggles. Therefore, anxieties over language easily emerge in an online classroom entirely dependent on written communication.

But these language frustrations represent only a portion of the adjustment difficulties for Asian students. Social scientists have long recognized that learning processes are highly cultural. Barbara Rogoff and Pablo Chavajay have studied the role of culture in cognitive development and trace the scholarly movements from looking at culture as a single variable among many in cognitive development to the current position that recognizes culture as the essence of the cognitive process.[3] Similarly, Raymond Wlodkowski summarizes, "The language we use to think, the way we travel through our thoughts, and how we communicate cannot be separated from cultural practice and cultural emotion."[4] In essence, all pedagogical systems carry implicit presuppositions on values within education, although professors rarely explicitly think about such concerns. But as theological institutions strive to attract more international students in order to enhance ethnic diversity, these efforts must include pedagogical examination.

Honor-shame in an asynchronous discussion environment

Asynchronous discussions have an intrinsic method of quality control, as all postings remain visible to the entire learning community. In contrast to the ephemeral nature of a face-to-face discussion, posted comments remain accessible in cyberspace indefinitely. Moreover, not only do students read each others' posts, but professors often require them to upload a minimum number of responses as well. The knowledge that fellow students will read and critique each others' content often motivates students to compose higher quality writings than in traditional homework assignments.

But such quality control by the learning community can create a threatening environment to students from an East Asian culture. Sociologists have long recognized that Asians have greater awareness of shame compared to Caucasians.[5] While in Western cultures shame stands out as a socially unacceptable emotion that indicates weakness and inferiority, in Asian cultures, the sense of shame is much more pervasive.[6] Within the Taoist background of Asian cultures, the sense of shame emerges as a reflex of a true sense of conscience. Shame helps the Taoist achieve self-realization, by comparing the self to the ideal. Although Asian cultures continue to migrate from this Taoist perspective to more Western conceptions of self, the presence of shame remains unmistakable, and these values lie deeply embedded within Asian international students.

Not surprisingly, these students require major adjustments when initially exposed to peer-review learning environments. A traditional assignment for the instructor alone protects the honor of the student, as the merit of the assignment remains in anonymity to the rest of the class. But when the student makes an online post, he or she exposes the work to a classroom of peers,

who in turn must critique the quality. This process conflicts with two implicit values in East Asian education. First, the peer review violates the large power-distance in schools, where the teacher initiates and sustains feedback for the students. Second, the peer review may threaten the totality of the group. Asian culture is highly collective with emphasis on values of group effort, harmony, and compassion. The online discussions implicitly value the American cultural norms of self-reliance, assertiveness, and competitiveness.

The focus-group students of George Fox Evangelical Seminary all confirmed the confrontation of shame in their experiences with online asynchronous discussion. Of the seven first-generation Asian students from George Fox Evangelical Seminary interviewed for this article, none of them had ever participated in an online discussion during their higher education experiences in their native cultures. One student commented that he was "very, very embarrassed," during his first month of participation in a hybrid class. When pressed for specifics, the student pointed to both the content of his postings and uncertainty as to whether he was doing the assignment correctly. This student also experienced stress and depression that he believes contributed to an extended hospitalization. Although this particular response was extreme, all of the focus-group students expressed significant levels of worry that other students might make insulting remarks about online content.

In addition to the content, the first-generation Asian American students also worried that their participation in asynchronous discussion exposed flaws in English. In a long-term study on Korean nationals studying in the United States, Hae Jeong Yu identifies the magnitude of the issue of shame in the U.S. classroom and the tremendous resources required to overcome it enough to successfully complete a graduate program.[7] In Yu's study, shame and English were inextricably linked together. Yu explicitly states that her own experience with English and shame motivated her study. In particular, she recounts the physical anxiety from class discussions: "In the course of class, I was sweating so badly and I was so nervous that my face got red. My heart pumped, and my tongue became stiff. My shame caused me to be frozen, to become speechless, thoughtless, and powerless. I felt I was nobody."[8] For Yu, the classroom discussion was a source of neither enrichment nor community but rather a dangerous venue that could expose her English deficiencies. Consequently, she safely chose to avoid participation.

Surprisingly, Yu's study finds that mastery of English did not reduce the level of shame. She claims, "The Korean students' shame in English speaking is grounded in a psychological understanding of themselves and others, rather than in their actual English speaking abilities."[9] This suggests that the issue with asynchronous discussions roots itself in a deeper level associated with identity. Interviews with several international students at George Fox Evangelical Seminary validated Yu's hypothesis to a certain degree. Even first-generation Asian students who have mastered English at a high level (as evidenced with near-native reading, writing, and speaking fluencies as well as outstanding grades) continue to express feelings of inadequacy and exposure when communicating in English. But overall, the first-generation Asian American students perceived that their gradual mastery of English may have mitigated their own anxieties associated with asynchronous discussions.

Learning "online" English

The difficulties of learning informal "online" English further exacerbate the potential exposure to shame of the first-generation Asian American student. When completing asynchronous discussion assignments, students typically make their initial posting in some degree of formal expository prose. Consider the following student response to a prompt on the Exodus narrative in a hybrid Hebrew Bible introductory class:

> God is portrayed as the one in total control of the drama that is unfolding. Though he allows Moses to argue with him, and says things like, "If they don't believe you" (4:8), which suggests there's some element of unknown in the story, God is still seen as the one making the moves. The hardening of Pharaoh's heart is one of the more perplexing parts of the story, but it does reinforce the fact that God will be the deliverer of his people one way or another.[10]

Each of the focus group students could comprehend the basic message of the above posting by sight reading, even without any context. Three of these students were in a probationary status due to not achieving a sufficient TOEFL score during the admissions process, yet they still understood the essential nature of the post. Such a relatively high comprehension to the initial student response is hardly surprising. All of the students in the focus group had at least ten years of rigorous English language training, primarily centered on reading expository prose similar to the initial post.

But whereas the initial posts often read in clear expository prose, the subsequent responses reflected much more colloquial patterns of English. These responses often were written in first-person and used humor both to deflect tension and to draw community intimacy. Consider the following third and fourth responses to the above post:

> **Respondent** [third item in thread]: Ha! You just can't fully buy into the "relational" thing can you?

> **Original Poster** [fourth item]: Yeah, Jane* (my wife) says I've been cynical lately :)

In contrast to initial posts, responses often drew on personal experiences, thereby engaging on a more personal level of English prose. This informal use of the English language in subsequent responses carries tremendous benefits within an online environment. Engaging in colloquial talk helps to foster intimacy and builds a sense of community. This practice is especially beneficial for theological education, which by its nature requires communication, perspective, and intellectual safety. Consequently, the language on the discussion boards typically emerges in a casual, conversational tone, which then nurtures an atmosphere of discussion and affirmation. For the native English speaker,

such language is easier and fluid and far less burdensome to read and write than formal expository prose.

But many international students have never studied casual, colloquial English. Asian students spend multiple years beginning in grade school studying English reading and writing. Except for rare instances, however, their own teachers are nonnative speakers and rarely introduce colloquial expressions. When students do learn idiomatic language, they use outdated expressions that are linguistic relics. English education grammars and dictionaries serve as the sources for English learning, with minimal or nonexistent exposure to media and other sources of colloquial English. As a result, this colloquial mode of English is extraordinarily challenging for the international student. Consider the eighth entry in the above online thread:

> Not too long ago Len Sweet did a Napkin Scribble podcast on the subject of eternity "One Helluva Napkin Scribble." It's worth a listen.

Whereas every participant of the focus group could identify the initial post, only one of the seven could confidently assess the meaning of this eighth entry. What is a Napkin Scribble? Is it capitalized because it is the name of a person? Why is "Helluva" not in my dictionary? What's a podcast? How can a "Len Sweet" do a "Napkin Scribble?"[11] Even when looking up all of the various lexical components in a dictionary, the array of possible interpretations is bewildering. Through a combination of dictionaries and Google searches, the students were able to collectively find the meaning, but only after considerable effort. The difficulties of constantly having to engage and navigate online English frustrate the first-generation Asian American students.

Such difficulties are hardly surprising with international students, as computer-mediated education largely depends on informal written language. A Korean student observed, "The English that we learned in Korea is very different from the English we need to master at the seminary. Reading textbooks is easy, but reading colloquial English is very difficult. Dictionaries often do not help." One Japanese student who has lived in the United States for the past six years remarked, "I think for most people, it takes thirty minutes for a good posting, but for me it takes over two hours." Interestingly, this student believes that he can accomplish all other tasks of the class at a pace more similar to that of native English-speaking students. Another student earned an A- in a class, but confessed, "It probably takes American students one hour to read all posts [of a given assignment], but the same reading takes three or four hours for me." Although the asynchronous nature of the dialogue allows international students to benefit from having more time to adequately prepare their responses, the focus-group students preferred the face-to-face interaction. They indicated the benefit of nonverbal cues, the ability to interrupt and ask clarification questions, and the intimacy of the live encounter. Therefore, online English almost serves as a third language that the first-generation Asian American student must master in order to successfully complete the virtual components of a theological degree.

Perceived benefit of asynchronous discussions

But despite the formidable challenge of their honor-shame culture and English struggles, the focus group wholeheartedly embraced the pedagogical use of asynchronous discussions. One student on probationary status due to her lower English abilities stated, "I love all discussions including online discussions." This study posed the following question to the focus group, "What would you rather complete for a weekly assignment: (a) a four-hour written assignment for submission to the professor; (b) four-hour participation in an online forum requiring an initial post and two responses." Five of the seven participants chose the second option. These five claimed that their desire to participate in the online classroom overcame their anxieties with asynchronous discussions.

The preference for online discussion is difficult to reconcile with the vast challenges that first-generation Asian American students face. But the interviewees all expressed an appreciation on the value that asynchronous discussions place on the learning community. All of them progressed through an Asian educational system that emphasizes the authority of the teacher and places the role of the student as a consumer of information.[12] All of them attended highly homogenous educational institutions in their native lands where any "diversity" was an anomaly. Additionally, in Korea, most major seminaries dogmatically defend their own denominational traditions, and consequently, the concept of multidenominational learning communities remains quite foreign. After arriving from such a theological culture, these students quickly recognize that Western theological education sometimes prioritizes the experiences of the greater learning community over the professor. This shared sense of learning serves as a huge benefit to their own theological experiences. All members of the focus group expressed appreciation for the opportunity to learn from the rich experiences of their peers from different family backgrounds, diverse denominations, and multifaceted ministry experiences.

In addition to learning from their educational community, the first-generation Asian American students appreciated the opportunities to voice their opinions and share their own experiences with colleagues. Ken Morse's study on asynchronous learning in a multiethnic business course supports this perceived benefit from Asian students.[13] Morse divides an online classroom between a low context learning group comprised of Western backgrounds with English as the primary language of origin, and a high context learning group of various Asian nationalities with English as a secondary language. Morse then surveys the participants in three major categories in comparing online versus face-to-face classrooms: advantages, disadvantages, and overall learning experience. Whereas both groups made similar observations on the disadvantages and overall learning experience, they made vastly different observations for the advantages. Specifically, the high context subgroup perceived that the "ability to say things I think appropriate" served as the prime advantage that online classroom environment can offer. This stands in stark contrast to the Western low context subgroup who best appreciated the student convenience of online education. In addition, members of the high context subgroup pri-

oritized their ability to reflect on their own postings before uploading them, whereas the low context group valued the concept of having others read their post. Morse suggests that this split shows the inward orientation of the high context subgroup concern of "losing face" contrasted with the outward concerns of the low context subgroup that is more interested in "What do others think?"[14] The fact that the two subgroups gave parallel answers for nearly every other section highlights these stark differences.

But what does one make of their difficulties in shame and English? What about their exposure? For all of the students, the embarrassment and stress was very real during their initial exposure to the asynchronous discussion. This initial exposure quickly dissipated, however, when they realized the pedagogical shift from their native higher education experiences. Several specific factors helped to further facilitate this adjustment. Focus-group students quickly pointed out that the first response to their post served as a tremendously empowering moment. Two of them recall reading the words, "Nice post," for the first time in response to their writing. Although seemingly generic, such a response acknowledged that the Asian American student's post was not only comprehensible but productive as well. When the "American" students began to interact with the Asian student within the context of asynchronous discussions, the latter viewed himself as a genuine part of a learning community.[15] Thankfully, none of the students ever received a direct response that criticized their English. But the unsolicited mention of this possibility during the focus groups suggests that they were all wary of such a response. Soon after their first online interactions, several of the Asian American students made conscious decisions to embrace these pedagogical tools. One student claimed, "I was so embarrassed [by having to do online posts], but I made a determination to work even harder that I may do well in the discussions." For this student, the decision had religious implications, recognizing that study time was a gift from God and that he wanted to appreciate this gift. Once they made such a determination, the generally positive responses from students allowed for a rather rapid assimilation of the process.

Recommendations

Overall, the focus group of first-generation Asian students provided helpful information in assessing the use of asynchronous discussions in their theological education. At the outset, it must be emphasized that despite the cultural and language comprehension difficulties, all of these students enjoyed the asynchronous discussion and viewed this innovation as an important tool to enrich their theological education. Such a conclusion should help motivate faculty and administration of seminaries to continue to seek new ways to effectively deliver instruction across cultural boundaries.

From reviewing the first-generation Asian American students' experiences at George Fox Evangelical Seminary, this study offers three suggestions for theological educators.

Consider the honor-shame barriers

First, professors should consciously consider the cultural barriers of the honor-shame background in the student and their negative implications. In terms of their initial foray into online discussions, several students used terms such as "nervous, tension, embarrassed, shameful" to describe their own experiences. By fostering care and empathy, professors can help to establish a certain degree of safety for these students that will help to mitigate their challenges. For example, a private email of encouragement from the professor to the struggling international student may greatly help to assuage anxieties and express acknowledgement of the difficulty of studying in a foreign language.[16] In certain cases, professors should recognize that the cultural values within a particular assignment may deeply conflict with a student's cultural values. In an extreme example, one student refused to participate in an online wiki exercise. Although this student had a high degree of English proficiency and maintained a stellar GPA, he could not get himself to correct other people's work as the assignment mandated. He cited a differentiation between the culturally "acceptable" task of a mere online response and the "unacceptable" task of fixing someone else's work. For such cases, a professor may consider whether it is appropriate to give alternative assignments.

Set clear expectations

Second, professors must set clear expectations. Several students expressed the need for some sort of guide to help acclimate themselves to online pedagogy. For many of these students, they admit that much of this information may have been given during their initial orientation, but this is precisely the moment when their English comprehension is the weakest and their assimilation into the scholastic environment is most overwhelming. Because none of our Asian international students had to navigate online learning in their education experience before coming to seminary, successful communication of the process would be immensely helpful. A simple two-page handout containing a typical prompt and an array of initial posts and responses can give international students a tangible example of expectations. For most of these students, the topic of suggestions opened up greater discussions, signaling that their difficulties transitioning to the asynchronous discussions were merely a subset of their greater difficulties with assimilating into American theological education. Certainly, discussions on this overall process must include adaptation into the learning pedagogy of an online environment.

Encourage students to engage material from their native contexts

Third, professors should make efforts to create assignments, which allow students to engage the material from their own native contexts. In a study on Korean students participating in online learning, Doo Lim suggests such custom assignments as the single primary recommendation for cross-cultural online learning.[17] He identifies that assignments that incorporate the students' own experiences greatly enhance student motivation. Such an assignment can potentially fully realize the benefits of an asynchronous discussion. The Asian student can reflect on his or her own contextualization of theology and present

it with confidence as an expert in the native culture. At the same time, the rest of the online class can learn and listen to a student from a contextual background very different from their own. These types of assignments can fully embrace the benefits of cultural diversity within the seminary classroom.

Conclusions

As with any topic in as nascent a field as online pedagogy, this study suffers from certain limitations. The lack of potential sample size of first-generation Asian Americans makes rigorous survey difficult. As theological institutions continue to implement asynchronous discussions into the theological pedagogy, a statistical sample of critical mass could serve to more scientifically identify these disadvantages, with delimiters according to factors such as specific ethnicity, English fluency, and attitude toward native cultures. All of these issues may contribute to students' abilities to successfully harness asynchronous discussion as a learning tool. Also, out of simplicity, the categories of *Asian American* and *honor-shame* have such multifaceted expressions that any such categorization restricts their truer essence.

Despite these acknowledged limitations, however, I hope that the voices of this focus group have helped to convey some of their struggles and catalyze a deeper sensitivity to their unique needs. Along a wider scope, this study reveals how implicit values within pedagogical innovations can impede the international students that seminaries so greatly want to court. With sustained effort, further technological innovations, such as the incorporation of asynchronous discussions, can continue to bring benefits to the theological enterprise for all students.

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ENDNOTES

1.   For an articulation of the important distinction between distance learning and e-learning, see Sarah Guri-Rosenblit, "'Distance Education' and 'E-Learning': Not the Same Thing," *Higher Education* 49, no. 4 (June 2005): 467–493.

2.   For representative articles on asynchronous discussions, consult bibliographic references in Alfred P. Rovai, "Building and Sustaining Community in Asynchronous Learning Networks," *The Internet and Higher Education* 3, no. 4 (2000): 285–297; Alison Black, "The Use of Asynchronous Discussion: Creating a Text of Talk," *Contemporary Issues in Technology and Teacher Education* 5, no. 1 (2005): 5–24; Ken Morse, "Does One Size

Fit All? Exploring Asynchronous Learning in a Multicultural Environment," *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks* 7, no. 1 (Feb. 2003): 37–55.

3.   Barbara Rogoff and Pablo Chavajay, "What's Become of Research on the Cultural Basis of Cognitive Development?," *American Psychologist* 50, no. 10 (Oct. 1995), 859–877.

4.   Raymond J. Wlodkowski, *Enhancing Adult Motivation to Learn: A Comprehensive Guide for Teaching All Adults* (Hoboken, NJ: Jossey-Bass, 2008), 2.

5.   Francis Inki Ha, "Shame in Asian and Western Cultures," *American Behavioral Scientist* 38, no. 8 (1995): 1114–1131; Anthony J. Marsella, Michael D. Murray, and Charles Golden, "Ethnic Variations in the Phenomenology of Emotions: I. Shame," *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 5, no. 3 (1974): 312–328.

6.   Ha, "Shame in Asian and Western Cultures," 1115–1116.

7.   Hae Jeong Yu, "My Shame is My English: Understanding Korean Students' Shame in English Speaking" (PhD dissertation, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, 2007).

8.   Ibid., 2.

9.   Ibid., v.

10.   The examples of asynchronous postings arise from an introductory Hebrew Bible class, delivered in hybrid format. They all are verbatim reproductions with the exception of the names, to preserve anonymity.

11.   All of the international students easily identified the relatively difficult word *eternity*. Incidentally, the fact that *Sweet* typically functions as a common adjective, but here serves as a proper name, adds to the interpretive complexity.

12.   This study does not intend to demean such a system. I, myself, completed my Master of Divinity degree in Korea, and I recognize many of the benefits of such a traditional educational program. For example, I had to thoroughly answer the question, "Describe Karl Barth's concept of revelation," but I never had to address the question, "What do you think of Karl Barth's concept of revelation?" Seminary students too often jump to the second question, before they can adequately answer the first!

13.   The online classroom was conducted entirely through the use of asynchronous discussions. Morse, "Does One Size Fit All?" 37–55.

14.   Ibid., 47.

15.   One of the students, though, noted that the intimacy within the online environment is not necessarily achieved in the face-to-face classroom.

16.   Such an email could even offer grading leniency over the issue of grammar on online posts. Because most asynchronous discussion grading rubrics have a section on proper grammar, these standards generate considerable anxiety among first-generation Asian American students.

17.   Doo Hun Lim, "Cross Cultural Differences in Online Learning Motivation," *Educational Media International* 41, no. 2 (Jan. 2004): 163–175. In addition, Ling Thompson and Heng-Yu Ku incorporate this strategy among Chinese e-learners. Ling Thompson and Heng-Yu Ku, "Chinese Graduate Students' Experiences and Attitudes toward Online Learning," *Educational Media International* 42, no. 1 (March 2005): 33–47.