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Life (Online) Together: Practicing Presence in Social Media Spaces

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Hey all,

I could use your prayers for wisdom and confidence. I have a couple things coming up in the next week that are making my “impostor syndrome” flare up (you know, that sinking feeling that you’re in the midst of people a lot smarter and more capable than yourself and that, at any moment, they’ll “find you out” for the average person you really are).

I’ve shared before the issues I have with self-confidence. I’m coming to think that these persistent misgivings may be something that I deal with for the rest of my life. Not sure why I have a hard time seeing myself and my contributions the same way others do. I appreciate your prayers and am thankful for your friendship and the opportunity to share all of this with you.

I posted this note to my doctoral cohort in late February. Within 24 hours I received a flood of responses by my colleagues from around the world (Kenya, Burundi, UK, Hong Kong, Canada, and Australia). They said things like, “You are an invited voice for a reason, you have a perspective to give. I’ll say it again, ‘who made your mouth’?” “Andy, you are among our best and our brightest, and I don’t doubt you in this regard for a moment. Tell your ‘inner impostor’ to shut up!” and “You were made for this. Stretch into the spaces God is opening up for you.” What an incredible outpouring of support from a wise group of men and women with whom I’ve formed quite a bond over the past two years.

What is remarkable about this exchange is not its content, but the vehicle used to deliver the content. This was not an email exchange or a forum post in some closed learning course management system. I posted this in my doctoral cohort’s Facebook group.

At George Fox Evangelical Seminary (GFES), we offer a diverse number of hybrid, or blended, learning courses. As with many D.Min. programs, ours is designed to be completed while our students remain in their full-time ministry settings. This means that most of their coursework is completed from a distance.

Traditional online or hybrid learning programs tend to utilize closed learning course management systems (LCMS) to create spaces for academic engagement. While a LCMS like Blackboard or Moodle does a great job at providing a sheltered structure for course delivery, it does a poor job at fostering community.
“Be Known.” That’s the simple promise of George Fox University, of which GFES is a part. What does that look like in a blended learning environment when students are only physically present with one another and their instructors once or twice a year?

I think that the incarnation is helpful here. Paul writes in Philippians that Christ “made himself nothing” and took on “the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness” (2:7). In order that we might be known, Christ came to meet us where we already are. He moved into our neighborhood.

Similarly, when we want to really know others we have to meet them where they are. One of the reasons that LCMSs don’t foster opportunities for people to be known is because that’s simply not what they’re designed to do. So, if those of us in blended learning want to know our “online” students, we need to be present online where they are.

A few weeks ago a colleague stopped by my office after a presentation I’d given on utilizing social media in higher education. She wanted to know how I decided which social media spaces to utilize in developing the seminary’s online presence. I told her that I go where our students and prospective students already are. For us that’s mostly Facebook and Twitter.

As a campus minister, you need to be present where your students are, and this includes having an online presence. That, more than anything else, will determine the services with which you engage your students. Maybe it’s Pinterest or LinkedIn or Google +, or perhaps your students are in World of Warcraft or Second Life. Wherever they are, meet them there.

At GFES, each of our D.Min. cohorts has a closed Facebook group that they’re a part of with their colleagues and our program staff. We use the groups for program announcements, sharing resources, and exhorting and praying for one another. Pastoral care happens in these groups. These ministry professionals share doubts and fears with one another that they could never share with those in their immediate ministry contexts. We create space for our students, wherever in the world they are, to be known. Do the same for your students. Let that guide what technology you use and how you use it.