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Theological Education
and Hybrid Models of Distance Learning

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ABSTRACT: The authors document the rise of so-called hybrid models of distance education and articulate their relevance for theological education in North America. In the first section, the authors lay out a typology of the visions for technology current among theological educators. One feature of this typology is the recognition of two very different ways of thinking about distance education. Early-stage thinking is characterized by a strong dichotomy between online and face-to-face courses. Later-stage thinking has tended toward the development of hybrid programs. The following sections explore the history of the development of hybrid models and how hybrid courses and programs work. In two final sections, the authors ponder the possible strengths of hybrid programs for theological education and the issue of hybrid models and ATS accreditation standards. A close reading of the current ATS standards for distance education reveals that they have been crafted according to models that are both outmoded in terms of their pedagogical sophistication and less than fully relevant to the ways in which distance programs are actually being developed by seminaries in North America.

Introduction

In the last few years, many seminaries have begun to explore online teaching and learning scenarios for use in theological education. For many this has raised serious concerns. For them, the state of the question is whether online teaching and learning can deliver the same level of student outcomes as that which derives from the traditional classroom. While this question gets at a very important issue, we would like to show that this way of framing the question is, in some ways, already passé for three reasons. First, it does not take into account that that particular formulation of the question has received an answer. Second, that form of the question is based on what many would argue is already an outmoded way of thinking about online teaching and learning, namely, the false dichotomy between online and face-to-face models. And, third, it does not take into account the recent developments centering around the concept of hybrid courses and programs—strategies that make use of both online and face-to-face models in an integrated way. Our positive thesis is that a new set of scenarios is becoming possible for seminaries in order to be able to pursue key aspects of their mission. This development could potentially have a significant impact on ATS accreditation standards and procedures.
A typology of technology and theological education and the place of hybrid models

Elsewhere, Delamarter has laid out a three-stage typology describing the attitudes toward and uses of technology for theological education in North America in the fall of 2003. This study was based on eighty-five interviews with representatives of forty-three seminaries whose combined headcount in 2002 was 35,051, or 46 percent of the total enrollment in ATS member schools. In what follows, we will describe briefly the typology, paying special attention to how educators in each of these environments tend to think about distance education.

Stage one thinking: A dichotomy between online and face-to-face

In stage one thinking, theological educators use new technologies to bolster some aspect of the classic model of theological education. The classic model conceives of theological education as (1) full immersion for at least three years in a (2) residential program in which senior members of the community instruct, inspire, and form junior members primarily through (3) lecture-based pedagogies and where students learn the art of theological reflection through (4) face-to-face community discourse, (5) library research and (6) writing.

Across North America, technology has been harnessed to assist with many aspects of this vision for theological education. Seminaries have digitized their library catalogues and forged consortial agreements that enable online access to the holdings of a host of libraries in their region. Email networks have made internal and external communication easier. Institutional administrative systems have been rendered more efficient and robust by the installation of administrative management software systems. To strengthen in-class presentations, classrooms have been rendered "smart" by outfitting them to project computer monitors (and all of the Internet and network resources to which they are connected), VHS and DVD players, document cameras, and the like. Recently, many seminaries have begun to use threaded discussions as an extension of in-class discussions. Though not without their problems (like gluts of unwanted emails and pedestrian uses of PowerPoint), these developments have been widely accepted as genuine improvements to the quality of theological education. For the purposes of this study, it is important to note that in this stage, seminary communities usually think about courses and their delivery as part of a rigid dichotomy: online or face-to-face.

Stage two thinking: The discovery of the hybrid course

The vision of stage one institutions for technology does not begin to change significantly until the seminary begins to try its hand with technology for distance education. This inaugurates a second phase. In Delamarter's findings, seminaries go into the experiment thinking that the issues will be technological—specifically, the use of a course management system, like Blackboard or WebCT—only
to discover that the issues are really pedagogical. They begin by trying to do online courses essentially by “translating what we do in the classroom into an online format.” So they type their lectures or deliver them in streaming audio or video. Students read, listen, or watch these; read the textbooks; and then write papers that they can submit using the website. Some adventurous faculty members include threaded discussions but complain that these can take a lot of time to administer. Because they have faithfully reproduced the basic elements of the traditional classroom experience (lectures, reading, and paper writing), they think they have done all that can be done. Unfortunately, these experiences are invariably judged substandard by the students. The only conclusion seems to be that the fault must lie with the online medium. At this point, many theological educators, individually, and seminaries, collectively, have turned away from online education, judging it to be an inadequate medium for delivering theological education.

Those who persist are able to move ahead only by going through a rigorous learning curve devoted to pedagogical issues. They report that they have had to adopt different teaching strategies—ones that are based on constructionist learning theory, student-centered learning, student-directed learning, collaborative learning theory, and the like. Having modified their approach to teaching, based on what they learned about learning, these educators claim that both they and their students have been surprised by the depth of community and the vibrancy of learning that take place in the online environment.

Somewhere in stage two, during this process of learning about new pedagogical strategies, many theological educators discover hybrid courses. These are courses that combine online and face-to-face experiences into a new model for teaching and learning. The details vary widely. Some approaches call for the class to meet every other week. Others meet only a couple of times. Still others dedicate only one or two sessions to the online environment. Seminaries by and large have been driven by a desire to serve distant students and to preserve some quality face-to-face time for their courses. Doing so responds well to the concerns of faculty members for whom this is an initial foray into online teaching. Whatever the mechanism that has driven institutions to explore hybrid delivery systems, the results have been surprising: when tested for student satisfaction and learning outcomes, hybrid learning experiences outscore both online courses and traditional face-to-face courses! All of a sudden, the dichotomy between online and face-to-face that governs most thinking in the stage one institution begins to break down.

**Stage three thinking: Hybrid programs**

One of the characteristics of stage three institutions is their ability to think in new categories to design hybrid programs. These programs employ not just a mixture of online and face-to-face courses but conceive the program in hybrid terms: which program elements would work best in a face-to-face medium and which
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would work best in an online format? There is another unanticipated consequence of going through stage two that begins to pay off in stage three environments: faculty members discover they can no longer conduct their face-to-face classes in the way they used to. Their pedagogical discoveries change their face-to-face teaching for good.

The history of the hybrid experience

The typology above purports to represent a snapshot of theological education in the fall of 2003. If it is at all heuristic, one may well ask, “How does the experience of theological educators with technology and distance education relate to that of others in the educational world?” The answer seems to be that we in theological education are reliving the history of distance education as it has been playing out for at least seventy-five years in North America.

Prehistory: The no significant difference debate

For nearly eighty years, studies have been made of the relative effectiveness of distance courses compared to face-to-face courses in North America. Thomas L. Russell’s *The No Significant Difference Phenomenon* has compiled an annotated bibliography of “355 research reports, summaries and papers on technology for distance education.” In the early days, of course, these technologies were little more than the conveniences of the mail service system. But more recently, they include online courses and electronically mediated training systems. On the other side of the research are fifty-two studies that document a “significant difference” in results between the two media. Most often these studies report results that favor the distance medium. As the name suggests, this body of literature argues that either there is no significant difference between the two media or, where there is difference, the distance medium is most often more effective.

So when it comes to the question of whether online teaching and learning can deliver the same level of student outcomes as those that derive from the traditional classroom, there is seventy-five years of experience and a body of literature that many are saying has already provided a clear answer: distance education can be as effective as classroom instruction.

To be sure, all informed observers talk about the potential of distance education and not the guaranteed outcome. Everyone agrees that it is every bit as possible to produce a really bad online course as it is to produce a really bad face-to-face course. The medium guarantees neither effectiveness nor ineffectiveness. But consensus has been reached on our theoretical question: there is nothing inherent in distance education technologies that render them incapable of mediating a quality teaching and learning experience. And the experience of theological educators in stage two and stage three environments seems to confirm what others in general education have learned: whether or not any given distance
course reaches that potential for quality depends on a host of factors having more to do with pedagogy than with technology.

**Either/or or both/and: The discovery of the hybrid course**

Due in part to the research reported above, educators in the last decade have experimented more and more with distance education strategies. But perhaps an even greater impetus has come from the rise of the electronic distance technologies, such as email and course management systems. These have dramatically increased the speed of communication cycles and brought a robustness that provides a much greater array of teaching/learning scenarios for participants.

But no sooner had this development taken place, than faculty members began to use these distance technologies and teaching/learning strategies to augment the face-to-face classroom experience. In doing so, the hybrid course was born. Because the hybrid course often proved more effective than both online and face-to-face, educators began to study the science of hybrid course design and delivery. As we will show below, after a half-dozen years, there is solid literature on what makes for excellence in hybrid courses.

For the purposes of this discussion, then, it is important to recognize that the old dichotomy between online and face-to-face is breaking down. The decision to offer a course exclusively online or exclusively face-to-face is driven much more by issues of tradition and logistics than by pedagogy. The advocates of hybrid education contend that when pedagogy alone is allowed to dictate the issue, the answer will almost always be hybrid—a set of strategic decisions about which course objectives are fulfilled best in the face-to-face environment and which in the online environment.

**Beyond the no significant difference debate:**

**Hybrid programs come of age**

Like dominoes tipping, the discovery of the hybrid course has led rather quickly to a new way of thinking about the delivery of programs. Educators are now hard at work trying to understand what makes for quality in hybrid delivery systems, not just for individual courses but for the implementation of an entire program. Carol A. Twigg calls this a move “beyond the no significant difference debate.” In her book *Innovations in Online Learning: Moving Beyond No Significant Difference*, Twigg provides case studies of thirteen such programs, representing both state and private universities and colleges; she details the ways in which these distributed, hybrid programs are developing particular strategies for excellence in teaching and learning, student services, etc.

Now, it should be clear that the experience in the general educational world on these matters of technology and pedagogy is as variegated as the world of theological education. Some (if not most) still provide an education that employs basically traditional modalities but with a few technological innovations added. Others, in pursuit of solutions for distance education, have begun to employ
online courses. Many very quickly discover the hybrid course. And a certain percentage of these move rather naturally into the development of hybrid programs.

What makes the hybrid course work?

In what follows we would like to review the findings about excellence in hybrid courses. In doing so, we have a particular goal in view. We would like to take the findings about what makes for excellence in hybrid courses and apply it, by extension, to the question about what might make for excellence in hybrid programs. Our belief—or, at least, our hypothesis—is that some of the things that characterize the former will also characterize the latter.

Strengths of the hybrid course

In a 2000 speech, Graham B. Spanier, president of Pennsylvania State University, called the convergence of online and traditional face-to-face instruction “the single-greatest unrecognized trend in higher education today.” Despite the fact that hybrid learning has seemingly passed under the radar for years, an increasing amount of research points to its potential for theological education.

1. **Student performance and satisfaction increase.** Pedagogical changes within hybrid courses produce an overall improvement in student learning. Research at the University of Central Florida (UCF) shows that within hybrid courses—what UCF calls “mixed mode” courses—students usually have greater success than within both traditional, face-to-face courses and web-based, online courses; in addition, student satisfaction for hybrid courses is greater than for online courses. The Learning Technology Center at the University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee (UWM) reports similar results. A major reason every faculty participant in a hybrid course project would recommend the hybrid model to other teachers was because student performance improved.

2. **Flexibility of time for students is greater.** The fact that hybrid learning offers students more flexibility in how they use their time is universally valued. The convenience and freedom of hybrid outweigh any technological hassles, especially for commuter students. Increased time flexibility, though, does not translate into less time spent in coursework—although this can be a common misperception on the part of students.

3. **Colors on the teaching palette multiply.** Hybrid learning provides teachers greater flexibility in accomplishing course goals. Certain pedagogical tools unique to either the classroom or online experience are now available to the teacher-facilitator. Simply put, “the hybrid model gives instructors more flexibility with their classes.”

4. **Connectivity between students and faculty is enriched.** Contrary to common faculty fears that interactions with students will lessen with decreased face-to-face time, research shows that connections between students and faculty
can become deeper in hybrid courses. The online component of those courses helps to engage students in new ways and to foster the building of community, thereby impacting the classroom setting in turn. One teacher who redesigned a large lecture course into a hybrid format was particularly impressed with the improved connectivity he had with students: “I have never felt more acquainted with students enrolled in a large enrollment course than I do teaching this course in a hybrid format.”

5. **Interaction between students increases.** Not only do hybrid courses foster student-to-faculty connectivity, but student-to-student engagement grows as well. When faculty gave reasons for their positive assessment of the hybrid model, the increase in “student interactivity” was cited as one of the most important.

** Essentials for successful hybrid courses **

Transitioning a traditional course into a hybrid that unites distance/distributed learning with the familiarity of the classroom entails re-imagining the course completely. Something new is being created that is more than the sum of its parts. Though there are varied approaches to constructing a hybrid course, the literature on hybrid learning reveals some basic essentials. What follows is not intended to be comprehensive but merely to give a taste of what is required to make a transition to hybrid learning:

1. **The teacher must facilitate learning.** In order to teach effectively in the hybrid environment, it is essential that the teacher see his or her role primarily as a facilitator of the learning environment. It could be argued that this is the prime contribution of online pedagogy to hybrid learning. Practically, when making the transition to hybrid, Sands recommends that teachers “imagine interactivity rather than delivery” and be prepared for a certain “loss of power.” In UCF research based on student evaluations, a key factor correlated to an overall rating of “excellent” for the teacher was receiving an excellent in “facilitation of learning.” This transition involves a level of sacrifice. Faculty must be willing to invest extra time in both the preparation and delivery of hybrid courses. Almost universally teachers report that hybrid teaching takes more time than traditional, face-to-face teaching—although time demands are spread more evenly. Those who do make this investment tend to believe that the extra time is worthwhile because of a more effective learning environment.

2. **Courses must be redesigned from the ground up.** Because something new is being formed, a teacher must not think in terms of adding online components to a traditional course. Critical to redesign is starting with your course objectives or goals and determining which are best met through a face-to-face and which through a virtual online environment. For example, certain tasks, such as large group discussions, lend themselves to a face-to-face setting, while others, like small group discussions, can best be accomplished online. Redesign also means much greater detail in instructions, breaking down assignments into accomplishable components, and then assigning each piece a part of the grade.
Giving a significant percentage of the course grade for online components lets students know that those pieces matter. Between face-to-face sessions, courses need routine, clear structure, and consistent patterns.

3. **Online and face-to-face components must be intentionally integrated.** Hybrid course developers at UWM emphasize that this issue is the single most important for successful hybridization: “There is only one effective way to use online technologies in hybrid courses: it is essential to redesign the course to integrate the face-to-face and online learning.” The most common mistake when first entering the ranks of hybrid teaching is to allow the online and face-to-face components to function independently of each other, in parallel dimensions. Experienced hybrid teachers have discovered that a greater portion of classroom/faceto-face time must be dedicated to connecting with the online work students have done outside of class.

4. **Socialization must be prioritized.** Research is showing that whatever the delivery system, building a sense of community enhances learning. In hybrid learning, socialization can be given a jump-start through an intentional emphasis on building community in the initial face-to-face class sessions. This beginning can then be nourished through effective online interactions. The unique fortés of the face-to-face and online environments for socialization (e.g., shy people often find their voice in the online milieu while extroverts value the face-to-face sociability of the classroom) can then strengthen the overall community-building enterprise. Design-wise, hybrid courses also seem to function best when there is a face-to-face session to bring “closure” to the course and experience.

5. **Students must be trained and supported.** The Learning Technology Center recommends that the first face-to-face sessions of the course be dedicated to two things: socialization and initiation into technology. Students do not grasp the hybrid concept immediately. They need early instruction on what hybrid is and on pedagogy. For example, because students in hybrid courses will be more active in their learning, they need to be taught the pedagogical value of that activity. Students also need training right away in technology and time management. Once these skills are learned, technology is not the obstacle some students perceive it will be.

6. **Teachers must be trained and supported.** Redesigning a traditional course into a hybrid takes more time than the initial development of the traditional course. Every successful initiative to bring hybrid courses and learning into institutions has the strong support and backing of administration. Release time, summer contracts, and other considerations are commitments administration can make to support the transition process, as is providing venues in which faculty can learn collegially from each other and where instructional technologists and faculty development specialists are available for consultation.
Possible strengths of a hybrid program

Based on our study of what makes for excellence in a hybrid course, we would like to probe some of the qualities that might characterize hybrid programs. The reader will remember the caveat about not counting potential as guaranteed success. In the same way that hybrid courses succeed only to the extent that they pay attention to good learning and pedagogical theory and give meticulous care to the execution of the course, so also would we expect hybrid programs to succeed by understanding and incorporating best practices into their teaching and learning. Were they to do so, we might expect some of the following.

Faculties with increased skills as facilitators of learning

As we have seen, successful teaching of hybrid and online courses necessarily involves a shift in the role of the professor from being exclusively a dispenser of knowledge to also being a facilitator of learning. These skill sets are not mutually exclusive but can be complementary. But faculty members who work only in the live classroom will not necessarily have had to deal with pedagogical and learning theory. Those who work in online and hybrid environments cannot escape it. In programs where a high percentage of the faculty members have undergone this transformation, there may be some additional synergies that result from the sharing of best practices and from the discussion of how to inculcate good pedagogical and learning theory into an entire program, not just into single courses. Program leaders and designers would thereby be empowered to think outside the box in terms of how best to meet overall program goals and objectives, which could include new environments for facilitating spiritual formation, mentoring, etc.

Increased student performance and satisfaction

As we reported above, the single highest correlative of student satisfaction in a course is the faculty member's skill as a facilitator of learning. Participation in a program taught by faculty members who excel in this area will undoubtedly elicit strong student satisfaction. But, of course, student satisfaction should not be confused with measures of actual learning. This is where constructionist learning theory and student-centered learning theory apply. To facilitate learning necessarily involves shifting from what the faculty member is constructing toward what students are constructing. Of course, this transition is not all or nothing, but when a program as a whole facilitates student-centered, constructionist learning, we can expect increased student performance, learning, and retention.

Deeper connections and increased community

Online and hybrid environments facilitate a higher quality of student-to-student and student-to-faculty interaction than is characteristic of the traditional
classroom. When face-to-face interaction—with its immediacy and energy—is combined with online interactions—with its depth and democracy—the combination can make for deeper levels of interaction. Where this is structured and sustained not just for a course but across an entire program, we should expect to see more significant connection and community among students and faculty. In particular, it would seem important to prioritize socialization and community building early in the hybrid program as a whole and not simply within each component. Such an emphasis may require giving credit for an initial community retreat or other such endeavor. In addition, a hybrid program would consider how best to bring a sense of closure to the overall experience, perhaps again in some kind of unique face-to-face environment.

**Greater access for students to theological education with less debt accumulation**

Perhaps the single greatest implication of the hybrid program is that it can render unnecessary the relocation of students from where they currently live. This fact alone alleviates a huge amount of the disruption students and their families experience and enables them to maintain the support structures that are already in place in their lives, including current modes of employment. This is no small consideration in a time when student debt accumulations for theological education have risen to all-time highs. Seminaries may not be able to lower the cost of the education, but when students are allowed to maintain the jobs they have, they may be able to pay for more of the education as they go, rather than relying on loans. And where students are engaged in ministry, with both a history and a future with a particular church, the church may be more motivated to financially support the theological education of the student.

**Deeper levels of integration through contextualized learning**

As with hybrid courses, a hybrid program should not be conceived merely as two parallel venues, online and face-to-face. Proponents of these programs claim that they are able to give greater attention than traditional programs to integrating the education of the student into the life context of the student (a third venue), precisely because the delivery system leaves the life context undisrupted and at the center. By this we mean that these programs can encourage students to view the situation as a theological education being brought into their lives as opposed to putting their lives on hold while they do a theological education. Where the program is peopled with a higher percentage of this kind of student, it can change the nature of the interactions that characterize the learning environment: from theoretical discussions about possible future scenarios in ministry, to the enrichment of ministry already in progress.

Lest this description of the potential of hybrid programs make them sound like the arrival of the *parousia*, we close this section with a reminder about a few of the “costs” of developing such programs.
As with hybrid courses, hybrid programs have to be redesigned from the ground up. It is a whole new creation—beyond just a collection of online and face-to-face courses. Strategic decisions about program objectives and goals have to be applied directly to the appropriate venues in which they will be addressed. Such a redesign must involve attention to the overall atmosphere of the program, being sure to render a certain level of consistency in the medium and in the community patterns from course to course. Online and face-to-face components and elements of the students' contexts in ministry have to be intentionally integrated, so that they are not experienced as parallel and disconnected.

Students must be given an early initiation into the technology and community patterns necessary to succeed in the program. Time must be dedicated at the start of a hybrid program to an intentional, face-to-face and hands-on induction into the ominous but rewarding world of technology and online learning communities. This calls for the institution to provide for much higher levels of training and support for students than is customary in traditional programs.

Likewise, faculty members have not only to be willing to undergo the transformation of pedagogy necessary to facilitate learning in the hybrid environment, the institution must be prepared to provide for their training and support along the way. This is important at the level of the basic technology but even more so at the level of instructional technology, the interface of appropriate technology and effective pedagogy.

Hybrid programs and ATS Standards

Among other things, the foregoing discussion has several implications for ATS and its accreditation standards and procedures. ATS has developed two documents that govern its thinking and practices related to distance education. The first is “Standard 10: Multiple Locations and Distance Education”; the second is, “Procedures Related to Membership and Accreditation,” section V, related to the approval of distance programs. A careful reading of these documents reveals the following.

1. Standard 10 employs ambiguous language that makes it somewhat difficult to decode its vision for distance education. Two terms in particular are multivalent. The first is “program,” which, in educational parlance, is usually intended in a broader sense as part of the phrase “degree program” but can sometimes be used in a narrow sense as a synonym for “course.” The second is the compound term “distance education” which, even when defined, can refer to widely different types of delivery systems. When the terms “distance education” and “program” are combined, with their respective ambiguities, the resultant phrase “distance education program” could theoretically mean either a degree program that makes use of online elements—and thus could encompass hybrid courses and a hybrid program—or it could merely refer very narrowly to an online class. As we will see, there
are one or two places where it seems like the former might have been in view, but when the ambiguity is resolved, it becomes clear that in the accreditation documents the phrase never explicitly means anything more than the latter.

2. When de-coded, it becomes clear that Standard 10 is written from a stage one understanding; that is, it labors under the false dichotomy between online and face-to-face and does not take into consideration issues about hybrid courses or hybrid programs.

Statement 10.3.1 opens with a definition: “Distance education is defined, for the purpose of this standard, as a mode of education in which major components of the program, including course work, occur when students and instructors are not in the same location. Instruction may be synchronous or asynchronous and usually encompasses the use of a wide range of technologies.” When the definition says that “major components of the [degree] program, including course work, occur when students and instructors are not in the same location,” it seems to suggest that there might be other things besides course work that could occur at a distance. If one understands “at a distance” to be one of the ways of referring to the online environment, then this might be taken to suggest that these are programs in which the online environment may be employed to address various objectives of the program, perhaps as part of a hybrid approach. Or, the paragraph may simply mean, “in a program that includes some online courses. . . .” As the rest of the paragraphs of the standard unfold, it becomes clear that it is only the latter that is envisioned. In all the other cases where it appears, the term “distance education” is really only a synonym for “online course.” And in these cases, the word “program” also functions as a synonym for “course.” Following are the other paragraphs of the standard. We have inserted additional words into the text in brackets to make clear what is partially ambiguous.

10.3.3.2 Schools using distance education [online courses] shall be intentional in addressing matters of coherence, educational values, and patterns of interactions among all courses offered within the [degree] program. Institutions shall guard against allowing the accumulation of distance education courses [online courses] to constitute a significant portion of a degree program that lacks coherence, intentionality, and curricular design and shall develop a system that monitors the number of distance education courses [again, online courses] in a student’s program of studies.

10.3.3.3 Programs of distance education [sounds like degree program, but what follows shows that what is actually meant is online courses, i.e., “degree programs that include online courses”] shall demonstrate the collaborative nature and research dimensions of theological scholarship that foster critical thinking skills. According to the degree program requirements,
distance education programs [online courses] shall seek to enhance personal and spiritual formation appropriate to the school's mission and ecclesiastical tradition and identity, be sensitive to individual learning styles, and recognize diversity within the community of learners. [Online] Courses shall provide sufficient interaction between teachers and learners and among learners to ensure a community of learning and to promote global awareness and sensitivity to local settings.

10.3.3.4 The development and review of courses [online courses, in this case] shall be a collaborative effort among faculty, librarians, technical support staff, and students, showing sensitivity to ministry settings and the goals of the entire curriculum.21

3. This very narrow understanding of distance education to mean a limited number of online courses as part of a degree program is even clearer in ATS Procedures, section V, "Procedures for Approval of Programs Involving Multiple Locations (Extension Sites and Distance Education." In this document, the development of distance programs is simply understood to mean adding ever more online courses. A distance program is explicitly defined as a program that has rendered six or more of its courses to be online courses (subpoint F.3). We reproduce the relevant materials here. Little comment is necessary.

F.1 Distance education courses [online courses] may be taught for one year with notification to the Commission on the annual ATS report form. When a course is offered a second time, Commission approval will be required, based on the design, requirements, and evaluation of the proposed course.

F.2 When an institution has received approval for two distance education courses, it may offer additional courses by notifying the Commission on the annual ATS report form.

F.3 When as many as six of the courses offered in any ATS approved degree may be taken through distance education, this will be considered a comprehensive distance education program, and the institution must petition the Commission for preliminary approval, according to guidelines adopted by the Commission. The petition should provide a proposed time frame including the point at which the first students taking courses in the distance education program will have graduated.

F.4 When the first students have graduated, the school shall undertake a comprehensive evaluation review of the program and shall petition the Commission for ongoing approval of the program.
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4. The programs under development by seminaries across North America and which claim the label “distance education” are very different in kind from one another. All of the following models are being developed—there may be others—and all of them claim the title “distance education”: (1) programs made up primarily of electronically mediated correspondence courses; (2) programs made up of a set ratio of online courses and face-to-face courses; (3) programs made up of a collection of online courses, face-to-face courses and some hybrid courses; and (4) fully hybrid programs (according to the definitions discussed above). These programs are not just different from one another in terms of their delivery systems; they are fundamentally different pedagogically. The pedagogical issues required to produce a quality correspondence course are very different from those involved in producing a quality online or hybrid course. The former has a lot to do with the effective guidance of independent study, but there is little or no student-to-student contact in the teaching/learning process and no community of learning. Programs that incorporate a limited number of online or hybrid courses will necessitate a higher level of pedagogical intentionality around building and maintaining a learning community. The highest levels of pedagogical intentionality are probably necessary in those programs that attempt to redesign the entire program as a hybrid program.

5. Our purpose is not to advocate one model as the most appropriate for all of theological education. Each institution should be left to determine that question for itself. It does, however, seem important to distinguish between these models and to ask several important questions about them. First, should the same designation be used to describe them all? Should, for instance, a program that is fundamentally a collection of electronically mediated correspondence courses be able to claim the designation “distance education”? Second, should all of these models be held to the same standard? One might argue that the current system has things turned on its head. Because there is no clarity about whether electronically mediated correspondence courses constitute a fully valid approach to building a degree program, accreditation procedures spend a lot of energy working with those programs to develop ways to incorporate student-to-student interaction and the cultivation of a community of enquiry. Would we be better off to call them what they are (the equivalent of independent studies) and let seminaries continue to use them in the ways they have been but not call them a legitimate venue in which to deliver all or most of a distance education program? As it is now, ATS standards require the most of programs that employ models with the lowest level of pedagogical sophistication and require the least of those programs that have chosen models that demand the highest level of pedagogical
sophistication. Proof of this is seen in the fact that an ATS accredited seminary
could develop an entire program of hybrid courses, meeting face-to-face only
once or twice per course, and technically never be subject to any of the
standards or procedures of ATS for distance education. The reason is that
these kinds of courses are currently considered to be modified face-to-face
courses and not distance education courses.

6. Finally, it seems doubtful that very many of the programs under development
by seminaries are being constructed along the lines envisioned by the
procedures manual—as a collection of a certain number of face-to-face
courses and a certain number of online courses. Because of this, one wonders
how helpful the current standards can be for the accreditation work currently
being done. Indeed, one wonders if accreditations are not having to be
adjudicated on a case-by-case basis, because the written standards do not
provide enough guidance to adjudicate the issues actually being faced.

7. As negative as some of this might sound, it is very natural that ATS is where
it is right now on the issue of accrediting distance education programs. As
a community of educators, we are moving into areas that have not yet been
widely understood. And along with everyone else in higher education, we
are sorting out the issues as we go along. We have already passed the point
of no return, and many are convinced that the best is yet to come. Our own
conviction is that our move forward will be helped by clarifying our thinking
with regard to hybrid courses and hybrid programs.

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04 academic year, he conducted a study on the use of electronically mediated distance
education tools and techniques in theological education (with the aid of a grant from the
Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion), a study on
sociological models for understanding scribal practices in the biblical Dead Sea scrolls
(with the aid of an ATS Lilly Theological Scholars Grant), and participating with twenty-
ine other scholars from around the world in the John Templeton Oxford Seminars on
Science and Christianity in the summers of 2003–05.

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received a course load reduction from the university to investigate hybrid courses and to
reconstruct a traditional, face-to-face course on Pietism—his area of scholarly interest—
into a hybrid course. Brunner has been on sabbatical during the 2004–05 academic year.
Theological Education and Hybrid Models of Distance Learning

ENDNOTES


3. Ibid., 135.


5. Summaries of 125 of these studies are available at The International Distance Certification Center, “The ‘No Significant Difference Phenomenon’ Web Site,” http://www.nosignificantdifference.org/nosignificantdifference/.

6. Summaries of these can be found at The International Distance Certification Center, “The ‘Significant Difference Phenomenon’ Web Site,” http://www.nosignificantdifference.org/significantdifference/.


8. For the information and one-on-one time given me during a research visit on October 6–8, 2003, I (Dan Brunner) wish to express my thanks to Alan Aycock, Jay Caulfield, Carla Garnham, and Robert Kaleta, the staff of the Learning Technology Center at the University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee. The “Hybrid Course Website” of the Learning Technology Center, http://www.uwm.edu/Dept/LTC/hybrid/, is an excellent tool for understanding and developing hybrid courses. For a more in-depth presentation on the definition, strengths, and essentials of hybrid courses, see Dan Brunner, “Exploring ‘Hybrid’ and its Potential for Christian Higher Education” (currently under review).


15. Alan Aycock, Carla Garnham, and Robert Kaleta, "Lessons Learned from the Hybrid Course Project," under "Lesson #4" *Teaching with Technology Today* 8, no. 6 (March 20, 2002), http://www.uwsa.edu/ttt/articles/garnham2.htm.


17. For a study of the institutional dynamics and processes necessary to conduct successful technology strategic planning, see Steve Delamarter, "Strategic Planning for Technology Initiatives in Theological Education" *Teaching Theology and Religion* (forthcoming).


19. The Association of Theological Schools, "Procedures Related to Membership and Accreditation. V. Procedures for Approval of Programs Involving Multiple Locations (Extension Sites) and Distance Education," http://www.ats.edu/download/acc/proced.pdf.


21. Ibid., 87.


23. Some readers may believe they detect an illogic in our argument. Earlier we argued in favor of the "no significant difference" findings and now we are arguing that a valid degree program should not be comprised entirely of electronically mediated correspondence courses. In fact, we agree with the concerns that have always been associated with the correspondence course as an appropriate venue for an entire ATS degree program. We would argue that it is only with the rise of distance technologies and an understanding of the pedagogical issues necessary for their use that distance education has become capable of cultivating a community of learning with full student-to-student interaction.

(See response regarding Standard 10 on the following page.)