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TEACHING INTEGRATION OUTSIDE THE TRADITIONAL CLASSROOM

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Today's educational environment is being transformed by online technologies that open new venues for teaching and make education accessible far beyond the traditional classroom environment. How might these changes affect the ways we teach the integration of psychology and Christianity? Three faculty members dialogue about such integration opportunities, advantages, and potential disadvantages.

In a related article published in this special issue, McMinn, Moon, and McCormick (2009) offer ten strategies for how integration can be taught in a traditional classroom setting. They consider integration in four dimensions (Moon, 1997): practical integration, personal integration, classic integration, and contemporary integration. But to what extent can these same purposes be accomplished through emerging trends in graduate education, such as hybrid and on-line programs? And if so, how is it similar and different from integration training in the traditional classroom?

Two of us (McMinn, Moon) teach in traditional classroom environments—one a residential doctoral program in clinical psychology and the other a residential graduate program offering master's and doctoral degrees in counseling and related fields. Admittedly, McMinn and Moon are unsure how integration training might look in a non-residential program, and perhaps even a bit skeptical, but at the same time they want to remain open to considering new delivery options for post-secondary education. The other author (Dominguez) directs the Human Services Counseling (HSC) program at a university offering both on-campus and off-campus graduate

programs. Most HSC students participate in hybrid learning, meaning they complete a portion of their requirements in a modular campus residency and the remainder via distance learning over the Internet.

McMinn and Moon pose the questions in this article, drawing on teaching tasks and strategies developed in response to Moon's (1997) four directions for integration: practical, personal, classic, and contemporary. Practical integration involves identifying clinical applications related to integrative themes. Personal integration refers to the spiritual and character formation of the therapist. Classic integration requires us to look back and see the rich historical resources available in the history of Christian thought. Contemporary integration calls professionals to function within the ethical and scientific framework of today's mental health professions. McMinn et al. (2009) describe teaching strategies for each of these four approaches to integration. Among others, these teaching strategies include talking to the integrators (practical integration), practice of spiritual disciplines (personal integration), experiential exercises across traditions (classic integration), and collaboration with other professionals (contemporary integration). The first three of the four questions posed in this article roughly correspond with teaching strategies described by McMinn et al. (2009). The fourth question is not so much about teaching as about collaboration between students and faculty. Dominguez will respond to the questions posed by McMinn and Moon, reflecting on ways that integration training can and does occur in a hybrid learning context.

QUESTIONS AND RESPONSES

Question #1—Practical Integration (McMinn)

In the traditional classroom setting where I teach, students often ask questions about practical

integration, such as, “When should I pray with a client?” These are difficult questions, of course, and rather than providing a single answer, I try to expose students to a variety of different perspectives. This can be done by assigning readings by authors of diverse opinions and by inviting those authors to participate in a conference call with the class. Over the years I have found these classroom conversations with leading integrationists to be a compelling and fascinating experience for students. I find they often come to like and respect the author they are talking with, even if they disagree with his or her perspective. It is through such experiences that students begin to recognize that integration is a conversation more than a product, instilling in them a desire to dialog with other professionals throughout their careers. In sum, it challenges students to develop an identity as integrators themselves, moving them beyond the simple consumption of another person’s integration efforts.

I wonder if there are parallels in hybrid learning. As an educator in a distance learning program, how do you manage to get students out of the “consumer of ideas” mentality and encourage them to be active participants in the integrative process?

Response #1 (Dominguez)

Given the nature of much of today’s online learning, students must be active participants in order to remain in classes. Distance education programs have thankfully evolved beyond mere correspondence courses. Sophisticated course design fleshes out material, presenting concepts in a variety of formats, such as video or interactive learning units, to enhance reading assignments. In addition, students are required to engage meaningfully with the material, as assignment value is placed on such. Beyond a student gaining points for engaged ‘discussion’ online, they are encouraged to be active in similar ways to traditional students by having exposure to varied readings and speakers as well.

A similar approach to collaborative dialogue can be, and often is, used in the online classroom. Conference calls, with or without video, are used frequently with distance classes. Once the invited speaker is scheduled, an electronic class meeting is set. Students can log in from any location to participate, and these discussions can be archived for later review. In fact, we recently hosted a panel of three guest lecturers who shared a similar interest (that is, globalization) in a video conference for both the on-

campus and online students. Two of them lectured from locations outside the country, while one presented on site. Students from all over the globe were present. While this format permitted us to see one another, the online students turned their cameras off to enable viewing the lecturers on the single large screen (two video screens shared space when brought to our centralized location), and the distance participants could see all three speakers and the local attendees. The biggest challenge faced by the moderator of this event is managing the online students’ (typed) questions, along with the live students’ (spoken) questions, and responses from the three guest lecturers. This exemplifies the way online collaboration with professionals in the field can occur, similar to the conference call, but with video features.

Question #2—Personal Integration (Moon)

I confess that I am a traditionalist when it comes to educational programs. And as long as I am acknowledging shortcomings, I might as well admit that I come to technology reluctantly and usually a year or two after the latest innovation has become popular with the masses. With that said, I have no doubt that non-traditional delivery of educational programs is here to stay and will radically change the ways future students will have their neurochemistry rearranged. Seeing a football stadium named after the University of Phoenix was the tipping point for me.

While acknowledging some of the advantages of non-traditional delivery—convenience, flexibility, availability, suitability for certain learning styles and staying away from the gas pump—I still need some reassurance. For example, when it comes to facilitating spiritual formation and personal integration, we often enhance these efforts by suggesting that students meet with a spiritual director, participate in small group activities, and then enter into dialogue in class about their experiences in a classroom setting. So, I have a two-part question: First, how might you screen for potential spiritual directors for students when geography may make it impossible for you to meet in person? Second, what are some ways to adequately substitute for weekly personal encounters with other students in small groups and with the instructor for face-to-face classroom dialogue?

Response #2 (Dominguez)

There are, of course, disadvantages to distance education and you have identified one in your

question. It is more difficult to support students with local resources when the educator does not share the same local context. Helping students find a therapist or spiritual director requires collaboration with an appropriate professional association or colleague in the student's area who can make referrals.

But in other ways, online education is ideally suited for helping students develop individualized plans for various sorts of growth, including spiritual development. We hope to accomplish this in our classes through a palette of readings and activities, discussion forums, and reflective assignments. Readings provide the content from which to launch. Discussion forums are areas of web-based teaching platforms, accessed only by students enrolled in the course, wherein the instructor may place thoughtful questions after information and assignments for the week are completed. The purpose of the questions is to generate personally integrated responses and to encourage dialogue within the class. In one particular class, the discussion forums are separated into groups based on types of spiritual activities, with a main forum dedicated to the process of spiritual formation. Students are free to write in these forums as they wish, provided that certain requirements are met. These requirements include posting within established time frames, with minimum word count and references, and posting a minimum of three posts for the week, one original reply and two replies to classmates' posts. Instructors also actively engage in these evolving discussions with students. Although this is not the same as a formal spiritual direction relationship, this process is designed to promote spiritual formation among students. And it may accomplish the goal better than what could be done in a traditional classroom setting.

Regarding your second question, many of our classes incorporate scheduled synchronous group encounters, either in dyads, small group format, or for an entire class dialogue. These are used strategically due to the complexities of scheduling across varied time zones. They are, however, rich times of sharing and connection as classmates gain the opportunity to interact with one another in real time. Students routinely have access to one another's ideas through course discussion forums, but synchronous group encounters also allow them to make personal connections as they see the faces and hear the voices of their peers. In addition, during these times, they can even hold private conversations that

may enrich the dialogue. For example, instead of wondering how another peer may feel about a topic that feels too vulnerable to post, a student can message selected individuals and assess other's ideas on a topic, even before publicly presenting such to the class as a whole. An instructor can likewise do such, even encouraging a less active participant without singling out the student or disrupting the entire class.

Question #3—Classic Integration (Moon)

A key learning component of our course on spiritual classics of the Christian tradition is to provide a way to "experience" a variety of traditions. These "traditions" may be broken down by spiritual temperament categories—Ignatian (SJ), Franciscan (SP), Augustinian (NF) and Thomistic (NT)—or Christian tradition (contemplative, charismatic, holiness, evangelical, social justice, and Incarnational). These activities are typically presented in a retreat-like classroom setting where the instructor leads the group through a particular spiritual exercise. Often the experience is enhanced by the use of music and sometimes images from sacred art. This "experience" of a tradition culminates with dialogue about personal reaction and insight gained from the exercise. How might you replicate such an activity through an online or hybrid program when so much seems to depend on face-to-face encounters?

Response #3 (Dominguez)

It is surprising how much can be replicated or modified to meet a similar goal in a digital environment. The synchronous group encounters described earlier could work well for this sort of experiential group activity, with the art and music being transmitted electronically. Whether an individual, small group, or classroom activity, students could navigate through a web-based experience developed by the professor, complete with accompanying music and artistic images and the instructor could easily post a video to replicate what might be offered in a classroom. The video, music, and art could be integrated to guide students through the exercise. A post-experience discussion forum would be a natural follow up for this type of activity. By presenting open-ended, broad questions aimed at increasing self-awareness, students would then have the opportunity to process and reflect with one another. This type of engagement seems to increase depth of thought and connection with others in the class. While this

online experience would be different from traditional classroom exercises, in my estimation it could be an equally powerful avenue for an experiential activity.

*Question #4—Contemporary Integration
(McMinn)*

Throughout my career I have found collaborative research to be an ideal venue for mentoring students in regards to integration. Some of this mentoring factors into the individual meetings that pepper my schedule almost every day, but most of my research mentoring naturally occurs in the course of my group research team meetings. During these team meetings, students and I explore theoretical and theological issues pertaining to our collaborative research projects and their dissertations. We discuss appropriate measurement tools, participant selection, ethical issues, and timelines for completing various projects, as well as presentation and publication options. Students practice their research presentations during these group meetings, and welcome feedback from their peers. It seems they learn at least as much from one another as they do from me. At the same time, the research team begins to develop a social identity. We gather a couple of times each year to socialize and become acquainted with one another's families. These research teams have become a great source of joy and satisfaction for me as an educator; I think my students learn more about integration from our working side-by-side on integrative research projects than they do from various lectures in the classroom—however erudite I find my lectures may be!

I understand that online learning involves many one-on-one interactions with the professor through discussion forums and emails, and I appreciate the synchronous group encounters you describe in response to Questions #2 and #3, but what about group interactions with the goal of collaborating on a common project that engages students in the contemporary integration? Can you envision online or hybrid programs that would allow students to work with a group of peers and a faculty member on a collaborative research project pertaining to integration?

Response #4 (Dominguez)

Such collaboration does in fact occur, particularly in our online PhD program, which incorporates peer group supervision, various online research groups, and a student-led online chat room where ongoing research projects are discussed.

It is important to note that each online class has a group component inherent to it and students are required to actively engage with one another in discussion forum. This engagement is reported to be highly valuable to most students as they connect with one another on relevant classroom topics as applied to life contexts. They often become personally quite open during these dialogues and, more often than not, exceed word count requirements as well as minimum number of required postings each week due to interest level and a draw to connect with others. When collaborative project groups are assigned, the flexibility offered through an online program proves to be of great benefit as many traditional constraints are lifted. For the online students, scheduling is as simple as agreeing upon a time to meet (and then turning on the camera and plugging in the headset), regardless of physical location or costs of fossil fuels.

Although I miss face-to-face contact with my students when I teach online courses, something powerful happens among members of an online community that may be difficult to imagine by those who have taught only in traditional classroom settings. In many ways, your question about collaboration exposes the very heart of an online learning community, which is collaborative by nature, with both students and professors alike. Academic content is delivered to students, of course, but they must collaborate with one another and with the professor to demonstrate proficiency with the course content. Technology lowers interpersonal inhibitions enough to create a lively interaction from the first day of class, and the depth of connection and level of participation that ensues only sometimes occurs in a traditional classroom setting.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Online education, while developing at a quick pace, is still in its infancy in many ways. Though there are still a number of obstacles to overcome, online learning instruction certainly seems here to stay. One instructional designer recently predicted that 80 to 90 percent of post-secondary education will be online within the next decade (Maslennikova, 2008). Regardless of the actual rate of growth in the online education arena, teaching styles and methods will inevitably face a need to shift to accommodate demand for these programs. Those interested in teaching integration will need to consider ways to creatively maintain activities that promote depth of

processing, while at the same time remaining relevant to a new generation of learners. To whatever extent these changes in educational delivery systems can be informed by empirical research, it will be helpful to all involved.

As this article illustrates, much of what happens in a traditional classroom setting can be approximated or replicated in an online environment. The extent to which these possibilities are being realized is a matter for future research. Specifically, it would be helpful to know the differential processes and outcomes of online and traditional education from the perspectives of students, faculty, and other key stakeholders (e.g., licensing boards, clients, colleagues). Beyond just asking the global questions of which forms of education works best, it will also be important to ask which forms of education fit with particular students. For example, a student who is cautious and quiet in a traditional classroom might prosper in an online educational environment where it is impossible to remain quiet. Comparing and contrasting traditional and online education is a worthy endeavor for future research. We hope that this article will enhance dialog about online alternatives to integration training that, in turn, may lead to dissertations and other research projects. There is little doubt that online education is here to stay, so research seems to be a better response than opposition.

McMinn, Moon, and McCormick (2009) began their article on teaching integration by describing the conclusion of Bain's (2004) 15-year study: the best college teachers are those who bring lively engagement into the classroom allowing students to see themselves as part of a grand scholarly adventure. Interestingly, this is quite similar to the rhetoric of those promoting excellence in digital learning (Siegel, 2006)—teaching and learning should engage students in real-world problems. Thus, teaching integration is not simply a matter of outlining various models of how faith and science work together, but helping students identify the real-world challenges and hopes of being Christians in psychology. McMinn and Moon's questions in this article seem to pertain to this issue of engagement. Can the experiential group-based engagement that occurs inside and outside the traditional classroom be replicated in an online learning environment? McMinn and Moon have raised some doubt in their questions, and Dominguez has conveyed her confidence and optimism that lively engagement is being accomplished through online teaching.

Bain's (2004) notion of lively engagement is based on his research regarding what the best college teachers do. But what do the worst college teachers do when it comes to teaching integration? It seems unlikely that a funding agency will ever fund such a study or that a publisher will ever print such a book, so we are left to our speculations. The worst teachers probably mimic the voice of the teacher in the old Charlie Brown television specials—providing a relentless stream of words that might convey important content, if they could only find their way beyond the auditory canal into the cerebral cortex of the disengaged students sitting at their desks. Students get credit for showing up perhaps, and for answering essay questions about the integrative models of the 1970s and 80s, but the course credit is their primary reward for a forgettable classroom experience. This is not to say that lecturing is an ineffective style or that one should not teach the integration models of decades gone by; indeed, Bain (2004) found many lecturers among his best college teachers. Rather, the point is that whatever is taught and however it is taught, it needs to engage the student if it is to be effective.

Even the most vocal critics of online education would probably agree that the online teaching methods described in this article are vastly superior to what the worst college teachers do in traditional classroom settings. In online environments students must interact with ideas and peers in order to get credit, whereas some students never reach this level of engagement in traditional classrooms. But how does the best online teaching compare with the best teachers of integration in a traditional classroom setting? We do not know. Or, perhaps more accurately, we do not agree. But this reminds us of the grand scholarly adventure of research. Someday we probably will know the best environment for teaching integration, and it may be because someone's research team takes it on as a collaborative project. But the question remains—will the research team meet in the seminar room down the hall or via Skype?

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