

Staff Work

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Finding Christ Through Online Communication

Joe Bakker

Dordt University, joe.bakker@dordt.edu

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Finding Christ Through Online Communication

Abstract

"Online education is a relatively recent result of the rapid increase in the availability of communication and the way that we learn. It has been a powerful and challenging phenomenon."

Posting about the benefits and challenges of web-based instruction from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/finding-christ-through-online-communication/>

Keywords

Christian education, web-based instruction, learning, effective teaching

Disciplines

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Comments

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in things

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Joe Bakker

In 1898, on the campus of Princeton University, Abraham Kuyper said, “World-intercourse and communication are constantly becoming more rapid and widespread.”¹ In the context of his speech, he was referring to the impact of communication to shape the lives of both the individual and an entire continent. I wonder if he suspected just how much the expansion of communication would continue to change 100 years later and shape the world.

Communication is central to the way that we learn. Whether we are learning history from 100-year-old texts or learning how to bake successful French macarons from a YouTube video, we rely on communication from others to fill in what we have not experienced on our own.

Online education is a relatively recent result of the rapid increase in the availability of communication and the way that we learn. It has been a powerful and challenging phenomenon. It is powerful because it has opened windows of opportunity for groups that have previously found access to education difficult, such as working adults. Online education has also been challenging in that it has required educators to adapt their communication practices to be effective in a new learning environment.

Throughout my career, I have been asked countless times about the effectiveness of online education. Do students really learn online? How do you know that a student finishes a course with all of the required knowledge, skills, and abilities the course intended? Do online students grow academically, spiritually, emotionally, and socially? The answers to all of these questions hinge on effective communication.

Effective communication is the cornerstone of quality online education. It requires both the instructor and students to be deliberate, timely, and specific in their communication with each other. For example, to have confidence that students are learning, a professor needs to communicate to her students what they need to demonstrate to show her what they have learned. Similarly, a student must effectively communicate what he has learned to show the knowledge, skills, and abilities he has acquired.

But wait. We need to be careful. We cannot just turn online education into a checklist of tasks and deliverables. We have to ensure that deep, meaningful communication is occurring in challenging conversations through which students are able to stretch and grow. These conversations rely on engaging prompts from instructors as well as sincere responses from students.

At the time of writing this article, I am currently taking an online class where one of my classmates is pushing me to grow spiritually. It is a course where we regularly dive into the most challenging issues facing higher education today. As a long-time student at Christian institutions, I am very accustomed to evaluating an issue through the lens of my worldview and articulating my opinion in light of my doctrinal beliefs. However, my classmate constantly pulls me (and our other classmates) back to Christ. He has a thorough knowledge of the scriptures, which he regularly uses to identify biblical examples of Christ, demonstrating how we should respond to challenges as believers. His examples remind me that challenging issues are about people. Christ's perfect life is an exemplar for us to exercise Christian compassion and obedience.

My classmate has reminded me what Christian education is all about by directing me back to Christ as the focal point of our conversations. Dr. Richard Edlin described Christian education as helping the learner "learn about the world and examine their role in it with God, not man, as the focal point of their studies."² Edlin's definition provides a simple explanation of a quality Christian education: focus on God, focus on Christ. The method to accomplish that is through meaningful conversations in the classroom or online. By engaging with students in meaningful communication, online education has every opportunity to steer students back to Christ.

FOOTNOTES

1. Kuyper, A. (1931). *Lectures on Calvinism*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Printing Company. p. 172

2. Edlin, R. J. (1999). *The cause of Christian education* (3rd ed.). Colorado Springs, CO: Association of Christian Schools International. p. 35