Online Education at Faith-Based Institutions: What do Students Really Want?

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Brief bio: Dr. Maude Yacapsin has an extensive background in innovative technologies and online strategies for teaching future educators. Her experience includes over 17 years of teaching via distance education in addition to memberships in professional organizations for classroom technology such as ISTE and PAECT. She encourages her students to globally engage in opportunities that enhance lifelong learning across multiple contexts.

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**Abstract**

The purpose of this investigation was to gain a better understanding of what expectations students have regarding faith practices in online coursework.  Two groups of participants were surveyed and were enrolled at two different faith based institutions in Pennsylvania; one a Catholic University and one a Christian College.  Results of the survey and subsequent response analysis indicated that 82% of the students preferred that the instructor integrate more faith practices in online coursework through various instructional activities despite the students reporting having enrolled at the particular institution for its academic reputation.

**Introduction**

The research on effective online pedagogy suggests that in order for an online class to be engaging and a positive learning experience for students, it must contain the following essential elements: student autonomy, instructor presence, and interactivity (Pelz, 2004). Student autonomy is best described as students having the capability to collaborate with each another through discussions, about projects and regarding assignments. Although these activities are course-related and designed by the professor, the professor guides the students through them in order to facilitate cognition in a constructivist environment. To note, "a continuing trend in all levels of education is toward creating constructivist and student-centered learning environments" (Ravert & Evans, 2007, p. 321). Strong consideration needs to be given to online learning best practices research and to those strategies reported effective by teaching peers as well as by current and former students. For example,

> Due to the format of the online learning environments, developing reliable and valid student assessment techniques for online learning environments is crucial to measure student achievement and student engagement. Finally, instructors in online learning environments perform different learning activities than they do in traditional (face-to-face) learning environments. (Oncu & Cakir, 2011, p. 1106)

Employing the above mentioned essential elements leads to student-student and student-professor interactivity by careful attention to discussions and the scaffolded design of the assignments. Content is organized then disseminated, as the professor helps students develop prior knowledge and familiarize themselves with each new learning. The professor maintains a supportive presence throughout, by guiding discussions, commenting on assignments and offering valuable feedback to students on a regular basis (Schutt, Allen, & Laumakis, 2009).

The purpose of this paper is to review best practice research on effective online teaching and to meet the needs of those students who desire to practice faith while learning in an online environment-quite probably with persons of faiths other than their own.  In addition, factors other than faith practice preferences will be explored.  These include student rationale for enrolling in online coursework, student institutional choice, programming and coursework and current faith tradition integration activities in the online environment.

## Literature Review

When examining a students' rationale for selecting an online master's program, current literature suggests that a students' life responsibilities figure prominently (Allen & Seaman, 2009).  Among student reasons for enrolling in an online course or program, was that it was consistent with their current lifestyle and the "personal control it allowed them" (Clayton, Blumberg, & Auld, 2010, p. 361).  For students who undertake higher education, employment and family responsibilities, online learning affords a more flexible schedule (Picciano, 2002). And, distance education, with its flexible scheduling and broader accessibility, is desirable to 84% of students who must work full- or part-time while balancing personal obligations (USDOE, 2007).

Poock and Love (2007) report that the decision-making process for enrolling in a graduate institution can provide students with an opportunity to evaluate possible school choices in order to find a best-fit for their strengths and talents.  This enables them to locate and pursue a preferred and specific field of study and determine what their educational needs will be. Graduate students find that they must also meet the college entrance requirements of the program to which they are seeking enrollment and may decide on a program or institution which has rigorous standards.  Other factors that influenced choice were favorable living/travel expenses,

opportunities for peer interactions, and job opportunities after graduation (Lei & Ning-Kuang, 2010).  Little research exists on students choosing an online program because of the institutions' commitment to a faith tradition.

Historically, education has been rooted in faith, especially postsecondary higher education.  Harvard University, for example, was founded after John Harvard willed his entire library and a sum of money equal to half of his estate to help educate ministers (Wechsler, Goodchild & Eisenmann, 2008). Faith was the driving force for establishing the institution in the 1600's even though there was not a physical site for a campus, any professors, or at that time, one student enrolled.

Faith-based education operates on the premise that faith is solidified when the person gains more knowledge and wisdom (Crawford & Rossiter, 1992). Thus, faith based institutions count on the multiple content areas or fields of study to help students understand complexities of knowledge as each works together. Regardless of the field of study, deepened knowledge points to embracing diversity within a faith community and hence the ability of students to generalize and demonstrate this premise to a global society.

It is apparent that faith based institutions hold these premises in high regard.  Their programming addresses the spiritual nature and importance of increased knowledge and its positive relationship to faith practices as evident in institutional goals, mission statements and branding.

Spiritual formation is one of the recognized benchmarks of higher education

that is Christian. A communal commitment to spiritual formation is

indeed part of the Christian higher education community's DNA, and is in

fact reflected in the criteria for accreditation in both the Association of Biblical

Higher Education (ABHE) and the Association of Theological Schools

(ATS). (Maddix & Estep, 2010, p. 423)

The majority of the literature however, focuses on undergraduate programming. As more and more faith based institutions begin to develop and refine online graduate programs, leadership at these institutions needs to engage in continuing, evaluative discussions regarding methodologies by which these same premises can be effectively translated to the online environment. Online education offers ways to improve teaching and learning which traditional education delivery cannot match, such as improving student access and facilitating richer student discussions (Kassop, 2003). However, when asked about faith practices integration in online coursework, what do students really want?

Recent research supports that faith formation does take place in online courses (Palloff & Pratt, 2007). A study originating at the Erskine Theological Seminary evaluating spiritual formation in distant education programs demonstrated that distant education programs can provide spiritual formation through the development of social networks or online learning communities (Lowe & Lowe, 2007). The learning communities facilitated spiritual growth by building on student and faculty discussion and interaction. With the professors' guidance and expertise in crafting activities and discussions that promoted faith practice, the communities utilized in these courses helped students develop significant relationships with peers and with God. They became authentic experiences that nurtured and formed faith. Gresham's (2006) research supports these in stating that divine pedagogy "includes a communal dimension similar to the church, provides active participation of the students in the learning process, and is relevant to online education because it is rich in symbols and signs that communicate meaning" (p. 27).

To address communal dimension, the activities used were group lead prayer, journal responses focusing on a devotion or faith tradition or on a reading from a sacred text (Lowe & Lowe, 2007).  The manner by which the activities were designed was consistent with the essential elements for a successful online experience mentioned earlier in this report.  The students reported that the learning community was one of the strongest aspects of the program (Kassop, 2003; Lowe & Lowe, 2007; Allen & Seaman, 2009). Students viewed it as a real community where they were able to share ideas without constraint.

## Methodology

For this report, a 10-question survey (see Appendix A) was distributed electronically to 60 possible participants via Qualtrics survey software.  Questions included in the survey ascertained what the students expected from online coursework at their respective faith based institution.  Thirty were distributed to graduate students at a Catholic institution in Southeastern, PA and the remaining to graduate students at a Christian college in Southcentral, PA.  The students were enrolled in various, online graduate programs at their respective institutions.  The students volunteered to complete the survey and a total of 37 ($N = 37$) surveys were submitted. This equated to approximately a 61% rate of return.  In terms of demographics, one question was used to determine student gender.  Thirty-four participants reported that they were female three participants reported that they were male. Twenty-seven students identified themselves as being Christian (no specific denomination), three identified themselves as being Catholic.  Six students reported "other' when asked how they would describe themselves by way of the faith they practiced.  When asked if they were enrolled in an online program of study at the master's degree level, 31 students reposted "yes" and six reported "no." A response of "no" may indicate that they perhaps are taking a class, but have neither yet enrolled nor been accepted into a program.

A survey question was included to ascertain what classification of institution the student attended as an undergraduate.  For this question, 33 of 37 participants replied.  Fourteen of the students attended a public, higher education institution, 13 attended a faith based higher education institution and the remaining students reported that they attended a private, but non-faith based institution as an undergraduate student.  When asked why they chose to enroll in online, master's level coursework or an online master's level program at their current institution, 33% of the students reported that their reason was due to the academic reputation of the institution.  Fifteen percent of the students reported that their sole reasoning for choosing the institution was its commitment to faith based activities.

A majority (55%) of the students identified themselves as being enrolled in a Social Sciences program at their current institution.  An additional 12% indicated that they were enrolled in a Master of Education program.  Program selections also included Business, Arts, Religion, Medical or Technology to which no (n = 0) students responded.  Thirty-three percent of the students selected "other" as their course of study.

## Discussion

At faith based institutions, the moral, ethical, spiritual and academic development of students is a fundamental goal.   In areas such as character enrichment and human intellect, spiritual formation is subject for advanced study and exploration.   However, spiritual formation is not and should not be confined to one area of study.   Using the phrase "cross-curricular" would be an appropriate way to describe curricular efforts at spiritual formation at most faith based institutions; meaning all faculty, across all areas of study assume a responsibility in educating students in relation to the "greater meaning and wise integration of all of their learnings within the larger context of their lives" (Crawford & Rossiter, 1992, p. 61).  As

graduate enrollments continue to rise at these previously undergraduate-exclusive, four-year

institutions, might stakeholders safely now assume that this premise will hold true for masters

level students?  It has been established, adequately, through research, that online coursework

fosters spiritual formation via learning communities (Lowe & Lowe, 2007; Palloff & Pratt, 2007)

But to what degree do master's level students want to engage in faith practices in the online

environment?

In reference to affirming whether course professors integrate faith practices in their

online courses, 74% of the students responding to the Faith Practices Survey used in the study

indicated that their instructor integrates faith related activities in her/his online coursework.  This

percentage is high, however, it is not all that surprising considering the coursework is offered at

faith based colleges.  Of this 74%, students report that their instructor utilizes the following

activities to integrate faith and learning:  readings, discussions, live video/audio sessions,

projects/assignments and assessments.  The specific percentage – activity breakdown appears

below.

*Table 1.*  Percentage of varying faith integration activities utilized in online coursework.

| Faith Integration Activity | Students Reporting Faculty Use |
| --- | --- |
| Readings | 74% |
| Discussions | 83% |
| Live video/audio sessions | 30% |
| Projects/Assignments | 65% |
| Assessments | 13% |
| Other | 9% |

The data presented above can be interpreted to mean that the instructors are utilizing a variety of

community building techniques in their online coursework.  Furthermore, the students indicated

that the purpose of these activities was to integrate faith practices in to the coursework.  Of the

26% of the students reporting that their instructor did not integrate faith practices in their

coursework, 22% of them would have preferred that their instructor do so via discussion forums or projects.  Over 56% reported "by other means," but no specific instructional activities were suggested.

Although students reported that they made a conscious choice when deciding to enroll in their current, faith-based institution, Catholic or Christian, a considerable percentage (23%) of students also reported that they "were not comfortable participating in faith based practices in online coursework."  Yet others reported that they would favor more faith related activities in online coursework (62%), and some indicated that they prefer less faith related activities in their coursework (15%).

In concord with current literature and according to the research and data presented throughout the course of this study, one can interpret that a majority of students who chose an online master's education at a faith based institution readily expect that faith integration will occur in their coursework.  For example, in research studies done in online education realms, Schutt et al. reports "the findings suggest that social presence impacts learning, interaction, interpersonal relationships, and user satisfaction" (Schutt et al., 2009, p. 137).  Remembering that one of the primary goals of online course development is the creation of a community of learners where the learners find opportunities to be leaders and teachers (Palloff & Pratt, 1999, 2007), the results of this study suggest that a religious or spiritual ethos can manifest itself among students as a result.  Online courses that include online chapel services, prayer rooms, faculty forums, audio and video, and discussion boards provide a place for social presence to take place in online courses (Maddix & Estep, 2010). These mediums can provide the social presence of students and faculty who are learning in a spiritually-forcused, online community (Maddix & Estep, 2010).

Even when activities appear abundant, of best practice and varied, most students prefer that even more be integrated.  Further investigation is suggested to delineate reasons for or provide stronger evidence of why students choosing a faith based institution might not be comfortable practicing their faith in an online environment.  Assumptions may include that their faith practice is of a more introspective nature than most, or that the online environment, for them, is a place viewed not sacred enough to engage in spiritual formation.  Again, these assumptions are just that, assumptions, and cannot be validated unless further study is initiated.

This study was conducted in Pennsylvania using student participants from two, smaller, liberal arts, faith based institutions.  The results should not be generalized to all faith based institutions outside of these.  The Faith Practices Survey used for this study was created by the researcher and was exclusive to this study.  Using this survey as a reliable and valid measure of student preferences would be counterproductive however, using it to gauge initial thoughts about faith integration in online coursework may prove beneficial to the institution.  It would be prudent to conduct further research on student rationale for the decisions they make and the preferences they report regarding choice of program, choice of institution, additional or specific types of faith integration activities they prefer in online coursework and comfort level when asked to participate in faith related activities in online coursework.  By doing so, faculty can create an enhanced sense of community by respecting the traditions of other faiths and faith-diverse online environments.

## Conclusion

*Koinonia* or fellowship is a hallmark of the Christian experience and the cornerstone of Christian educational philosophy (Pazmino, 1997).  Although research exists to substantiate claims of community in online courses, there remains still, a concern among some faculty that

the quality of teaching and learning in online courses is amiss.  It is important to address the concerns of the professoriate by acknowledging such beliefs then providing evidence to support online learning and its consistency with the college's mission, its well-established instructional goals, its high standards for maintaining integrity and its commitment to the sense of community for both residential and students who study from a distance.

Maslow spoke to the sense of belonging as a basic human need (1962).  The efforts to build an online community at the both campuses in this study are evident through the degree and variation of community building activities within the courses taught.  This is not a suggestion that the campuses here "rest on their laurels," but rather that they continue to engage in active measures advocating for community building among the online population and nurturing those already in existence at the residential level.  This researcher believes that two distinct learning communities can exist at one institution and benefit from one, defined *sense* of community.  By presenting faculty with the tools (i.e., professional development, training, input and feedback) to maintain a strong commitment that affords students quality exchanges and experiences online, college campuses have the premiere opportunity to provide their learning community with advancements in spiritual formation that crosses generations, cultures and attitudes.

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**Appendix A**

**Faith-based Practices in Your Online Coursework**

Q1

☐

Gender:

- ○ Female
- ○ Male

Q2

☐

I enrolled in a higher education institution that is described as having a rich foundation in, and commitment to, promoting faith through faith-based practices.  I would describe myself as:

- ○ Christian
- ○ Catholic
- ○ Jewish
- ○ Other

  [                    ]

Q3

☐

I am enrolled in Masters degree/ post baccalaureate coursework at this time.

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

Q4

☐

As an undergraduate, I attended a _____.

- ☐ Public higher education institution
- ☐ Faith-based institution
- ☐ Private institution, not faith-based institution

Q5

☐

I enrolled in a faith based institution at the post baccalaureate level because of _____.

- ○  The institution's academic reputation
- ○  The institution's commitment to faith based activities
- ○  I am/was an Alumni
- ○  All of above
- ○  Other

  [                    ]

Q6

☐

I am enrolled in a program for students interested in pursuing a masters degree in:

- ○  Business
- ○  Education
- ○  Social Sciences
- ○  Arts
- ○  Religion
- ○  Medical
- ○  Technology
- ○  Other

  [                    ]

Q7

☐

My instructor integrates or has integrated faith practices (i.e., prayer, devotion, readings) in online coursework.

- ○  Yes
- ○  No

Q8

☐

If the answer to question number 7 is "yes", my instructor integrates faith-based practices through online course _____.

- ☐ Readings
- ☐ Discussion forums
- ☐ Live sessions (i.e, via webinar)
- ☐ Projects/assignments
- ☐ Assessments
- ☐ Other

[          ]

Q9

☐

If the answer to question number 7 is "no", I would prefer that my instructor integrate faith-based practices through course _____.

- ☐ Readings
- ☐ Discussion forums
- ☐ Live sessions (i.e., via webinar)
- ☐ Projects/assignments
- ☐ Assessments
- ☐ Other

[          ]

Q10

☐

I would prefer that the instructor integrate _____ faith-based practices in the course.

- ○ More
- ○ Less
- ○ I am not comfortable participating in faith-based practices in coursework