Reflections on Teaching Pastoral Care Online

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I have been teaching Pastoral Care courses online for the past decade for four different seminaries (Andover Newton Theological School in Massachusetts, Church Divinity School of the Pacific in California, Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia, and Wartburg Seminary in Iowa). What follows are my reflections on the drawbacks and advantages of teaching Pastoral Care online.

There are many different modalities possible for teaching over the Internet and there will doubtless be many more in the near future. My teaching has been almost completely text-based, with no videotaped lectures, no conversations taking place in "real-time" with people online at the same time, and certainly no virtual classroom. The students read the assigned readings, often including a written lecture by me; they post their initial responses to discussion questions ("forums") about those readings; then they and I carry on a conversation by posting responses to each other's comments. There have been occasional phone conversations, when I have thought that a student needed to talk her way to a more do-able or enjoyable paper topic, or when someone needed assistance in writing a reflection paper. These conversations have been rare—most courses have gone by without my ever speaking with a student. Occasionally students have talked to each other over the phone, usually when they have been working on overlapping top-

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ics for their project, or when one wants to share a personal experience that is relevant to the other's paper topic. I have used three different instructional software systems: Blackboard, Moodle, and Andover Newton's own online system. Of those three, I have been happiest with Moodle—but all three have worked adequately.

As online instruction progresses, it is likely that purely text-based teaching will become less common. Because the digital world is changing so rapidly, these reflections might be too out-of-date to be useful within a few years. My hope, however, is that much of what I say will apply in varying degrees to other styles of online teaching. The addition of videotaped lectures, for instance, probably wouldn't make that much difference to the overall experience. Even if forms of virtual assembly become more affordable and accessible, there will be still be a need for courses that do not require students to be online at any specified time, since online flexibility remains valuable for so many.

Drawbacks of Teaching Pastoral Care Online

Obviously, the main thing that is lost in online teaching is face-to-face interaction in shared, mutual, physical presence. As Lorrie Moore has one of her narrators say of talking on the phone: "People talking were meant to look at a face, the disastrous cupcake of it, the hide-and-seek of the heart dashing across. With a phone, you said words, but you never watched them go in. You saw them off at the airport but never knew whether there was anyone there to greet them when they got off the plane."[1] In online written conversation, similarly, you cannot read the other person's reaction to your words on their face. You also do not hear the other's tone of voice, breath pattern, perceive their body language, or subliminally get messages from how they smell. When people are together in a physical space, they interact on all these physical levels simultaneously with the verbal communication. They also create a sort of group-feel as an interacting system on all these levels, as people unconsciously and consciously react to each other's verbal and bodily messages. When people are not physically together, some dimensions of communication are necessarily lost.

Teaching About Presence without Actual Presence
It may seem that Pastoral Care, of all subjects, most demands in-the-body interpersonal communication. Aren't we all about teaching the importance of the ministry of presence? Indeed, there are aspects of the teaching of Pas-

toral Care that are not easily possible online. You cannot, for instance, have students role-play a face-to-face conversation, where all the levels of communication can be observed by the participating students and by the rest of the class. For this reason, I have not tried to teach a basic, full-semester seminary Introduction to Pastoral Care course online.

I have been told that research has shown that the best subjects for online courses are those where the students have relevant personal experience about which they have strong feelings. It is my belief that this is true because the students' experience and feelings help contribute human interest to make up for the lacking human interest that comes with shared personal presence. The human interest of hearing, seeing, and smelling other people's body language, facial expressions, and tone of voice is replaced by the human interest of my own emotionally-charged memories and others' deeply-felt stories. Pastoral Care topics may be some of the best subjects for online teaching for this reason. The subject I have most often taught online (in a number of variations) is "ritual care for people in transition and crisis," where we examine pastoral care and transitional rituals for people who are getting married, getting divorced, are ill, dying, bereaved, losing a job, moving, adopting, or entering a long-term care facility, etc. Students bring their own relevant, feeling-imbued experience to the online learning experience. When I have taught a mini-introductory course (about half a semester) for all-online certification programs for lay ministers, I have used the topic of sickness as a focus; which is a good topic in the sense that almost everyone has had significant, relevant, personal, feeling-laden experiences. When I taught a course on off-the-cuff praying in pastoral visitation, I listed as a prerequisite that the student have some experience as a visitor who prays with people.

Recognizing Uniqueness without Physical Cues

It takes longer to get a sense of each person as an individual in online interaction because one can't link their words with all the sensory impressions of their physical self. It takes a while before I have a sense of a particular person linked to each message I read. It helps if their postings make frequent reference to easily recognizable aspects of their life: a specific ministry site, an unusual family constellation, a unique-in-the-class personal experience, or physical condition. Also, it helps if people have a distinctive writing style. Sometimes I have had to call up *all* of a particular student's postings to make sure I have not confused two students in my mind. (This can, of course,

happen in the classroom, but it is a more common problem online.) Whatever the mode of teaching pastoral care, it is important to be attentive to the particularity of each person, since we are talking about inherently personal matters.

The Absence of the Group Creative Process

Group spontaneity that results from brainstorming on a particular case does not translate well to online classes where there are no real-time meetings. Individual responses to a case study may be more thoughtful and varied than they would be in the classroom, but the group spontaneity of bouncing ideas off of one another doesn't work quite as well. I miss this as a mode of teaching about ritual. The group creative process is useful especially for discussions of how to improvise ritual for particular situations.

Managing Misunderstandings Online

One problem associated with online communication that has been much discussed is "flaming," i.e., hostile or insulting interaction. This is more of a problem on anonymous forums than in classes where people's posts are attached to their personal identity (and indeed, to their academic record). Nonetheless, the phenomenon of making hurtful remarks or failing to quickly realize that a remark did hurt someone's feelings occurs in part because of the lack of social cues that would come through in face-to-face interactions, by reading each other's facial expression and body language. In general, I have rarely had this problem in teaching Pastoral Care online. It may be that people who choose to take Pastoral Care electives are just nicer than average! When misunderstandings and possible hurt feelings have occurred, I have emailed the offending student privately to alert her to how her words might have come across. I have also found that it is more likely online than it is in the classroom that one of the more mature students will step in and help to heal such breaches in communication. Perhaps this is more likely online because the professor has less overall control of the conversational process.

There are drawbacks to teaching online that affect the professor, in particular, and are related to the difficulties of adjunct teaching, in general. For one, the pay is pitiful, often even less than an on-campus adjunct instructor receives. In addition, the instructor does not have a sense of community with other instructors, cannot so easily get a sense of what the students are experiencing and learning in their other classes, and has little awareness of

significant issues in the corporate life of the seminary as a system affecting the students and their learning environment.

<center>ADVANTAGES OF TEACHING PASTORAL CARE ONLINE</center>

In spite of all of the challenges in teaching about the importance of full human presence when you're not fully humanly present, there are yet many advantages to online instruction/learning. Some of the gains I will list apply to online teaching in any field, while others are particularly advantageous in the teaching of Pastoral Care.

Equalized Participation

One of the major gains from teaching online is that group conversational participation among the students may be equalized. When people are in a room together, some persons are more likely to speak than others, and some persons (an overlapping, but not identical, subgroup) are more likely than others to be listened to and referenced in later conversation. People with a more assertive personality or more social privilege may be more likely to speak; people with a more attractive personality or appearance, more social privilege (including being male), or more facility at "working the crowd" are more likely to be heard and referenced. In online classes, many of these differential factors are neutralized in a couple of ways. First, the fact that people aren't seeing and hearing each other means that they are less affected by the social cues attached to gender, class, appearance, and personality type. This is the good side of the lack of many-leveled communication! It does help level the playing field for women, shy people, people with heavily accented English, or those with physical disabilities.

Another equalizing factor in a class that does not meet in "real-time" is that the instructor can require every student to respond to a question in the initial response period, and expect that each student will read every other student's initial posting (this can be monitored to some degree by the software). In subsequent online conversation, some of the differential factors of gender, personality, and skill at communication may continue to make some students more voluble and/or more attended to than others, but there is a good chance that everyone has been heard by everyone else at least once in each forum's discussion. In addition, although the conversational phenomenon of an idea's being credited by the group, not to its originator, but to a higher-status participant who repeated it (e.g., a man repeats something a woman suggested and in later conversation the group credits the man with

the idea) may occur in online conversation, the instructor (or another participant) can go back over the conversation and explicitly credit the idea's originator. Also, the instructor can monitor her participation in class discussion more exactly than in real-world conversation and try to identify, and diminish, her own unconscious favoritism based on factors other than the content of the person's postings.

More Time to Listen and Reflect

A second major advantage of online instruction, especially classes that do not meet in "real-time," is that there is more time to think and to listen in the course of conversation. In a seminary pamphlet, one online student put it this way: "Online, I was given a chance to absorb what my classmates said, then let it ferment before I responded, enhancing our level of conversation."[2] Communication specialists have helped us recognize that one of the major impediments to good communication in spoken conversation is that we are too busy preparing our own speech (continuing our own line of thinking or our own argument, defending against a perceived attack, or fending off competing points-of-view) to be able to hear and understand what the other person is saying. The process of non-real-time discussion online is such that you have time to read (and re-read) a message and to let it sink in before you respond. Knee-jerk reactions or dismissive responses are very rare in my experience. Listening gets the edge over promoting one's own conversational agenda. I believe that students in non-real-time online classes are more likely to be deeply affected by the ideas their classmates or I bring up in discussion, including ideas which are quite new to them. It is my observation that students in my online classes are more likely to incorporate and refer back to their classmates' insights as the class proceeds than were students in my on-campus classes.

Another way in which the time to think during non-real-time online conversation can lead to stronger discussion is that each student has time to think up a response to a common question on their own, without being influenced by other responses. This is particularly true in the initial sequence of responses to a discussion forum. In the classroom, because it is harder to get every person responding to a question after having time to think about it, the responses will not be as wide or varied. As the online conversation develops on a topic, students are reminded of parts of their experience they might not have considered otherwise. For instance, in response to a question about the ways in which we do our grief work later on in bereavement—the

formal and informal rituals of remembering the deceased that occur long after the death—one student might mention symbolic and ritual acts (displaying a photograph or quilt, retelling a favorite story, or making a recipe associated with the deceased) done at a family reunion. This may lead other students, who never would have thought of those behaviors under the category of "grief work," to share their own stories of informal memorializing at family gatherings. Alternatively, if one student describes something from his experience that the others do not share, such as a cultural tradition like the Days of the Dead, it can lead people to realize how poor our own culture is in opportunities for symbolic grieving later on in bereavement. Any of these things can happen in classroom discussion, but the pool of initial responses to draw from won't be as broad as it is online, making this sort of thing is less likely to occur.

Online Advantages for the Teacher

This gift of time during the conversation affects my instruction positively. In the classroom, I am likely to pass over a comment that I do not understand or cannot immediately see as advancing the discussion. Online, while I still pay more attention and respond more thoroughly to postings I find more insightful, I do have the time to read each statement and see whether I can find something from it to pick up and carry into the discussion. At least in the initial go-round, where every student responds to the discussion question, I respond to each post. (As the conversation on a topic develops, it would actually inhibit class discussion if I responded to every post.) In the classroom, while I know I should respond positively whenever possible to some aspect of a student's contribution, I often neglect to do that under the pressure of time. In online discussion, almost every comment I post begins with a "Yes, you make a good point about X." I may then go on to suggest alternative approaches, make a *caveat*, or challenge a student's assumption, but I nearly always manage to start by affirming something the student has said.

There are other major and minor advantages to online teaching from the instructor's point of view. The fact that all communication (except possible phone calls) is recorded and preserved can be helpful on various fronts. I can show that I did indeed tell the class X, Y, or Z as of a certain date. Years ago, a dean advised me to create a paper trail in the case of a particular student's problematic behavior; online, there is no need to create a separate paper trail because all interaction is automatically documented. The complete record of class discussion also makes it possible to be more objective in

grading class participation. It is easy to see the number of postings any one student has made and even possible to pull them all up and skim through them again. Though there is always some subjectivity in judging the quality of a student's postings, this access to the complete record is a helpful corrective to faulty memory. I have generally been essentially correct about my sense of how much each student has participated, but at least once I found I had way underestimated a particular student's level of participation when I looked at the number of responses and skimmed over her comments.

Also, it may be a helpful preventative measure that there is no unmonitored group-talk—though, of course, students can email each other individually and, in theory, even set up an independent group discussion elsewhere online. Once in my sixteen years of full-time on-campus seminary teaching, I had a class in which a significant subset of the students used the class break as a gripe session to reinforce each other's dissatisfaction with the course (perhaps not surprisingly, it was a course on the volatile subject of sexuality). Online disgruntled students do not have the same sort of opportunity for a group undermining of the classroom process (or, alternatively seen, to do necessary revolutionary work!). Another helpful aspect of online teaching in dealing with dissatisfied students is that the student does not have to come to the professor's office or catch him after class to raise a concern; she can post a question on the "office hours" forum or email the professor directly any time.

One minor advantage to teaching online these days is that you don't have to fight with the distractedness of students in the classroom who are surfing the web during class! This is more and more of an irritant in classroom teaching, as students pursue unrelated tasks on the web on their laptops or phones. Students in online classes might, of course, surf the web while doing their class work, but it doesn't disrupt their class participation in the same way.

The Settings for Learning Online

A final set of advantages to online teaching has to do with where the students are as they take the class. They are at home in their familiar context, they are often actually working as lay or ordained ministers while they participate in the class, and they are often in varied and far-flung settings. All three of these factors can enrich discussion and can be of particular help to the teaching of Pastoral Care.

The fact that the students are usually in their own home-base means that it is easier to integrate the observation of normal life into the thought processes of class discussion. Students experience and observe various sorts of crises, losses, and celebrations and can share their observations with the class. They can interview their mother or grandmother about her experience of pregnancy-loss during the week that we talk about miscarriage and stillbirth. They go to funerals with newly informed eyes. Their county has disastrous flooding during the semester and they share what they see to be communal and individual pastoral needs—leading to the writing of a final paper about disaster care.

Embedded Learning

Many seminaries that have expanded contextual education have found that students' concurrent involvement in ministry settings can enrich their educational experience in their other classes. While on-campus seminary students may be doing ministry in local parishes while they are taking other courses, it is more likely that an online student will be doing full-time ministry, possibly in a place he has served for a long time, or she may be doing volunteer or part-time ministry in a place she's known well over many years. The fact that many of the students are concurrently doing what one might call "embedded" parish work, and that some of them are the pastoral leaders of their congregations, can be a plus for teaching in any of the practical fields. These students have deeper observations of parish life to share than a seminary intern does who spends ten hours a week at a congregation previously unknown to him. Also, they have the opportunity to try things out *in vivo*. They can start praying for those who mourn in their congregation, not only the week after the death, but for several more weeks, and again at the one-year anniversary. They can devise a Mother's Day evening ritual for those who have experienced miscarriage, abortion, or stillbirth. They can take a sock-puppet along for the first time when they visit a sick child. Then they can share with the class how it went! More formally, they can do a final project/paper for the class, which includes something tried in their own setting: the beginning of a healing ritual process for a congregation emerging from bitter conflict, a civic ritual for recovering flood victims, the development of a congregational policy regarding weddings or funerals, a goodbye-to-the-house ritual for people who are moving, or the blessing/cleansing of a room damaged by a gang shooting from outside. These examples are all drawn from my courses on ritual care in transition and crisis,

but the parish-based final project would be possible in many Pastoral Care or other practical area courses.

Often students in an online class live in very different settings and at very great distances from each other—settings varied in regional and ethnic cultural assumptions and practices. One can get a lot of variation in contextual education settings within a seminary's urban area, but the diversity of an online class's range of current settings is often much broader and the students' rootedness in, and understanding of, their local community's culture is often deeper. This adds great richness to class discussion. Again, it helps that you can require every student to say *something* in response to a common question. A startlingly wide-range of responses is likely to surface to begin the discussion.

The Benefits of Embedded Diversity

Whether because of this diversity, or because I as the instructor have less tight control of the conversational process, I have found that in online classes more serendipitous connections happen as the students share their experiences. For instance, more than once, someone has remarked during a discussion of the importance of relinquishing one's own agendas in most pastoral conversations: "Hey, that sounds like what I've learned about the practice of contemplative prayer—you have to be able to let go of your own agenda, no matter how holy it is." That sort of slightly off-topic, but greatly enriching and enlightening, association is less likely to be voiced in classroom discussion. Another example of serendipitous connection has occurred in the discussion of the question about what your family/community does later on in bereavement. It often happens that some students' communities, such as African-American or Latino churches, do significantly more communal grieving in the months after a death than does the average mostly-white Protestant church, which does little in the way of ritual remembering after the first week. Sometimes, though, there will be students from small, largely white, rural communities that have significant (formal and informal) ritual later on in bereavement. This can help the class realize that the determining factor is not a specific ethnic cultural tradition, but rather the existence of what the sociologists would call "organic community." This realization leads to a more informed discussion of the issues for bereavement in a postmodern context. How do we provide support for the ongoing bereavement journey in the absence of organic community—when they may not, for in-

stance, in their daily life see anyone else who knew the deceased loved one or be in any place evoking memories of her?

The fact that an online class can gather people who are spread over great distances is a gift, especially for students who are ministering in isolated rural areas. It makes continuing education or the pursuance of a degree or certification possible for someone who cannot commute to a nearby seminary. The online class can also provide a form of community, peer support, and peer consultation for people serving churches in far-flung rural settings. Such students' appreciation of the class as peer-support contributes to their dedication to the classwork and to the quality of their interaction with each other. Pastoral Care professors should welcome this, not only because it enhances the level of class discussion, but also because one of the goals we have in teaching is to model and encourage students to develop practices of mutual support.

I trust it is now evident why I do not consider online Pastoral Care instruction to be a 'poor relation' of on-campus instruction. I believe that each format has its strengths and weaknesses. In an ideal world, even seminarians who are able to take all their required courses on campus might be encouraged to take some classes online, preferably classes where the majority of the students do not live nearby. I hope the availability of online classes will increase the likelihood that ministers with seminary degrees will pursue continuing education, particularly in the field of Pastoral Care, where the experiential nature of the subject matter lends itself to vibrant online discussion, and where the students' deep knowledge of their varied ministry settings leads to a better group understanding of the cultural intricacies of care.

NOTES

1. Lorrie Moore, *Like Life* (New York: Vintage Books, 2002), 142.

2. Bob Lane, student at Starr King School for Ministry, Berkeley, CA, quoted in publicity material for the school.