

Online learning at ATS schools: Part 2—Looking around at our present

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NOTE: This two-part article focuses on the past ([Part 1](#)) and present (Part 2) of a pedagogy that often invites controversy among ATS schools. Some view online learning as the next big thing (actually the now big thing), while others see it pretty much as the next/now bad thing. What does our brief history with this educational model have to tell us? And what does the present state of online learning among our schools have to teach us? These are the questions we will try to address in this two-part series.

In Part 1, we looked back briefly at the relatively short history of online learning among ATS schools. In Part 2, we look around at our present experiences to see what ATS members are learning about the effectiveness of online education in a theological setting. Perhaps the most we can say is that we are still learning—because this pedagogy is still rather new to ATS. For example, we are just now seeing the first groups of graduates of completely online MDiv degrees finish their degrees. That said, we clearly know much more now about the effectiveness of this approach among theological schools than we did even a few years ago. And the results are reassuring for ATS online education.

One recent source of information comes from the two ATS peer groups studying the educational effectiveness of online learning and the role of spiritual formation in online contexts. Both of those groups are part of the larger Lilly-funded [Educational Models and Practices Project](#). Some initial, and very encouraging, results from the online formation group were shared in a recent ATS [Colloquy Online article](#) on how online theological



education is shifting the formation model. We now share some initial, and equally encouraging, results from the online educational effectiveness peer group.

The ATS peer group studying the educational effectiveness of online learning consists of 17 members from seven ATS schools. This group was formed in 2015–2016, one of 18 ATS peer groups in the Educational Models and Practices project. They have met several times in person and by conference call since then, with another major meeting planned in April 2017 in Pittsburgh. In December 2016, ATS (on behalf of this group) surveyed the 141 academic deans of schools with comprehensive distance education. The survey focused on the educational effectiveness of online learning at these ATS schools that have considerable experience and expertise in that pedagogy.

The survey response rate of 58% is both quite high and quite representative of all 141 schools with comprehensive distance education. Those 141 schools are also fairly representative of all 273 ATS schools (see Table 1). One area perhaps less representative relates to ecclesial family, as a higher percentage of evangelical schools offer online education than is represented in the membership (55% vs. 44%) and a lower percentage of Roman Catholic schools do (10% vs. 22%). Another area that was a little less representative relates to whether a seminary is freestanding or embedded in a college or university. Some 74% of the survey respondents were from freestanding seminaries, which represent just 66% of all 141 “online” schools and 64% of all 273 ATS schools. Still, the results of this survey—the first from ATS to focus on online learning—are remarkably representative and equally encouraging.

What do the results of this survey say about the educational effectiveness of online learning in graduate schools of theology? Here are seven initial observations that merit further reflection and conversation:

1. Almost half (45%) of the respondents offer degrees that are either completely or mostly online.

The most frequent programs offered completely online are the academic MA (28%), the professional MA (13%), and the MDiv (12%). The most frequent programs offered mostly online are the professional MA (35%), the MDiv (31%), and the academic MA (21%). A handful of schools also offer other degrees completely or almost completely online, e.g., the DMin, ThM, and PhD.

TABLE 1: Table Showing Representativeness of ATS Respondents to Survey on Online Education

	Survey Responses	“Online” ATS Schools*	All ATS Schools
Total Number (%)	80 (58%)	141 (52%)^	273 (100%)
Number (%) in US	66 (83%)	120 (85%)	234 (86%)
Number (%) in Canada	14 (17%)	21 (15%)	39 (15%)
Number (%) independent	59 (74%)	93 (66%)	176 (64%)
Number (%) embedded	21 (26%)	48 (34%)	97 (36%)
Number (%) Evangelical	43 (54%)	77 (55%)	121 (44%)
Number (%) Mainline	26 (33%)	50 (35%)	93 (34%)
Number (%) Roman Catholic	11 (13%)	14 (10%)	59 (22%)
Number (%) over \$4 million~	43 (54%)	79 (56%)	135 (49%)
Number (%) under \$4 million	37 (46%)	62 (44%)	138 (51%)
Number (%) over 145 students#	44 (55%)	83 (59%)	136 (50%)
Number (%) under 145 students	36 (45%)	58 (41%)	137 (50%)

NOTES:

* “Online” ATS school refers only to those schools approved for “comprehensive” distance education, which includes any school offering at least six courses online on a regular basis. No ATS schools are “only” online.

^ The 52% is for all 273 ATS schools, but only accredited schools can be approved for comprehensive distance education; if only those 249 schools were counted, the percentage would be 57%. Two of these 141 schools did not receive a survey.

~ \$4 million in expenditures for educational and general expenses (excluding auxiliary enterprises) is almost the median amount spent last year by all ATS member schools.

145 is the median number of students enrolled this past year at an ATS school, with a few schools yet to report.

2. Virtually all respondents evaluate the educational effectiveness of their online offerings through multiple means.

The five most common measures of assessment are course evaluations by students (98%), course-embedded assignments with rubrics (79%), surveys of graduating students (73%), informal feedback from faculty (68%), and capstone projects (49%). Three of those five are indirect measures of student/faculty perceptions, and two are direct measures of student performance. Other measures cited fairly frequently include retention/graduation rates (48%) and feedback from field education supervisors (41%). That last measure is not too surprising, given online education's focus on contextualized theological education for these ATS members.

3. About 40% of respondents have compared the educational effectiveness of their online programs to their onsite programs.

Another nearly 20% have not yet done so because their online programs are still fairly new. A third of the respondents indicated that they did not compare results from the two groups because they felt it would be too much like comparing apples and oranges, given the rather different demographic characteristics of their online and onsite students.

4. Among those who have compared student learning assessment results for their online and their onsite offerings, the vast majority (71%) indicated that the best way to describe those two results was "similar."

One reported that their online results were "better" than their onsite results, and three reported they were "worse." Some 16% reported that they could not effectively compare their online and onsite results for a variety of reasons, including very different demographics for those two constituencies.

5. Almost one third (30%) of the respondents have done some cost/effectiveness studies of their online offerings.

All 24 of those respondents provided comments summarizing the nature and results of their studies. Almost all said their online offerings were very cost effective, though most cautioned that online education should be looked at as a long-term investment, noting that initial (start-up) costs can be substantial and can take a few years to recover. One respondent, echoed by several, stated that going online is "not a cash cow but a source of revenue . . . making [their] program accessible" to a much larger constituency. Several indicated that the biggest cost savings were for their students, not their institutions, but added that any additional expenses were more than covered by more revenue from more students.

6. Among the biggest benefits of online education, these were the top five responses: (1) 99% said it gives students more flexibility, (2) 81% said it reaches more students, (3) 66% said it helps students learn in their own contexts, (4) 46% said it helps reduce the cost for students, and (5) 45% said it enhances the school's global outreach.

The lowest rated benefit was "helps reduce costs for the school," chosen by only 14% of the respondents. That is consistent with the comments noted above about cost savings being more for students than for institutions. Among the dozen or so open-ended comments submitted, about half highlighted the increased accessibility provided by online learning, and about half highlighted the improvement in learning that occurs online. As one respondent noted, teaching online "helps faculty members think through their educational goals and processes," with another adding "it increases student engagement in the course."

7. Among the chief challenges of online education, these were the top five: (1) 60% cited training faculty to teach online, (2) 56% cited incorporating good instructional design, (3) 51% cited doing formation online, and (4/5) 34% cited “building relationships” and “addressing the technology have’s and have not’s.”

Tied for last (with only 20% citing) were “getting faculty acceptance” and “school’s ability to afford the technology needed.” Among 18 open-ended comments, concerns varied widely, but faculty training and suitability of the online format for certain students or courses were cited by about half.

This ATS survey also asked these seminary deans if they had any other comments they wished to add. 34 of the 80 respondents (43%) offered a wide range of observations. Almost all were very affirming of online education, including these (verbatim) comments:

- Because students in the online program learn in the ministry setting in which they will serve, we have had virtually no problems with graduates failing in their first congregations.
- For all the challenges, it gives students access [to seminary] who would not otherwise have it.
- Online learning addresses a multiple audience It is much more inclusive.
- It takes a clear goal and endgame. Online should not be done in a “shoot from the hip” manner and “fixed on the fly.”
- It requires more work and more money to make this delivery format work

effectively. However, when it works well, it works really well.

- It’s extremely effective. It makes traditional teaching work better. So much more can be incorporated Online produces more engagement than we think.
- Online students are much more engaged in “in-class” discussions than students in standard on-ground courses.
- Our faculty are split on this matter. Some see better student engagement and learning, while others continue to wonder about quality [a comment not echoed by any others].

One other recent source of information about the educational effectiveness of online learning comes from the ATS Graduating Student Questionnaire (GSQ). Two of the GSQ tables from 2015–2016 are particularly helpful in comparing results from graduates who did the majority of their degree online with those who did the majority on-campus (traditional, daytime students only). The first table below (see Table 2) shows how these two groups of graduates rated 15 areas of personal growth while in seminary.

TABLE 2: Results of 2015–2016 ATS Graduating Student Questionnaire Online vs. On-Campus Comparison for GSQ Table 14 (green = higher scores for online; red = lower scores for online)

AREAS OF PERSONAL GROWTH [5 = highest]	MAJORITY ONLINE	MAJORITY ON-CAMPUS	DIFFERENCE
Enthusiasm for learning	4.42	4.17	+ .25
Respect for my religious tradition	4.22	4.16	+ .06
Self-knowledge	4.19	4.11	+ .08
Respect for other religious traditions	3.92	4.05	- .13
Empathy for poor and oppressed	3.78	4.00	- .22
Insight into troubles of others	3.85	3.98	- .13
Trust in God	4.30	3.95	+ .35
Self-discipline and focus	4.27	3.97	+ .30
Ability to live one's faith in daily life	4.20	3.88	+ .32
Strength of spiritual life	4.20	3.75	+ .45
Self-confidence	4.10	3.92	+ .18
Desire to become an authority in my field	4.03	3.87	+ .16
Concern about social justice	3.72	3.95	- .23
Clarity of vocational goals	3.86	3.80	+ .06
Ability to pray	3.64	3.37	+ .27

The second table (see Table 3) shows how these two groups of graduates rated 20 ministry skills learned in seminary. While these results were not analyzed for any statistically significant differences, it is interesting to compare the differences in the mean scores on these 35 items for these two groups of graduates.

Two-thirds (23) of the 35 items were rated higher by the online group, while fewer than one-third (11) were rated lower. (One item was rated identically by both groups.) Those who pursued their seminary degree mostly online gave higher ratings to items like “enthusiasm for learning” and “self-discipline and focus,” which tend to be characteristics of online learners. Graduates who studied mostly online gave lower ratings to items like “empathy for the poor and oppressed” and “concern about social justice,” which may be because a greater number of predominantly online students tend to be evangelical, rather than mainline Protestant or Roman Catholic, two ecclesial families who tend to give those areas greater attention.

One of the most surprising results relates to spiritual formation. In the personal growth area of “strength of spiritual life” and in the ministry skill of “ability to give spiritual direction,” online graduates rated themselves much higher than did onsite graduates, with scores of 4.20 vs. 3.75 on the former and 4.07 vs. 3.77 on the latter. In fact, those two items (highlighted in yellow in the tables in Tables 2 and 3) showed the greatest gap of all 35 items, along with “ability to live one’s faith in daily life,” which was also rated much higher by online graduates (4.20 vs. 3.88). What is surprising about those results is that spiritual formation is frequently cited as a special challenge for online learning among theological schools—and a reason many seminaries do not do online learning. Yet, these online graduates affirmed quite strongly their own spiritual growth and their own ability to give spiritual direction, much more so than onsite graduates. To be sure, these GSQ results represent only one year, and they are only indirect measures

TABLE 3: Results of 2015-2016 ATS Graduating Student Questionnaire Online vs. On-Campus Comparison for GSQ Table 15
(green = higher scores for online; red = lower scores for online)

SKILL AREAS [5 = highest]	MAJORITY ONLINE	MAJORITY	DIFFERENCE
Ability to think theologically	4.49	4.45	+ .04
Ability to use and interpret scripture	4.38	4.33	+ .05
Ability to relate social issues to faith	4.18	4.18	+ .00
Ability to work effectively with men and women	4.11	4.17	- .06
Knowledge of church doctrine and history	4.19	4.11	+ .08
Awareness/appreciation of globalized context of ministry	4.20	4.07	+ .13
Ability to work effectively in my religious tradition	4.09	4.07	+ .02
Knowledge of Christian philosophy and ethics	4.21	4.00	+ .21
Ability to interact [well] with other cultures, racial/ethnic contexts	3.97	4.00	- .03
Ability to teach well	4.20	3.93	+ .27
Ability to lead others	4.09	3.89	+ .20
Ability to give spiritual direction	4.07	3.77	+ .30
Ability to preach well	3.96	3.97	- .01
Ability in pastoral counseling	3.80	3.85	- .05
Ability to interact effectively with other religious traditions	3.91	3.92	- .01
Knowledge of church polity/canon law	3.72	3.71	+ .01
Ability to conduct worship/liturgy	3.70	3.79	- .09
Ability to administer a parish	3.53	3.24	+ .29
Ability to integrate insights from science into theology/ministry	3.79	3.62	+ .17
Ability to integrate ecological concerns into theology and ministry	3.54	3.59	- .05

of students' perceptions of themselves and may or may not reflect actual performance or behavior in these areas. Still, it appears that seminary graduates who study mostly online feel better about their own spiritual formation and abilities than do traditional graduates who study mostly onsite.

So, what does the future of online learning look like for ATS schools? It is too soon to look too far ahead, but our recent past and our present results indicate that online learning is becoming a proven pedagogy for theological schools. It is certainly a popular one for an increasing number of seminarians. No doubt there is still much to learn, and no doubt it may not be appropriate for everyone, but this educational model is proving to be effective—not just for many, but for most of our member schools. That is rather remarkable for a practice that was non-existent among ATS schools as recently as 20 years ago and was offered by only a small minority of members just 10 years ago. What was once an exception is now becoming the norm. One can only wonder where online learning might take us.



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