

Global seminary programs: Learning across cultures online, at home and abroad

By MELINDA THOMPSON AND MERI MACLEOD

Working with an exception approved by the ATS Board of Commissioners in 2013, two veteran distance educators reflect on Abilene Christian University's online Master of Arts in Christian Ministry degree program and offer four principles for teaching across the contexts of West Africa, Eastern Europe, and the United States.



US and Ghanaian students enrolled in the Foundations of the Theology of Ministry course form the inaugural cohort of MACM students from Accra in July 2014. The professor, Melinda Thompson of Abilene Christian University, is in the back row.

Learning in online multicultural classrooms is now an everyday reality for many around the globe and for students in the online Master of Arts in Christian Ministry (MACM) degree program at Abilene Christian University's Graduate School of Theology (GST) since last year when the program expanded to Ghana to provide theological education for church leaders in West Africa

through a partnership with Heritage Christian College in Accra. This year the program includes Croatia through the Biblijski Institut in Zagreb.

Christian's students are probing the nature of the church and ministry informed by the contexts of West Africa, Eastern Europe, and the United States, resulting in rich dialogue, new insights, and a growing self-awareness of the impact of one's own context and culture.

One quarter of the MACM curriculum is taught in a residential context, and three locations are available to choose from: the US campus; Heritage Christian College in Accra, Ghana; or the Biblijski Institut in Zagreb, Croatia. Seminary faculty teach twice each year in Ghana and in Croatia. Over time, the growing intercultural experiences of the seminary faculty will contribute an increasing intercultural influence in all the programs of the GST, enriching students' learning across the curriculum.

CULTURE IN AN ONLINE PROGRAM

Culture's impact on course design and on teaching and learning is increasingly being addressed by faculty and instructional designers who are aware of how culturally diverse classes present enhanced learning opportunities

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Mobile technology and Internet access continues to expand rapidly around the world, offering new educational opportunities.¹ Today church leaders from across an array of cultural contexts can study together in unprecedented numbers. Abilene

and new challenges. For example, cultural factors were identified in a study that examined students' experiences in a global graduate online program² in which Norwegian faculty designed a program that was taught to students from Norway and three African countries. The findings indicate three adjustments need to be made:

1. **Social adjustments** of family responsibilities and expectations, time commitments for taking an online course, and support systems for students participating in an online program;
2. **Technological adjustments** of reliable and affordable Internet access, levels of computer literacy, and the impact of mobile technology on teaching and learning; and
3. **Cultural adjustments** inherent in the relationship between students and their professors and its impact on student learning.

CULTURAL INFLUENCES IN THE MACM PROGRAM

An analysis across research studies related to teaching online global courses identified nine recommendations for faculty.³ Four are highlighted here with an example of how each has been experienced in the global MACM program.

Principle #1

Learners from strong uncertainty avoidance cultures are threatened by learning situations that are unstructured and unclear. They expect formal rules to guide their behavior.

The Ghanaian students very much want to know what is expected from them. They set high standards for themselves and work hard to please their professors. At the same time, however, the professor needs to pay attention to power issues (principle #2).

Principle #2

Pay attention to power issues. The African students are

Lecturing with roosters crowing in the background and occasionally trying to talk over the noise of a generator when the power went out were unique challenges.

—Melinda Thompson



The main building at Heritage Christian College houses staff and students on the first floor, provides dorm space for students participating in the residency on the second floor, and supplies a kitchen and open-air classroom on the third floor.

often hesitant to seek clarification from the professor because they hold different viewpoints on the power distance between professors and students. This often leads to increased anxiety levels or the need for a third party with whom they have an existing relationship—the GST recruiter or their program advisor, for example—to serve as go-between for them.

Principle #3

In distance learning contexts where active participation in discussions is highly valued, instructors need to make specific efforts to promote critique and divergence and encourage students to create a safe space where opinions, experiences, beliefs, and knowledge can be shared. During the first residency, five American students joined the Ghanaian students in Accra. The American students dominated class conversation on the first day or two of the course. It took some work on the part of the professor to persuade the African students to share their perspectives and to affirm that different viewpoints all contributed to the larger conversation.

Principle #4

Social presence is the key for the success of students from context dependent cultures. It took several email attempts with limited response before realizing that the students' emails contained lengthy greetings, praises to God, and inquiries about health and family. While these introductory items seemed superfluous to the American recipients—possibly even intrusive into one's personal life—they formed the backbone of relationship building for the Ghanaian students. Caring about one's health and one's family members showed care for the person and the rest of the areas of their life, including their studies. When US administrators and faculty began adjusting their email communications to include some of these niceties, the response level increased dramatically. This same approach also helped to improve the communication and relationship building with the administration of Heritage Christian College.

COURSE DESIGN THROUGH COMMUNITY OF INQUIRY

Course design holds an important key to creating the online environment that provides the support students of diverse cultures and ethnicities often need. The Community of Inquiry (COI) course design model is a research-grounded framework that is growing in popularity globally and has been recommended for culturally diverse courses. Foundational to COI is the conviction that “purposeful” interaction online is critical to learning and that conditions for inquiry and quality interaction need to be intentionally created. As a result, the model is based on incorporating three foci together: social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence.

The COI model lends itself to creating a supportive learning environment for all students by demonstrating the essential contribution social presence makes to foster learning online. Once faculty discover the importance of social presence online and how to design for it, their courses become a supportive learning context for all students regardless of their culture or ethnicity. Scholars⁴ have noted that the COI framework stimulates

a “culturally-responsive pedagogy,” and with its emphasis on purposeful interaction to increase students' cognitive skills, it seems especially pertinent to the graduate-level programs offered by ATS member schools.

The relational climate (social presence) of a course *as experienced by the student* is key to thoughtful participatory dialogue in an online setting.

Two course design tips

1 Begin with low-risk assignments spread across the first several sessions to begin to establish trust and community. Assignments include sharing information about favorite foods, a favorite website or app, or a favorite location to go with friends. It also includes sharing photos where possible. Invite reflective conversation among the students about diverse contexts and cultures that come through in their sharing.

2 Collect information from students on the mobile technology they prefer to use or have access to, particularly in Eastern Europe and across much of the Global South. Often there is greater access to online technology through “mobiles” (cell phones). Guide faculty in creating one-minute audio files to encourage each student. Begin with non-Western students to convey faculty confidence and encouragement, and as a way to hear the professor's tone of voice.

More tips for course design are available by contacting the authors.

See next page.



Melinda (Mindi) Thompson serves as Director of Distance Education for the Graduate School of Theology at Abilene Christian University in Abilene, Texas, and can be reached at mlt11a@acu.edu. Her experiences with ACU's MACM in Ghana provided the impetus for this article.



Meri MacLeod is a theological educator and educational consultant who serves schools internationally, focusing her work on educational change, technology-supported learning, and faculty workshops on Community of Inquiry-based courses. She can be reached at merim@digitalseminarian.com.

ENDNOTES

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