Educational Models and Practices in Theological Education

Formation in Online Contexts Final Peer Group Report

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Why the Schools Engaged this Educational Model

The peer group studying formation in online contexts began its work with a face-to-face meeting in November 2015. The group continued its work at the Educational Models Forum in February 2016, through conference calls and email correspondence, and another face-to-face meeting on September 14-15, 2016. The group completed its work at the Peer Group Forum in April 2017 and a final conference call in July.

These schools adopted the online educational format for a variety of reasons, including their missions to provide theological education to those without access to the schools’ campuses, to remain competitive with similar schools offering online study, and as an adaptation that was part of a complete reinvention of how the schools delivered their educational programming (Lexington).
All agree that formation is central to theological education, but there are significant differences in how the schools understand “formation.” Participants in the group agreed that simply offering online classes without particular attention to formation is not sufficient to achieve human and spiritual formation. Many of the other peer groups have also identified the necessarily “formational” character of theological education. More than other forms of education, theological education must attend to the multifaceted development of the person. In addition to intellectual and academic formation and development of skills of ministry, theological students must be formed as persons of integrity and spiritually formed to lead communities of faith and serve in other contexts. The ATS Standards of Accreditation degree program standard for the Master of Divinity degree names four areas of required program content. “The learning outcomes for the MDiv shall encompass the instructional areas of religious heritage, cultural context, personal and spiritual formation, and capacity for ministerial and public leadership.”¹ A few of the groups have also referenced The Program of Priestly Formation of the United States Council of Catholic Bishops with its four “pillars” of formation: intellectual, pastoral, human, and spiritual. While not all schools use these categories, nearly all would see formation in those areas or similar areas as fundamental to theological education. The groups have noted the need in some contexts to emphasize the four areas more equally. The peer group studying formation in online contexts recognizes the broad formation that takes place within the online medium as well as through structures and processes for formation within the students’ home contexts.

**Crucial Issues and Questions**

Because the schools represent a fairly broad spectrum on the theological map, including the three ecclesial families in ATS (Roman Catholic/Orthodox, Mainline Protestant, Evangelical Protestant), and variations within the families, definitions of “formation” are quite diverse. The current standards are quite broad and use diverse language to speak of formation and, while in most instances the standards reference “personal and spiritual formation,” in several instances they use other modifiers to describe the type of formation expected (A.3.1.1; B.2.5.5; E.2.1.2). This diversity does not stem from the nature of specific degrees, but perhaps from some ambiguity in the standards about the meaning of “formation.” The group explored developing a definition that is appropriate across the diversity, but recognized that this might not be possible. Members do agree, however, that theological education is inherently formational and that schools must have a working definition within their own contexts and be able to demonstrate that appropriate formation is taking place through their programs, including formation that gives attention to cultural differences among students.

Online programs must attend to the “extracurricular and cocurricular” dimensions of theological education and formation that once were assumed to take place through the residential model. Assumptions have been made in the past about the formation of students prior to their graduate theological studies by networks of institutions and persons and about the formation of students during graduate theological studies on the school’s campus. Further, many students are coming to graduate theological study without formation by those networks (extensive congregational life, Sunday schools, youth and young adult programs, denominational colleges, etc.) and schools are sometimes faced with the need for remedial work. This suggests that the assumptions about formation in residential programs need to be reassessed because so many students are commuters. All seminaries need to give attention to whether and how these students form community. Ironically, some online programs have often given more focused attention to formation than residential programs. Some of the schools reported that moving

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into online learning has compelled them to become more intentional creatively to address some aspects of formation that were assumed to happen on campus.

For example, because online students won’t meet in the schools’ chapels for worship, some schools video stream their chapel services. Similarly, the schools utilize asynchronous discussion boards as ways for students to interact about matters of spiritual import such as prayer for one another. They have found that “the medium promotes a deep sharing among students.” Exercise of this intentional creativity may also include photographs or audio and video recordings of liturgical performances, prayer practices, and students telling their stories.

Faculty teaching in online programs that utilize the students’ contexts as part of the formational process are challenged to contextualize their teaching in ways that connects effectively with a range of ministries. This can be hard work but it can also be fruitful work, and work that helps faculty members connect their disciplines more seamlessly with practices of ministry.

Because assumptions about formation may no longer be accurate, programs delivered by all modes (online and residential) need to give explicit attention to formation.

If the campus is not the site for theological study, schools may draw upon resources for education and formation in the students’ home contexts such as congregations, local mentors and spiritual directors, families, and other resources. Online technology actually aids access to and interaction with these local contexts. Formation for these “rooted learners” must make the best possible use of home contexts and recognize that the capabilities of contexts vary depending on the health of congregations, availability of qualified persons and resources, and complexities that develop when the primary ministry context for formation may be, at the same time, the place where the student provides religious leadership. Institutions with online programs need to give attention to how the role of the institution changes in this educational model. The school is no longer the primary provider of student experiences, but rather an orchestrator of the resources in which the students are embedded.

Online programs will need to insure that students’ perspectives are appropriately broadened, that programming is adequately flexible to allow the students’ ministry contexts to be incorporated into their academic work, and that students develop into self-directed learners. Online programs should take advantage of faculty-student interaction—between students and among student, church, and faculty for education and formation.

Schools in the project have identified a number of crucial parts in the “matrix of learning” that can contribute to the education and formation of students, including:

- familial relationships,
- context of ministry,
- student cohorts that build relationships between students through the program and often beyond,
- mentors who work with students face-to-face,
- professors who are prepared through academic training, ministry experience, and instruction for online teaching, and who are themselves personally and spiritually formed,
- curriculum specifically designed for the online format that take advantage of the local context, and
- community networking globally so that the student is, as one school put it, “encouraged to see herself/himself as a citizen of the world village united in Christ.”
Opportunities and benefits

Many of the opportunities and benefits of the online model of education are identified in the report of the peer group studying more broadly the educational values of online education. This report will repeat some of those opportunities and benefits, but will focus on aspects directly related to formation.

Utilizing the students’ own contexts as essential to the educational and formational processes allows formation to be integrated into the students’ ministries as well as using the day-to-day experiences of the students in the learning and formation processes. Many schools have found that online classes increase the diversity of the student population, and interactions among these embedded students has the advantage of providing them with cross-cultural experiences. Sharing about their local ministries broadens awareness, as these create a wider ministry landscape that promotes mutuality, empathy, and knowledge. The result of working with these contexts for ministry can include strengthening ties between schools and congregations, between schools and other sites of service, and among schools, alumni, and others recruited and trained to serve in the formational work of theological education. Students’ contextual connections to the church allow some simultaneous evaluation by the church and the academy.

Pastoral ministry is regularly noted as one of the loneliest professions. Online learning can provide needed community and support from fellow students, professors, and mentors for those already in ministry. Some schools have observed that the depth of relationship and community created in online programs rivals that created in residential programs. The community created online may also have the ability to continue after graduation in ways that residential community cannot.

Challenges and Obstacles

Early on, the group identified a list of “myths” about online education.

1. Everybody understands what formation is. Even “spiritual” formation.
2. Nothing about formation in online contexts is measurable.
3. Formation can’t be done online.
4. Formation in these programs relies solely on what is done online.
5. Formation only happens if schools do something intentional to make it happen. [In fact, people are formed by going through the experience of online engagement whether schools pay attention or not.]
6. There is no community online.
7. Students want to take online solely to avoid traveling to campus. [In fact, there are many reasons why students want to take online.]
8. Formation can be abstracted from context.
9. Formation in traditional residential contexts has been uniformly effective and consistent.
10. Online education is less expensive for schools and students.
11. All “solutions” must come from the schools. [In fact, students are creating solutions before we even know there is a problem.]
12. Students can easily add online study to what they are already doing.
13. Online education will be easier for students.

Schools using online education are challenged to keep their technology up to date. It is essential to have adequate support for the technology infrastructure and for the technological needs of students and
faculty. Because of the reliance on technologies, maintenance is crucial and troubleshooting must be rapid and effective. Students must be oriented effectively to the school’s course management system and have access to IT support services. In addition, schools must be vigilant in looking toward newer technologies and realize that there will always be cost-benefit tradeoffs to their choices of technologies.

Faculty must be trained and supported for online learning and, in some cases, schools must navigate and overcome faculty resistance because as one participant put it, “faculty can make or break online programs.” Many faculty members will need to develop new pedagogical approaches and think in dramatically different ways about their teaching. It is important to have personnel dedicated to instructional design. Some means of quality monitoring (perhaps feedback from colleagues) is also important. It is crucial for schools to calculate faculty workload issues fairly and the group agreed that online teaching is at least as labor intensive as on-campus teaching, and usually requires more time and effort. This group also noted the importance of expecting and helping faculty to be formed themselves in order to mentor the formation of students.

Use of adjunct faculty and other educational personnel such as mentors and other volunteers requires administrative oversight and support. Schools must orient these additional staff to the school and its educational practices and ethos, and they must hold personnel accountable to agreements about their roles in the processes of education and formation. Formation in all contexts must include significant interaction between faculty and students.

Library resources and the skills of library personnel must be adapted to serve the online population. Other student services such as student advising, registration, counseling services, academic support services, chapel, must also be adapted to the online context.

Assessing Educational Effectiveness

The group has reviewed how each school addresses formation and also shared insights about instruments that are available to assess student formation such as the Spiritual Transformation Inventory (spiritualtransformation.org). The group agreed that assessment of all programs whether residential or online must be equal regardless of the mode or educational model.

Practices with embedded assessments used by the schools include:
• covenant groups of students that meet regularly online with a faculty member and an experienced pastor to measure and report individual growth,
• including in all courses a learning goal in the area of spiritual formation,
• evaluations that are part of curricula in spiritual formation, in some cases courses are required each term,
• development of rubrics that help measure spiritual and personal growth, some of them with extensive and broad sets of competencies that are measured,
• extensive and regular reporting by “ministry” and “spiritual formation” mentors who meet regularly in-person with students, and
• reports from “ministry reflection groups” that are part of the students’ ministry context,
Demonstration of Financial Viability

The group agreed that the cost of online formation adds little to the existing cost of online programming. On the other hand, they also admitted that it would be very difficult to quantify, separate, and measure the costs of formation activities and processes.

Class size and faculty workload remain difficult issues. Standard practice for online courses among the peer group institutions is to limit enrollment to around 15-20 students, which may limit overall enrollment and revenue or require expenditures for more faculty. Because “regular and substantive” interaction between faculty and students is expected, classes larger than 15 students can become very labor intensive.

Educational Principles

The group has identified these six general educational principles related to formation in online contexts.

• Each institution must define formation in ways that fit their missions, constituents, and particular degree programs. Models must be shaped with intentional outcomes that are measurable.
• Formation includes preparation for the communities to be served.
• Formation is intensely relational.
• Faculty need to be prepared to contribute to student formation.
• Institutions should recognize online students as “regular students” and value residential and online students equally.
• Outcomes for residential and online students must be the same.

Implications for Standards:

1. The standards should eliminate distinctions of the means of educational delivery (online, residential, CBE, etc.) and focus on achieving the outcomes.

2. The standards need to have more consistent language about formation. The standards should require each institution to define “formation” for each degree and incorporate that definition into its statement of learning objectives for each degree.

Recommended Practices:

If a school delivers programs both online and in residence, the outcomes must be the same

• Define formation for your school’s programs and/or tradition. Such might include spiritual, human, intellectual, social, pastoral categories depending on the ministerial needs of your students.

• Develop strategies for integrating formation into academic programs. Such might be integrated within the courses or extracurricular or cocurricular programs. Strategies may leverage students’ communities and contexts or other cultural contexts. Strategies should focus on clearly defined competencies.

• Develop an assessment plan for formation aligned with the formation competencies. Competencies for distance students should be identical to those for residential students.
• Provide adequate training and support for faculty, including adjunct faculty, and other supporting professionals. Training and orientation should include skills, such as effectively using online tools, and knowledge, such as understanding program history and mission.

• Provide adequate training and support for students as well.

• Limit class size to approximately 15-20 students per “section.” Section here refers to the number of students that might be expected to interact and for what counts as a course for faculty teaching load.
Appendix
Observations from Conversations with Other Peer Groups

Prison
Conversations with those offering theological education in prison affirmed that there might be ways to cross-fertilize our two models. An increasing number of prisons are making (limited) Internet access available to their inmates, and thus it would be possible for educators to utilize an LMS tailored to the prison context with limited Internet access. Currently, the hurdle to overcome is providing inmates full access to a theological library. Synchronous video conferencing technology already makes it possible for inmates to join faculty members (and non-incarcerated students) in live classes.

Implication for standards: this group raises issues of how “contact” is defined between faculty and student; and issues of defining the minimal level access to a library.

The prison model and the residential model share certain features. Students in each model are gathered together for learning in a shared context. In an online prison model, however, students would be gathered in a context that they would not share with faculty and staff. Faculty and staff would become the “dispersed” members of the community, thus reversing the relationship of learning to location characteristic of traditional online education. In this respect, an online prison model would share similarities with an online global model. Highlighting the different offline realities of learners and teachers points to the importance of all schools claiming the resources of the students’ setting. Taking student context seriously may also influence advising and admissions practices.

Historically African American schools
These schools already do significant formation and have clear understandings of how it is done, including embracing the community in which the student is embedded. The Historically African American educational model highlights the students’ offline reality. This is also characteristic of the Global model and other schools with constituencies that are predominantly people of color.

Latino/a schools
Challenges for these populations vary by the students’ generation in North America, with each generation bringing different formation needs. The Latino/a schools model also highlights the students’ offline reality.

Asian schools
The Asian Schools have mostly first generation students, and these schools tend to lose second generation students to “non-Asian” seminaries. Because of cultural heritage, they often have a top-down leadership model that makes formation more difficult. Like the African American and Latino/a schools, formation for the Asian schools would be mostly in community highlighting the students’ offline realities.

Accelerated Programs from Bachelor’s to Master’s Degrees
Some institutions allow graduate credit hours to count for undergraduate credit, but not vice versa.

Students without a Bachelor’s Degree
Some programs require psychological tests or other such instruments to evaluate such students for admission. Most did not want to employ Prior Learning Assessment because of how much work it is.
**Competency Based Education**

Competency Based Education remains in an experimental phase. CBE programs identify competencies as the ways to understand and pursue the formation of students. Members thought that only some parts of CBE could be done online. Mentors are deeply involved in some schools, but perhaps without enough concern for their credentials and preparation. CBE is probably not fitting for all students because it requires a highly self-motivated learner. This group highlights the need for all models to identify competencies.

**Global partners**

The schools in this group focused on making resources available to less fortunate partners around the world. They work to develop mentors who can move into the foreign communities in order to know the host culture and to be shaped by the institution.

**Residential Programs**

This conversation led to mutual affirmation. Those teaching in online programs continue to value the existence of residential programs. No one should presume any inherent competition or antagonism between schools that have embraced distance education and those that remain committed to residential education, as each type of school excels at something different. Both share commitment to how place and context shape student learning—residential schools by gathering students together in the same shared space for learning and online schools by attending to the learning that takes place in dispersed locations unique to each student. The conversation, therefore, highlighted the possibility that residential programs might take even more advantage of their local contexts and exploit them for more explicit attention to contextual formation. For example, schools located in cities might use their urban contexts to develop leaders in urban ministry.
Appendix A
Atsusi Hirumi’s framework for understanding course interaction

Hirumi’s table translating theoretical approaches into practical kinds of assignments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instructional Strategies</th>
<th>Theoretical Orientation</th>
<th>Teacher Directed</th>
<th>Cognitive</th>
<th>Neurobiological</th>
<th>Student-Centered</th>
<th>Constructivist</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Direct Instruction (Joyce, Weil, &amp; Showers, 1992)</td>
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<td>5 Component Lesson Model (Dick, Carey, &amp; Carey, 2005)</td>
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<th>Task Analysis</th>
<th>Message Design</th>
<th>Emotions</th>
<th>Facilitating Learning</th>
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<tr>
<td>- Behavioral Objectives</td>
<td>- Practice and Feedback</td>
<td>- Cognitive Load</td>
<td>- Emotions</td>
<td>- Discovery and Inquiry-Based Learning</td>
</tr>
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<td>- Programmed Instruction</td>
<td>- Contingency Contracts</td>
<td>- Self-Regulated Learning</td>
<td>- Sleep, Nutrition and Movement</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Advanced Organizers</td>
<td>- Cognitive Task Analysis</td>
<td>- Active Discussions</td>
<td>- Collaborate Learning</td>
<td>- Cognitive Apprenticeships</td>
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<tr>
<td>- mnemonics</td>
<td>- Cognitive Load</td>
<td>- Summation, Role-Playing and Immersion</td>
<td>- Reflective Teaching and Learning</td>
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</table>

10
Hirumi’s steps for course design based on the preceding two considerations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 1</th>
<th>Identify essential experiences that are necessary for learners to achieve specified goals and objectives (optional);</th>
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<td>Step 2</td>
<td>Select a grounded instructional strategy (Level III interaction) based on specified objectives, learner characteristics, context, and epistemological beliefs;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Step 3</td>
<td>Operationalize each event, embedding experiences identified in Step 1 and describing how the selected strategy will be applied during instruction;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Step 4</td>
<td>Define the type of Level II interaction(s) that will be used to facilitate each event and analyze the quantity and quality of planned interactions; and</td>
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<tr>
<td>Step 5</td>
<td>Select the telecommunication tool(s) (e.g., chat, email, bulletin board system) that will be used to facilitate each event based on the nature of the interaction.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Step 6</td>
<td>Analyze materials to determine frequency and quality of planned eLearning interactions and revise as necessary.</td>
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</table>

*Figure 2. Six step process for designing and sequencing eLearning interactions*
Appendix B

Testimonies from peer group members as to why they adopted the model/practice:

“There are several reasons why online courses are used. Online courses allow students with other life commitments to continue their degree programs. Students who had difficulty commuting . . . could have part of the geographic barrier removed. All programs had residency requirements, so it was not aimed primarily to benefit students at extension sites. . . . It did give a benefit of increased course options for students seeking to take the minimum allowable in residency. Now with our recently approved fully online MATS, we are able to reach those students for whom commuting . . . is a major barrier or impossibility. We also can serve students who cannot attend regular residential courses due to other life commitments . . . . As the lone denominational seminary . . . online education allows us to serve more of the candidates for ordained ministry.”

Testimonies about educational effectiveness from academic deans of schools with comprehensive distance education, from the survey conducted by ATS in fall 2016:

- 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].

Comprehensive answers from the fall 2016 survey about how educational effectiveness is measured at particular institutions

“Our courses (online and traditional) are assessed through the regular course evaluations. Generally speaking, they are equivalent across the board. Some courses/faculty are better than others in different delivery methods, but that varies from faculty to faculty, from delivery system to delivery system. [X] also has an institutional effectiveness and assessment office whose job it is, among other things, to assess the programs internally. So, it looks at the student learning outcomes of specific courses, evaluates the assignments that are directly connected to the SLOs, and then gives a ‘grade’ for each delivery method.
As I understand the last figures I was aware of from this assessment, the online delivery is equal to the traditional delivery.”

“Distance education programs are given additional support, development, and assessment provisions in order to ensure the highest quality education. Every faculty member is partnered with an instructional designer to walk them through the design, development, and implementation of their courses. This partnership is key. Faculty are able to find answers to their pedagogical and technological questions quickly and efficiently. They also have someone available to talk through best practices and strategies for effective teaching. The instructional designer can also provide additional support for designing learning activities and resources for students requiring ACCESS services. Every online and hybrid course goes through a pre-course, mid-course, and post-course evaluation by the instructional design team. Faculty are evaluated on their course design, organization, clarity, and overall online presence. These evaluations are an invaluable tool for responsive teaching -- faculty are able to take this feedback and make course corrections immediately. . . The student feedback has become a tremendous resource for improving the teaching processes each term.”

“The online and hybrid modalities are extremely effective teaching methods. [X] Expects a high level of faculty engagement in each of these modalities—often resulting in an even higher attention to student progress than possible in traditional face-to-face classrooms. Each week students participate in a variety of learning activities actively engaging them with their course work, faculty, and peer students. This constant activity allows for high student accountability and, when needed, faculty intervention. The course expectations are identical to the related courses on campus. Students complete the same readings, the same assessments, and often engage in the same conversations that they would otherwise have on campus. All master’s level courses are also incorporating Signature Assignments to monitor student progress across program learning outcomes (PLO). These Signature Assignments will provide further evidence of learning gains across modalities.”

“[X] Offers online courses and certifications, but no fully-online degree programs. All of our regular programmatic assessments are inclusive of our online offerings: student course evaluations; program-midpoint evaluation conferences with between students, advisers, and other faculty; alumni surveys; other institutional assessment. We also make assessments that are specific to our online course offerings. First, we added language to our student course evaluations to determine how our online learners experience “community” (acceptance, reciprocity, and trustworthiness) in our online course offerings. Second, we have a set of requirements for syllabi and courses specific to online courses, which we revise according to feedback from online faculty who have employed them. Third, we have a Digital Learning Committee whose charge includes soliciting and responding to the evolving needs of learners and instructors in our online course offerings. Finally, we plan for 2017–18 a targeted review of our online offerings for the previous two academic years.”

“Our online courses and programs are effective. Students in our online introductory courses are well prepared for the advanced courses for which the introductory courses are prerequisite. Students who have taken many online courses perform well on our MDiv-degree capstone project. Informally, students report that our online offerings are, on average, more challenging than the face-to-face counterparts.”
Appendix C
For Further Reading


