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Project name: Digital Live

Project abstract

Digital Live is a new course format that combines select communication technologies with several innovative teaching strategies to overcome the barrier of distance for large numbers of potential students around the world, while greatly enhancing the learning experience for all students in a course. The project aimed at two major goals:

1. to greatly expand access to theological education, and
2. to substantially enrich the learning experience of all students in our courses through exposure to a larger and more diverse student body.

The innovation of Digital Live lies not only in the technology that allows virtual students to attend class meetings from afar, but also in the combination of multiple methods of course design that "level the playing field" for virtual and in-person students by giving both sets of students the same classroom experience. Students are assigned to small teams that execute all major coursework together. Team projects are scaffolded through a combination of synchronous instruction and discussion of relevant concepts and asynchronous instruction in the form of pre-recorded lectures and reading. Course facilitators aid the learning process during class by guiding group chat during lectures and bringing important questions to the attention of the professor. They also attend the first team meetings outside of class to ensure the smooth and cohesive team dynamics.

Project report

During the course of the project, we made a great deal of progress toward both of the goals stated above. The course format we developed can accommodate large numbers of students very efficiently without compromising the quality of instruction or learner engagement along the way. Although we did attract students from many states in the U.S. as well as from several other countries, we did not see the substantial growth in enrollment that we hope to achieve in the future. Our pilot course also succeeded in creating a much richer learning experience for students than the instructor had been able to accomplish in previous offerings of the same course. This was achieved through the organization of the class into small, virtual learning teams that got to know each other from the start of the semester. These teams were in constant communication about coursework and soon began sharing about ministry, family, concerns, and prayer needs. The quality of friendship that formed on several of the teams was well beyond what was expected, and there seemed to be a direct correlation between these emotional bonds and the outstanding quality of the projects executed by these teams. Related to this was the testimony from many team members that they felt their outlook challenged (in helpful ways) and expanded

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through interaction with other students from very different locales, with different life experiences.

The most important question we addressed in this project was whether it was possible to create a learning experience that accommodated (potentially) hundreds of virtual students from around the world in such a way that emotional and intellectual transformation exceeded what had been possible with smaller numbers of students in more traditional classroom settings. There is no question that the outcome of the project gave a clear affirmative answer to this question. A great deal of work remains to be done to refine and improve all aspects of Digital Live. Nevertheless, student experience (as observed by the professor and course facilitators and as reported in evaluations) testifies to the tremendous potential of this approach for achieving remarkable learning and transformation through the kind of rich engagement we created between the professor, the course facilitators, and other students.

We learned that, contrary to the assumption that community cannot be effectively fostered in a virtual environment, learning teams that are properly scaffolded and supported can become very rich contexts of support and encouragement even as teams work together to execute projects that are larger and more complex than any students could manage alone. This should come as no surprise to those with firsthand experience in social media. But for many older faculty this is a surprising conclusion. The emotional connections that are formed on teams in this way are critical to the excellent performance of the teams in producing work that exceeds what individual members imagined possible. A primary goal in this team-based approach to learning is to instill the recognition that teams of highly diverse people with shared convictions can achieve a great deal more than lone rangers in ministry. We also seek to begin to form the habits and convictions that make for smooth functioning of effective teams. The hope, of course, is that students will take these experiences and skills with them into whatever ministry context they enter in the future. Thus, Digital Live courses do not simply foster the mastery of a subject and a set of skills related to that subject; they also promote the acquisition of high-level skills in teamwork, leadership, and "followership."

From the experience and learning that has resulted from the Digital Live project this past year, we would recommend that other schools give careful thought to how virtual students can be brought into the classroom alongside traditional (on campus) students. Many of the innovations described above have long been in use in the world of corporate training, yet too few seminaries have recognized the potential of this format for increasing enrollment. Additionally, the robust use of course facilitators (beyond traditional TAs) is critical to the successful implementation of Digital Live. These support staff play a key role in handling student questions and concerns (including bringing questions arising in chat forums to the professor) as well as in ensuring that teams are working effectively, communicating well, and, ultimately, producing the best work they are capable of. Finally, professors seeking to produce a course in a format similar to that outlined above require the collaboration of experts in several different fields. Schools need to

persuade professors of this reality and then provide them with the team best suited to creating a successful course in this format.

The only resource we used from outside our institution for the project was the Microsoft Teams app for teams' communication and meetings. The application worked exceedingly well, and we expect to use it for similar purposes in the future.

All of us involved in the ATS Innovation Project are supremely grateful to ATS for this innovation opportunity. The lessons outlined above have already made a deep impact on those involved in the project, and it is our expectation that they will exert a growing influence throughout our institution as we continue to grapple with the changing realities surrounding theological education in North America, today.