# Online offerings bring added benefits

By Richard Benson

I was a dean at a small Catholic seminary for almost 20 years, and I was there when online learning began to surface in ATS schools several decades ago. The intervening years have shown that online learning is much more robust and effective than many of us imagined in those early days.

There was a consensus among theological educators in those earlier years that online learning might offer some limited benefits to ministry education. For example, my school began a dialogue with another small Catholic school in a different state about creating some online courses that would be shared by both schools allowing a more robust enrollment and a sharing of faculty in some electives that were difficult to offer by one school alone. At the same time, there was a parallel consensus also growing among the faculty at many traditional theological schools that online learning could never serve to replace the majority of face to face classes—especially classes that demanded hands-on ministerial training—and certainly not substitute for the physical presence necessary for authentic formation of the soul.

Online learning was interesting, but was likely not going to prove very effective in the world of graduate theological education for ministry. One needs to remember that it was at that same time that ATS was trying to gently nudge theological schools from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning. The accreditation standards were beginning to reflect that essential paradigm shift. In fact, most colleges and universities have led the way in developing online pedagogy that has proved itself to be every bit as effective in student learning as face to face courses at these institutions of higher learning.
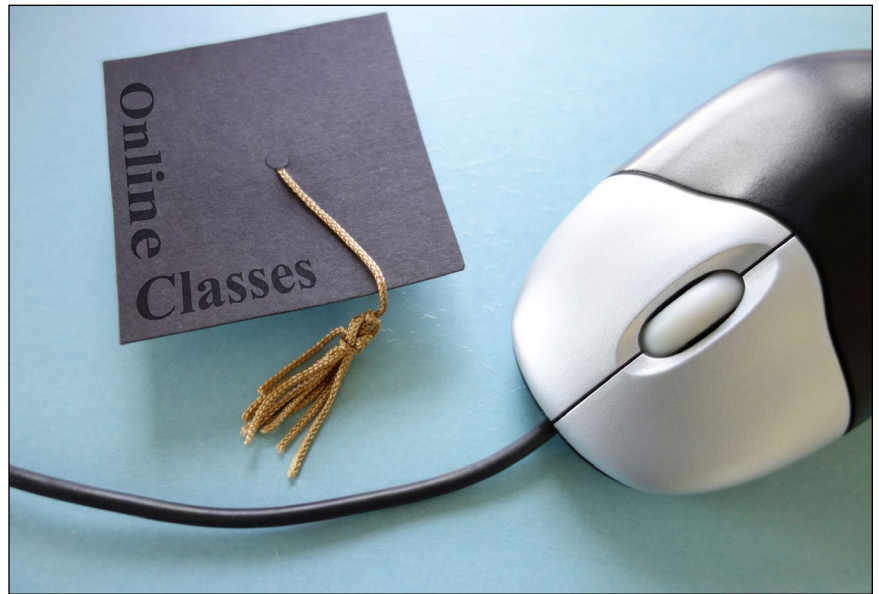
Schools of theology and ministry have experienced the same trajectory. I believe that what Loida Martell (Lexington School of Theology) and I were saying together during the ATS webinar, "Going Online for the Fall? Glean Wisdom from Some with Experience in Online Teaching and Formation," was simply that online learning can and does facilitate legitimate theological learning. We have seen that online learning, whether integrated into a curriculum with face to face course offerings or offered as a fully online curriculum, can prepare our students effectively to minister. I do not even pretend to be an expert in online learning—this is a wide field on its own. What Loida and I presented at the webinar was simply some of the major learnings that have come our way either by personal experience (trial and error) or from wisdom shared with us by our colleagues at our schools and by other ATS deans over the past three decades.

One of the most important learnings about distance education for theological education and formation has been the wonderful discovery that it is possible to deliver spiritual formation online. Schools like Loida's and mine have created very effective models for retreats, faith sharing, and spiritual mentoring for online students.

Our imaginative and talented formation directors have created both synchronous and asynchronous opportunities for prayer and meditation online. Students can be transported to a private prayerful environment that offers the space for mindful contemplation and prayer all online. This is offered for individuals and for small groups. We often video our on-campus retreats and spiritual conferences and then organize them for online access so all our students can share a common experience in spiritual formation.

We took our students on a retreat that included a virtual tour of the Mexican-American Museum, and allowed them to contemplate, meditate, and pray over particular pieces of art that enriched their souls. The online sharing of this experience was a wonderful opportunity for students to grow as a small community of faith. We regularly use Zoom for theological reflection groups, avoiding the need to ask students to commute to campus to accomplish something that is equally effective online. Thus, theological schools have found that distance formation can be as equally effective as distance education.

1 A school must first set itself up for success in online learning by carefully choosing its course management system (the web-based platform that faculty members use to build their courses).

A system that has the most bells and whistles (and, likely, the highest cost) will not always be the most effective. A school chooses best when it chooses a system that is intuitive for ease of use by both the professor and the student. A system that demands a high learning curve will demand a significant amount of time spent in training for your professors and for your students.

There are course management systems that are costly and others that are free, like the open-source Moodle platform. Deciding on one based on the factors at one's school is important. It's also important to stick with a choice for a reasonable amount of time so that faculty and students can become comfortable with it. The following questions are helpful to consider: How much does it cost? Do you lease it? Do you buy it? Who maintains

it? Do you outsource maintenance and training or do it in house? If you choose Moodle, who will get it up and running? Does your school have the personnel to keep it up and continue to customize it to meet the needs of faculty pedagogy and student ease?

2 Do not confuse technology with teaching.

A good course management system will only be as effective as the professors who use it to build their courses and deliver the content. If we have learned anything, it is that an effective course is one that students enjoy, find intriguing, and learn throughout the course. We should not just move a boring lecture in the classroom to a boring lecture online. Online learning is a challenge; it demands that we discard any idea that an online course is simply presenting material to an understanding that designing a course truly engages students but does not overwhelm them with the material they are being asked to master.

Loida and I were explaining that online education is more about pedagogy and less about technology. To have a successful online course, it is important for faculty to have some education about how today's students use and respond to media—especially media found on the Internet. Effective pedagogy uses the media in a way that is comfortable for our contemporary students. Our students are not us! At the same time, students and new faculty should not assume that familiarity and a love of social media means an automatic or even an easy transition to online learning. In fact, the need to use email and write academically without texting acronyms can be a big challenge for many of our students. A well-built online course literally seduces a student into learning. A good online course creates a learning space in which the student is anxious to participate.

3 With a simple but useful course management system and a well-designed pedagogy, the effective online course embeds a continuum of engagement.

In the early days, and still somewhat evident today, some online courses were "turn key" experiences. Professors

created a self-paced course that asked the student to engage the material in only two ways—read it and write about it. These courses were rarely, or at best minimally, effective. Professors checked in only when assignments were due, or worse, only when the final paper was turned in for correction.

What we have learned is that the heart of effective online learning is a triple engagement. The effective online course creates an architectural plan that engages the student with: (1) the material, 2) the other students in the course, and (3) the professor. Without this triple engagement happening from the first day to the close of the course, the course can only be minimally effective. However, this does not have to be a burdensome project as some professors have imagined. Integrating a series of "low stakes" assignments that ask student to engage the material with a short response to peers, (e.g., to read and comment to at least one other fellow student's comments) allows a learning community to be built. Also, I have found it effective to either grade these comments based on a simple clear rubric or make a general comment to all the students about a particular discussion board. This ensures that students know that I am familiar with their comments and that their input matters. Many students have claimed that they have learned and understood the assigned material best by reading the comments of their peers.

4 Online learning is often made more effective for learning when assignments are scaffolded.

This means that larger assignments like a final research project or paper can be divided into smaller parts, each of which is graded. A paper can be divided into three of four graded assignments that are combined for the final grade in the project: (a) the title or theme, (b) an annotated bibliography, (c) an outline or first draft, and (d) the final paper. The advantage of many course managements systems is that they are very nimble in helping a professor set up a grade sheet that does all of the grade calculations and allows students to easily follow the current statuses of their grades in the course.

5 Online courses can be either synchronous or asynchronous.

A synchronous course is one in which students gather online at the same time with the professor. Basically, through technology like Zoom, a professor can deliver a real-time lecture, students can ask questions orally or in written form, and a professor can divide the students into online discussion groups. This is often the simplest way for professors to get their feet wet in online course delivery.

The downside of synchronous online delivery is that it is dependent on a robust Internet connection for everyone involved. Depending on the bandwidth at the school, office, or the professor's home, the lecture can be poorly delivered by the Internet. It also presumes that every student has robust reception. In a day and age where families at home are often sharing a single WiFi connection with multiple users at the same time, a student may not have an effective connection with the course.

Asynchronous online courses depend on a careful and well-designed pedagogy that is available to the student in the course directly through the school's course management system. Because it is asynchronous, the student can access the course and engage in learning whenever they decide. Engagement with the material, other students, and the professor are all built into the course with careful precision regarding due dates for all assignments so that everyone is engaged with the material in an orderly way. Bandwidth is rarely a problem because there is no reliance on a live or streamed video. The course moves ahead at a set pace and students learn from the material and assignments, from interaction with their peers, and from their professors' engagement.

The Association of Theological Schools
The Commission on Accrediting

10 Summit Park Drive, Pittsburgh, PA 15275-1110
T: 412-788-6505 • F: 412-788-6510 • www.ats.edu

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6 *A school that invests some time and resources in building a robust infrastructure for online learning (hardware, software, reliable Internet access, and accessible support staff) that includes robust WiFi, has updated computers for faculty, and user-friendly software will not be wasting its money.*

Faculty feel more confident in producing an effective online course when they have had the opportunity for training or mentoring. Faculty and students need access to IT support for all the regular issues that will inevitably arise with both the hardware and software involved. Developing online training for students is also very effective, including making clear to new students at your school the minimum requirements necessary for a personal computer to be effective. A good student with an ancient laptop is not an effective combination. Speaking of the need to keep student access as a significant concern of a good school's pivot to online education, evolving course management platforms are now offering the ability to deliver an entire course through a phone app. Also, a wide range of free media is available to deliver content over a phone or tablet (e.g., Zoom, Skype, etc.).

While some of us might smile at the idea initially, anyone who is working with students nowadays knows that they are generally more comfortable with their phones than with a laptop. They prefer a text to an email. Using this kind of platform may help some of our students get better access to their theological education than with an antiquated and wheezing laptop laboring to connect with dwindling bandwidth in their homes. A good school needs to think about its students and their resources, or lack thereof—who may not have access to a decent computer or to a robust WiFi connection in their residence, or perhaps no Wi-Fi connection at all. Allowing students to borrow or rent laptops may be a good thing for your students, along with making sure the school has plenty of computer workstations available for students. Offering courses through their phones might be an even better choice.

Online learning, in the end, is a means and not an end. It has its benefits and its challenges but—across the board—colleges, universities, and schools of theology and ministry have found that the benefits far outweigh the burdens. For many of our schools who do not intend to fully abandon brick and mortar buildings or face to face classes, online offerings have served as an added benefit to our enrollments. Some of our students find travel—commuting, especially at night—difficult. For other students with different work schedules, online offerings are a viable way to pursue their dreams of earning a degree for ministry, while taking care of family and personal issues at the same time. Online learning has a legitimate place side by side with our brick and mortar classrooms.

Richard Benson *is the Vice President and Academic Dean at the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, Illinois.*