The value of learning ecosystems in theological education

By Gabriel Etzel
and Mary Lowe

COVID-19 has been a disruptive force that has caused us to reconsider the way we teach and the way students learn. Among some of the results, it has brought to light the way in which the entire learning process is a highly inter-dependent entity consisting of many variables: an ecosystem of sorts with many moving parts.

In broad terms, this ecosystem can be reduced to three larger components of education: the student, the faculty, and the curriculum. It is important to ask questions related to each of the areas in order to create an effective learning environment. What does the student bring to the classroom (i.e., life experience, prior learning, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation)? What does the faculty member bring to the classroom (i.e., expertise, life experience, approach to education)? What curriculum will be used (i.e., resources, textbooks, learning management system)?

Within a residential classroom, it is typical for the emphasis to be placed on the faculty member and the student, with the curriculum itself playing a supporting role. Conversely, in online classrooms there is often an emphasis on the student's engagement with the curriculum, with the faculty member playing a supporting role. Moreover, in an online format there is often an emphasis on the learning management system (LMS) as the central hub for learning. Our current realities, however, reflect a different approach in that we're using online technologies to deliver remote teaching and learning. One of the outcomes of that is a greater emphasis on the seemingly central role of the LMS and the learning ecosystem.

The problem is that when we try to apply an analog model to a digital format, we fail to fully recognize and appreciate the interconnected reality of teaching and learning. This often leads to a compartmentalized view of education. All three elements (faculty, students, and curriculum) must be working in conjunction with one another for an optimal educational experience. In the wake of converting residential courses to digital formats, we have to resist the error of over-emphasizing the LMS, thinking that it will automatically foster an effective learning environment.

The LMS is only one element in the ecosystem of the teaching and learning process as is the student experience, instruction, and formational outcomes. When viewed from a holistic perspective, the teaching-learning dynamic becomes much more robust because each element is leveraged as part of the entire system. It also shifts the focus from one tool to integrating multiple variables. The LMS is no longer treated as the center around which teaching occurs, but is treated as a tool or resource for engaging the learner. It shifts the responsibility for teaching to one that is bi-directional, which also allows for experience, context, and engagement to take their rightful places in the educational process.

When we shift our perspective, it allows us to move the conversation from an online vs. residential equation to one that embraces teaching and learning in a far more cooperative manner. Borrowing from Bronfenbrenner's (2005) nested structures illustration, each of the components serve to underscore the significance of a collaborative ecosystem or one in which persons and processes all contribute to an egalitarian model of education. Rather than feeling like we're losing something when forced to teach remotely or gaining something when we upgrade to a new LMS, we're confronted with the reality that the ecosystem far outweighs the positives or negatives. If you can envision Bronfenbrenner's concentric circle model as a Rubik's cube where each level can be adjusted to fit the circumstance, the teaching and learning process can be far more adaptable to change.

If we want to come out of this pandemic with a healthier view of learning—which includes the interconnectedness of students, faculty, and curriculum working in a unified way—we submit that, as a way of creating a path forward, the following guidelines be considered. First, we have to create a more robust (and required) faculty training process that provides a conceptual framework for integrated systems. Second, we need to design courses in a way that embraces multiple avenues of content acquisition. Third, we believe that leveraging a student's social network allows for multiple spheres of influence. The influence is not limited to learning but formation as well. When the student is viewed within an ecology of development, it allows for a more inclusive approach to teaching, learning, and developing.

We recommend the following resources: *Ecologies of Faith in a Digital Age: Spiritual Growth through Online Education* by Steve Lowe and Mary Lowe; *Teaching the World: Foundations for Online Theological Education* by Gabriel Etzel, Timothy Paul Jones, Chris Jackson, and John Cartwright; and *Exploring Learning Ecologies* by Norman J. Jackson.

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2