

My Experience with Online Teaching

George Lyons

It all began innocently enough in January of 1998. The Dean of NNU offered to take me to lunch at the Hong Kong Chinese restaurant in downtown Nampa. Never one to turn down a free meal, I accepted. Only over lunch did I learn what Sam Dunn, then Vice President for Academic Affairs at Northwest Nazarene University, had in mind. He was hoping to get the Department of Philosophy and Religion to take on a new project — to find a way to offer courses for Nazarene pastors using the Internet. He felt that he was meeting with only resistance in his efforts to get the official leaders onboard for his still nebulous dream. By my own choice, I was only a small cog in the administrative machinery of the Department. But I could assure him that, so far as I knew, we were more than willing to take on any proposal the administration believed in enough to support with more than encouragement to do more work.

We all had our platters full with heavy loads, overloads, additional assignments, church expectations, etc. As I saw it, the question was not whether we would cooperate, but whether the administration was willing to offer release time and additional pay for us to take on one more thing. Sam assured me that the administration was quite serious about this. Within a few weeks, he offered to pay my way to attend a conference on Asynchronous Learning in New York City in April. He offered to pay all of the expenses for our hotel room across from the World Trade Center and for a taxi tour of Manhattan while we were there. After I looked at the conference program, I agreed to attend, provided he would attend some key sessions with me. He agreed. The sessions I had in mind addressed the time required to prepare and deliver online courses compared to regular courses, additional compensation for online course preparation, and intellectual property rights.

All of the speakers agreed that faculty should be given release time to prepare courses for online delivery, that faculty should be paid extra for preparing the course materials, and that the resulting intellectual property should be jointly owned by the institution and the individual. If Sam grew tired of being jarred by my elbow when such points were made, he never said so.

Nothing much happened once we got back on campus. But when Gary Waller started making plans for the schedule for NNU's Master of Ministry program, I was scheduled to teach a course entitled, "Preaching from the New Testament." After some conversations with Gary and Sam, it was agreed that I would offer this course online during January and February of 2000. The biblical emphasis was to be the Gospel of John and 1 John. Although our MMin courses are normally taught for adjunct overload pay, it was agreed that I would teach this course as part of my regular load.

I had already begun converting handouts used in my undergraduate course on "Johannine Writings" into html documents. So with some additions and upgrading, I could see how the course might be delivered online. But I had no idea what all actually doing so would involve. I prepared most of the online course materials during the summer of 1999 and I was paid well for doing so. During the fall quarter of 1999, I had a reduced teaching load. I tried out some features of the developing course with my on-ground undergraduate students.

During the fall, I also took an online course on online teaching through Convene (no longer in business), which was providing the platform for the Nazarene Bible College's online initiatives. I was hooked. Here was an education class that seemed to have some practical value, something I could use even in my traditional classes, rather than just another fad. As January of the new millennium rolled around, there were dire predictions of online disasters ahead. None of the worst-case scenarios materialized. But my class was complicated by a few minor Y2K glitches.

There were 15 students in the class. One of them did not know how to type and had never so much as sent an email message before the course began. Some were old hands with the Internet. Some had taken earlier on-ground classes in the MMin program. For others, this was their first course. Most were male, Nazarene pastors. But there were two women, and several were only lay leaders in their churches. Most students were from the Northwest region (including two in Alaska), but one was taking the course in South Africa. All were working full time while they took the course.

It didn't take long to discover that this was going to be a lot more work than I ever imagined. Four of the students told me in private email messages that they had decided to be the top student in the class. Their papers—two each week of the nine week course posted publicly for all to read — were longer than I expected, and much better. When the other students read their papers, their papers also grew in size and improved in quality.

At first, I tried to respond in detail to each of the papers in a public post for all students to read. And I nearly died trying. Well, not quite. But I found myself filling every available hour of every day trying to keep up with all the reading and grading — the assignments I had given the students and their posts and responses — and preparing weekly lectures to supplement the reading.

As the course wore on, I had the good judgment to drop some assignments. And I found that I could respond as well in collective posts, bringing together my comments on all of the papers submitted on a particular assignment. By the ninth week, we were all exhausted. It was clear that the course would have been better had it been one week shorter. But everyone seemed to agree that they had learned more in this course than in any other they had ever taken. That included the professor.

This was my most fulfilling master's course as a student or faculty member. I had the joy of repeatedly experiencing "lights turning on" in the minds of students as students helped one another

"get it." To change the metaphor, I was merely the midwife as new ideas were born. Education happened in this environment. Ignorance was not tolerated. No one could hide in the back row, unengaged. Everyone participated in the learning process. This was a great class!

After this successful experiment with online course delivery, the Department of Philosophy and Religion began working in earnest on a proforma for a new MA program with an emphasis on Spiritual Formation. It was to be delivered entirely online. In order to staff the program, we would need to hire two additional faculty members. We would need to recruit 15 students for each cohort. And we would need to get regional accreditation for the program. For good measure, we also applied for a grant to help cover our start-up expenses.

The administration at NNU did everything the online learning gurus said you should do to do it right. We could never have done this without their support and encouragement. So far, everything has gone completely according to plan. Drs. Tom Oord and Mark Maddix joined the faculty of the (now) School of Theology and Christian Ministries in the fall of 2002. We have 15 students in our first cohort. These students are completing their third class in the program. A new cohort will begin in March with at least 19 students. And we are hopeful that the grant request will be approved soon.

I am to teach my first course in our new MA program in January of 2004. Because it will feature online delivery, it will be possible for me to teach it while I am on Sabbatical—probably from Büsingen and the European Nazarene College. It's been quite a trip from Chinese food in Nampa to the Swiss Alps. I'll let you know about the ride when I get back.

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