THE GREAT TRANSFORMATION IN
CHRISTIAN EDUCATION AND ONLINE LEARNING
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Introduction

At no other time in Higher Education has there been such an abrupt disruption in instructional delivery than when the COVID-19 pandemic hit. The shift to remote learning impacted education and the workforce at all levels into new, uncharted changes for many institutions. Over the past couple of years, more Christian colleges and universities have begun expanding and increasing their number of online programs. Growing pressures from the pandemic to increase enrollment, graduate employable learners, and universities' relevance are forcing the way Christian institutions operate, causing a shift from the traditions of face-to-face learning and paradigms that have been established to expanding their online education.

This disruption in education demonstrated the gaps in the higher education infrastructure to quickly move to an online or remote platform to deliver a quality learning experience and provide spiritual and mental support for the institutions. We must rethink educational practices and consider effective and appropriate strategies for online learning and the importance of integrating faith in the process. Christian Institutions often have inextricably interconnected missions that provide learners with skills to develop their leadership, service, and spiritual connection. It seeks to integrate faith and to learn within the teaching process. Also, it encourages personal and collective responsibility. Rooted in historical foundations and demonstrated by continued online learning growth, one purpose of Christian education is to contribute to support of a holistic approach to learning (Domenichella, 2016). These Institutions aim to provide a quality educational experience to demonstrate care for the whole person. This whole-person view seeks to promote with development of every person's intellectual, emotional, social, physical, artistic, creative, moral, and spiritual potential. This is true for all Christian institutions regardless of whether the education is face-to-face or online (Rovai, 2008). In the book, *Modern Technologies and the Human Future: A Christian Appraisal*, Craig Gay, professor of interdisciplinary studies at Regent College in Vancouver, Canada, states whatever we use our technologies for, we ought to be using them to enhance ordinary embodied human engagement with each other and with the created world (Bucher & Gay, 2019). It is evident that the pandemic illustrates the importance of human attention and connection and has altered the future of teaching in online learning.

How will Christian institutions answer the call to provide an online learning experience that provides a holistic approach as digital transformation evolves in our society? We must acknowledge some hard truths, recognize the value of change, and evaluate our educational practices. While other industries have had to re-invent themselves when facing challenges of similar magnitude, Christian colleges and universities remain essentially unchanged. However, the last couple of years demonstrated that Christian institutions are needed more than ever. The Christian college and universities must re-connect, unify, and offer more grace as Jesus Christ has done for us after social distancing and being in isolation that has impacted many individuals' spiritual development and mental health. My prediction is that Christian colleges and universities

will become the pioneers of Christ-centered, innovative, inclusive, and thriving digital learning communities.

This essay will highlight effective online learning strategies that identify ways that transform online learning, support digital native and digital immigrant learners, develop a curriculum that aligns with integrating faith, and enhance and create a digital curriculum using technology for learning to improve learners' success.

Transformation in Online Learning and Changing Demographic

As time passes, we must consider the effectiveness and appropriateness of technology used in online delivery and provide adequate support services. Integrating tools such as social media sites like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn Learning, etc., to promote digital inclusion and provide an engaging online learning experience for a new generation of learners has resulted in the use of labels such as "digital native" and "digital immigrant." There are many ongoing discussions among university administrators, faculty, and learners on responding to this digital shift. The digital natives are generally born in the 1980s, and they are comfortable in the digital age because they grew up using digital technology (Čut, 2017). Digital immigrants are born before the 1980s and are fearful about using the technology (Čut, 2017). The term used for this gap is the "digital divide." The digital divide impacts the way we teach and the online learning experience. The demographic group has changed in age, race, gender, income, and some with visible and hidden disabilities. Yesterday's learners are not today's learners, creating a new digital divide. The digital divide has expanded from having broadband access to understanding how to use technology to navigate a global society. Despite the efforts to close the digital divide gap between learners who have access to mobile devices and the internet to learn or perform day-to-day tasks, a digital equity problem still exists regarding age, economic status, and ethnicity. Christian institutions can help close the gap and advance equity by providing opportunities for learners to be educated on using digital technologies in online learning.

 Although the demographic group may have changed, all learners want a connection with faculty members and feel part of the campus community. As a result of the changing demographic in online learning, we see the shifts in the nature and character of these learners.

In an enlightening article written by Georgia Hambrecht, Ph.D., the author discusses ethics between learners and faculty members in online learning. The author illustrates the characteristics she employs in her online course. The author conveys that there are two key points essential to characteristics of morals in a virtual classroom or online education: respectfulness and fairness. This certainly lacks, in my opinion, learners do not have the same opportunity to connect and engage with faculty if they are online in the same manner if the course was face-to-face.

First, the author describes her definition of respectfulness to the learners. The author defines respectfulness as valuing the learners' unique contribution to the class. The learners are given activities such as designing a web page with instructions and providing personal facts, for example: recommending good books or identifying the candidate for the soundtrack of their life. The author suggests the tone of the lectures and contents can also communicate a sign of

respectfulness. An example the author uses is introducing a class topic and requesting the learner to list previous experience or knowledge related to the topic, which gives the faculty some information concerning their life experience. The author also suggests that another way to foster respectfulness is through evaluations.

Secondly, another characteristic that the author illustrates that fosters online learning ethics is fairness and upholding high standards for the learner. You must make sure online assignment deadlines are consistent and fair. I found it helpful to allow learners to have the weekends for more flexibility and time and set assignment deadlines on Tuesday.

Lastly, online learning is not just for teaching skills or knowledge. It also involves being able to develop learners with the ability to demonstrate outstanding character. Online learning pedagogy should be the same as the traditional learning environment. The faculty should have the same expectation for the learner regardless of the delivery modality and model the behavior they would want for the learner, which is being respectful and fair to their peers. This will help build trust, engagement, and community in online learning and improve the quality of instruction. By connecting with and supporting one another, individuals in a faith community strengthen their relationships as they engage with innovative ideas, share challenging issues, gain a vision of life more significant than themselves, and go out into the world seeking to uplift and serve.

Developing Quality Online Learning

Although relationships are essential in an online learning environment, you must know how to organically transform those relationships into a thriving digital learning community. In the well-written article by Michael Grahame Moore, key points discussed the impact of digital technologies that promote social interactions through networking and allows the learners to share file and multimedia to create content. Christian colleges and universities will need to reflect on how faculty could appropriately integrate these digital technology tools into their curriculum to build a Christ-centered learning community.

Moore discussed valid points about the changes in technology and how they significantly impact how we deliver online learning. He describes digital technology as the power provided for learners to work together in creating content through multiple authoring tools, whether in text, audio, or video, that are used frequently by digital native learners who have grown up using technology. The use of digital technology has expanded to social media and other platforms. These sites are being used for training purposes for faculty development, developing civic participation, leadership skills, experimenting, and many other uses. The author poses a question; does it serve the purpose in education for teaching or entertainment? The author made a great point that entertainment is diminished quickly in the eyes of an adult, tuition-paying learner.

On a final note, the author states that institutions should provide faculty and learners training and professional development to utilize digital technology tools effectively. It is essential that faculty members feel confident and comfortable using technology for online learning. It seems as if everyone brings a new term for technological innovation into our vocabulary, making it challenging for the digital immigrant to catch on to the ever-changing

tools. I encourage institutions to develop a basic glossary of the most used digital technology tools at their institutions. Here's a list of digital technology tools with examples for applications or software that may be used at your institutions. This can help reduce anxiety and helps our digital immigrants feel less overwhelmed and, as a result, build their confidence and comfort level to use these for teaching and learning.

1. **Learning Management System.** A Learning Management System is, sometimes called an LMS, is a software application that manages all aspects of the learning process, delivers your content, tracks the learners, and provides reports to ensure the learner is active in the environment.

2. **Lecture and Video Capturing Applications**. Lecture and video applications combine audio, video, text, and graphics used in learning. For example, video and lecture capture systems record the screen of your computer, a video of the presenter, a PowerPoint, a whiteboard, a document camera, or a lab experiment. Examples of lecture and video applications used to complete these tasks include Screen-casting, YouTube, Panopto, Knovio, and Vimeo, which are applications used for online video presentations. Another example of an audio and video sharing tool is Voicethread, a cloud-based application used in online courses for discussions.

3. **Social Networking Sites**. A social network is a website that allows people to come together and share information, photos, and videos. Facebook, Twitter, and Lynda.com (LinkedIn Learning) are the most popular social networking sites.

4. **Instant Messaging**. Instant messaging, sometimes referred to as IM, is a real-time online communication tool that connects two or more people, usually on a mobile device, computer, or laptop. Typical IM applications are GroupMe, Google, Yahoo Messenger, Teams, and Slack.

5. **Picture or Video Sharing**. Various mobile applications and services are used for sharing photos, videos, and messages with other people. The most common applications are Instagram, Snapchat, and Facebook.

6. **Cloud Computing**. Cloud computing delivers on-demand computing services (such as applications, storage, and processing power), typically over the internet and on a pay-as-you-go basis. The cloud computing services used for this research are a software as a service (SaaS) and platform as a service (PaaS). Some examples of SaaS are Google Apps, OneDrive, Dropbox, learning management systems, massive open online courses (MOOCs), and digital badges. An example of a PaaS is Amazon Web Services.

7. **Virtual Meetings**. Virtual meetings, sometimes called virtual conferences, use technology to allow groups to collaborate through an Internet connection using audio and video. Examples of virtual meeting platforms are Zoom, Microsoft Teams, GoToMeeting, Collaborate, and Skype.

The importance of faith-based institutions integrating into the online learning curriculum is to encourage collaboration and improve digital literacy and inclusion. Digital literacy skills are essential for learners wishing to participate in today's digital society. There are policies and processes to ensure that learners have access to the internet and mobile devices, but digital equity goes beyond equipment and broadband. It includes training faculty on best practices to incorporate technology into instruction and providing learners with consistent digital learning experiences.

Developing Online Learning Curriculum and Authentically Integrate Faith and Learning

Christian colleges and universities must keep up with the range of digital technologies available and provide online access to spiritual, emotional, educational, and outreach resources. Christian institutions can incorporate a face-to-face and virtual space in their efforts to inform, form, and transform learners into Christians. As faith-based institutions consider their call to develop learners in faith and how to move online, it can be helpful to examine how other institutions are telling their stories using a digital platform.

An effective Christian institution integrates faith at every chance and level. In the online environment, the integration of faith and learning has been accomplished, at least in some part, by creating devotions, reflections, assignments within the lesson, and Christian principles within the lecture content. Faculty should be experts in their fields, mature in their faith, and incorporate the Christian worldview in their online courses to impact the learners. Faculty members at Christian colleges and universities offering online classes have shown that faith can be integrated into their online course content, just as in traditional courses. This focus on faith integration is primarily designed to build upon and enhance a learner's relationship with Christ and develop a thriving Christian community within the campus. To expand around promoting an authentic experience for learners to integrate faith in the learning process, provide an on-demand or live stream link of chapel services to engage the online learner with the on-campus community. Also, share devotional topics across disciplines that include videos, text, or songs to build a devotion library developed by faculty at your institutions.

Creating a campus culture that develops, nurtures, and inspires Christian servant leaders and scholars is a goal for most Christian campuses, both face-to-face and online. This environment is cultivated beyond the curriculum and is one of the most significant aspects of a Christian institution. Classmates, cohorts, ministry, and testimony among fellow learners are essential for the authentic development of our learners in spiritual growth. We must answer whether Christian colleges and universities are crafting an environment for online learners who may complete a degree program without ever being on-campus. Through collaboration using digital technology platforms, online learners, faculty, and institutions can impact their outreach by extending the institution's Christian community beyond the walls of the physical campus. This extension of community is accomplished by utilizing the relationship-building of the online learning community and the intentional strategies of the institution's faculty and learners to care for and encourage their fellow learners.

Conclusion

All in all, I find the next three to five years, Christian colleges and universities' goals are to become leaders in the online learning space. The focus areas are developing a vision to support and sustain online learning by using digital technology, supporting the changing demographic, and cultivating a culture that demonstrates God's love through inclusion. Here's a list of strategies to develop a Christ-centered online learning community.

New Generation of Learners

1. Engage new learners in higher education programs and courses to increase enrollment, retention, and success by developing a curriculum that focuses on skill-based instruction.
2. Enhance the use of social media and classroom technology in the curriculum for traditional learners to increase student engagement.

Quality of Online Learning Instruction and Integrate Faith in Learning

1. Empower faculty to utilize digital technology in the curriculum to improve student success.
2. Create programs and courses to close the digital skills gap.
3. Apply transformative and experiential learning to allow learners to explore and share their experience on a specific topic to improve learners' success.
4. Develop an institution topical devotional library to share across disciplines.
5. Incorporate an on-demand or live stream chapel or church services in the online courses.

Professional Development

1. Enhance faculty experience using social media and digital technology in an online environment.
2. Empower faculty to have knowledge, confidence, and comfort to utilize digital technology to improve student success.

Overall, serving in my role at a Christian institution inspires and encourages me to continue working for His kingdom and aligning my life with God's purpose. I hope to gain more wisdom and insight to continue this journey to serve our next generation of online learners.

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