

Virtual Reflection or Virtually Reflecting? Doing Group Theological Reflection Online

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Group theological reflection is at the core of many Field Education programs. Group reflection on real-life case studies produces passion, empathy, tears, arms around shoulders, laughter, powerful moments of shared insight, and sometimes even life-long friendships. For many students, this aspect of their seminary experience is at, or near, the top of their favorite memories. So, what happens when you take the concept of group theological reflection and place it in a virtual classroom? Does the same kind of passion get generated? Can a communal transcendent moment happen online? And, ultimately, can good theological reflection take place in an online forum?

These are real questions that must be explored when we choose to use digital technology to create a virtual world as a venue for the reflective aspect of experiential learning programs. In this context, I use the term 'virtual' to describe the experience of being present relationally through the means of online technology without being present physically.

As a field educator, I oversee a summer field education program that is almost completely based online. Ministry Formation courses at the seminary at McMaster University can be taken throughout the academic year (September–April) or during the summer (May–August). The summer program is unique in that it affords students the opportunity to do placements anywhere in the world without being required to meet on campus for group reflection on their ministry experience. Instead, students meet for two days of orientation and group building at the very beginning of the summer course and for one day of debriefing at the end of August. In between those meetings, the weekly group interaction—focused on student presentations of case studies based on their ministry experience—takes place online in a virtual classroom. This reflection is based on my experience in both face-to-face group meetings and virtual-group theological reflection. Group reflection done in a virtual world holds many of the same obstacles that face-to-face group reflection does, as well as some unique options that make it attractive.

THE POTENTIAL AND PITFALLS OF ONLINE THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

The key to a vibrant online community is not that much different than the key to a face-to-face community—intentionality, authenticity, and meaningful experiences to reflect on together. The two-day initial face-to-face meeting is crucial. When the right tone is set, potential for a genuine reflective online community emerges that can enable the virtual experience to be as satisfying as a live one. When they return for a final day of reflection, it has been my experience that people who began largely as a group of strangers, come together for a joy-filled, tear-filled day to unpack together the work they did separately over the summer.

A Written Forum

One of the benefits of online group dialogue is that it must be written. While we have always known that the process of writing case material and responses is a good way to synthesize our thoughts and cause more careful articulation, a face-to-face discussion may easily slide into verbal reporting or responding that favors the verbal group participants. Online group theological reflection demands written material. In my experience, online posts reflect a genuinely measured, sincere, and thoughtful response to a ministry experience that is usually repeated in the ongoing, online group interaction. In a written forum, the discussion tends to be a bit more focused as group members respond to each other and I attribute this, at least in part, to the use of written communication.

For those not as gifted in writing, an online forum can be a challenge. This is particularly true for those for whom the group's common language is their second language. In a virtual-forum body language, facial expression, gesture, and immediate help in finding the right way to express a thought are eliminated. These missing cues may make it more difficult to engage in theological reflection online as robustly as in a face-to-face group.

Sustaining Attention

For some, the lack of physical proximity can lead them to take the group less seriously than they would if they were seeing their fellow group members regularly and having to look them in the eye. The accountability that seems more inherent in face-to-face group meetings is diminished in the virtual meeting, particularly if the group uses written posts as the form for group interaction. Detachment is easy. When this occurs, even the most eager par-

ticipant may become less engaged with group discourse. The lack of physical meetings may exacerbate an inclination toward minimal participation.

Other Challenges

It can be harder to 'coach' theological reflection at a distance. When a group or a particular student is struggling with the art of theological reflection in the virtual classroom, addressing the issue can be trickier than simply drawing someone aside for a conversation and giving them some instruction on how to improve. If it is a whole group that needs some coaching, having a conversation with them is not always easy or straightforward. Anytime we try to help people develop their ability to do good theological reflection we are embarking on a journey that will take time. Doing group theological reflection online will inevitably be more labor intensive.

Despite the fact that I have had many positive experiences with virtual groups, in general, I have found that virtual theological reflection groups usually do lack a certain dynamic that being physically together provides. The assumption that people feel freer to share openly online is not always true. Some people will be more guarded in a virtual discussion if they are anxious about how their written comments will be interpreted without the aid of tone and inflection or if they don't have the ability to quickly clarify a misinterpreted comment. Virtual groups are less willing to ask tough questions or address personal issues. The challenges of group reflection online are often the same as the potential benefits. In other words, the things that can be positive can also take a negative turn and become real challenges for this kind of approach.

Engage in the Task of Coaching the Group

As already noted, one of the challenges of virtual groups is the feeling of emotional distance that can pervade a group when they are not sitting down across from one another on a regular basis. Leaders have to be aware of the danger of complacency and very intentionally dedicate themselves to offering the same kind of teaching/coaching with an online group as they would with any other group. This means working one-on-one with students who need extra coaching, even if this must be done via email or phone. It means giving the group good feedback on their presentations, interaction as is appropriate, and encouraging good performances, privately and in the group as a whole.

Confront Unacceptable Performance

If online groups are going to deliver quality educational experiences to our students and help them develop as theologically reflective practitioners,

then we will need to engage the various shortcomings that our students experience (or perpetuate) with equal, or a higher, degree of dedication than we would when we sit with our students in our office or over coffee. The online world can make these conversations more challenging, but they must be part of how we do online theological education if it is to equip students effectively for their calling.

CONCLUSION

If at all possible, including face-to-face elements with the virtual component can help to increase the overall experience and quality of group reflection. In my program, the opening two days are a vital part of forming group affinity and trust. In those two days, we discuss theological reflection, explore our expectations for the group, share personal stories, our summer learning goals, prayer requests, and have meals together. Bonds begin to form and these are carried into the virtual community that continues to meet throughout the summer.

As the virtual church continues to emerge as a very real option for people to choose as their primary place for spiritual connection and growth, online education may become essential in order to train students for virtual ministry. One of the great needs for the church in the years ahead may be that of “ipastors.” That is, people who are able to pastor people through online forums. Introducing virtual Field Education options contributes to the overall equipping of a new generation of virtual ministry pioneers.

When we learn to adjust our expectations and understand that meeting in a virtual classroom is not better or worse—just different—than being physically together in a classroom, then we put ourselves into a position to maximize an online experience. When we have helped to create the right set of expectations and dedicated ourselves to helping develop the life of our online group, then our virtual reflection community can thrive and, perhaps, even experience some virtual moments of genuine transcendence.

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