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Interrupting Adult Learning through Online Pedagogy

This paper considers online pedagogy in relation to Christian adult learning and asks how this might be interpreted by theological educators. The online community of inquiry is proposed as one recognized pedagogical approach and illustrated by reference to a continuing professional development programme for online adult learners across the church school sector in the UK. In seeking an online pedagogy that is also theologically informed, attention is given to Belgian theologian Lieven Boeve's work concerning a theology of interruption. Insights gained from this are considered alongside reflection from the author's experience as online educator. The paper concludes that online pedagogy can be interpreted as interruptive when influencing and shaping the online environment for adult theological learning.

Introduction

Educators today ask how online technologies can be used to support an environment that enables learners to engage in meaningful learning. Online technologies facilitate contemporary teaching and learning as well as being media for human communication and expression. A convergence of online technologies delivers and supports a range of teaching and learning experiences (Holmes & Gardner, 2006). Initially dependent on text-based web conferencing, online learning increasingly features sophisticated and interactive digital media. In many formal educational settings, online

courseware and communications are hosted within the infrastructure of a virtual learning environment. This means that long-standing assumptions about the relationship between time, place, pace, and physical presence in education are changing (Morgan-Klein & Osborne, 2007). This paper explores a theologically informed approach to the question of how these changes should be viewed in the context of adult theological education, drawing upon Lieven Boeve's theology of interruption.

Different approaches to online pedagogy influence the design, delivery, and quality of the learning experience. As teaching moves away from the physical or face-to-face classroom, some researchers suggest that a new pedagogy is needed. Proponents claim that online learning is pedagogically disruptive because it moves away from traditional patterns and towards new flexible, informal, and innovative teaching and learning approaches (Siemens, 2004; Downes, 2007; Kop, 2007; Meyer, 2010). However, other literature pays less attention to the idea of online pedagogical novelty, seeing instead that online learning depends upon a wide range of pedagogical practices that emerge from existing educational theories applied in the online environment according to the philosophy or infrastructure of the online educator. One pedagogical camp looks towards the objectivist view of knowledge and emphasises transmission of learning outcomes and course materials over more active learning processes (Weller, 2007). Knowledge is imparted from teacher (or computer) to learner through successful instructional design principles. This mode of online learning tends towards a sustaining or replication of existing instructional practices as pedagogy is transferred from face-to-face classroom practice into the online environment (Gulati, 2004). However, questions remain about the quality of learner experience this brings (Stephenson, 2001).

The discourse about online pedagogy is, however, more generally linked with the educational theories and principles of constructivism (Salmon, 2003; Morgan-Klein & Osborne, 2007; Mason & Rennie, 2008) that acknowledge the active role of the learner in constructing knowledge. These broadly state that views of the world are not objective or stable but change as learners reflect and build on past experiences, with new knowledge and understanding occurring in and through these active constructions. Dewey (1966), Vygotsky (1962), Brookfield (1986), and Bruner (1986) can be highlighted among those who have significantly influenced the constructivist field. From such theories, a more widely

accepted understanding of online pedagogy has emerged which holds that active processes of dialogue, collaboration, and interaction are fundamental to learning. Online constructivist pedagogy seeks 'active meaning-making and interpretation of experience which is communal, collaborationist and negotiable' (Carusi, 2003, p. 96). Gulati (2004) states that online pedagogy must reflect learning for real-life contexts with flexibility, collaboration, and openness among learning participants. Mason and Rennie (2008) favour 'an open-ended, negotiable approach which structures activities so that students have opportunities to collaboratively negotiate knowledge and to contextualize learning within an emergent situation' (p. 17). Lee (2010) succinctly summarizes constructivist pedagogy as learner-centred, context-rich, and experience-based.

This paper is concerned with online pedagogy in relation to adult learning in the context of theological education. In the field of adult learning, Freire (1972) is a key exponent of pedagogies that moved away from a 'banking' of programmed content towards more interactive and critical models of learning. Knowles (1980), in his theory of andragogy, considers the adult learner as possessing particular characteristics, needs, and resources that strongly influence the learning situation. Schön (1983) asserts a need for critical and reflective activity in order for adults to develop in their professional role. Mezirow (1991) sees how adult learners become autonomous thinkers through negotiating their own meaning systems (ideas, beliefs, values, experience) rather than uncritically acting on those of others. Such theories inform adult theological education which recognizes both exploration of doctrinal content and attention to shared human experience. Theological educators understand that critical dialogue and reflective activity help adult learners know their own starting points and embedded positions which, once recognized, can be challenged towards new or more meaningful theological frames of reference. Allowing space and creating opportunities for self-reflection and reflection-in-dialogue-with-others is an essential pedagogical principle. Opportunities to examine assumptions or question one's theological stance or faith identity can deepen an existing worldview or allow it to take on new meaning, especially when articulated in sustained critical conversation with others (De Bary, 2003). A pedagogy of adult theological learning based on conversation and dialogue, both inner and social, invites an appreciation of diversity and opens possibilities for healthy debate and creative thinking

(Stone & Durk, 2006). The development of critical openness, together with theological reflection, can afford a genuine search and readiness to act for personal and social change (Regan, 2002).

Christian educators hold a commitment to salvation history and gospel values. They also have the task of helping adult learners think critically about contemporary spiritual and moral issues, interpret them wisely, and forge relevant meaning, purpose, and values for today (Rossiter, 1999). The challenge not only is to present Christian tradition in rich and stimulating curriculum frameworks. It is to invite attention to cultural, personal, and professional contexts in relation to church teaching and tradition. Authentic learning seeks engagement with Christian doctrine in fresh approaches that encourage a critical learning process to help shape one's 'personal interpretative map for meaning-making' (D'Orsa, 2013, p. 76). This suggests a need for Christian educators to be open to new pedagogical approaches. But what might this look like for online adult learning? And what theological insights might illuminate online pedagogy?

Method

This paper is framed within an interpretative paradigm that draws on my professional experience in leading an online programme of adult theological learning over the past decade as well as on extensive case study research carried out among online theological educators and adult learners. It does not present research data or state findings, as these have been reported elsewhere (Stuart-Buttle, 2013). Instead, the paper offers an interpretation of online pedagogy that is also theologically informed. It shares some reflective insights about online pedagogy as a different educational space. This invites us to reflect on how people learn theology in contemporary situations.

References to adult online theological learning in the paper relate to a long-standing programme of continuing professional development for adults who are mostly (but not all) teachers working across the church school sector in the UK. A minority are involved in pastoral ministries or studying for personal faith development. The course is a national programme with a curriculum set by the Board of Studies of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales but delivered through local diocesan centres and universities. It consists of eight components, with

required teaching hours, fixed learning outcomes, and assessment criteria.[1] The online mode of programme study was proposed to the Bishops' Conference in 2001 and since 2004 has been accepted as a fully validated certification route. There is no requirement for campus attendance; instead, learners are invited to engage fully in the online environment. Online participants are attracted from across the UK, many of them citing reasons of flexibility of delivery and access that suits professional lives as well as enhanced opportunities for networking and collaboration. Since its inauguration, hundreds of adult learners have participated in this online programme to raise their levels of theological literacy and learn how to apply theological frameworks to professional practice and understanding of Christian faith.

Online Community of Inquiry

The online programme outlined above is broadly based upon the community of inquiry pedagogical model (Garrison et al., 2000). This model is widely recognized among online researchers and practitioners. It places online educators and learners as active participants in the learning process and invites collaborative-constructivist pedagogy, without losing focus on the cognitive aspects of teaching and learning. The online community of inquiry depends upon the interaction of three key elements: cognitive, social, and teaching presence. We briefly outline each in turn.

'Cognitive presence' refers to how online learners construct and confirm meaning. In order for this to occur, a context for critical thinking is needed that relates not just to individual internal learning processes but to the reciprocal relationship between learning contents and real life/work/faith experience. Online pedagogy, therefore, needs to encourage learners to interact with course materials which are purposefully designed to invite personal meaning and knowledge construction through shared inquiry and online discourse. This can be prompted through structured online discussions, reflective journaling, blogging, collaborative online activities, and informal/formal assessment tasks. These interactions are built into the pedagogical design in order to move beyond transmission of learning content or mere exchange of theological information. Instead, the pedagogical goal is to 'draw learners into a shared experience for the purposes of constructing and confirming deeper meaning' (Garrison, 2000, p. 95).

Social presence within the community of inquiry refers to how online learners interact with others in the online environment. They need to establish social relationships around common educational goals and find 'emotional expression, open communication, and group cohesion' (Garrison, 2000, p. 99). This is achieved when learners 'project their personal characteristics into the community, thereby presenting themselves to other participants as "real people"' who are able and willing to articulate feelings related to the educational experience (p. 89). Open and safe online communication can build mutual awareness, foster reflective peer responses, share values, and enhance community principles and ways of working together. This can be brought about in both formal and informal social interactions through peer discussion, live chat, personal e-mail and messaging, and video conferencing. However, it needs to be recognized that while fostering group cohesion and belonging is an important aspect of online pedagogy, it does present challenges. Online social presence is neither guaranteed nor automatically achieved since all human communication, including online mediated expression, carries a potential for misunderstanding and redundancies of meaning.

The third element in the community of inquiry is teaching presence, defined as 'the design, facilitation and direction of cognitive and social processes for the realization of personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile outcomes' (Swan et al., 2008, p. 1). The online educator is critical within this understanding of pedagogy. 'Appropriate cognitive and social presence, and ultimately, the establishment of a critical community of inquiry, is dependent upon the presence of a teacher' (Garrison et al., 2000, p. 96). Online teaching presence cannot be ignored, although the emerging discourse does recognize a changed role from the traditional instructor or academic expert to that of facilitator or learning guide. This can be construed in three ways. The online educator influences the pedagogical design in terms of how course materials, learning activities, and assessment practices are selected, organized, and presented, and also establishes course parameters and organizational guidelines. He or she also takes a lead role in supporting and encouraging the collaborative capabilities of learners to realize educational outcomes by helping them share meaning, identify agreement and disagreement, and reach consensus for knowledge exchange and understanding. This may include drawing in less active participants, giving acknowledgement to individual contributors,

or directing/challenging/weaving the online discussion activity (Garrison et al., 2000, p. 101). The online educator exercises intellectual leadership and pedagogical expertise by sharing resources, diagnosing misconceptions, and giving feedback for learning. In summary, he or she operates within a pedagogy predicated on contact, communication, feedback, and flexibility (Brennan, 2003).

The online community of inquiry demonstrates one model for adult learning and has underpinned this author's online professional practice. Now we might ask how online pedagogy can be theologically informed. We turn to the work of Belgian theologian Lieven Boeve (2007, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c) who proposes a re-contextualization of Christian education in a postmodern cultural context. How might his theology of interruption inform an understanding and interpretation of online theological pedagogy?

Theology of Interruption

In recent times, theologians and educators have sought to invite dialogue with the postmodern world in order to bring the Christian narrative into the contemporary context. The idea of continuity holds that Christian faith must be in dialogue with contemporary culture and society in order to bridge or open new possibilities for Christian expression. However, critics hold a different reading of the Christian narrative, seeing discontinuity or rupture between faith and a secularized, pluralist, and de-traditionalized contemporary world. Such critique limits the possibilities of reciprocal dialogue by closing off Christian faith and tradition. According to Boeve, neither continuity nor discontinuity does justice to the essential link between God and salvation history. If the Christian worldview is closed from the contemporary context, then it is removed from present-day lived experience. On the other hand, if continuity is maintained too easily with the contemporary world, then there is a risk of Christian frames of reference being reduced to the private domain or immersed in a conflicting plurality of worldviews, which poses serious challenges concerning the identity, particularity, and truth claims of Christianity in a secularized and relativist world. So, how can Christian teaching and learning take on plausible and legitimate expression within the changing and challenging context of today?

It is here that Boeve offers a theological concept of interruption as a way for Christians to 'reconsider and reformulate the identity, credibility and relevance of their faith' (2009a. p. 4). A theology of interruption is a not a half-way house, lying mid-way between continuity and discontinuity. Nor it is capitulation, abandonment, or overly easy adaptation of faith to culture. Rather, Boeve proposes a theological model of interruption as a means to open up the Christian narrative to the 'otherness' of contemporary culture so that it thereby can be reconfigured or changed by new insight and incursion. The Christian narrative remains recognizably the same narrative, even if challenged in the process and shaped or enriched anew. This is what Boeve (2007) presents as theological interruption. It offers both dialogical method and imperative to engage Christian tradition with contemporary culture (p. 103).

Boeve (2009c) demonstrates that the Christian narrative has been and always is being interrupted by an encounter with otherness. The story of salvation is permeated by interruption, from a God who reveals himself through creation and the Scriptures, to the incarnational in-breaking of Jesus Christ into human history, whose very birth, death, and resurrection serve as the supreme model of interruption. So the Christian narrative is never closed but continually permeated by newness of encounter with the divine 'other'. The Christian story is always open to a new reality of God at work in the church, in the world, in personal living, and in those encountered through a plurality of worldviews, cultures, and situations. This interruption confronts our personal and communal narratives and is the place where God can become known and revealed. For Boeve, this invites a dynamic praxis of interruption which invites faithfulness to one's own particular narrative identity and tradition, at the same time as opening up to and respecting the other. This praxis moves beyond patterns of continuity or discontinuity to invite a theological re-imagining and re-articulation of the Christian gospel in the contemporary situation.

Online Pedagogy as Interruption

Boeve's theology of interruption suggests that while the core of the Christian narrative holds true, at the same time it must be open to fresh expression in contemporary cultural contexts in order to continue to speak to its own internal community and engage with the external world. Boeve does

not relate a theology of interruption directly to online pedagogy or the practice of Christian education. Therefore, what insights might be gained from it? Rather than replicating a debate about whether online learning disrupts, transforms, or merely sustains pedagogy, a different approach for Christian educators is to consider how online pedagogy is interruptive in theological vision and for educational praxis. The remainder of the paper now takes up this discussion.

Learning viewed through a lens of interruption carries resonance for theological education. Each new learning situation invites continuity with tradition or what has gone before, at the same time as it opens up new possibilities. Authentic learning is never about reiterating a closed narrative but is rather about being open to new articulation. For learners themselves, this might mean acquiring new knowledge/understanding, transformed perspectives, or realization of personal insight/development. Stern (2013) points out that real learning always involves surprise. In doing so, he echoes the educational ideas of philosopher Martin Buber (2002), that learning is 'neither a routine repetition nor a lesson whose findings the teacher knows before he starts, but one which develops in mutual surprise' (p. 241). Approaching pedagogy through a lens of interruption takes us beyond seeing learning as technical exchange of information prompted by a need for objective understanding or as monologue that repeats or reinforces the status quo (ibid, p. 22). Instead, it opens up a sense of learning that allows the unexpected to interrupt the learner and/or the learning process or situation.

The idea of interruption carries further relevance when traditional courses are moved into the online environment, as this gives theological educators an opportunity to re-think existing strategies and learning organization. In moving away from the traditional classroom framework, online pedagogy invites more open and personalized approaches to learning, available in synchronous/asynchronous mode with accessible and flexible 24/7 delivery. Learning opportunities are extended via online technologies for adults in their homes, schools, workplaces, parishes, or places of ministry. This encourages adult learners to engage in theological study, previously deemed irrelevant, inaccessible, or impossible for adult lifestyles challenged by family, work, ministry, and personal-social commitments. Geography and time are removed as defining characteristics of participation and interaction, creating new opportunities to take up

faith study beyond the local parish, college, or catechism class. The scope and vision of Christian educational ministry is thus opened up by online possibilities. This has significance for the ownership of theology, formerly the preserve of the university, seminary, or specialist theologian. It suggests a different sort of theology, not derived from academics or church hierarchy but emerging from within the ordinary people of God (Astley, 2002; De Bary, 2003).

Online pedagogy determines course design and curriculum materials. Whereas a traditional course may depend on linear structures and hierarchical thinking to shape courseware and resources, online learning uses interactive hypertext materials. This allows selection of and access to learning contents according to personal order, choice, control, timing, and pace. The ability to download, add or annotate one's own or another's work, or extend a primary text or online posting beyond the boundary or meaning of the original author becomes possible. E-mail, discussion boards, blogs, wikis, social bookmarking, file-sharing, RSS feeds, Web search, instant messaging, social networking, virtual worlds, audio or video podcasts, or e-portfolios may feature in the learning design. Such technologies open up interruptive and unexpected dimensions as it is not always possible to anticipate or control how they are used in the service of learning. Learning may well take place beyond the scope or control of the online educator, especially when online discussion and peer collaborations occur behind more visible course structures (Huang, 2002).

Online pedagogy presents learning resources that invite user-generated content. This raises epistemological questions about the nature of knowledge, which many theological educators agree is more than mere online information exchange. Sajjadi (2008) sees a danger in online pedagogy taking religious knowledge and interpretation away from authoritative sources. This, he suggests, interrupts the authoritative nature of religious tradition and encourages the emergence of personalized knowledge spaces built through the agency of learners as co-authors of knowledge-construction and co-producers of meaning. We recognize instead a creative or interruptive tension for the online educator, whose task is to uphold the wisdom of Scripture and doctrinal tradition while, at the same time, encouraging communal inquiry, experiential-critical reflection, and peer communication according to the character, needs, hopes, fears, and experiences of adult learners themselves.

We saw earlier that the online community of inquiry holds cognitive, social, and teaching presence as key elements for collaborative rather than instrumental learning (Lewis, 2007). Increasingly, online educators recognize that effective online pedagogy depends upon successful relationships within an inquiring community (Downes, 2007; Garrison et al. 2000; Holmes & Gardner, 2006; Palloff & Pratt, 2007). This means that attention is needed for quality and depth of conversation, reciprocal exchange, negotiation of meaning, and the development of relationships to support learning and teaching (Ascough, 2007). Notions of Christian education rest strongly upon the centrality of human community and personal relationships (Dinges, 2006; Gresham, 2006). Palmer (1998) reminds us that education will only be truly transformative when it cherishes the human person who lies at the heart of the enterprise. This invites relationships in which we speak and listen, make claims on others, and become accountable to those around us. The cultivation of such learning communities of truth, Palmer argues, should be the goal of Christian education. Critics might question whether this is possible in the online environment and challenge the quality of human communication, identity, and relationships expressed there. However, research indicates that genuine relationships and enriching experiences of growing in faith exist among people who authentically share themselves, their learning, and their lives in the online environment (Hess, 2005; Campbell, 2005; Stuart-Buttle, 2013).

Online pedagogy affects the ways that learners think and communicate, theologically and educationally. It allows access to religious narrative and educational discourse in ways previously unknown. It presents new possibilities for belonging, communicating, relating, being present, and sharing faith with others. It brings about cognitive and affective learning when exchange of narratives takes place with mutual respect, trust, and a critical yet open and reflective spirit (Gresham, 2006; Zukowski, 2000). It is a missed opportunity if Christian educators fail to take notice of this new space for learning (Stuart-Buttle, 2011). Online pedagogy changes how people learn, and it prompts educational practitioners to adopt more participatory and collaborative ways. As Hess (2013) points out, there are shifts underway in how learning happens in the 21st century. Christian educators, working in a globalized world, need to be attentive to these shifts in order to design learning experiences that are effective and constructive for today's learners.

Conclusion

This paper has considered how Christian adult learning is interrupted by emerging practices in online pedagogy and asked how this might be understood and interpreted by theological educators. The online community of inquiry has been presented as a pedagogical approach, with an emphasis on cognitive, social, and teaching presence for quality and effective online learning. Reference has been made to research literature and personal online practitioner experience. Particular attention has been given to Boeve's theology of interruption. Insights have been drawn from his concept of theological interruption to propose that online pedagogy is interruptive in its capacity to influence and shape the online environment for adult theological learning. This invites further discussion about future theological education in new virtual spaces.

Notes

1. Core-component courses are Old Testament, New Testament, Christology, Church, Sacraments, and Moral Theology. The remaining components are specialist electives chosen from areas of practical theology such as Philosophy of Christian Education; Mission, Ethos, and Values in the Church School; Catholic Social Teaching; Chaplaincy; Engaging with World Religions; Liturgy and Collective Worship; Youth Ministry; and Parish Catechesis. The specialist components are determined by each local provider.

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