

Hermits, Closed Orders and Congregations

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Introduction

This paper examines how the Open Theological College, a distance learning course in theology, has enabled students from a diverse background to study theology part-time alongside their other commitments in life. Important factors for their success include flexibility and accessibility of the course. It is suggested that, for the future, besides any improvements related to learning technology, the OTC can work yet further to improve the accessibility of the course by working towards building a learning community that involves a yet wider range of individuals and approaches, and perspectives to theology within its boundaries. This includes such issues as how communal relationships should be construed and how power between the education provider and learners should be brokered.

Background

The Open Theological College (OTC) was originally formed in the early 1990s as a partnership of six UK bible

colleges. Its mission was to promote theological education for those who could not attend traditional residential-based theology courses. Modeled in principle after the Open University, Level 1 courses were delivered by the partner colleges, and Levels 2 and 3 directly from the OTC. The administration of the course was also done from the OTC in Cheltenham. The programme was validated by the University of Gloucestershire (then Cheltenham and Gloucester College of Higher Education) and the College operated from the premises of the University.

The OTC was incorporated into the University in 2002 and became part of the Department of Humanities. Subsequently, the University decided to redevelop the programme. All levels would now be delivered by the University, and the old programme was to be phased out. The provision of electronic learning tools was enhanced, including with a greater integration of library facilities (including access to electronic articles via ATLA) and the addition of WebCT virtual learning environment software. Students could also now utilise a postal library. The programme had originally been delivered with no fixed time limits for completing each module as long as this was within the overall time limits of the students, but from 2006 the delivery of modules was moved into a semesterised system. Currently, the new programme has been completely developed, with some 35 modules either written or revised. New features for 2009-2010 include move to Moodle VLE software and minor revisions to the Level 1 programme. The student body is diverse, consisting of mature students in UK and abroad. All study part-time, even though a full-time mode is also available upon request. As the student body is diverse, it is difficult to identify a typical student, but some examples of an OTC student might include a computer programmer studying on the course part-time alongside their work, a housewife, a retired professional, or a pastor in Christian ministry, whether with or without previous academic study, either in theology or some other field.

Learning model

Each module includes a substantial learning manual that guides students in their study and includes a basic explanation of the module content, activities to reinforce learning and links to guided readings. As students progress in their studies, they are also encouraged to move towards their own research. While no residentials where students physically gather together are required, each module offers a two-week Moodle discussion seminar, and students are also offered an annual residential summer school. Students submit their assignments to tutors with whom they can communicate by telephone and email. The assignments are marked by their tutor and moderated at the OTC office according to standard University moderating procedures. Students then have an opportunity to have a telephone or email tutorial with their tutors after receiving their assignments back marked.

Features that have enabled students to study successfully with the OTC

Probably the most important feature for the success of the programme has been the provision of carefully constructed modular course materials that are selfstanding, flexible and accessible. There are no entry requirements to Level 1, except for sufficient proficiency in English, and students can study at home in their own pace within the deadlines for assessment for each module. Associate students do not have any deadlines for the completion of their study programme, they only need to keep within the time limits of each module taken (they can forgo assessment if they do not aim to obtain formal credit for the module). Extensions are available for students with mitigating circumstances. Each module comes with a module manual has been produced by a subject specialist, under the supervision of the Course Leader. (In this, the development process required some considerable effort?each manual is on average of the magnitude of 40,000 to 50,000 words, and manuals for 35 modules thus total some 1,500,000 words). Each module also involves a set of textbooks, and a separate reader of extracts is provided together with the module manual. Most modules are divided to about 15 study units that normally involve about three hours study so that one unit can be completed in one evening's study session. Module units incorporate readings, activities and study links, utilising electronic resources where applicable. The manuals promote various viewpoints, and facilitate the development of critical thinking and research skills as students progress in their studies. As already mentioned, the recent inclusion of VLE (Virtual Learning Environment) seminars has enabled interaction between students who may be far removed geographically. Each seminar typically involves guided asynchronous discussions over a two-week period and

focuses on relevant aspects of the module where such discussions can particularly enhance the learning experience, and seminars generally also reinforce module content and bring out new perspectives on it. Recently the OTC has experimented with linking VLE discussions to assessment. For example, students on the first module 'Introduction to the Old Testament: The Pentateuch' are asked to write a reflective report on their WebCT (current VLE software used) seminar as part of their first assignment.

Blended Learning and the OTC

The advantages of campus-based learning usually include closer teacher-student and student-student interaction, the opportunity to take care of any administrative issues relating to studies in person with relevant officers at the University, and, importantly, overall feeling of community.¹ At the same time, except for cost considerations, the advantages of distance learning include emphasis on study and research skills and on the development of student initiative in and responsibility for their own learning.² Blended learning of course would try to combine best aspects of both face to face and distance learning. Interestingly, most campus-based courses at the University of Gloucestershire now include a VLE site, and, in general, most higher education institutions in the UK have incorporated VLE. Because many part-time students on campus-based programmes are unable to attend campus regularly, it is useful for residential programmes to consider any issues relating to delivery that have traditionally been associated with distance learning (e.g. dealing with students who find it difficult to attend lectures), in case such considerations might help these students. At the same time, for example, VLE sites with links to resources and enhanced electronic library facilities will enhance the experience of both campus-based students and students at a distance.

Learning communities

Here we come to the questions of how learning happens and what makes good learning. It is clear that much of what we learn we learn from others. Of course, we also learn from experience, and while some of our experiences are individual, many of them arise from interaction with other people. Even when we learn from experiences that are not directly shaped by other people, we reflect on such experiences based on our previous understanding, and much of this has been shaped by our previous learning and experiences with others. And, of course, as language is the medium through which much of our reflection takes place, and language is learned from others, this means that ultimately practically all of our learning is communal one way or another, even when we sometimes might want to try to give as little acknowledgement to the communal element as possible. And, of course, much of our learning from others and from literature is based on a body of knowledge that has developed over generations, and hundreds, even thousands of years. While we may not always agree that all aspects of the body of knowledge available to us constitute an advance in knowledge, in some areas, such as technology-related subjects, this is certainly the case, save any ethical reservations we might have about the application of such knowledge. As for theological studies, in any case, it is the nature of the subject that one would be expected to interact critically with the interpretations of others that ultimately span the two-thousand-year history of the Christian church and beyond.

Learning communities and the development of knowledge

We may thus summarise that practically all of our learning is communal, whatever the case, and this can also very much be said about theological learning. However, throughout history people have had a differing idea of what communal learning should be like. In terms of theological education, people in the past have had a wide variety of understandings about what community means. If we take theological learning in a wide sense of incorporating anything that relates to learning about Christianity, the New Testament itself suggests guidelines for what a Christian (learning) community should be like. And yet, even (church) history has shown that various individuals have interpreted these guidelines differently. Related interpretations range from hermits who sought to get closer to the divine (invariably with a desire of a better understanding of the divine, which of course can be considered a form of learning) in isolated places, to monastic orders that were themselves more or less isolated but operated as a group to

work together and share ideas to modern evangelistic congregations who often promote a more universal engagement. As for theological study in higher education, as with most other education, the predominant model has generally been that students come to the teacher to learn. This has probably been much the case since the development of universities in Middle Ages, but one might trace the roots of this for example to the scribal schools of ancient Mesopotamia. And, of course, in the Orient, a dominant traditional model of learning has been a close one-to-one relationship between a master and a disciple. Ultimately, these have incorporated the idea that learning is 'delivered' by the teacher in close physical proximity to the student, with its associated feedback and reflection in effect more or less taking place under the close physical supervision of the teacher. Certainly, such a model increases the power of the teacher to develop the student in ways that the teacher wishes. However, with the development, or, rather, proliferation of books, delivery has become less dependent on physical proximity between the student and teacher.³ Naturally, in general, books have been available since the development of writing towards the end of the fourth millennium BC, but it has been only with the advent of the printing press that books could become the property of the masses (interestingly, libraries as such already existed before the invention of the printing press). Such developments have inevitably reduced the need for close proximity between students and teachers and enabled more independent learning. At the same time, they have probably decreased the direct power of teachers and other authorities, and this may ultimately have even been one important reason for the development of democracy in the West.⁴ Of course, the choice of books often limits one's choices, making culture and scholarly communities more of a delimiting factor, and this is probably for example reflected in the way Western consciousness has worked since the enlightenment and the invention of the printing press and the development of modernity.⁵

Subsequent to the development of the printed page, the development of electronics and computers that started in the West, and in the latter part of the 20th century in particular, has further enabled access to information that requires less direct interaction between students and teachers. One interesting future development that is also very relevant for distance learning is the development of digital libraries. While digitising all books and articles in the world is still quite a way off, the trend is towards digitisation, and much has been digitised already. For example, OTC students can access the ATLA electronic database with a good number of articles available online, and can already preview books via Google books. Certain publishers make their books available also in electronic form, sometimes even free of charge.

Technology has of course also enabled those with similar interests to increasingly be able to communicate with each other without being in close physical proximity. While such communication already occurred via letters in antiquity, and telegraph and telephony from the 19th century on,⁶ the recent development of the Internet in particular has enabled virtually instantaneous communications between various parts of the world (this includes email and internet telephony). The Internet, and recent computer technology in general, have enabled such innovations that relate to learning technology as VLEs that are presently taken for granted. In general, for example, with the OTC, students are constantly evaluating the practical side of delivery and, as one might guess, provide feedback about course delivery constantly. This means that it is important to work towards increasingly efficient and user-friendly delivery and access to learning resources that technology might enable. That said, interestingly, a number of students express that participating in VLE seminars has contributed towards a feeling of belonging and reduced their isolation, while some prefer to work on without much direct interaction with others.⁷

Technology thus both enables people to access increasing amounts of information without the need of physical proximity to the provider of that information, and at the same time potentially enables virtual contact with others with similar interests from their location. Interestingly, such a situation seems at first sight to increase choices that are available to the individual in question. Consequently, those who wish to remain isolated hermits or equivalent can in many ways opt to do so (even when it is generally unlikely that they can withdraw to a cave, even though perhaps to a virtual cave instead),⁸ on the other hand, those that wish to engage directly with others potentially have a global reach through the Internet. In this particular sense, technology seems fairly neutral, even though, it certainly seems to increase the potential for people to interact with each other, and this seems a useful trend. As one specific point, we should also mention here that, importantly, technology clearly seems to enable enhanced access to people with

disabilities, including via distance when such people might find it difficult to move and travel about.

In terms of what is actually being taught, as learning (or, perhaps, rather, teaching) usually involves exercise of power, technology seems to at least partly devolve related power away from those that have traditionally decided what should be taught and what not, even if such decisions may sometimes have been implicit and influenced by tradition and culture. For example, students might have easy access to information that would not normally be recommended by teachers, for whatever reason. As one related observation, such devolving of power and the ability to pick and mix has probably further helped the advent of today's postmodern age. The advent of global communications has also enabled people to become more aware of other cultures and ways of thinking, even though language barriers are still one significant limit to true intracultural understanding. At the same time, on a different trajectory, the development of mass media (newspapers, radio and television? these are now also delivered through the Internet) has actually worked towards increasing the ability of those in power to at least influence their societies and beyond with their views.⁹ There is thus a tension between individualism and democracy on one hand, and control on the other, and it is no wonder that, for example, governments presently seem to be increasingly interested in monitoring the Internet, and even controlling its usage directly, at least in certain parts of the world. However, and as already implied, any education provider will also have to ask questions about the use of the Internet, certainly, making references to what are deemed as dodgy websites by students is a concern for the OTC. Of course, such uncritical referencing is a simple example, but, for example, how about if students are referring to and influenced by literature that advocates a particular academic stance which might not be considered as acceptable by the education provider? With the OTC this might for example include a student with non-trinitarian views, against which there are certainly no apparent explicit qualms as such, but such a student might still be in practice be marked down for holding such views, or even considered strange or at least to some extent the odd one out. Or, to what extent could a follower of Islam in practice really study on the OTC course? Or, in a wider sense, what role should personal faith commitments play in the study, and on what terms can and should people with varying faith commitments and presuppositions study on the course, considering that the relationship between faith and academic study is known to be a tricky issue for a number of those who study theology? In general, we know even from the history of science that new and radical views can be found difficult to accept, and if and when they have been accepted and eventually become mainstream, this may sometimes even have taken a considerable amount of time.¹⁰ These simply suggest that what should be considered as acceptable and what less so, or not at all, may not be a clear-cut issue at a given time, and what is not considered acceptable at a given time might be considered thus later, or in a different academic culture.

Through these comments, we can see that an important issue is not only to ensure that people can be in a situation where they can learn, but the question of what they should learn and who controls the end product and how. Certainly, the development of technology has now enabled the coming together of minds from across the globe. Much of discussion with distance learning is about asking questions about the experience of students and ultimately the quality of student learning. While these are valid concerns, one may nevertheless ask the question of whether some of the worries are related to the question of how much the 'teachers' have control over students taught. In order to move forward in this, perhaps universities should think yet further of what constitutes good learning and scholarship. In theological subjects in particular, we know that, for example within the subfield of the Old Testament (the main area of specialisation of the author of this article), there are various schools of thought, each teaching their students in a particular way (mainstream, maximalist, minimalist). From the standpoint of culture, for example, can such learners that do not embrace the boundary conditions of the learning community be embraced? Or, better, how can the boundaries expanded to include a wider array of individuals with differing perspectives and approaches? In the past, communities have been able to ostracise or otherwise block the progress of learners who do not share their fundamental assumptions. The lessening of control in a number of ways in the modern world has (as it certainly seems) increased the freedom of learners to take views that differ from dominant ones. With the OTC, as suggested by comments above, sometimes issues relating to diversity in thinking arise directly from students. At other times, this may be less the case, and it is the task of the provider to reflect on these based on some other considerations. Certainly, students coming to a new field of study, such as the Old Testament, may often not be in a position to critique new approaches, and should be guided by the education provider. At the same time, as already hinted at, the

provider may be fixed to a particular set of approaches, and it might require an innovative student or equivalent to give new ideas. Also, sometimes students might feel difficult to express different or radical ideas if they feel that the academic culture they are part of does not support such ideas. It might even be asked if, for example, some students who approach the subject from a personal faith perspective might, in the course of their studies, perceive academic study as not supportive of faith and quietly withdraw, or, in general find the course as not what they expected. Or, vice versa, with faith-based courses, some students may feel that given approaches are too restrictive in terms of a particular denominational stance.¹¹ Certainly the OTC does have students who say that the course was not what they expected, and one may wonder if allowing for more diversity might have helped, even when it is sometimes not possible to be certain of the reasons. And, of course, if the course is perceived in a certain way, some prospective students might not wish to embark on it to start with. To address these types of issues, the balances of power need to be carefully considered in order to arrive at an optimal mix between traditional approaches to theological learning and innovation within such learning. If one can thus arrive at a balance that provides for optimal results with learning, we are in other words speaking about how to achieve enhanced quality and standards of learning.

Summary and prospects

To summarise, it is very beneficial to utilise technological innovations for enhancing student learning in a distance learning context in particular. Accordingly, providers should carefully pay attention to adapting helpful technologies for themselves. However, the technologies available should be used in a carefully considered manner. Ultimately we also come to issues of community and how power is used within communities. The potential danger of allowing too much freedom is the lack of quality of student learning. The danger of too much control is the lack of finding new innovative ways to learning and the subject matter, and potentially hampering the progress of students that do not fit in commonly known and accepted categories. In theological study, there are ample examples of both of these extremes. The task is to find approaches that make students aware of the rich tradition of theological study while at the same time enabling students to seek their own innovative views and perspectives on the subject.

As for universities, they have a fair bit of control over issues relating to learning through their course design and degree awarding powers. In addition, scholarly communities generally consist of persons qualified through university study. (In fact, these communities are fairly global nowadays, with much of their communication occurring as would happen with distance learning programmes, and with the occasional residentials [conferences]). With for example access to public funding, such communities, which of course have their own cultural characteristics and ways of thinking, also exert considerable power. As intimated, one of the tasks would then be for these communities to maximise access to existing body of knowledge without becoming overly prescriptive about what to do with it. Naturally, in this context, it is very important for such communities to continually reflect on what quality of learning is. Generally, monitoring quality takes place through peer review,¹² and the government also provides guidelines to education providers broadly based on the peer review process. Innovation will be to encourage people to higher understanding that truly transcends limits previously experienced, and the peer review process should allow for diversity and explorations of previously uncharted ideas and territories, including when external examiners might look at student work on a course they have been assigned to. In the past, hermits sought to withdraw from the world in order to transcend its limitations. Similarly, monastic communities, and churches in general sought to form their own communities that would again transcend the world around, and sometimes transform it. In theological learning, perhaps the task is to find a model of a learning community that can build on existing knowledge and at the same time truly attempt to transcend what already exists for better understanding and for a better world.¹³ The challenge for distance learning (and for education in general) is to find a model that enhances the possibilities of students to move towards such a path. In this, studying at a distance naturally gives students the freedom to be more independent. At the same time, they perhaps have less personal access to a learning community in the discipline that could help them benefit from the learning that the community has already achieved, in addition to any feeling of belonging that at least some might desire. The important point for future course design is to enable best aspects of both tradition and innovation. This in my view will also be a continuing challenge that the OTC course faces in the future, even when it is clear that the OTC has already worked to address many of these issues through its course design. As can be seen,

the issue is ultimately not about mode of delivery, but about the way students are both made to understand what the existing knowledge is and how to truly transform and develop that knowledge further in innovative ways, and one may trust that this will ultimately benefit their respective communities, and society and humanity at large. This said, it is important to continually consider further ways to develop the way the OTC programme, and for that matter, all theological programmes are delivered at a practical level in support of these important goals.

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Endnotes

- Cf. e.g. V. Roach and L. Lemasters 'Satisfaction with Online Learning: A Comparative Descriptive Study', *Journal of Interactive Online Learning* 5.3 (2006), 317-332 (pp. 321-322).
- Cf. e.g. Roach and Lemasters 'Satisfaction with Online Learning', p. 320.
- Cf. Eriksen, T.H., *Globalization: The Key Concepts* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2007), pp. 16-17. Eriksen also notes that books particularly (have) enabled the accumulation of knowledge.
- Cf. Eriksen, *ibid.*, p. 24. Eriksen however notes that in another sense they have promoted standardisation of thought (*ibid.*, pp. 24-25).
- *Ibid.*, pp. 24-25.
- See e.g. Patricia Fara, *Science: A Four Thousand Year History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009),

pp. 212-213 on telegraph.

- Note here the comment in Roach and Lemasters, 'Satisfaction with Online Learning', pp. 320-321 (quoting G. Rosenfeld, 'A comparison of the outcomes of distance learning students versus traditional classroom students in the community college'. Dissertation Abstracts International, 66[05] [2005], 1607) that, while the overall quality of learning between distance learning and face to face learning seems to be comparable, face to face learning seems to achieve higher completion rates. One might argue that this is because of a sense of community that face to face teaching enables. However, might one also at least partially think that as face to face learning generally requires a greater investment of time and money, those who have made such investments are less likely to drop out? The study Non-Completion in Vocational Education and Training and Higher Education: A Literature Review Commissioned by the Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs by C. McInnis, R. Hartley, J. Polesel and R. Teese, **REB Report** 4/00 (Centre for the Study of Higher Education, The University of Melbourne, 2000) also seems to imply that more complicated issues than just the question of being part of a closely interacting community are at stake.
- Cf. Eriksen, Globalization, pp. 29-31 which discusses fragmentation and potential alienation in the contemporary globalised society.
- This was already the case since the invention of newspapers, and of radio and television. Interestingly, the power of experts can perhaps be associated with these developments, too, even when other issues are also at stake, and, recently, certain erosion of confidence in experts has taken place (cf. Eriksen, Globalization, pp. 29, 132-133).
- See e.g. Kuhn, T.S., **The Structure of Scientific Revolutions** (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 1996), P. Feyerabend, *Against Method*, 3rd edn (London/New York: Verso, 1993). Certainly, Kuhn's views, while influential, have been subject to extensive criticism and have not met universal acceptance, as for example Fara, *Science*, notes (see p. 184). While space precludes further comments here, we may note here that Fara herself points out cases where new ideas were not accepted immediately (e.g. Darwin lived his life as a recluse due to some vituperative opposition; see Fara, *Science*, p. 230), in many ways much in line with what Kuhn would argue in this respect.
- It is understandable that, say, faith based providers may have reasons to set certain more or less express boundaries, for example in terms of what might be required of a Christian minister operating in a certain denomination, however, they can nevertheless reflect on these related matters carefully.
- For a recent analysis of peer review, in terms of judging quality in particular, see Michèle Lamont, **How Professors Think: Inside the Curious World of Academic Judgment** (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2009).
- Of course, what a 'better world' means is itself subject for discussion.

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