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9-2020

Athens Visits Jerusalem: Community of Inquiry for Theological Educators

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Oh, look – another article about Community of Inquiry in online learning. (Yawn!) Ever since Randy Garrison and his colleagues coined the term in the early 2000's¹ we've seen thousands of articles encouraging us to incorporate social, teaching and cognitive presence in online course design. We're supposed to set a climate, select content and support discourse to create a robust learning community – how many times have you seen that three-circle diagram² of overlapping presences in some well-intentioned teacher's workshop? I've seen everyone's eyes glaze over in my fair share of online learning presentations. It's all well and good for some education major to conduct yet another study on the effectiveness of this or that pedagogical approach. But we're theologians. We train ministers, not educators. What do John Dewey's disciples³ have to do with discipleship? Or, to quote the famous phrase, what has Athens to do with Jerusalem?⁴

Quite a bit, actually. Community of Inquiry addresses teaching and learning as an interrelated set of networked relationships. The intersecting elements of social, teaching and cognitive presence are used to “inform methodologies and approaches to online learning design

¹ Confirmed by Karen Swan and Phil Ice, “The Community of Inquiry Framework Ten Years Later: Introduction to the Special Issue.” *The Internet and Higher Education*, 13 (2010): 1-4.

² Community of inquiry framework from “Critical Inquiry in a Text-Based Environment: Computer Conferencing in Higher Education,” by D. R. Garrison, T. Anderson, and W. Archer, *The Internet and Higher Education*, 2. (Amsterdam: Elsevier Science Inc., 2000), 88.

³ Community of Inquiry is largely considered an application of education reformer John Dewey's work in the first half of the 20th Century. See Kelvin S. Beckett, “Dewey Online: A Critical Examination of the Communities of Inquiry Approach to Online Discussions,” *Philosophical Studies in Education* 50 (2019): 46-58.

⁴ Tertullian, *De praescriptione*, vii.

and delivery.”⁵ COI is widely considered one of the most influential models in asynchronous learning.⁶ Practically every aspect of online course design has been shaped by COI. Video introductions, discussion forums, peer reviews, journaling, group projects, and a host of additional activities are normative in online classes today because of insights gained through COI-based research. Online degree programs have grown exponentially in the past twenty years, at precisely the same time that COI has come into its own. Those education majors might be onto something. Maybe Athens and Jerusalem aren’t that far apart, after all.

My first love is biblical studies – I’m firmly rooted in Jerusalem. But I’ve been working in online learning a long time. I’ve seen plenty of resistance from theological educators who don’t think online learning is suited to the reflective formation that is integral to ministerial training. Perhaps it would help to consider Community of Inquiry in a different light. I belong to a faith tradition that likes to “call Bible things by Bible names.” So let’s use some Bible names, or a biblical theme, to talk about COI and online learning. Perhaps that’ll help my Jerusalem colleagues think more positively about their Athens-focused workshop leaders.

One of the first things that attracted me to Community of Inquiry was the affinity between COI principles and Christian ideals. Building and nurturing a supportive community (social presence), using real-life events to explore ideas and apply them to meet the needs of the world (cognitive presence) and passing along instruction interspersed with personal meaning to the next generation (teaching presence) are all wonderful ways to think about the life of faith. Who wouldn’t want to build – and teach – online classes using those principles? Online learning

⁵ Shazia K. Jan, Panos Vlachopoulos, and Mitch Parsell, “Social Network Analysis and Learning Communities in Higher Education Online Learning: A Systematic Literature Review.” *Online Learning Journal* 23 (2019): 2

⁶ Holly Fiock, “Designing a Community of Inquiry in Online Courses.” *International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning* 21 (2020): 135.

makes it possible to train disciples around the globe, including students who would never be able to come to our campuses to take classes in a residential format. COI assists in those efforts to fulfill the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19) with a “culturally-responsive pedagogy”⁷ that enables faculty to meet the learning needs of students in diverse contexts.⁸

There are several ways to approach Community of Inquiry and theological education in an online context.⁹ I might suggest an approach that uses a different acronym for COI: community of *incarnation*. At its core, Christian tradition acknowledges the Word who put on flesh and dwelt among us, making God known in grace and truth (John 1:14-18). Moreover, God-in-the-flesh emptied himself, becoming obedient to a humiliating death (Philippians 2:6-8). As followers of this incarnate, exalted Lord, we too are called to lay aside selfish desires. We save our life, paradoxically, by losing it in service to others (Matthew 16:24-25). Christ’s incarnation sets the prime example for life and faith. His incarnation affects the way we think about everything, including teaching online.¹⁰

Perhaps our colleagues in missiology can help us bridge the gap between Athens and Jerusalem. Sherwood Lingenfelter reflects thoughtfully about the implications of the incarnation for cross-cultural ministry. His points are quite relevant for online teaching as its own form of diverse, personal relationships:

⁷ Daniel R. Smith and David F. Ayers, “Culturally Responsive Pedagogy and Online Learning: Implications for the Globalized Community College.” *Community College Journal of Research and Practice* 30 (2006): 401-415.

⁸ Melinda Thompson and Meri MacLeod, “To the Ends of the Earth: Cultural Considerations for Global Online Theological Education.” *Theological Education* 49 (2015): 113-125.

⁹ I highly recommend Stephen D. Lowe and Mary E. Lowe, *Ecologies of Faith in a Digital Age: Spiritual Growth Through Online Education*. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018).

¹⁰ I’m grateful to Timothy Paul Westbrook, “Global Contexts for Learning: Exploring the Relationship Between Low-Context Online Learning and High-Context Learners.” *Christian Higher Education*, 13 (2014): 281-294 for first connecting incarnation to online theological education for me.

It is noteworthy that God did not come as a fully developed adult, he did not come as an expert... He was an infant, born into a humble family in a conquered and subjugated land... God's Son studied the language, the culture, and the lifestyles of his people for thirty years before he began his ministry. He knew all about their family lives and problems. He stood at their side as learner and as coworker.¹¹

Standing alongside as a fellow learner is precisely the sort of “purposeful” interaction¹² that Community of Inquiry encourages in online learning. Theological educators have dedicated their whole lives to studying language, culture, and many other aspects of their chosen discipline. Unfortunately, that singular focus sometimes leads to a myopic view of other disciplines: disciplines that can be useful partners in communicating our passion for theological studies to the students we're called to serve. An incarnational lens can help theological educators move a little closer toward a COI-based Athens while remaining firmly grounded in their discipline-specific Jerusalem.

¹¹ Sherwood G. Lingenfelter and Marvin K. Mayers, *Ministering Cross-Culturally: An Incarnational Model for Personal Relationships*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 16

¹² D. Randy Garrison and Martha Cleveland-Innes, “Facilitating Cognitive Presence in Online Learning: Interaction is Not Enough” in *The American Journal of Distance Education* 19 (2005): 133-148.