Teaching the Bible through the Internet

In the Classroom and at a Distance

Ronald A. Simkins, Creighton University

Abstract

This essay will argue that the internet provides an "added-value" to education, providing resources for more effective teaching and enhancing the learning of the students. The internet emphasizes written communication, facilitating clarity of thought and serving as the basis for critical thinking. The internet emphasizes the social dimensions of learning, and the students' own role in their learning. This essay will illustrate the value of the internet for teaching and learning through a case study of transforming a traditional introductory course on the Bible into a distance course.

Teaching and Learning through the Internet

[1] Once the internet became widely accessible, it offered the hope of inexpensive education to the masses, especially to those who are unable to benefit from a traditional university curriculum as a result of either geographic location or schedule constraints. Internet based education could be delivered (in theory) to any location on the planet, and students could work through the course material at their own convenience. Distance education initiatives have been enthusiastically put forward by university administrators and public officials, often with the intention of developing more economically efficient means of delivering education. Faculty tend to give a more cautious response, questioning, on the one hand, the long-term impact of such initiatives on the role of university professors, and on the other hand, the quality of such education. A continuing focal concern of faculty is how distance or online education can replicate the faculty's own expert contribution to the learning process.[1]

[2] The prospect of inexpensive education over the internet is not likely to be realized - at least not in the near future. Research has indicated, and experience has borne out, that distance education has unexamined costs and limits on its generation of income. In addition to the startup costs, involving both infrastructure and production of course materials, distance education courses incur the costs for technical support, which ideally should be available twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. More significantly, however, the income generated by distance courses is limited by several factors. Foremost among these is the workload of the professor. Distance courses usually create much more work for the professor than traditional courses, and unlike traditional courses, the workload increases linearly for each student enrolled in the course. An online course of ten students may demand as much work from a professor as a traditional course of thirty students. As a result, some studies suggest that most distance courses should be limited to 12-20 students, depending on the level of instruction (Boettcher). A second limiting factor is that distance education is not appropriate for all students. Distance education requires students to be self-motivated and to take responsibility for their own learning. Students who do not have

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[1] See the discussion in Feenberg and University of Illinois Teaching at an Internet Distance Seminar, 16-19.

these characteristics would learn better in a traditional course setting, and may choose simply to avoid online courses.

[3] The potential of the internet for education is not realized in budgetary windfalls but in the transformation of teaching and learning. The technology of the internet provides an "added-value" to education, offering professors resources for more effective teaching and enhancing the learning of the students. The internet has leveled the playing field between distance courses and traditional courses. Through the use of the internet, distance education courses may demonstrate a quality of teaching and learning equal to traditional in-class courses, and may even surpass them. [2]

[4] The technology of the internet is not a cure for poor teaching. Effective learning requires good teaching whether it takes place online or in a classroom. Technology should not be allowed to drive pedagogy, but rather should serve and enhance pedagogy. The internet makes possible new paradigms for teaching, but the value of the internet is in the advantages it provides to enhance student learning. First, the internet emphasizes written communication over oral communication (although as technology improves, this may change). Written communication is not simply a substitute for oral communication but a fundamental mode of expression in its own right.[3] Writing promotes learning and involvement in the course material. Through writing students become self-conscious of the relationship between language and thought; their writing facilitates clarity of thought and serves as the basis for critical thinking.

[5] Second, the internet emphasizes the social dimensions of learning. Unlike the traditional classroom where students and professor have three hours of contact per week and occasional office visits, the internet provides opportunities for contact twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Moreover, the lines of communication are not simply between the student and the professor - as is often the case in the classroom setting - but also between the students themselves. Bulletin boards and chatrooms become the forum for the students to share their learning with one another.

[6] Third, the internet emphasizes the students' role in their own learning. The internet does not allow students to remain passive. By removing the professor from the "front of the class," the internet places a greater share of the responsibility for learning on the students. They must take the initiative for working through the course material; they must determine relevant topics for discussion and then express their own understanding of the subject in writing. Of course, the benefit of this added responsibility is better learning, for students learn more effectively when they are actively engaged in the course material. The internet is also open-ended, encouraging the students to explore the subject matter on their own beyond the limits of the course material.

[7] Finally, the learning advantages provided by the internet are not available solely for distance courses. The internet can provide the same "added-value" to traditional courses. Indeed, the use of the internet in education has blurred the distinction between traditional and distance courses (compare Bonk). Teaching and learning can take place online at remote locations and in the context of the university. In the remainder of this essay, I will illustrate these theoretical and

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[2] See the studies complied by Russell. Additional studies are also summarized on a companion website at http://cuda.teleeducation.nb.ca/nosignificantdifference/index.cfm. One study that indicates that distance education produces more effective learning is Schutte.

[3] Feenberg emphasizes that the properties and power of writing is the key to online education.

practical aspects of teaching through the internet by examining how the internet transformed my traditional introductory course on the Bible.

The Context of the Course

[8] My first encounter with using the internet in teaching an introductory course on the Bible was in the mid-1990s when the technology of the internet first became widely available to my students at Creighton University. I first began to use the internet, not because of any inherent advantages it offered for learning, but rather because it was innovative. It offered me the opportunity to publish course materials in an attractive format that would be accessible to my students twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. My initial publication on the internet was simply an expanded version of the course syllabus. It may have differed little from the paper version that I handed out at the beginning of the course, but it was flashy and at the cutting edge of technology.

[9] As the years passed the course website became much more developed and the content was specifically designed to aid the learning of the students. First, I published lecture notes to enable the students to take notes more effectively in class. In order to assist the students in the writing of course papers, I published extensive guides on how to write the papers and the guidelines by which they would be evaluated. I put online a variety of "handouts," which summarized and supplemented the course lectures. Finally, I published the course lectures on the website in fully developed prose so that the students could read the material prior to class. The class period could thus be devoted to the students discussing the course material rather than my presentation of the material.

[10] In the end, I had produced an attractive virtual textbook for the course, but my teaching of the course had changed very little. I spent far too much class time lecturing, and the students spent far too much time passively listening. Engaging the students in discussion of the course material was an arduous task. Even though they had access to the lectures in advance, I suspect that many students did not read them. They continued to expect me to lecture on the course material in class, and I found myself repeatedly slipping into a lecture mode. I had placed myself on center stage in the class, and the students were content to leave me there.

[11] I had been seduced by the technology of the internet. Technology had become the means through which I had hoped to improve my teaching and the students' learning. Although I enjoyed lecturing and effectively communicated the course material, I was increasingly dissatisfied with the passive learning of the students. The lecture format demanded little active student engagement. I was using the internet in new ways to deliver course materials (on the model of an electronic textbook), but I had not adequately addressed my own pedagogy. My enthusiasm for using the technology of the internet diverted my attention from addressing the primary problem with my course. Rather than consider the issues of what I wanted the students to learn and how I could most effectively teach that, I focused on ways in which the internet could facilitate the students' learning of what I was already teaching (primarily through lectures). The teaching paradigm through which I had learned and now instructed others remained unchallenged (compare the discussion by Farrington).

[12] In the Summer of 1999, the Dean of Creighton's University College, the school serving summer and non-traditional students, invited me to convert my traditional introductory course on

the Bible, "Reading the Old Testament," to an online distance course.[4] I was chosen largely because of my prior experience with using the internet in my courses, and indeed I had already put online much of the material needed for the course. Yet the unique challenges posed by a distance course forced me to address pedagogical issues from which the use of technology in my traditional courses had distracted me. For example, in a distance course I could no longer lecture to my students; the distance format had the result of excluding me from the center stage of the course. Although I could put my lectures online, they would be just another textbook apart from the dynamics of the classroom setting. I could design the course and write much of the course material, but I could not deliver the material to the students. The students would be responsible for their own consumption of the course material. As a result, a distance course based exclusively on the publication of online lectures would be similar to a traditional directed readings course, and I recognized that this was not an effective method for teaching an introductory course on the Bible.

[13] What did I really want the students to learn in the introductory course? For years I had taught the introductory course with two basic objectives: that the students learn the content of the Old Testament and how to interpret the Old Testament. I used lectures to teach about the Old Testament and to model my own interpretation of the biblical texts, and student essays were used to assess whether the students themselves had learned how to interpret the Bible - generally in terms of imitating my own interpretations. The students were, of course, free to offer their own interpretations. However, when the essays were written following the lectures in which I demonstrated my own interpretation of the biblical texts, the students tended to offer variations of my own understanding. The lectures had conditioned the students to read the biblical passages in the particular way in which I had interpreted them. Moreover, the students were concerned to reflect my interpretation in order to demonstrate their knowledge of the course material. In a distance course, however, this approach would not be sufficient, nor, as I began to realize, could it adequately teach the students what I really wanted them to learn.

[14] As the format of a distance course challenged the teaching paradigm with which I was so familiar, I began to reassess my objectives for teaching the introductory course. I had been training my students in a body of knowledge, but I wanted to educate them in a new perspective.[5] I wanted my students to be able to interpret the biblical texts within their literary, social, and historical contexts, but more importantly, I wanted my students to take responsibility for their own interpretations. In order to be responsible members of a religious community, my students needed to be able to formulate and justify their own interpretations of a biblical text and to critique the interpretations of others. I wanted my students to develop a critical perspective on the Bible that is socially and historically informed.[6]

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[4] The Dean had been hired in part to initiate the offering of distance education courses. He chose to offer these courses in Theology in order to build upon a successful existing certificate program aimed at the non-traditional student.

[5] I work with the assumption that all humanities courses in a liberal arts curriculum should have the general learning objective to teach the students to read, think, and write more critically. A new perspective, gained through a critical understanding of a subject matter, should be a goal of education in the humanities.

[6] All undergraduate students at Creighton University are required to take an introductory course on the Bible as part of their core curriculum. The Scripture course is followed by a course in Christian Theology in which the teaching and doctrine of the Christian Church is examined within the context of Scripture.

[15] In order to effectively teach for these learning objectives, I needed to place greater emphasis on the students' own interpretations of the biblical texts. I should not place myself and my interpretations on the center stage. I would still need to provide the students with information on the literary character and the social-historical context of the texts, but I needed to refrain from offering my interpretations and to facilitate the students forming their own interpretations. I also needed to engage the students in discussion of their interpretations, both with myself and with other students. Indeed, the lines of communication that are typical of the lecture teaching paradigm - communication that is structured hierarchically between the professor and the students - now seemed wholly inadequate to facilitate my objectives. The seminar offered a more appropriate paradigm for this task, for in a seminar each participant is responsible for contributing to the discussion, and the lines of communication are far more collegial. Through use of this teaching paradigm the students would be empowered to participate in two ways: first, the students would be expected to explain and defend their own interpretations of a biblical text; and second, they would be encouraged to critique the weaknesses of other interpretations and to offer constructive criticism.

[16] Although teaching for these learning objectives could take place in a traditional classroom setting, the advantages of the internet - the emphases on written communication, the social dimension of learning, and the students' role in their own learning - were well suited for this new, reassessed teaching paradigm. At the very least, the internet could serve the teaching pedagogy by providing a convenient means for publishing course material and distributing student work, and by offering tools for communication between the course participants. But the internet could also enhance student learning. By requiring a written form of communication, the internet would facilitate more thoughtful student participation, and would ease the burden of assessing the work of other students. Moreover, the similarities between the advantages of the internet and the expectations of the seminar teaching paradigm indicated that this paradigm was an appropriate approach for teaching the introductory course on the Bible as a distance course.

The Structure of the Course[7]

[17] In designing the distance course I focused on four "ingredients" that together will address my learning objectives: content, interpretation, evaluation, and discussion. The content of the course will be delivered through webpages and textbooks. In particular, the webpages will include discussions of the literary, social, and historical contexts of the biblical texts. They will also provide the students with supplementary primary texts from the ancient Near East and a variety of interpretive aids. The textbooks include a standard introduction to the Old Testament (Boadt) and two books that offer non-traditional interpretations of the Bible from a feminist and an ideological-critical perspective (Bellis; Fewell and Gunn). These latter books will challenge the students' casual reading of the Bible, and prompt them to engage in their own interpretation of the biblical texts. The students will interpret the biblical texts through writing argumentative essays and abstracts. These written assignments will focus on a thesis that makes an interpretative claim about the meaning of a biblical text. The thesis then will be argued from a variety of evidences and with cogent reasoning. The students will share their argumentative essays with other students who will write critical evaluations of the essays, assessing the merits

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[7] A helpful guide to designing a distance course is Schweizer.

of the students' interpretations and arguments. The students also will discuss the course material, including their own interpretations, through an asynchronous bulletin board.

[18] The course itself is structured into twenty-four lessons. Through the succession of these lessons the students will write four argumentative essays, seventeen abstracts, two critical evaluations, and a final synthetic essay. Each lesson is structured similarly. A learning objective is stated so that the students will know what they are expected to learn through the lesson. The assignments of the lesson are designed to facilitate this learning objective. For example, in Lesson 3, which deals with the topic of the Yahwist creation myth in Genesis 2-3, the learning objective is stated as follows:

> Through this lesson the student will learn how to interpret creation myths, and thereby discover the fundamental values of the ancient Israelites. In particular, the student will learn how the Yahwist creation myth symbolizes, and thus constructs, the Israelites' understanding of gender.

The assigned online readings provide examples of comparable Near Eastern creation myths, and address the literary character and social function of creation myths and the role of gender in Israelite society. The textbooks offer multiple and differing interpretations of the Genesis story. The students' learning is facilitated by discussion questions:

> What does this creation myth suggest is the status of humans in the world? How are humans related to other creatures? How are humans related to God?

> What is the relationship between the social roles of men and women? Why is the man's social role symbolized by farming? Why is the woman's social role symbolized by bearing children?

Through addressing these questions and others on the bulletin board, the students will recognize how the Genesis creation story functions as a creation myth and how it constructs a particular understanding of gender. Finally, the students will write an essay (or an abstract) interpreting the Israelite understanding of gender presented through the story.

[19] Each lesson lists a variety of reading assignments from the Bible, the textbooks, and online materials, and includes a short bibliography for further reading beyond the course. The online lecture provides the integrating focus of the diverse reading materials. The lecture focuses primarily on describing the literary, social, and historical contexts of the assigned biblical texts, and in the processes incorporates discussion of the supplementary materials such as ancient Near Eastern texts or interpretive models. Although most of the lecture is in the form of text, graphics are also incorporated into the lecture in a significant way. For example, numerous diagrams illustrating interpretive models are used in the lectures. Most of the graphics, however, are used in units that are labeled "Material Culture." These units describe archaeological remains, illustrated by photos, that contribute to the understanding of the biblical texts. Thus, the archaeological evidence of child sacrifice in the Punic world, particularly at Carthage, is used to illustrate some of the social dynamics in the story of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac (Genesis 22:1-19). Also, the archaeology of the Israelite settlement is used to present a contrasting picture to a historical reading of Joshua 6-12. The lecture is not simply a presentation of information; it is designed to be as interactive as possible. Throughout the lecture questions are raised about specific biblical passages and issues of interpretation. These questions may serve as a basis for discussion on the bulletin board, in addition to the general questions listed on each lesson page.

[20] Beginning with Lesson 3, each lesson contains an essay topic in the form of a question on which the students will write argumentative essays or abstracts. The students are randomly assigned to write the essays for four lessons; for all other lessons they will write abstracts. Each

essay topic is designed to highlight the students' interpretations of a particular biblical story. They may interpret the story in any way they choose; no emphasis is placed on "correct" interpretations. However, the students must state the meaning of the story in a thesis, and then argue for that meaning from the literary, social, and historical context of the story. In order to aid the students in the writing of their essays and abstracts, specific approaches to the topic are suggested in series of guidelines. Elsewhere on the website, I present specific grading criteria by which the essays and abstracts will be evaluated. Those students who are writing critical evaluations of the essays will assess them according to the same criteria.

[21] Two additional writing assignments are worth noting. In Lesson 1 at the beginning of the course I engage the students in an exercise that will be used solely for the purposes of assessing their learning in the course. The students are asked to read three biblical passages - Genesis 2:4-7 (parts), Exodus 22:16-17, and 2 Samuel 16:20-21 - the meaning of which is difficult to grasp apart from their literary, social, and historical context. Then the students are asked to answer a series of questions that address the students' existing knowledge about the passages. Questions such as: What do you think you know about the text? What do you think the text reveals about its era? What do you not know about the text? The information from this exercise is used to put the students' learning in the context of the knowledge they bring to the course, and is then set aside until the final lesson of the course. In Lesson 24 the students are required to write a synthetic essay on how to determine and defend the meaning of a biblical text. This essay will require the students to draw upon all that they have learned from the preceding lessons about interpreting the Bible. To aid the students in their preparation for this essay, they are encouraged to reflect again on the self-assessment exercise in Lesson 1. By reflecting on how they might understand the biblical passages differently at the end of the course, the students will gain insight into their own learning through the course. The reasons for which their understandings of the biblical passages has changed may become the focus of the final essay.

Evaluation of the Course

[22] I offered this distance course for the first time during the Summer 2000 term. The course was offered during a five week period, the regular length of a Summer Session term at Creighton University. Excluding weekends and the Fourth of July holiday which occurred near the end of the course, the students were required to complete a lesson each day of the course. As a result of this compact schedule, the workload of the students in the course was quite intensive, but no more so than is required in a traditional summer course. In fact, I could detect no difference between the distance course and a traditional course in the students reaction and adaptation to this workload except in one area: the initial burden of getting started in the course.

[23] I initially had eleven students enrolled in the course, representing traditional and non-traditional students. Four students were Creighton undergraduates needing a summer course to fulfill their core Theology requirement; two students were enrolled in Creighton's extension nursing program in Hastings, Nebraska, and also needed the course to fulfill a Theology requirement; one student was a professor at a local university who wanted to study theology; and four non-traditional students were taking the course for a variety of personal and professional reasons. Approximately one month prior to the beginning of the course I made the syllabus for the course available on the internet, and I sent an email to the students informing them of this and the technology and skills that would be required for the course. During that month four students dropped the course for reasons I do not know. Perhaps some of the students chose to

enroll in a traditional summer course instead. In any case, at the beginning of the course seven students were enrolled.

[24] Four of the enrolled students - one traditional undergraduate and three non-traditional students - had no difficulty getting started in the course, and continued to work through the course material according to the schedule. The other three students, however, did not adequately get started in the course and finally dropped the course. The reasons for their failure vary, but they are indicative of the problems faced by students in distance courses. One student dropped the course because he thought he could do the course in his spare time while he pursued other interests. The convenience of distance courses may give the false impression that these courses are easy or that they do not demand as much work as traditional courses. As a result, distance courses are most successful for students who are self-motivated and disciplined to work through the material without the structure provided by the traditional classroom course.

[25] Another student dropped the course because of the added workload of the course. Distance courses often require more work from the students than traditional classroom courses - additional reading assignments, for example, to compensate for the lack of classroom lecture (see Strong: 99-100) - and indeed, I required more reading than I would in a traditional setting. This student appeared to be self-motivated and disciplined, but she was not able to keep up with the reading (she emailed me on two occasions asking whether I really expected the students to read all the assigned material). She was also taking another course at the same time (a traditional course), which is not unusual for Creighton students, and she complained that my course required too much work in comparison.

[26] The third student dropped the course as the result of a number of problems that prevented her from actively engaging in the course, but the significance of these problems was enhanced by a couple of technological problems. First, she was not able to access the password-protected directories of the website which contained the lectures and the supplementary readings. Second, she was not able to log onto the bulletin board. Although these technical problems were quickly resolved once I was notified (near the end of the first week of the course), they nevertheless delayed her participation in the course and discouraged her to the point that she chose to drop the course. Perhaps if the course had been offered over the duration of a fourteen week semester, she would have had sufficient time to recover from her initial setbacks, but the intensity of a summer course did not allow for much flexibility. She quickly fell behind in the reading and writing assignments, and was unable to catch up.

[27] As the professor in the course, I was faced with a set of problems unique to the distance format. One problem stemmed from the absence of face-to-face contact with the students. Although I communicated with the students daily, indirectly through the bulletin board and directly through email, the lack of immediate feedback from the students left me questioning the effectiveness of my communication. This is the problem with all asynchronous communication. In class I could depend on changes in facial expression or immediate verbal responses to guide my communication with the students. In the context of a distance course, however, a conversation could last several days before I was convinced that a student understood the point I was trying to make. The dynamics of the bulletin board posed a related problem. When a student made a substantive comment on the bulletin board, my natural response (learned from teaching in a classroom) was to affirm the student's comment with a "well stated" or a "good insight." Similarly, when I posted a comment on the bulletin board, I naturally wanted some response

such as "I understand," but often no direct response followed. Such affirmations, however, tend to clutter the bulletin board, and ultimately distract others from the on-going discussion.

[28] I had anticipated problems of communication simply due to the nature of distance courses. One problem I had not anticipated, however, was the extensive amount of time required to teach the course. The process of communication itself was time consuming. Answering emails and guiding the bulletin board discussion for four students almost took as much time each day as I would have spent in a traditional class. If the course had had more students, the time demands would have been proportionally greater, for communication in a distance course is oriented toward the individual student rather than toward the class as a whole. The grading of the students' essays, abstracts, and critical evaluations also took more time because I felt the need to comment more extensively on their work in the absence of direct contact. The flip-side of this problem is that I had a far richer interaction with my students than is usually possible in a traditional classroom setting.

[29] Technological problems are not unique to distance courses, but they play a more significant role in this context because technology is usually the medium for delivering the course. If the technology fails, the course is unable to proceed. Problems with technology, of course, are a frustration for both students and professor.[8] Several of my students had to deal with minor technological problems such as being unable to log onto the website or the bulletin board or to open email attachments, and in most cases the problem was due to their lack of familiarity with the software they were using. I was easily able to offer solutions in most cases. But one morning a student called me in my office to inform me that her internet service provider (ISP) was out of service. She had been cut off from the course and did not know how to proceed, and I was powerless to help her. Fortunately, her internet service was restored later that day, but otherwise she would have been forced to find another ISP quickly or access the internet from another location. In any case, technological problems are the bane of distance courses, and unfortunately the burden of these problems often falls upon the professor, who may have no ability to solve them. For the same reason that universities maintain their academic buildings, they must provide adequate technical support, for both the professor and the students, if distance education will be successful.

[30] For the remaining four students the course was successful. Their written material - essays, abstracts, and critical evaluations - demonstrated that they had learned to interpret biblical texts within their literary, social, and historical contexts and to assess critically the interpretations of others. Particularly satisfying for me was the independence and originality of their interpretations. While clearly reflecting the course material, the students brought their own beliefs, values, and interests to the interpretive enterprise. Their final synthetic essay also demonstrated that they were self-conscious about the interpretive process. They demonstrated an awareness of the problems posed by interpreting socially and historically distant texts like the Bible, as well as how to determine and defend their interpretations.

[31] The most significant aspect of the course proved to be the bulletin board discussions. Initially, the students posted responses to the general discussion questions for the lessons or to the questions raised in the lectures. These responses demonstrated that the students were

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[8] Students' frustration in distance courses, in particular, revolves around two foci: technological problems without access to technical support, and lack of adequate feedback or ambiguous instructions from the professor. See the study by Noriko Hara and Rob Kling.

thoughtfully engaging in the course material. By the end of the first week of the course, however, the students were posting their own questions about the material, and were also commenting on other students' postings. Multiple and divergent lines of communication were established. The students were learning also from each other. My role within the conversation was still necessary. I guided the conversation through questions and comments, and the students often sought out my expertise. But they also wanted to know how their fellow students judged their interpretations, and they readily offered their own opinions and judgments to others. I also benefited from the discussion. The students offered a number of interpretations that I had not previously considered, and some of their comments forced me to reconsider some of my own interpretations. The bulletin board functioned to create within the course a community of learners.

[32] While the challenges of converting a traditional course into a distance course led me to reassess my objectives and pedagogy for teaching in this new format, the benefits of this process were not solely for the distance course. My teaching of the course in a classroom setting has been similarly transformed and has benefited from the added-value of the internet. Indeed, the only real difference between the "traditional" course and the distance course is that the former also has a classroom component. The students have similar reading and writing assignments. The internet is the medium used for delivery of the course material and the bulletin board discussion. However, whereas I took an active and guiding role in the bulletin board discussion for the distance course, the students in the traditional course set the agenda of the bulletin board discussion. This is the students' forum for discussing how the biblical texts interest them. I give primary direction to the discussion in the classroom. Previously, the class period had been consumed largely with lecture. Now with the help of the internet under a new teaching paradigm, the class period is devoted primarily to discussing the students' interpretations of the biblical texts. The students digest the course material from the internet, and then write their essays and abstracts prior to the class in which this material will be discussed. The students come to class having already formulated their own interpretations, and thus are already engaged in the learning process. Whether through distance education or in a traditional classroom course, the internet in the context of a good pedagogy can enhance the learning experience of students.

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