

Technology as a Methodology for Religious Education

Catherine P. Zeph, Ed.D.
Assistant Professor of Religious Education
Loyola Institute for Ministry, Loyola University New Orleans

In the four years that I have been at Loyola University New Orleans, our faculty and staff have moved from being concerned that our extension students have access to computers (“we still need to allow for those who have typewriters”) to how we can best audio and video stream our program on the Internet. Similar to the rest of the plugged-in world, this one example demonstrates how quickly and deeply the discussion and use of information technology as an educational methodology has affected our program. Since 1983, over 2000 students have graduated with either a master’s degree or continuing education certificate in religious education or pastoral studies from Loyola through the Loyola Institute for Ministry Extension (LIMEX) program, the largest lay ministry program in the United States in my denomination. At the heart of the program are approximately 90 intentional learning groups in 25 states and four countries, in which students gather together locally to proceed through twelve courses designed by the Loyola faculty. Each group has one or two facilitators trained by Loyola to guide the students through the learning designs of each course, with the support of Loyola faculty and staff, adjunct faculty, and local liaisons.

Our faculty and staff have been discerning how best to use these new technologies to augment our program, particularly with respect to educational methodology. Students are grateful to have the ability to study with others locally, while receiving some benefits of being connected to the university electronically as if they studied on-campus: library services, writing assistance, and access to the career center are all available to them. Bernard Lee, former director of the Institute and a current faculty member writes, “LIMEX is a complex model that has no analogue in graduate ministry education...it is not an independent study program, not a correspondence course, not a video course” (1993, 9). It has done well as a distance program (read Patterson’s article and lecture (1996a and 1996b) for a good discussion on distance education and the implications for theological education and ministry formation), but like other programs of higher education and particularly religious education, LIMEX has been affected by the global introduction of e-mail and Internet technologies. Along with the changing technologies, it appears that changing understandings of church and roles of ministry, changing populations of students, and a changing church hierarchy all present implications for the use of technology as an educational methodology. This paper will reflect upon the LIMEX program as one example of the questions and potential uses of information technology as methodology for religious education in these changing times.

Born out of the post-Vatican II movement to involve and educate lay people, LIMEX was developed in response to requests from local bishops who asked Loyola to offer a distance education program for their lay leaders who lived too far to commute. Through the years this program has typically met the needs of middle-age Catholics who wanted a newer adult understanding of their faith and/or who sought knowledge and skills in order to lead others in their own home communities (Ludwig, 1996). Much of the ongoing success of the LIMEX

program for both students and local sites has been rooted in the intentional learning communities noted above (see Fleischer, 1999 and 2000, and Zeph, 2000 for more discussion on the structure of the LIMEX program). In these learning groups, students learn to dialogue with each other and reflect within the group context and in their journal and writing assignments upon varying issues of ministry and their application to the social and natural world in which they live. Not only does the learning community model the communal nature of the Christian life, but the experience of the intentional learning community also offers students an opportunity to practice their ongoing or future roles as ministers. Barbara Fleischer, current director of the Loyola Institute for Ministry, writes: “education for ministry needs to foster ongoing critical reflection on communication styles and heighten interpersonal as well as theological and natural world sensibilities. To do so, it needs to model and foster the kind of deepening transformative dialogue that evokes conversion and growth, both in theological and relational dimensions” (2000, 5). LIMEX graduates often find themselves transformed by the experience of their learning communities, and many have reported to us that their group stays in touch long after graduation.

More recently, the deeper question for faculty and staff has been how best to use these electronic technologies in support of the two adult education principles that are held as primary within the LIMEX program: that the learner is central to their experience, and that ministry takes place within a context. To mutually discern, assess, and agree on how to complement our courses and the learning group process has been for us a challenging exercise of reflection and creativity. Perhaps in similar ways as those who first created the extension program based on a successful on-campus program, we are now thinking through how to keep the successful model of the intentional learning community, while transforming it for a newer time. The development of communication skills and styles is introduced early to students in the LIMEX program, and is reinforced throughout the program through the use of peer feedback groups, journals, written assignments, and group participation and facilitation. Before the first course starts, students are asked to consider and commit to a Learning and Group Process Agreement; this is routinely reviewed during the life of the group. Fleischer (2000) notes two implications for online education:

- (a) online courses for professional ministry should provide some attention to and reflection on communication styles, even if the primary means of communication is verbal and textual; and (b) some face-to-face coursework with feedback and reflection on communication skills needs to be a critical component of any program of professional ministry or religious education (12).

With the ever-changing speed of information technologies and hardware, it might seem easy to say, “why not put our whole program, including the learning communities, online?” Even though learning communities can happen on the Internet and through e-mail, often achieving some of the same attributes of community life as face-to-face interactions (Palloff and Pratt, 1999), our faculty has some reservations. Indeed, some of our worst (and humorous) fears come out of that dark question, “how could we possibly grant someone a ministry degree or certificate online without any face-to-face interaction?!” Like the initial requests to physically and geographically become a distance program almost 20 years ago, new technologies and

today's students require us to look at the new societal and cultural definitions and expectations of being a distance program. Fifteen years ago, a distance program was often associated with being a "correspondence" program (Patterson, 1996a, 63), now whole for-profit educational institutions are being created to attract the new distance education market that is available through electronic technologies. Without letting go of the current structure of our program, the Institute faculty and staff have been discussing how best to use the Internet to complement and enhance the education for ministry and religious education that already exists within the LIMEX learning groups.

To begin, each of the past few years has brought continued changes in technology: newer hardware and software create newer ways of communicating. Integrating the use of electronic methodologies into our program for communication and information has been a logical first step and proven beneficial to most, if not all (at least one faculty member pines for the good old days of the #2 pencil!). When I first arrived at Loyola, voicemail and e-mail were underway and there were a variety of computers with a mix of software programs and printers attached. We now have new computers that are connected by a common server, an office calendar online, and some of us share common computer folders and databases. E-mail is a regular form of communication, and listservs have been created for our liaisons (diocesan representatives) and facilitators. All faculty and staff in our office have a web page, and depending upon interest and skill level, each has been encouraged to add links and information that reflect their professional interests and responsibilities. The Institute has its own web page, with links to its differing programs and to the university at large. There is a LIMEX web page that provides general information, intended for a general readership and developed with an eye to marketing and recruiting new students.

One result of the use of these new technologies for communication and information has been a perceived sense of increased accessibility and a corresponding expectation of immediate delivery and reply. More students and facilitators are communicating directly with staff and faculty by e-mail or fax, some are inquiring about the potential of online services, such as registration or the evaluation of papers, and one group from Scotland recently e-mailed pictures to us of their learning group at their meeting site! Communicating between each other and between our various constituencies by e-mail and listservs has given us a quicker and more direct means of informing each other and provides ways to easily inform students and liaisons of upcoming courses, events, and workshops. LIMEX students have access to our university library web page, holdings, and databases through the use of student identification and passwords. There are in place, within the Institute and the larger university, a number of electronic technologies and programs available in which to share communication and information. At times our heads are spinning, but we are doing our best to keep up with the ever-changing scene of cyberspace.

Over this past year, the Loyola Institute for Ministry (LIM) has engaged in strategic planning efforts to assess from our constituencies how we can best utilize new technologies to meet the educational needs of our students. In an informal online survey, LIMEX liaisons were asked, "what delivery system for graduate programs and courses best meets the educational needs of pastoral ministry students in your area?" The highest number of responses (90%) favored the LIMEX facilitated learning group model, while 53% preferred Internet-delivered courses with some regional group meetings (LIM Program Review and Strategic Plan, Spring

2001). A common and strong sentiment from surveys and conversations asks us to keep the learning group model, while putting parts of our courses (videos, audios, some print materials) online. We have decided for now to put a couple of our focus courses online, as they do not require the full use of the learning group model. Loyola University along with other members of the Jesuit Net (Jnet), an online consortium of other U.S. Jesuit colleges and universities, has decided upon the Blackboard™ courseware package for online courses. Faculty are being trained on the use of Blackboard™, and over the next year will be thinking up ways to put some of their regular courses online.

Initially, faculty have begun to put links and resources for students on their web pages. This may be the easiest way to encourage the use of technology as a form of educational methodology online: by providing the knowledge of particular sites and documents for students to pursue further. In addition, through the simple means of e-mail or a listserv, students in a single learning group can benefit from communicating with each other and their faculty members in a reflective mode. One caveat would be that all members have access to a computer with an Internet browser and an e-mail address. I have heard of at least a few LIMEX learning groups that unwittingly added a layer of confusion and complicated communication issues to their group dynamics when only a few of their members had access to e-mail and others did not. Facilitators have had to assist their groups with not only their face-to-face communications, but also with their sidebar conversations around the electronic table!

The use of electronic technologies for communicating critical reflection between students and between students and faculty can be of great value. Leona English and Dorothy Lander (2000) note a similar challenge as ours in their graduate adult education distance program: “we believe that other faculty and students in distance learning programs could benefit from our experience of building reflective practice through dialogue into our program. For distance learning, the emerging technologies associated with the Internet are implicated in this reflection through dialogue” (87). Like LIMEX students, their students are asked to keep a journal in which to reflect upon one’s learning in the program, outside reading, and professional practice. Faculty respond to students through e-mail, and in so doing discover the benefit of time and space in which to reflect thoughtfully: “we find ourselves responding to the learners we advise in the reflective ways of sober second thought and sustained critical reflection that the distance learning environment affords” (92).

Patterson (1996b) spoke of eight educational issues in distance education that may have relevance for theological schools. The last one concerns critical reflection: “...student learners can get lost as more and more sophisticated technologies are used. Cues about what is going on with the student which may be observable in face to face instruction, are absent.” She quoted Reed and Sork (1990, 39): “to what extent does the institution and the teacher have an obligation to monitor the learner’s emotional state and to respond when that state is unsettled or otherwise disruptive of the educational process?” The LIMEX program does an excellent job at monitoring the observable behavior of students through communication with the facilitators of the learning groups and with the adjunct faculty who evaluate the written assignments. But Patterson (1996b) does name a legitimate concern for those who would introduce

students to questions that may impact faith-related beliefs. The question of formation is embedded in concerns about distance education: what is being formed, and how; our understandings of communication which impact our understandings of relationship; the emphases on independence; the power of media for inadvertent information; our relationship to the concept of knowledge (web document, no page number given).

These issues are important ones for those working with or considering the introduction of electronic technologies into a ministry or religious education program. The necessity for some face-to-face communication upon which to build an educational cyberspace community for both relationship and critical reflection appears in much of literature (Fleischer, 2000; Palloff and Pratt, 1999; Patterson, 1996a and 1996b). Shale (1990) offers this reminder:

In an abstract sense it is possible to learn and know in the privacy of one's mind. In the educational process, however, private knowledge gets converted to public knowledge through critical reflection and critical discourse. A defining characteristic of education is that it is a process of validating private knowledge, and a process of recurring validation of what has previously come to be known through education. In order to validate what one knows, one has to hold up such knowledge for public inspection by other people who have received public recognition as 'knowers' in the particular field of interest (334-35).

Patterson (1996b) comments after this quote, "for theological education, this is not an optional task."

Along with changing technologies, and again during my four years at Loyola University, I have also observed some changing understandings of church and roles of ministry, changing populations of our students, and a changing church hierarchy. Each has broad connections and implications to the cultural world of changing technologies, are seemingly related, and are impacting our program. I mention them briefly in relation to using technology as methodology for religious education.

First, in a more intense way recently, it seems that the U.S. Catholic Church is experiencing among its members various and different understandings of what it means to be church (Ludwig, 1996). For some, those that grew up before and with the changes of Vatican II are frustrated at the amount of increased and public control being exerted by the current leadership of the church. Others who came of age after the implementation of Vatican II are looking for answers to questions that may not feel relevant to others or important to a changing world. Groups of people are leaving the institutional church, while some are creating small Christian communities as a hopeful alternative. Others are attending to their spiritual growth in ways that might not get nourished in a local parish. Many are recognizing that a primary ministry for all of us may be to our planet. Similarly, the role of ministry is changing as the numbers of clergy decreases. The education and professional development of seminarians continues to be somewhat different than for the laity (Zeph, 2000). Lay people and religious sisters and brothers are working as professional ministers, and some are finding or creating new ministerial roles for themselves out in the marketplace. The Internet is linking people together with similar concerns, and any number of diverse religious education programs and interests can

be found online. Our program has created our focus courses to meet some of the needs of these changing understandings of church and ministerial roles. Much of our effort these last few years has been dedicated to the development of these courses, realizing that with the changing technology, we can meet some of the diverse interests and needs of our students.

Second, the population of our students is changing in age and ethnicity. As noted before, LIMEX originally was developed to meet the educational needs of the laity after Vatican II. For years, the typical student was either a woman in her 40's whose children had grown, or someone who was making a second or third career transition, this time into an area of church ministry (Lee, 1993). Just as the original market of students in our on-campus program (religious sisters and brothers from the New Orleans area) became saturated, we are finding the same to be true today in our original extension markets. Many dioceses have sponsored numerous learning groups, such that there are fewer middle-aged students seeking our program for the same reasons as those that did a decade ago. Now those in their 30's and 20's are approaching us for study, and many of them, while well educated, are wanting answers about the institutional Church and the Catholic faith. They are not as interested nor may not have enough life experience to grapple with the questions that Loyola faculty developed for those with a lived memory of Vatican II and the new spirit it gave to the Church. In addition, they are Internet-savvy and are not as inclined to join groups the way the previous generations did. On the other hand, we are finding that a growing number of Hispanics whose native culture is not American and whose native language is not English are interested in learning more about the Catholic faith by earning a continuing education certificate in our program. They struggle with the language and the level of education needed to succeed in the learning groups. The difference between these groups reflects the digital divide and a wide gap in the use of Internet technologies. Both groups seek religious education, but in ways that our program may not be able to meet. We are rooted in education through critical reflection and community, and can offer some related and supporting methodology online. Can we meet the needs of these changing populations? To some degree the answer is probably yes, but we are not as ready to meet the specific demands of these students as with our existing student population.

Third, a changing U.S. Catholic Church hierarchy that appears to desire control for the education of laity does have implications within the world of electronic technologies for both students and faculty of religious education programs. More than anything, given the availability of a good computer and some research ability, the sheer amazement of the Internet is that practically any kind of information can be distributed to anyone at anytime. An upside of global and instant communication is the ability to instruct, while a downside can be to destruct. It would seem prudent for those contemplating putting any part of a religious education program online to be aware that varying theological perspectives or misinformation may be distributed between students or between those who would wish to criticize a particular program based on differing beliefs or opinions. It is for these reasons that it seems appropriate to continue discussions about how to encourage online learning between students and faculty. We do not want to limit what students can learn or control online discussions, but there is a natural concern to control who has access to student-based discussions online. Like with any good classroom conversation, it occurs for the benefit of those who are present and have an existing relationship. Electronic technologies, when used well and with the proper spirit of inquiry and

communication, can support the learning needs of those in that classroom, whether they are meeting in person or in cyberspace.

These last three issues regarding the changing nature of church and ministry roles, students, and hierarchy may seem tangential or not relevant to the longer discussion at the beginning of this paper. But they are connected to the larger cultural changes that the U.S. has been experiencing due to the infusion of the Internet and electronic technologies into our daily culture, and they have impacted the conversations Loyola faculty and staff have had around the LIMEX table in New Orleans. The use of technology as a methodology for religious education gives us and many other distance education programs new possibilities with every new upgrade and product development. These times are exciting, and we are finding ways to complement the communication and critical reflection that goes on in our intentional learning groups, in ways unknown to those who first developed our extension program. The Loyola Institute for Ministry has been doing distance education for almost twenty years, and yet it seems we are beginning anew.

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